

Local faith leaders discuss spirituality on campus



Rabbi Matisyahu Friedman (pictured) heads the Jewish Life at VCU student association, just one of the 17 religious student associations that make up the ICMA.

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Spectrum Editor

The Interfaith Campus Ministers Association (ICMA) of VCU hosted an interfaith panel of religious leaders from student associations around campus to answer questions about the importance of spirituality on campus on Oct. 6.

The forum was held at the Grace and Broad residence center, and featured Catholic representative Rev. Mike DeNoia, Jewish representative Rabbi Matisyahu Friedman, Muslim representative M. Imad Damaj, Methodist representative Rev. Katie Gooch, and was moderated by ICMA member Joshua Soto.

“There’s unity and diversity in humans, and to understand that reflects good, right and true tolerance. To acknowledge the beauty of diversity,” Soto said. “We really want to encourage a dialogue. We can be honest about where we’re at, and still be tolerant. We can really still love each other.”

What is spirituality?

Friedman:
“It’s hard to have a conversation about spirituality when we all define it differently. I don’t think you need religion to be a good person and to live a meaningful life. When I say spiritual I mean nothing to do with practice. Just knowing that we matter to God. The best proof is that we all matter. It’s knowing that we might feel alone, but we know we aren’t alone.”

DeNoia:
“Religion and church are very important, but it doesn’t necessarily mean we’re spiritual. Many a religious person has sinned, and for that we beg for forgiveness. My religion gives me a structure to live in with my spirituality.”

Gooch:
“A big point of my understanding is the incarnation. A lot of times our bodies are still going, but we ignore the spiritual side of our life. Through prayer and works of mercy we help know that side of us.”

Damaj:
“You can break it down to one word: ego. Spirituality is controlling the ego. To get out of that state of distraction and into connection with the divine. To bring yourself into knowing yourself better to control the forces within ourselves.”

Why should we devote time to spirituality and religion when college takes up so much of our time?

Damaj:
“You certainly have less and less time in college. When you fail a test, you go back to the professor to ask to see your paper, so you can see what you did right and wrong. Spirituality is like this. It’s about knowing yourself.

Spirituality is the path to getting to know yourself and the path forward. ‘Why am I doing this? What is my intention?’ Your goals, your ethics, and the intention of your actions. Spirituality is being ethical and responsible.”

Gooch:
“When I was in college, I was so busy. I didn’t know what I was doing, or why I was doing it, but I was busy. Spirituality is asking ‘what is motivating you? What is God calling me to do?’ That’s going to change the motivation for what you do. Spirituality allows you that freedom. Religion provides structure to stay in check. Religious practices help bring me back to that state.”

DeNoia:
“My God doesn’t demand consistency. He’s not looking for an hour on Sunday. My God is looking to walk with me, every step, every hour of every day.”

Friedman:
“As the world goes on, the world becomes more and more lonely. There is more and more emptiness. We feel so terribly empty. Terribly alone. It’s about the awareness and understanding that each of us matters so tremendously.”

What is your definition of love? What is the soul? How do you know love?

Friedman:
“Love is an emotion. Its building, its developing. Very rarely do people fall into love. Love is about giving. You don’t fall into love and get married for years. The more you cultivate it, the more you will reap it.”

DeNoia:
“Love is about giving. When I love you, I don’t do it for me. Love is not selfish. It’s about you. My God tells me we are all blind people sitting around an elephant. Each faith touches a leg, the tail, the trunk.”

Gooch:
“I don’t fully know the definition of love. But if I want to get to know love, I have to get to know God. God is love.”

Demaj:
“God loves us because he created us. He gave us eyes, ears, heart and a brain and the freedom to use them. Along with that comes responsibility. Through Islamic tradition, it has become clear he does not like sin. But the door is always open to repent, to ask for forgiveness and come back to God.”

For more information on how to get in contact with VCU religious associations, visit the ICMA website at <http://www.icma.vcu.edu/>

Decolonizing Columbus: Questioning the legacy of the first colonialist

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VCU’s Political Latinxs United for Movement and Action (PLUMAS) addressed the nuanced nature of Christopher Columbus and why his legacy and the holiday celebrating his name has is increasingly controversial and facing pushback throughout the Americas in a forum titled, “Decolonizing Columbus” on Oct. 6.

The panel of six consisted of two VCU students, Diego Orbegoso and Camila Aranguiz-

Allend, as well as VCU’s faculty: Dr. Antonio Espinosa, Associate Professor of Latin American History and Isabela Tavares de Melo, Adjunct Professor of Figure Drawing and Costume history. With two speakers from nearby colleges; Alicia Diaz, Associate Professor of Dance in The University of Richmond and Zoe Spencer, Associate Professor of Sociology, Social Work and Criminal Justice at Virginia State University.

The panel’s diversity, in regards to age, race, ethnicity, as well as an open floor for audience questions,

allowed for thought provoking discussions and debates.

The opening question was ‘What does Columbus mean to you?’

“(Columbus’ landing was) a symbol of colonialism, forced Catholicization, the exploitation of (an) indigenous labor force, the extermination of indigenous groups,” Espinosa said. “The establishment of racial hierarchy which [erases] focus on the Caribbean.”

Professor Tavares de Melo, originally from Brazil, said that colonial systems initiated by Co-

lumbus affected Brazil differently - but at the root the it has the same results.

“In Brazil we don’t even talk about race. We really pretend we don’t have racial issues,” said Melo.

She said later on in the panel that due to colorism, she’s privileged due to her fair skin, another impact of colonization.

The rest of panel and the audience echoed Dr. Espinosa’s comments: Columbus’s legacy is one of oppression, violence and an audience member put it, ‘the start of people of color having to conform to systems that don’t value them.’

This is at the heart of a national debate: should institutions

change Columbus Day to Indigenous People’s Day?

Colorado recently joined the list of states who have made this nominal switch. Universities such as George Mason campaign annually to demand this change.

Both panel and audience were divided on the topic.

“I’m wondering how much a step forward that really is?” an audience member said. “We’re just gonna call it a different name but not address any systematic things?”

Both student speakers on the panel agreed and felt it was a tactic of complacency.

“To call Columbus day Indigenous People’s Day, it’s just a slap to the face to the them. It should be called Genocide Day,” Spencer said.

Espinosa said it’s important to change the name to highlight the resistance of Native populations.

“What does solidarity look like to you? When different groups with similar struggles come together in strategic ways, respecting their specificities [but] understanding their power together?” Diaz said. “That’s interesting, that’s solidarity.”



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