



Practicing Islam in the U.S.A.

by *Jalaledin Ebrahim*

It will come as no surprise that, like most people, I practice the tradition of my family of origin, which is a spiritual mystical interpretation of Islam. Given our current post 9/11 context, is it easy to hold fast to this tradition?

Perhaps one first has to look at the very early influences from the perspective of child development to appreciate how profoundly one is marked by one's faith, despite perceived attacks in the media and elsewhere.

It begins with rites and rituals at birth when an infant in our tradition is accepted as a murid or disciple of the Imam of the Time or the Spiritual Master of the Age, in direct lineal descent from the Prophet Muhammad. In the case of a male, you cannot at the outset ignore the experience of circumcision, if only to formalize the religious identity of the infant. In my case, my parents had made that decision before I made my eager appearance in the hospital in Nairobi, Kenya, when it was still a British colony.

Early in the first days of infancy my parents sought out the Mukhi, a congregational leader (there being no clerics in our path of Islam), and

arranged for a ritual similar to a baptism. I was anointed with holy water which was blessed by the Imam of the Time, prayers were said for me, and my given name was registered.

In my early childhood, I would join my parents at least weekly at the congregational prayers and was taught how to participate through imitation of the older kids and adults. This was an important and critical period for early

socialization.

While this social and psychological conditioning was important, the expression of faith embodied by my grandmother and mother were far more influential. I remember how my mother broke out in a chant with her prayer beads one night as my father was driving a VW van in a rain storm

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in some very difficult, flooded, and unpaved African terrain, without street lighting. We arrived at our destination safe and sound. That felt like a miracle because my Dad could hardly see the road ahead in the dark.

If that was a miracle, then how do we categorize the healing hand of my grandmother as I lay in a polio ward at an infectious disease hospital at the age of eleven, diagnosed with poliomyelitis of the brain? She would pray over me every evening and anoint my head and face with holy water for three weeks. It was nothing less than miraculous when the hospital director called my mother to take me home as they could not find any further reason to keep me.

However, the event that has perhaps had the most enduring impact on my faith was my grandmother's passing when I was twelve years old. She attended daily congregational prayers, morning and evening, and was a devoted believer. She died quite suddenly one evening in the Jamatkhana (community prayer hall) after she had descended the staircase with my mother. From all reports, it was considered a blessed

and miraculous passing, a perfect death if there ever was such a phenomenon. My grandmother, having completed her worship rituals, passed her purse to my mother and lay down on the floor without falling or stumbling, almost as if she had expected to be called at that very moment. At her funeral, complete



The Grand Bazaar in Istanbul.

strangers reported that they had been the recipients of her generosity and wanted to be present to say their farewells to this pure soul. The presence and prayers of the community made me aware that births, weddings, and funerals are all part of the landscape of the spiritual tradition that I was raised in. My faith evoked notions of the sacred and the miraculous.

By the time I was a teenager, it was quite normal to identify with our faith tradition as the anchor of familial and community life. However, it is also

true that other cultural influences began to compete for my attention – Elvis Presley, Cliff Richard, The Beatles, and the Rolling Stones, rock and roll, jazz, rhythm and blues, and American movies! Where were these all supposed to fit into my world?

This was the beginning of a period of introspection and cultural assimilation. I was a member of a progressive Muslim community with a Sufi orientation, but I was also part of an emerging beat generation. We liked to go to parties, do the fox trot, cha cha, and twist! And for this to happen we needed to have normal and natural contact with the opposite sex. We lived in a cosmopolitan city and many of us were exposed and influenced by this seductive Western lifestyle. My peers and I were pulled in both directions. I clearly remember the night we had a dance party – all clean fun,

with no alcohol or drugs. After two in the morning, a few of us piled into a car and took a ride, making it back in time for the dawn meditation and morning congregational prayer. Both lifestyles were compelling.

The most challenging developmental age for maintaining my faith was during college. I had the good fortune to attend what is now known as the American University of Paris. I was burning the candle at both ends and occasionally

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taking risks with my social habits at the expense of my academic success. This was a heady time in the 60s when students were exploring and experimenting with everything from personal and political philosophies to altered states of consciousness. We were studying Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The Vietnam War was raging and political opposition to the war in Europe and the USA seemed far removed from the bourgeois values of my faith community. However, a couple of sparkling moments occurred when I had the opportunity to have an audience with His Highness the Aga Khan, the charismatic leader of our faith community. Similar to a Sufi Sheikh, his role is to interpret the faith according to time and context: hence the modern contemporary outlook on Islam for which our faith community is often ostracized in the larger Muslim ummah.

I had sought his personal counsel and guidance about pursuing Islamic studies. He had attended Harvard University and graduated with honors in Islamic History. I was not earning high grades and I clearly had to turn a corner if I wanted to achieve some academic success. Hard work and regular prayers formed the essence of his answer.

The second encounter was an

initiation into the mystical aspects of our faith tradition, another experience that was to stay with me for the rest of my life.

Having turned the page on my academic mediocrity, I transferred to Cornell University in 1969. The campus was highly politicized, and as much as I tried to hold onto my religious tradition, it did not seem to have any role in the thinking of a college activist. Engaged



Buddhism seemed to be more relevant: being in the moment, accepting that life is suffering, seeking the stillness within, and contributing to the well being of humanity as a whole.

Our icons were Che Guevara, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Peter, Paul and Mary, Bob Dylan, and the renowned Jesuit priests – the Berrigan brothers. Within this context, I could not relate to the religious tradition I was raised in because it had nothing to offer me in the things that I thought really mattered on the planet at the time. I was able to maintain my practice of prayer and meditated on and off, but it did not seem to be a part of an overall schema for

viewing the world. My faith had become lukewarm.

The Vietnam War ended and the human potential movement emerged in the mid 70s. I enrolled in Transcendental Meditation (TM) and Est. Both of these methods seemed to call me back to my faith tradition.

One evening, before attending the Jamatkhana in Santa Monica, California, I sat in my car for 20 minutes meditating,

using the more accessible TM method, rather than my tradition’s practice that was required to be performed at 4 a.m.! Then when I went into the congregational prayer, I had a new, profoundly luminous experience of an altered state of consciousness. I had to ask myself, why did I have this

experience in the sacred space of the Jamatkhana and not earlier in my car or elsewhere? This was perhaps a moment of awakening to the deeper experience of my faith.

In the early 80s, I embarked on a pilgrimage to the holy sites of Islam: Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, followed by Kufa, Kerbala, and Najaf in Iraq. However, nothing could compare with the numinosity of being in the presence of my spiritual teacher, the Aga Khan. By now I had had many such opportunities in different cities throughout Europe and North America.

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By 1994 my mother had been fighting a valiant battle with breast cancer for twenty years and was close to her own death. I could see it in her eyes – they had changed from a soft brown to a sparkling silver.

One day in our family condominium in Redondo Beach, California, she kept saying, “I want to go home!” My sister and I thought she was reeling from the morphine taken to manage her chronic pain. That evening she asked me to submit her tithes at the prayer service. When I returned she was waiting for me to make sure that her final task had been performed. Then she painfully made her way up the stairs.

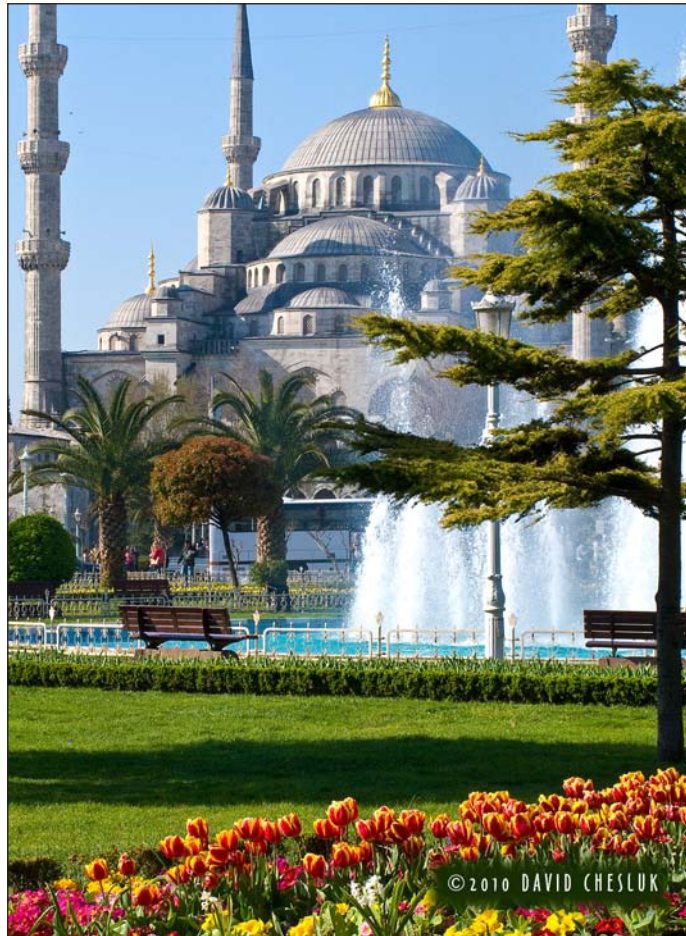
“Think of them as the staircase to heaven, Mom,” I encouraged.

“I wish,” she responded.

Once up the stairs, she walked to her bedroom and lay on her bed. A sideways glance to the upper right corner of the ceiling, as if to greet the angel of death, and she forever closed her eyes.

I was there to witness her death. The next morning she was to have been transferred to hospice. The night of her death, people from our community – complete strangers to my sister and me – started arriving and helped us to make the necessary arrangements. Volunteers came to cook

and provide sustenance during our time of grief. We had delayed the funeral two days so my father could arrive from Kenya to be present for her last rites. This experience of complete support forced my sister and me to re-examine our relationship with the community. We had followed the practice of the faith but



The Hagia Sophia mosque in Istanbul.

we had done precious little to engage in the community. My mother’s passing shifted our relationship with those who had stood by her and us in the final hours. We were grateful and indebted, but more, we were blessed to be “in community” with other practitioners on the path.

While getting a graduate degree in Spiritual Psychology, I was introduced to a workshop on Sufi healing by a Shadhilliya practitioner. This and other encounters with various Sufi circles, which comprised many practitioners raised in other religious traditions, helped to situate the progressive

practices with which I was raised into the context of a more universal thread: mystical Islam. I no longer felt so alone in the practice of the faith. Even though these mystical paths are not embraced by mainstream Islam, I had found a way to nourish my soul in the post-9/11 American context.

Practice of the faith, in my experience, is never a static phenomenon. It involves a dynamic process of learning about the small self and the Big Self, about Self and Other, about light and shadow. There are moments of deep faith and then moments of doubt, uncertainty, and ambivalence. There are moments of frustration at not fitting in and moments of celebration where everything is in flow. What keeps one going is the call of the Sacred and the Miraculous. Then there are those unexplained deep moments of stillness and inner peace.

No, it’s not easy being Muslim in a post-9/11

world, but as I dig deeper, I find buried treasure in my faith of origin.

See <http://jalealadin.blogspot.com> for scholarly research citations and reflections for Jalealadin’s upcoming dissertation, “Towards an Integral Psychology of Islam.”

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