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Laura Davis
Linfield College

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The personal face of Islam

Saadiah Khawar Khan Chishti helped put a personal face on Islam this fall.

Chishti, a visiting Islamic scholar from Pakistan, captivated Linfield community members when she served as a scholar-in-residence through the Understanding Contemporary Islam (UCI) program, jointly sponsored by the American University of Beirut in Lebanon and the Council for International Exchange of Scholars in Washington, D.C. She took part in classes and spoke on a variety of topics, both at Linfield and in the McMinnville community.

Clothed in flowing, traditional shalwar-kameez-dupattah/chadar suits, Chishti spoke earnestly and often with students, faculty and community members, dispelling stereotypes about Islam. Her soft-spoken demeanor enhanced her ability to relate ties between Islam and Christianity and to explain her religion in a way that sparked interest and dialogue in the community. She emphasized that Islam, an Abrahamic tradition, believes in dialogue and co-existence.

“We may practice our own religions as a family of God, but live in peace, harmony and good will,” she said.

Linfield students welcomed the exposure, according to Linda Olds, professor of psychology. After Olds’ gender and spirituality class, in which Chishti focused on female spirituality and Rabia, an Islamic female saint, students lingered to continue the discussion.

“It is rare in modern culture to be in the presence of someone who so richly embodies and articulates with passion and clarity the spiritual path in any tradition,” Olds said.

Several students, including Deeksha Sivakumar ‘07, were inspired to choose research themes relating to women in Islam.

“She was very engaging because she truly believed what she spoke about Islam,” said Sivakumar, an international student originally from India, whose parents now reside in the United Arab Emirates. “My personal discussions and meetings with her were invaluable.”

Lindsey Kish ‘05, a comparative religious studies and psychology major, was fascinated by the concept of five-times-daily prayer, which Chishti likened to a spiritual roll call for Muslims. Kish said she believes Islam is radicalized and misunderstood in America.

“She was able to show Islam to be not only a valid and versatile tradition, but also one that, in its principles, if not always in its practice, holds women in the highest esteem,” Kish said.

For Chishti, each discussion, whether at Linfield or in the community, was inspiring and gratifying in many ways.

“I think our conversations have stirred imaginations and thinking and brought ideas (community members) haven’t thought of,” she said. “I’m going home very satisfied that the objective of bringing Islam and Christianity together has been achieved.”

Chishti is a prominent scholar in the international community. She is a project director for the Higher Education Commission of the government of Pakistan, president of the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council and a member of the Executive Board of the Islamic Philosophical Association. She has served as a fellow at Harvard and



Saadiah Khawar Khan Chishti, visiting Islamic scholar from Pakistan, spent much of her semester at Linfield engaged in conversations with students. She is pictured here with Emily Clouse ‘06, left, and Keenan Havens ‘08.

Oxford universities, and has been a visiting professor at Villanova University. Chishti holds degrees from Cornell University, Government College in Lahore and the American University of Beirut.

Shaik Ismail, director of International Programs at Linfield, said Chishti provided a forum for dialogue as she discussed the many facets of Islam as a faith and as a political phenomenon.

“At a time when the world is mired in fear, violence, distrust and misconceptions, we are fortunate to have this opportunity to engage in conversation about faces and cultures that are different from ours,” Ismail said. “Dr. Chishti gave us a glimpse of some of the misconceptions of Islam and allowed our community to ask questions, to explore and to comprehend.”

– Laura Davis