

Interrogations of a Muslim

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From a relatively young person's point of view, Islam may seem to be an old-fashioned belief system full of out-dated ideals and unrealistic traditions. To the average modern American, Islam may be considered a 'backwards' religion, especially in the wake of the current situation between Western Christian and Muslim countries. The 'War of Terror' has unfortunately become a "War on Islam", creating a heated 'Us vs. Them' mentality common among both sides of argument. When I met Ahmed, a young Pakistani Muslim here on a student visa to complete his college education, I thought, 'could there be a more perfect person to tell me about Islam?' Ahmed did not look the part of a typical Muslim, especially in American terms. He wears jeans and t-shirts, eats at Del Taco, listens to classic rock, and is fascinated with the newest technological devices and inventions. For someone who practices a 'backwards' religion, shouldn't he live and look that way as well? Although it may seem to many Westerners that Islam is a backwards religion, the real question is: How does such a misunderstood religion work for a young man in living in such a differently religious culture?

At twenty-six years old, Ahmed stands at a thinly built six-foot tall, his handsome face is marked with two deep dimples on either side of his cheeks that indent even when he opens his mouth to speak. He has been in the United States for three years, coming here to attend college. Because of my own busy schedule, I only had time in the evenings

to talk to him in person, and all other times were via Instant Messenger or on the phone. When I was able to conduct personal interviews, they would be done in my living room, sometimes before the sun went down. We sat on separate couches, facing each other. It was during one of these evening visits when I began to ask him what his experiences were being a Muslim.

The first issue I took up with Ahmed was his relation to Islam, and what it was that allowed him to be so drawn to it. He first pointed out that he and his conservative mother have different points of view on the mystic points of Islam. I replied that it is common for children to have a more liberal view on the world than do their parents. He quickly corrected me: “Not really. There are certain people who look at Islam in a more mystic way, like Sufis¹. Like, you might hear a tradition of the Prophet’s rug crying cause he wasn’t standing on it anymore. I don’t believe in that stuff and I’m very against it. It’s really sad that a lot of Pakistan is into that stuff instead of the important parts. But there’s sort of a revolutionary movement going on among the younger generation. But Islam is a simple religion. I do not believe in traditions like those. And when I research them they usually do not show up” (Ahmed 9/24/07). Aside from the ideas of jinns² and mystical aspects of the religion, I asked about the traditional side of Islam. From what I knew, it was partly considered a ‘backwards’ religion due to the traditional beliefs and practices. Wasn’t Islam known for its inability to progress? “I don’t like the idea of doing stuff by tradition. Another reason I believe in Islam so much is that it brought forward a scientific revolution. When Christians were burning books and killing scientists, the Muslims were trying to research stuff, even translating Plato, Aristotle. The Muslims made these really

¹ A Sufi is a Muslim mystic.

² In Muslim legend, a spirit often capable of assuming human or animal form and exercising supernatural influence over people.

awesome universities in Baghdad and Spain. Oxford and Cambridge were based on these universities” (Ahmed 9/24/07).

I understood that he was stating he didn’t like to follow tradition simply for tradition’s sake. If that were the case, why was he so strict with his beliefs, if not for sake of tradition? During this time of the interview, the subject of partying and drinking came up. Ahmed has told me that it is usually the wayward Muslims who drink alcohol, but that he does not. He chooses to be very strict in his beliefs, including no alcohol, drugs, or smoking, no premarital sex, no violence. On a daily basis he puts forth full effort in “being a good Muslim”. In fact, he has criticized other non-practicing Muslims for not being as strict with themselves. He has stated that non-Muslims respect his choice not to drink more so than his friends who are non-practicing Muslims. I wondered what kind of effects his self-restrictions had on his social life. He stated that he is always the friend who is called on to drive his drunken friends home. “It really pisses me off,” he has said. “I don’t really like taking care of that. I mean, I’ll be very nice and all, but I don’t like it. It makes me hate alcohol even more, and I pretty much hate it already” (Ahmed, 9/19/07). According to Ahmed, he doesn’t see getting drunk or even social drinking as something enticing. He sees the effects it has on his friends, and has decided long ago that it’s not worth his time or the negative effects it has on his body.

But what are the bodily effects of fasting? When we met, it was mid-September, during Ramadan. Ahmed explained Ramadan to me as a month-long holiday in which Muslims fast³ as a form of self-discipline, and to remind them of their devotion to Allah⁴. I met Ahmed just as Ramadan had started, and through all the interviews I heard how this

³ Fasting is a ritual in which Muslims refrain from consuming food and drink, and abstain from all sexual activity from sunrise to sunset. In the Qur’an it is required of all Muslims as a form of worship.

⁴ ‘Allah’ is ‘God’ in Arabic.

day of fasting was harder than the last. He wouldn't even accept my Chapstick for his chapped lips because he was afraid it would taste or smell too much like candy or food and make his mouth water, making the fasting that much more difficult. On this particular day we sat on separate couches, facing each other. He arrived just before sundown, and I was able to watch him break his fast⁵. He usually carried a few dates with him to use for this purpose. Once, as we were driving, he asked me to give him a piece of candy from my big bag of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. He explained that it was ideal to break a fast with something sugary, as it can give one a boost of energy after a long day of no food or drink. If not dates were available, candy was equally suitable to him. Of course, he also had admitted to having an incredible sweet tooth. Sitting on the couch opposite him, I posed a question: If your body is a gift from God, why hurt yourself by fasting? What is the purpose of this? He stated: "If it can make you sick, you're not supposed to [fast. For instance] my dad used to be on medication so he didn't fast back then. So when you get better (provided you get better) you can do the fasts of Ramadan that you've missed then. [If it's a chronic health problem that's preventing one from fasting] you can just provide for another person's Iftar⁶. You don't have to fast then" (Ahmed 9/25/07).

When the fasting is over, I wondered what, on normal days, Ahmed eats, considering he cannot eat meat that is not Halal⁷. He explained to me that in Pakistan all restaurants are Halal, which makes perfect sense considering Pakistan is a Muslim country. However, here in the area of Silicon Valley and Santa Clara County, there are only a handful of restaurants which are Halal. In fact, one night while we were having a

⁵ 'Breaking a fast' is the symbolic manner in which one eats something after the long day of fasting. This is traditionally done by saying a prayer, then eating a date. It is officially called *Iftar*.

⁶ *Iftar* (Arabic) and refers to the evening meal for breaking the daily fast during Ramadan. It is often done as a community, with Muslims gathering to break their fast together, and is done right after sunset.

⁷ Halal is a term for meat slaughtered or prepared in the manner prescribed by Islamic law.

conversation over Instant Messenger, he sent me a link which showed a listing of all of the Halal restaurants in the area. There were a total of five. Ahmed stated that this does definitely inhibit his choices for places to eat, if he were one to eat out. Usually he goes to the local Halal market and purchases meat and food to prepare at home. I knew he frequented Del Taco on his way to and from school, and asked him if he had checked to see if they served vegetarian beans when he orders his vegetarian burrito. I was sure I would have caught him on something, but I was wrong. He had checked, and they do serve vegetarian beans. The one thing he cannot eat, however, is pork. According to the Qur'an,⁸ Muslims are forbidden to eat the flesh of swine. Ahmed pointed out that, in his interpretation of the Qur'an on this matter, it is forbidden except in times of absolute desperation in which one's only other option is to starve to death. The night he told me this, I had already finished my delicious dinner of Chicken Cordon Bleu. I decided to keep that bit of information to myself. Due to the restrictions on where he can eat, I asked him how this affected his social life, if at all. He replied that he hardly ever had money to eat out anyway, so it didn't bother him that much.

On a Friday evening when Ahmed came to my house for another interview, he brought his computer on which he had family photos, including some fairly recent ones of himself. He showed me pictures of himself from the year before. His hair was long and kept pulled back in a ponytail, his face covered in a neatly-trimmed beard and mustache. He told me that with this last visit to Pakistan to see his family this past August, his father told him he was getting 'too fat', and suggested he lose some weight. From the pictures I saw, I didn't notice that he was much heavier than he was standing before me, but he

⁸ Qur'an is the sacred text of Islam, considered by Muslims to contain the revelations of God to Muhammad.

insisted that he'd lost twenty pounds. He also decided to cut his hair and shave his beard. Though many Muslim men grow their hair long and keep a beard as Muhammad the Prophet did, Ahmed had this style for seven years, and was ready for a change. He came back clean-shaven and short-haired, and thinner. He also looked much younger without all of the hair. This prompted a later discussion over Instant Messenger on the way Muslims kept their hair. He confided to me that he trims his armpit hair, as well as other personal body hair. "Muslims believe in being clean, and with an excess of hair, there is more chance of sweating and smelling, and overall being less clean" (Ahmed 10/2/07). As I learned that cleanliness of the body was of utmost importance to Muslims, this made sense to me.

One issue which I had not yet addressed was the common misconception of Islam being a sexist religion, or more so, gender-biased. I asked Ahmed of his opinions on women's roles in relationships, according to his interpretation of Islam. He explained that he felt it was the man's obligation to take care of his wife, and that it was up to him to work and provide for the family. Half of his earnings and property belonged to the wife; however, if the wife chose to work, she was not obligated to share her earnings with her husband or family. This seemed to be the opposite of what I'd heard about Islam, about it being oppressive to women. I asked him about this. He told me that, like any other religion, there are different interpretations of the scriptures, and there are fundamentalists whose beliefs are much stricter than others. I questioned that if Islam is not oppressive to women, as I had once thought, why are the women required to cover themselves in a

Burka or Hijab⁹? Ahmed explained to me that it is “sort of a rape prevention thing as well” (Ahmed 10/24/07). Men are “supposed to lower their gaze” (Ahmed 10/24/07) as a woman walks by, but also the woman has a responsibility to cover the parts of her body which may be seen as sexual objects to men, and this also shows respect for her husband and family as well.

I had a problem with understanding why it was up to the woman to cover herself to prevent her own rape. I asked Ahmed about this. He replied, “In pre-Islamic Arabia, if a man passed a woman to whom she was attracted to, it was common that he would grab her and just ‘take her’ (sexually). So in the Qur’an, it was stated that women could avoid this by covering themselves” (Ahmed 10/24/07). He explained further that the Qur’an teaches modesty for both men and women, however it is implied that the men are the weaker sex when it comes to primal urges, but physically stronger. With that combination, women are more likely to be subjugated to sexual molestation.

Based on all that I learned from Ahmed about his interpretation of Islam, how it fits into his personal life, and how he is affected by living in a non-Muslim country, I had come to a conclusion of my own. It seemed as though he was liberal enough in thought to understand the core of the religion itself, its values and lessons, without being a blind sheep which follows all the others just because ‘that’s just how it is’. He seemed to be knowledgeable enough in the teachings of Islam to make his own decisions, and still be flexible enough in his own opinions and beliefs to successfully integrate his upbringing in Pakistan, and his new adult life in the U.S. I liked his groundedness and his level-headedness when it came time to answer the tougher questions I was asking. Obviously, I

⁹ A Burka is a loose garment covering the entire body and having a veiled opening for the eyes, worn by Muslim women. A Hijab is the headscarf worn by Muslim women, sometimes including a veil that covers the face except for the eyes.

was asking questions which he knew were ones the majority of Americans wondered as well. He integrates Islam's philosophies into his everyday life as he goes about obtaining a degree in Computer Science and eating Del Taco. In general, he may be slightly displaced here, in a Western Christian country which has an overall misunderstanding of the principles of Islam, but that doesn't shake his beliefs or values.

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