

# How Young Muslims are Encountering their Faith

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Though practiced by less than one percent of Fairfield County, Islam is one of the state's fastest-growing religions. From 2010 to 2020, the county's estimated Muslim population has increased by a staggering 42.8 percent, according to data provided by the US Religion Census and Nazarene.org. In comparison, the estimated Catholic population in the county has decreased by 20 percent, while the estimated Jewish population has decreased by 30 percent (Reform and Conservative combined).

While religions such as Catholicism and Judaism face declining membership — particularly among those 21 and younger — throughout Fairfield County, Islam continues to hold strong. To examine why this is and how young Muslims are approaching their faith today, I was invited

by Jamal Ahmed ('17) to attend a lecture hosted by his friend, Adnan Rokadia, an Imam and college chaplain at Pratt Institute.

In all major religions, educating youth about their faith is crucial to building the future of the community, and Islam is no different. After Isha — the last of Islam's five daily prayers — a group of young Muslims, whose ages ranged from 10 to 20-years-old, gathered around in a school circle in the basement of the Rahmatul-lil Alameen Masjid on the West Side to listen to Rokadia deliver his lecture on what he called "the basics of Muslim faith."

The audience of current elementary schoolers to Westhill and AITE alumni listened as he reviewed topics ranging from the five pillars of Islam to the difference between halal and haram. Rokadia said that

by covering these essentials in a classroom-style environment, young Muslims not only learn what their faith is and isn't, but that they also come to understand "one of the important parts of being a Muslim, [which is] to have good company."

"[By] Being in this gathering today, you're doing something very crucial to your practice of Islam," Rokadia said to the students.

At the end of the lecture, a goat biryani dinner was brought downstairs for the students and their parents to eat, cooked fresh in the masjid's upstairs kitchen. At this point, students began to reflect on the lecture amongst themselves. As one of



**FRESH DINNER** Students and parents partake in a goat biryani dinner after the lecture. Photo by Eugene Caibal ('25)

the older members of the audience, Shahan Salim (AITE '22) said that he appreciated the lecture and saw a need for reaffirming Islam to the younger members in the audience.

"When people start actually trying to go through the struggles of life, I feel like a lot of [them] are always trying to find a distraction," he said.

Reflecting on the growing number of youth seeking paths to self-improvement via social media, Salim said that online influencers only contribute a small piece to an overall larger puzzle.

"When you try to work on yourself, you're gonna find faith. Fixing your mental, your physical, your spiritual, it takes a little bit of faith. You can't do it by yourself."

For Salim, finding his faith has been an "up-and-down journey," but one that he said is an essential part of growing up.

"When you make mistakes, you'll learn from them, and that's what's going to help you change, that's what's going to help you evolve. I think that's where people [like myself] tend to find their faith," he said.

Ahmed and Rokadia said that by stimulating the minds of their students, they were proud of how the first session went. They both plan on the lectures becoming a monthly occurrence at the masjid, with Rokadia noting down the students' questions and ideas for later lectures diligently towards the end of his lecture.

The upcoming lectures are on: why Islam forbades iconography, how to approach banking and business, and how to start a masjid soccer league.



**DUTIFUL STUDENTS** Young Muslim students listen to a lecture on numerous key aspects of Islam. Photo by Eugene Caibal ('25)