

Portland Muslim imam graduates from Catholic university: 'I felt at home'



Abdullah Polovina, 41, is the imam for the Bosniak Educational and Cultural Organization, a community of Bosnian Muslims in Portland. *(Melissa Binder/The Oregonian)*



By [Melissa Binder | The Oregonian/OregonLive](#) on May 18, 2015 at 9:15 AM

The premise of Abdullah Polovina's story sounds like the start of a bar joke:

A Muslim imam walks into a Catholic university...

Except it's true. Polovina, who leads a congregation of Bosnian Muslims in Portland, did walk into a Catholic university.

And in June, he'll walk out to "Pomp and Circumstance."

The 41-year-old recently completed a master's degree at [Seattle University](#)'s School of Theology and Ministry, where he was the first Muslim to ever enroll.

"I was looking for a place to be accepted as myself and to be the true face of Islam, though I am not the best follower," Polovina said.

Polovina lived and worked in the Emerald City as an imam, or Muslim religious leader, for more than a decade before moving to Portland in 2013 to lead the Bosniaks Educational and Cultural Organization. He completed his degree by commuting to Seattle about twice a week during the two-year program.

He first connected with leaders at Seattle University through interfaith dialogue events hosted by the Jesuit Catholic college. He values education, he said, and wanted to pursue a graduate degree that would improve his leadership. He'd befriended faculty at the college. The university's transformation leadership program appealed, and he didn't mind the Biblical focus.

Studying the Bible with the other students, almost all Christians, was a little uncomfortable at first, he said. But he quickly settled into sharing his own perspective and appreciating the overlaps. There are many similarities between Islam and Christianity, he said, from moral values to key historical figures.

"I felt at home," Polovina said. "I strengthened my faith and strengthened myself as a leader."

Students in the degree program explore the spirituality of leadership, said Mark Markuly, dean of the three-year-old School of Theology and Ministry. Courses are designed to make students more self-critical, reflective and thoughtful by integrating their own religious heritage into leadership theory.

Although Seattle University is a Catholic campus, Markuly dreams of seeing his segment of the university mature into an interreligious haven.

"There were some students that I think had never spent time or known anyone of the Muslim tradition," Markuly said. "By his presence in classes, Abdullah helped a lot of our students more deeply encounter the wealth of the Muslim tradition."

Polovina's presence also alerted faculty to a few changes they'd need to make in order for the campus to be more Muslim-friendly, such as providing pork-free meals and working around daily prayers.

An immigrant from the former Yugoslavia, Polovina knows a thing or two about the harm that can rain from division between ethnic and religious groups. In his eyes, Islam and Christianity can flourish in the same space – whether it's a classroom or a country. After all, devout believers have even more in common than moral laws and allegiance to Abraham: they share a craving for the divine.

"Belief is like food," he said. "When we get hungry, we eat."

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