Come together
ECSU program builds bridges to Islam

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WILLIMANTIC — Feryal Salem said she cried when she heard that Republican Donald Trump won the presidential election.

The president-elect, who beat Democrat Hillary Clinton in the Nov. 8 race, has instilled fear in many Muslim-Americans.

“Our president-elect did say offensive things about other groups as well, but Muslims were under the spotlight,” said Salem, assistant professor of Islamic scriptures and law and co-director of the Islamic Chaplaincy Program at Hartford Seminary.

Salem, who said she “grieved” and “mourned” after learning about the presidential election results, was one of three panelists during “Honest Conversations with Muslim Neighbors,” an event in the Betty Tipton Room in the Eastern Connecticut State University Student Center Tuesday evening.

The event was hosted by ECSU Campus Ministry and the Windham Region Interfaith Working Group.

The event, designed to educate the public about Islamic culture, was co-sponsored by Connecticut (ECSU, Page 4)
ECSU hosts program on Islam

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Council for Interreligious Understanding, Hartford Seminary and the Muslim Coalition of Connecticut. Terry Schmitt, the executive director of Connecticut Council for Interreligious Understanding, moderated the panel.

The other two panelists were Refai Arefin, an attorney and imam for the Islamic Association of Greater Hartford, a mosque in Berlin, and Diana Hosain, a recently retired professor at Manchester Community College.

Salem noted racism and Islamophobia were not “deal breakers” for many who voted during the presidential election.

Since the election, she said many mosques around the country have received hate mail.

During the long, divisive presidential campaign, Trump frequently targeted Muslims as a way to eliminate terrorist threats, even going so far as to suggest they be temporarily banned from coming to the U.S.

Critics decried that campaign promise as going against the Constitutionally protected freedom of religion.

“There are women who have taken head coverings off out of fear,” said Salem. “I’ll never do that.”

She said while many Muslims are scared, “I’m a tough cookie.”

Audience members asked several questions during the two-hour event, including questions about Islamic beliefs.

Muslims believe in God, “Allah” in Arabic, and the Prophet Muhammad, who is the prophet, or “messenger,” of God.

“It’s not a tribal identity,” said Salem. “You have Muslims of various different ethnic groups.”

Muslims follow five pillars: “Shahada,” recitation of the Muslim profession of faith; “salat,” performing ritual prayers in the proper way, five times a day; “zakat,” paying an alms (charity) tax to benefit the poor and the needy; “sawm,” fasting during the month of Ramadan; and “hajj,” a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Hosain noted that charity is not just about donating money.

For example, she said the gives charity through her work with English as a second language students. Hosain taught ESL and coordinated the ESL program at MCC.

Hosain also created and taught a course in peace and conflict studies at MCC.

She said there is charity in almost “everything I do.”

Panelists also discussed the significance of wearing a head scarf.

“Men as well as women are supposed to be dressed modestly,” said Hosain.

Salem said covering her head “helps me to keep a certain mindfulness in why I believe in what I do.”

“It’s a spiritual practice,” she said.

Another issue addressed during the panel was how non-Muslims should respond when they see Muslims engaging in prayer.

One audience member said they went to a store and saw a Muslim store owner praying in his store.

That person inquired as to what he or she should have done in that situation.

“If you’re not in a hurry, you could wait,” said Hosain.

One person asked why radical Islam has become attractive to young people and what can be done to stop it.

Arefin said Islamic State members are “terrorists and their goal is to cause as much harm to society and kill as many people as possible.”

He said the radicalization is not happening at the mosques, rather, it is happening “by-and-large” on the internet.

“It’s a problem that society as a whole has to tackle,” Arefin said.

He said it is important to make sure young people are well-educated about religions and do not “feel bullied.”

The panelists noted the importance of reaching out to people who are from different cultural backgrounds.

“No one knows I’m a Muslim,” said Hosain. “I fly right under the radar.”

Salem said it is important to “say hello” to people, noting that, often, people are “afraid to talk to me because they think I’m strict or rigid.”

She said by interacting with people from different cultures, we learn more about ourselves.

Hosain said there about 43 mosques in Connecticut.

“We have an open-door policy,” said Arefin, noting anyone is welcome to visit the mosque in Berlin that he works at.