

Miss USA Rima Fakhri, Muslim and modern: An interview

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Rima Fakhri's path from Lebanon to Las Vegas, where she was crowned Miss USA, is not unlike other immigrant success stories, but she stands out because of one notable first: she is very likely the first Miss USA who is Muslim.

At a time when many Americans view Muslims with suspicion and hostility, Fakhri, 24, sees herself as a testament to America's promise as a land of opportunity. While she insists religion does not define her, the erstwhile Miss Michigan also recognizes that she can challenge stereotypes of the cloaked and dour Muslim woman.

While some people think Muslims are obsessed with modesty, on May 16 Fakhri strutted down the Miss USA catwalk in a bikini and says she has received nothing but support from Muslims. (Some of her answers to the following interview questions have been edited for length and clarity.)

Q: What role did religion play in your and your family's life?

A: We're more of a spiritual family. Religion really doesn't define me or my family. My family's been very liberal, and we appreciate all different kinds of religions.

Q: Could you elaborate on what you mean by spiritual?

A: I consider myself to be blessed. I have a family that is a mix of different religions and different ethnicities. My brother-in-law is Christian, and he (and my sister) baptized their two sons. I have an uncle who converted to Christianity, and he's a priest now. My family is Muslim. But none of this ever came up in our family. We don't look at religion as something that defines us, we look at religion as something that we respect, and something that teaches us about ethics.

Q: You've said your family celebrates Muslim and Christian holidays. Can you explain?

A: We'd go to church on Easter. We always had a Christmas tree, and every year we go to the Radio City Christmas Show, and we watch *The Miracle on 34th Street*. But we celebrate some of the Islamic holidays as well. When I went to the University of Michigan, because it has more of a Muslim community, my dad wanted me to learn more about Islam. I didn't know much about Ramadan and other holidays, and my dad wanted me to take that opportunity and learn.

Q: With all these different influences, did you ever struggle with your identity?

A: No. My father always told it like this: we're from Lebanon, Lebanon is our mother. But we look at America as our adoptive mother. And we were never confused on any point because my dad was someone who always had stories and lessons. I think that's also why he sent us to Catholic schools, just because he thought a Catholic school would help us learn about how to be good, ethical human beings.

Q: While you don't define yourself by religion, did you still face questions or hostility because of your Muslim background?

A: Oh, yeah. People were always asking, "Is your family OK with this? Do you know what you're doing?" They always assume I'm going behind my family's back, but my family is my biggest supporter. There are many Muslims who appreciate and understand and support me, and there are those who just don't get it. I hope everyone can look beyond the bikini or beyond the whole beauty pageant stereotype and realize that what I'm doing is more significant than just that. It represents the United States as a country of opportunity, where you can do anything you want to, and ethnicity and religion cannot stop you.

Q: What do you make of the accusations on the blogosphere that your family is somehow connected to Hezbollah?

A: It's absolutely false. Once again that's a stereotype. My family—just like anyone else from any other ethnicity—is a family going through stereotyping, where people are going to hate, they're going to say this person should not be here. Every ethnicity has had racist remarks and prejudice against it. But I'm proud, because everyone who goes through what I'm going through right now will learn things that will carry on for the rest of their lives.

Q: What values instilled by your family have served you the best?

A: My father always said, "You don't know who you are until you know where you came from." That's one thing I always remembered. The other thing that they always taught me was respect and reputation. You always respect yourself.

Q: Do you see yourself as an ambassador for Muslims, or an activist who challenges stereotypes of the Muslim woman?

A: I do. I feel like I can be a great representative. America is the land of opportunity, and people can live in America and be who they want to be. Don't deny your faith. Don't deny your ethnicity. Don't stereotype Muslim women, because as you can see with me, or in Lebanon, for example, beauty is appreciated. -*Omar Sacirbey, Religion News Service*