



IF THE OCEANS WERE INK

*An Unlikely Friendship and a Journey to
✦ the Heart of the Quran ✦*

C A R L A P O W E R





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to the Heart of the Quran



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*For Richard and Helen Power, who first showed me the world, and for Antony, Julia, and Nic, who
still do, every day.*

INTRODUCTION

A Map for the Journey

When I was eleven years old, I bought a tiny book containing a verse from the Quran from a stall outside a Cairo mosque. The amulet was designed to be tucked into a pocket to comfort its owner throughout the day. I was neither Muslim nor literate in Arabic; I bought it not for the words inside but for its dainty proportions. The stall's proprietress watched me bemusedly as I cooed over the matchbox-sized book. My family and I were living in Egypt at the time, and back at home I taped a blank sheet of paper over the cover and crayoned a woman in a long blue dress, writing on top, "Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte." I then placed the book in the waxy hand of my doll, which sat stiffly on a high shelf in my Cairo bedroom.

The little book outlasted the doll: I found it over a quarter century later, one sticky summer afternoon in St. Louis, wrapped in a jewelry box in my parents' house. It was a minor miracle that such a flimsy item from a market stall had endured so long. It was a major miracle that I'd found it at all, in a three-story house so crammed with exotic souvenirs that friends called it Aladdin's Cave. But somehow I did find that booklet, amid the spoils of my father's avid collecting from the Middle East and Asia: mosque lamps from Cairo, stacks of Indian brocades and embroideries, Bokhara samovars, lapis lazuli boxes, mounds of tribal jewelry, and hundreds of carpets.

Amid all this, my Quran chapter survived. By the time I found it, I knew enough to be embarrassed for having wrapped someone else's scripture in my own childish concerns. The summer I rediscovered it, during that bleak time after 9/11, shrill voices proclaimed a "clash of civilizations" between the Islamic world and the West. With suicide bombings in Kabul and Baghdad and the horrors of Abu Ghraib still fresh in my mind, my juvenile game seemed insensitive.

By then, not only had I inherited my father's immersive interest in the Islamic world, but my childhood fascination had been seasoned by studying and reporting on Muslim societies. Over the years, I'd also acquired several more Qurans. As an undergraduate, I bought a \$5.99 paperback for a survey course on Islam. It sat on my bookshelf, its pages cheap and grainy, its spine barely cracked. In my twenties, when I was working at an Islamic think tank in Oxford, I received a Quran for free courtesy of the Saudi Arabian government. Bound in blue leatherette, stamped in gilt with calligraphic script, it was one of millions of copies distributed across the globe in the 1990s as part of an official Saudi campaign. A third Quran was parrot green, with pink flowers on its cover. Inside: a pressed rose, withered jasmine blossoms, and two ticket stubs from the Cairo opera house—relics from a romantic summer studying in Egypt. On my bookshelf alone, there were three translations of the Quran, with many symbolic meanings: one copy a textbook, another an instrument of state-sponsored propaganda.

the third a repository of personal memories.

But my Qurans only hint at the book's symbolic possibilities. Since Muslims consider it the word of God, a Quran not only offers comfort and inspiration as a text, but commands reverence as an object. This power has also led to the text's politicization. Waved before a crowd, it can inspire revolutions and wars. Burned or besmirched, it triggers diplomatic incidents and deaths. Quoted or misquoted, it's been used to justify mercy, and mass murder. In an age when migration and technology have spread its message far beyond its traditional homelands, the Quran has impressive influence in Europe and America. At times, it has been the target of displays of intolerance. Dutch politicians have tried to ban it. A Florida preacher burned it, streaming the destruction over the Internet. News that American soldiers in Afghanistan had burned several copies of the Quran sparked protests and killings. And when the University of North Carolina put excerpts from it on a summer reading syllabus, right-wing groups launched lawsuits, claiming reading the Quran would interfere with students' religious freedom.

The Quran began as a series of revelations to Muhammad, a caravan trader, in the seventh century. In two decades, these words grew into a spiritual, social, and political force in the Arabian Peninsula. Today, the Quran's impact is global. Over fourteen hundred years after the Prophet Muhammad heard the first revelation, the text continues to transform geopolitics as well as personal worldviews. As the scripture of the planet's fastest-growing religion—with 1.6 billion followers, Islam is second in global popularity only to Christianity—it stands as a moral compass for hundreds of millions. Studied alongside the words and deeds of Muhammad, the Quran has been a bedrock for constitutional leadership styles, and laws. Its words have lent legitimacy to regimes—and to resistance to them. Reading it should be a prerequisite for understanding humanity.

And yet, as I'd later discover, surprisingly few people do. Like any rich and complex text, the Quran is invoked more often than read, and read more often than its meanings are agreed upon. Hostile and casual readers have accused the Quran of being chaotic. Even pious Muslims concede that while its majesty and lyricism overwhelm, some verses confuse as much as clarify. In fact, many students of the Quran don't understand the classical Arabic they stumble through, and even top madrasas frequently overlook the book in favor of classical works on Islamic law or philosophy, texts that came into being centuries after the Quran's revelation. Many—good Muslims and curious non-Muslims alike—simply never attempt it. Even the Quran proclaims its own limitless possibilities:

Say, even if the ocean were ink
For (writing) the words of my Lord,
The ocean would be exhausted
Before the words of my Lord were exhausted,
Even if We were to add another ocean to it. (Chapter 18: Verse 109)

Revered by a population as diverse as the *umma*, or worldwide Muslim community, the Quran can refract in dazzling ways. The San Francisco civil rights lawyer may discover freedoms in the same *sura*, or chapter, in which a twelfth-century Cairo cleric saw strictures. A Sudanese mullah, or religious teacher, may read a command for wifely obedience; an Indonesian wife may interpret the same passage as a call for equality and compassion. The Marxist and the Wall Street banker, the despot and the democrat, the terrorist and the pluralist—each can point to a passage in support of his cause.

Sheikh Mohammad Akram Nadwi, the Islamic scholar who taught me the Quran, once told me an old Indian joke. A Hindu goes to his Muslim neighbor and asks if he could borrow a copy of the Quran. “Of course,” said the Muslim. “We’ve got plenty! Let me go get you one from my library.” A week later, the Hindu returns. “Thanks so much,” he said. “Fascinating. But I wonder, could you give me a copy of the other Quran?”

“Um, you’re holding it there,” said the Muslim. “There’s just one Quran, and you’ve got it.”

“Yeah, I read it,” replied the Hindu. “But I need a copy of the Quran that’s followed by Muslims.”

“The joke is right,” said Akram. “All this talk about jihad and forming Islamic states, that’s not what the Quran says!”

We were sipping tea in an office in Oxford, a couple of years after 9/11. I was a correspondent for *Newsweek* magazine then, and had dropped by to see him at the think tank where I first met him in the nineties and where he was still working, the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. We’d been talking that day, as so many millions of pairs of friends had been, of angry young men with pilot’s licenses, of grizzled criminals hiding in caves, of daisy cutters and blood begetting more blood.

Crowded with desks, strewn with papers, the room where we sat resembled the headquarters of some ramshackle militia. The walls were hung with maps of South Asia, crisscrossed with arrows and studded with little red X’s, from north of the Khyber Pass to down south below Bombay. On the bookshelf, spines glittered with gold-embossed lettering in Arabic and Urdu. Rows of binders labeled in English, Urdu, or Persian filled shelf after shelf.

I recognized my own handwriting on some of those binders. A decade before, I’d worked with Akram to help fill them. We’d researched together on a team of scholars—some Muslim, some Western, all male except for me—mapping the spread of Islam through South Asia. To distinguish him from all the other Mohammads who worked at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, my colleagues and I called him “the Maulana” or “the Sheikh,” traditional honorifics for an Islamic scholar.

And what a scholar he was. Just twenty-seven years old when we first met, he was already a rising star in the global network of traditional ulama, or Muslim religious authorities. Though he was raised in an Urdu-speaking village in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, the Arabic he learned at a small-town madrasa was so good that he’d begun writing grammars of the language as a teenager. He went on to the prestigious Nadwat al-Ulama, a madrasa in Lucknow, India, where he later stayed to teach and write. His earliest specialty was hadith, or the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, which form the basis of Islamic laws as well as guidelines for the daily life of devout Muslims. At Oxford he would begin the work that would gain him fame far beyond madrasa circles: a forty-volume collection of biographies of thousands of Muslim women scholars, a work that would reilluminate Islam’s lost history of women as religious authorities.

That day at Oxford, the mood was bleak. More than a decade after we’d been colleagues, we were both grayer. Since 9/11, we’d watched relations between Muslims and non-Muslims fray in ways destined to remain unrepaired during our lifetimes. All the sweet optimism of our days spent researching India’s Muslim scholars and mystics seemed quaint. When the Twin Towers fell, the world had cleaved in two, we were told. “You’re either with us,” intoned my president, George W. Bush, “or against us.” In a single sentence, President Bush had dismissed the Sheikh, me, and scores of millions more. His worldview had no space for nuance or equivocation. It didn’t recognize Americans who questioned the invasion of Iraq, or Muslims who deplored both the jihadis and the

policies of the U.S. government.

Most of the media echoed President Bush's black-and-white vision, pounding out a steady drumbeat of declarations about two cultures, airtight and separate: "the West" and "the Islamic world." When the twain met, they assured us, trouble followed. It had been this way since the days of the Crusades and it would continue in this way until those Muslims got modernity like the rest of us. But "Islamic world" was always a flabby term. It grows increasingly useless in an era in which migration and conversion mean that Muslims now live everywhere, from Peking to Sydney to Patagonia. Equally meaningless: the statement "Muslims believe." Those pronouncements about a group that encompasses 1.6 billion people fall dramatically short in describing an *umma* that embraces people as diverse as Pathan tribals and Kansan surgeons.

But fear favors the crude stereotype, and those were fearful times. When I worked at *Newsweek*, a respected writer emailed a memo disparaging Muslim culture in terms so sweeping and vulgar that a more I could think of—as I stared at his words with hot, red eyes—was anti-Semitic rhetoric out of 1930s Germany. The Sheikh heard parallel rants from his fellow Muslims. "When people say things against Americans or Jews, I tell them I've worked with both kinds of people, and that not all of them are like the ones we read about," he said.

In such a climate, our friendship felt freakish. It had always been an oddity: I'm a secular feminist, Jewish on my mother's side and Quaker on my father's; Akram is a conservative *alim*, or Muslim scholar. When we'd met, I'd been a miniskirted twenty-four-year-old, unsure of anything except my own importance. For the two years we worked together, we had found common ground in the commonplace, sipping tea, grumbling gently about our boss and sodden English winters. He was soft-spoken and gracious, quoting liberally from his beloved Persian poets, sharing homemade *biryani*. Growing up, my family lived in a range of places in South Asia and the Middle East. In Akram, I recognized the effort it took to create familiarity in an unfamiliar place. In time, we would grow from friendly colleagues into friends.

When I visited him that day in Oxford, we sat, two bookish types, bewildered at the blood and vitriol of the battles being fought in his name and mine. Every Islam-related bit of news seemed to be bad. Every Muslim depicted in Western papers seemed to be extreme. "Nobody wants to interview Muslims like you, Sheikh," I sighed. "Pick up a Kalashnikov! Start calling for sharia law! Then you'll get some airplay!"

The conversation petered out, and our cups of tea grew tepid. The pale lemon sun had faded, giving the room an antique feeling. For some reason—perhaps the Oxford dusk, perhaps my sense of being swept aside by the zeitgeist—I suddenly remembered a World War I recruiting poster I'd once seen. A chiseled man in a three-piece suit and one of those T. S. Eliot hairdos, slicked and center-parted, was shown at home in a cushy armchair, looking glum. His blond daughter was on his knee, and his son marched toy soldiers across the floor. The caption read: "Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?"

Designed to spur an earlier generation of Britons onto the battlefield, the poster had precisely the opposite effect on me. It rallied me, sure. It made me worry about how my kids would look back and ask me what I'd done during these dark times, during this so-called War on Terror. It made me want to run out there, armed only with my keyboard, and attack prevailing stereotypes. I was ready to lead a charge into transcivilizational dialogue. The blithe generalizations about "the Islamic world" and "the West" were fictions, lazy catchalls employed by headline writers and zealots.

"What did *you* do in the war, Daddy?" the Sheikh repeated slowly. "That's very good, really. It is incumbent on us to work hard, in these times, to make people understand one another."

When I think back on that day in Oxford, I note that he didn't say that it was time "to take a stand." Such sentiments were for hard-liners. The Sheikh's life smudged the thick black lines that Muslim extremists and American neocons wanted drawn between "the Islamic world" and "the West." Since his education had followed the classical Islamic syllabus, he'd been schooled in those great building blocks of Western civilization, Greek philosophy and ethics. Shuttleing between mosque and third tank, Akram led a life in England that proved that the West and Islam weren't separate, but braided together. Unlike many Muslim religious scholars, he educated his daughters in British secular schools. What were his Oxford-born daughters if not "Western"? And also "Muslim"? And what of the Sheikh himself, who taught students at Britain's oldest university, Oxford, and also gave lessons at mosques and madrasas?

His own six daughters will never have to ask him what he did during the messy decade after 9/11. Between teaching and work at the Centre, he produced research that chipped away at the belief that Islam had never allowed women freedoms. Over those years, he uncovered a long-forgotten history of female Islamic scholarship, blotted out by centuries of cultural conservatism: a tradition of women religious authorities stretching back to the days of the Prophet. When he started, he figured that biographies of women religious scholars would make a slim volume, representing thirty or forty women. Ten years on, the work stands at forty volumes. He'd discovered nearly nine thousand women including ones who lectured, dispensed fatwas, and traveled on horse- and camelback in pursuit of religious education. The Sheikh's work on women scholars challenges bigots of all types. The Taliban gunman who shoots a girl for going to school. The mullah who bars women from his mosque. The firebrand who claims that feminism is a Western ideology undermining the Islamic way of life. The Westerner who claims that Islam oppresses women, and always has.

Such voices rise loudest, soaring above softer ones like Akram's. Extreme messages carry further without the weight of equivocation. Men spitting out sound bites denouncing the West make for arresting headlines. Conflict and cultural outliers are two great turbines of the news business, but they're particularly central to the Western media's coverage of the Islamic world. In part, this stems from the very real wars in the post-9/11 era. Yet the news stories of conflict are rarely balanced by feature stories in other sections of the media. Scanning American magazines over the years, I can't remember ever seeing a major fashion magazine cover featuring a woman wearing a hijab, or travel magazine coverage of the best hotels in Mecca for the hajj, the Muslim pilgrimage.

If Muslims rarely make it into the papers as three-dimensional human beings, there is also scant appetite in the mainstream Western media for what their scripture actually says. Never, in my seventeen years of writing magazine stories on the Islamic world, had an editor asked me to write about, or even cite, the Quran, and how Muslims understand it.

This gap was particularly glaring in my case, as someone who had been exposed to Muslim cultures nearly all my life. I had lived in Tehran, Kabul, Delhi, and Cairo growing up, and I had studied Islamic societies in college and graduate school. And yet what most interested my professors and editors was not faith, but the politics that grew from it. I had churned out papers on the split between Islam's Sunnis and Shias, on Egyptian Islamists, on Moroccan marabouts, but never on the central text that united them all: the Quran. Writing for *Newsweek* and, later, *Time* magazine, I wrote on mosque design and yuppie Muslims, headscarves and punk bands, Islamic hedge funds and halal energy drinks. I also wrote stories on violent leaders who made the news: jihadis, bin Laden, the Taliban, Pakistani extremists. I wrote on their political views, but never, really, on the piety the

claimed inspired them all. And I certainly never reported on the Quran.

To be fair, Islam is so all-encompassing that one can easily swerve from its spiritual aspects. Its foundations, the famous five pillars, are mostly centered on actions rather than beliefs: reciting the *shahada*, the statement that “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Prophet”; performing the five daily prayers; giving to charity; fasting during the holy month of Ramadan; and going on hajj. With guidelines on everything from dressing to eating to trading, Islam is woven through the world itself rather than confined to church on Sundays.

Still, it’s telling that the few times I did turn my attention to the Quran, I merely dipped into it. I studied a few suras for an undergraduate seminar. I read the verses scholars cite on topical issues, like women’s dress codes and wife beating. I shivered at the muscular beauty of its poetry. At times, I wondered about what a deeper appreciation could bring to one’s existence. Reading *Madrasah Lijah*, Akram’s first-person account of a day at his seminary in Lucknow, I was struck by his description of his early-morning ritual—a dawn recitation from the Quran, before he attended congregational prayer at the mosque. A favorite chapter was “al-Zumar,” or “The Crowds,” which had a verse on God’s forgiveness that would inevitably make him cry:

Say: O My slaves who have transgressed against their own souls
Do not despair of God’s mercy. Surely God forgives all sins.
Surely He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

“On reciting it,” Akram wrote, “I experience such joy that I keep reciting it over and over again.”

As a nonbeliever, I knew I couldn’t replicate Akram’s ecstasy. As an English speaker without classical Arabic, I knew I’d lose the poetry of the original words. But a bit like the nun who, while drifting off to sleep, allows herself a few seconds of wondering about sex, I found that Akram’s description suggested the limitations of my own cozy secularism. It rankled that I could be missing one of the most powerful experiences on offer. I’d read of Muslims who believed the Quran could stop earthquakes. The mother of a friend recited it to keep calm while being robbed at gunpoint in her own home. In mosques in Lahore and Cairo, I’d watched grown men weep at the sound of its words.

To date, my appreciation of Muslim civilizations had merely involved observation, as when admiring the medallions on a Turkoman carpet or the sweep of calligraphy around a Mughal arch. I was polite and restrained. Weary of being a well-behaved visitor in the realm of the believers, I wanted to try a year of immersing myself in Akram’s worldview, and the most obvious way to do that was to read the Quran with him. As a journalist, I’d spent years framing Muslims as people who do things—built revolutions, founded political parties, fought, migrated, lobbied. I craved a better understanding of the faith driving these actions. I’d reported on how Muslim identity shapes a woman’s dress or a man’s career path, a village economy or a city skyline. Now I wanted to explore the beliefs behind that identity and to see how closely they matched my own.

To go beyond writing about Muslims as headlines, I knew I needed to engage in an extended conversation, exploring the issues that made the news but stretching far beyond them into how the Quran shaped a Muslim’s worldview. I wanted to go to the book at the source of the faith and to begin to understand how it guided one learned believer’s life. I hoped to understand the Quran’s impact not just on culture and politics, but on an individual as well.

Several years after our Great War conversation, I approached the Sheikh and proposed a project that would eventually become this book. I wanted to immerse myself in his teachings, attending his lectures on the Quran and other Islamic issues and having occasional one-on-one lessons over the

course of a year. Rather than attempting a comprehensive investigation of the entire Quran, which would be the work of a lifetime, not a year, the lessons would be a springboard for discussing a manner of topics. Some would be taken from the standard playbook of Western obsessions with Islam. I was curious about Akram's views on women's rights, polygamy, and sharia law. I was eager to hear his reading of the so-called "Verse of the Sword," which bin Laden used to justify his jihad. But I also wanted our conversations to range into areas seldom touched by stories in the media. I wanted to know more about what the Sheikh saw as the Quran's most important themes, and how they'd shaped his life. Which verses and which hadiths (words and deeds of the Prophet) had guided him, as migrant husband, and father? I hoped to hear his thoughts on marriage and child rearing, and on Judaism and Christianity. I wanted to learn more about the Quran, but I also wanted to work as a sort of cultural cartographer, charting where our worldviews overlapped and where they clashed. I wanted to map out what divided us, and what united us.

To my surprise, he readily agreed. He said yes, not just to the lessons, but to what would be unprecedented intrusions for so private a man. In the course of the year, he endured scores of interviews and numerous visits to his Oxford home. When I asked to shadow him through a typical day, from the gym to the mosque, he let me. He allowed me to accompany him back to India, where we visited his old madrasa and ancestral village. He encouraged me to interview his family and students. Never did he try to limit who I talked to, the questions I asked, or what I wrote.

Why would he consent to such a regime? It helped that I'd written about him before, and that we knew each other for twenty years. But ultimately, he agreed to my project for much the same reason that I wanted to do it. "There's so much misunderstanding about Islam and Muslims," he said. "People only hear the words of the extremists. The ulama, their voices are never heard."

* * *

"But why study with him?" asked a Muslim friend. "Why this particular sheikh?"

She had nothing against Akram per se; she didn't know his work. Still, she knew that there are hundreds of English-speaking sheikhs in Britain and America, and that many of them are willing to teach women. Some would doubtless take on a non-Muslim like me. Choosing an Islamic scholar is inevitably complicated, since Sunni Islam famously lacks a clergy and a central organizing structure. With no archbishop's office or local diocese to steer one toward a particular scholar or imam, anyone seeking Islamic knowledge can study with anybody who will teach them. So her question was a good one: Why choose Akram? Why not an Islamic progressive, one whose worldview lies closer to my own? Why not write on Amina Wadud, the African-American scholar who produced the first feminist reading of the Quran? Or Hamza Yusuf, the Berkeley-based cleric with a Los Angeles madrasa, who can riff on Homer and Florence Nightingale as easily as on fourteenth-century Sufis?

I chose Akram for many reasons, chief among them being the fact that his outlook is so different from my own. Western journalistic coverage of Islam occupies a cramped space, focusing either on violent extremists or hidebound fundamentalists. Occasionally, we Western readers get exposed to what are dubbed "moderates"—shorthand for Muslims whose beliefs make no intrusion on politics or public spaces. The horizon isn't exactly broad: we're invited to peer either into the abyss—or a hall of reflecting mirrors. If I wanted to see where my own worldview intersected with and diverged from an Islamic one, then it made sense to read the Quran with someone who had trained in a traditional madrasa, outside the West.

Akram's years in an Indian madrasa anchored him far more securely in the Islamic tradition than the radicals, many of whom learned their Islam on weekends or at teach-ins. As a working *alim*

consulted by ordinary Muslims in Britain about practical issues from marriage to mortgages, he has vantage many academics at Western universities simply don't share. "Akram is really different," observed David Damrel, a former colleague from the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, now professor of comparative religion at the University of South Carolina Upstate. "There are some scholars who engage with local communities, but rarely with people outside of them. There are others who teach at Western-style universities. Akram has done both. As an imam in Oxford, he didn't simply engage with Western-style academics. He was also on the front lines, at the mosque."

Educated in India and Saudi Arabia, fluent in Urdu, Hindi, Persian, Arabic, and English, Akram has an outlook built from layered identities. During his youth, the culture of the village of Jamdaha mixed with his madrasa training, which began locally, then in Jaunpur, and then finally at Nadwat al-Ulama in Lucknow, India. After twenty years in Britain, and seasons spent studying in Damascus and Medina, the Sheikh has a cultural scope that spans continents. Even by the standards of an educational tradition in which bright village boys can go far, the Sheikh's near-seamless transition from a village prodigy to a global scholar is a stunning example of Muslim cosmopolitanism. Rare is the working *alim* who has taught Oxford undergraduates. "Offhand, I can't think of anybody who has made such a dramatic leap," said Damrel. "I can't think of anyone who has done it so gracefully, and done it with eyes wide open."

Nowhere, it seemed, did the Sheikh feel out of place. He was at home in both the West and India, since for him, his true home lay somewhere else altogether. "This tiny earth, it's not your place," he once told me. "You have to sit here for a very short period—sixty or seventy years. It's a testing place, then you come back to your real place."

If I admired the grace with which Akram navigated the world, it was partly because my own journeys through it had been somewhat meandering. My cosmopolitanism, spread broader and thinner than the Sheikh's, was born of a childhood being towed around the world by a restless father. A man who yearned for minaret-studded skylines lit by scimitar moons should never have taught Wills and Trusts at law school in St. Louis. Summers were spent in Europe, and every few years my parents would take leave from their universities to teach farther east, taking my brother and me to live in Iraq, Afghanistan, India, and Egypt.

My father flattened the earth for us, making its exploration a sort of spiritual quest. During the years abroad, my brother and I discovered "home" was less a single place than wherever we happened to be. I was a well-trained little nomad, comfortable most places as long as I had my parents, a Laurie Ingalls Wilder paperback, and the occasional playmate. My earliest lessons in cultural difference were crude, but they were a start: in Qom, the Iranian city of seminaries and scholars, every female, even five-year-olds like me, wore a chador, the black cloak worn by Iranian women. In Afghanistan, you never went sleeveless, never photographed someone without permission, and never refused a cup of chai. When I could, I tried to understand the cultural differences between Islamic societies and my own, but I also loved seeing their similarities. Initially, this desire sprang from trying to make foreign places home. The compare and contrast routine helped knit together an existence split between the Midwest, the Middle East, and Asia. As I grew older, this exercise became academic and professional. I studied the interplay between Western and Islamic cultures in college and graduate school, and later wrote on it as a journalist. After 9/11, the topic gained a political urgency, with fear and anger convincing both Muslims and non-Muslims that "They" hated "Us." To study with Akram was not just to cultivate a deeper understanding of Islam. It was to test the boundaries of my own faith: a zealous belief in the virtues of trying to understand what's really foreign, and what just looks that way.

Our experiment in cross-cultural conversation started in a café, just off Oxford's main shopping street. With its sumptuous display of triple-decker cream cakes and cutesy name, the Nosebag, it seemed a strange place to hold a Quran lesson. In earlier centuries, the Nosebag might have been the sort of coffeehouse where more sober Oxford undergraduates repaired for table-pounding debates over Locke and Sophocles. The Sheikh and I sat at a dark wooden table under a low ceiling, gazing out leaded windows onto a gray winter drizzle. Britain starts its Christmas preparations the minute the first leaves fall, so though it was early November, a choral version of "O Come All Ye Faithful" piped from a speaker. Two American grad students gossiped about their professors. Gray-haired ladies in cashmere rustled their shopping bags, talking softly of their Christmas finds.

We'd agreed to meet at the Nosebag because it was convenient, just around the corner from the Sheikh's office. I put my copy of the Quran on the table between us and tried to ignore my innate twinge of embarrassment. It felt unseemly, somehow, holding an earnest discussion of a holy book open in the open, where others could hear us. Briefly, I had a half-formed thought of setting up a cardboard sign on the table: "This Conversation for Research Purposes Only."

The Sheikh saw nothing odd in studying the Quran over midmorning tea in Oxford's shopping district. My own sense of religion may be confined to houses of worship, but Islam takes a broad view. "The whole world," the Prophet Muhammad once observed, "is a mosque." At airports during hajj, or pilgrimage season, I've seen the pious prostrating outside duty-free shops and next to boarding gates. Muslim cabdrivers pray behind the taxi office at New York's LaGuardia Airport. I once saw a turbaned Afghan standing on the empty storefront display platform of a St. Louis grocery. Eyes closed, palms curved heavenward, he was praying, connecting with the Infinite over Grand Boulevard's lunchtime traffic.

Akram and I embarked on our study of the scripture through a decidedly more mundane activity: eating cheese scones and sipping strong mugs of English Breakfast tea. The Sheikh looked nothing like the Western stereotype of a Muslim scholar that day. In his herringbone tweed, khakis, and black lace-ups, he just resembled an affable professor. His beard is shot through with gray, but his face retains a younger man's smooth and open quality. He has eyes the shade and sheen of polished tea. Though I'd known the Sheikh for twenty years, I felt nervous.

"Sheikh," I opened hesitantly, "I've never actually read the Quran." I waited for the gravity of my confession to sink in. Admitting as much at this stage in my career felt shameful, akin to a literature professor revealing she'd skipped Homer and Hamlet.

"Most Muslims haven't read it either," Akram said brightly, buttering his scone. "And even if they have, they don't understand it. The Quran is alien to them. Usually, they'll just go to the books of law. Or if they're interested in piety or purifying the heart, they'll read Ghazali"—a philosopher—"or Sufis like Rumi."

Akram's calm unnerved me. I knew, of course, that many graduates of the Muslim world's lesser seminaries hadn't really read Islam's scriptures. The boys in village madrasas, rocking back and forth on lispings lines from the Quran in classical Arabic, a language they didn't understand, might have been literally reading, but not much more. The suicide bombers and jihadist foot soldiers who had been promised a reward of seventy-two virgins in paradise were duped. Nowhere does the Quran mention such rewards for murder. Yet I assumed the graduates of the great Islamic institutions, like Cairo's venerable Al-Azhar, or the Sheikh's own alma mater, Nadwat al-Ulama in Lucknow, would know the Quran intimately, if not by heart.

“Even people who go to good madrasas don’t necessarily know it as well as they should,” said Akram, briskly brushing scone crumbs off his khakis. “In fact, the Quran is often the weakest part of the madrasa curriculum.”

I leaned forward, assuming I’d misheard. His voice is as soft as it was when he was a young *alim*, and despite his two decades in England, his accent still bears the strong stamp of provincial India.

“Really?” I stammered. “But it’s ... I mean, it’s the Quran! It’s obviously the basics of what religious scholars are studying?”

“It’s not. Far more effort and class time is given to the texts of jurisprudence or hadith.” The four branches of Islamic knowledge that came after the Prophet’s death, like law and philosophy, had only made the Muslim world’s injustices and divisions grow, he continued. They’d moved mankind further from the source. The message of the Quran and the sunna, the example of the Prophet Muhammad, had been buried by a mountain of academic debate. In the centuries after Muhammad, scholars erected an elaborate system of *fiqh*, or jurisprudence, a man-made legal scaffolding based on interpretation of the Quran and hadith. Developed after the death of the prophet in AD 632, these four schools of law differ on issues from the proper prayer postures to whether or not believers may eat lobster. The medieval religious scholars who developed *fiqh* were frequently far more conservative than the Quran, and often much more punitive than the Prophet Muhammad. “Read the books of Islamic law, and you’ll see they are much harsher on women,” said Akram. “You know when they get really against women? When all the scholars start studying philosophy.” The misogyny running through *fiqh*, said the Sheikh, was a matter not merely of scholars’ medieval mores, but of the influence of the Greek philosophers on them. Aristotle, a man who held that the subjugation of women was both “natural” and a “social necessity,” influenced key Muslim thinkers who shaped medieval *fiqh*, argued Akram. Before Aristotle became a core text, and before the medieval scholars enshrined their views on gender roles in Islamic law, men and women were accorded far more equal freedoms in Islam, he explained. He sketched peaks and troughs in the air, as if plotting the rise and fall of sexism through history.

“God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen” was reaching its crescendo above us. “So why do people get so obsessed with following the schools of law?” I asked. “Why not just go back to the Quran?”

A wide, bright smile. “People can be lazy.” Consulting scholars and obeying their rules was safe and easier, said the Sheikh. “You don’t need to read, or question, or think. You’ve got other people thinking for you. If you become open, it’s a challenge.” He glanced at his watch, checking to see how much time remained before the noon prayer. “You see, Carla, what’s happened, really, is that we in the Muslim world have destroyed the whole balance. We’ve become obsessed with these tiny details of these laws. What does the Quran keep repeating? Purity of the heart. That’s what’s important! Why has cutting off a thief’s hand—something it mentions once!—become of such importance to some people?”

As a scholar, he was incredulous; as a journalist, I wasn’t. Gore and absolutes always grab people’s attention faster than poetry and nuance.

Akram smiled conspiratorially. “People are really very shocked when I tell them that the four schools of law aren’t really that important,” he said. “If people would just read the Quran, most of these differences would finish.”

I wasn’t convinced. More people were reading it, but it still created controversy. Men still used the Quran to legitimize their actions when they beat their wives. Bin Laden had used the Quran to declare war on all those he deemed infidels.

There’s reading the Quran properly and reading it sloppily, the Sheikh continued. All too often, people read it selectively, taking phrases out of context. “People just use it for whatever point the

want to make,” he shrugged. “They come to it with their own ideas and look for verses that confirm what they want to hear.”

The Quran was not a shopping list for the good life, said Akram. Pious Muslims like him, and eager students like me, need to stand back for a panoramic view of the text. The careful reader couldn't be distracted from its overarching messages and interlinking themes. Its very design was miraculous, one of the infinite signs of God's grace.

“A book as miracle,” I nodded.

“Ah! Now is it a book?” he slapped his thigh gleefully. “That's the first question you need to ask. Is it a book, or not?” He leaned forward, warming to the question. Was not the man-made concept of a book, with a beginning, middle, and end, too puny a word to describe something as infinite as the Quran?

“After all,” he continued, “it doesn't read in the order it was revealed. The first revelation Muhammad received doesn't come until very late, until sura 96.”

This was not good news. I was prepared for subtlety, but like a Broadway producer, I'd hoped for a tune I could hum.

The Quran may not unfold chronologically, but its ordering was deliberate, sent down from God, explained Akram.

“Why do you think the order was changed?”

“Since God was specific, there must be a reason.” He sat back, satisfied. Many things were open for discussion, but not divine strategy. It was a lurch, this switchback route from ambiguity to certainty and back again.

“So, in this sense, it's a book, right?”

“Yes. The Quran keeps calling itself a book. It's a book sent down to the Prophet, and it revealed to the people what they needed, when they needed it.” But being no ordinary book, he continued, the Quran didn't always make sense as other books did. “You'll be in a verse about the law of divorce,” he says, tracing a line on the table, like a football coach planning a play. “Then suddenly there will be a bit about prayer, and then go back to divorce.” He sat back. “How is one supposed to make sense of that?”

I had no clue, and in that, I certainly wasn't alone. Among the most stridently confused readers of the Quran was Thomas Carlyle. The Victorian writer was a great admirer of the Prophet Muhammad and of Islam itself, but found its Holy Book “as toilsome reading as I ever undertook ... a wearisome confused jumble.”

But it wasn't a jumble, insisted Akram. “You will see, and be amazed, how it fits together. If you move the verses around, you'll be surprised to find that they don't work out of order.”

I was beginning to see why many Muslims focus on concrete rules rather than the Quran's subtleties. Wrangling over mundane problems like veils and pork derivatives was far easier than wading through thickets of Quranic verse. How comparatively simple, to debate whether M&Ms are halal (permissible) or *haram* (banned). Few mortals could rise to the challenge of appreciating divine design. I felt overwhelmed, and it must have shown, because the Sheikh smiled. “Look, the Quran is difficult. To read it in the original, you need to know classical Arabic, which very few people want to take the trouble to learn.”

I certainly wasn't going to. I remembered well the old grad student wheeze about learning Arabic—that it's just the first twenty years that are tough. I patted my translation, sitting right next to the teapot, and I made to open it, eager to get started, but the Sheikh went on. “To really understand it, you'll need to know a lot,” he said. “To understand the stories of the Prophets in it, you need to know

your Bible stories.”

I gulped. My knowledge of the Bible was cobbled together from Renaissance paintings and reading *Paradise Lost* in sophomore English.

To understand the text, you need to understand the context, the Sheikh continued. To make sense of the rules it sets down, you need to understand Arab society during the age it was revealed: “So if you don’t know the customs and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad’s time, you can’t make sense of it.”

My background in seventh-century Arabia was rudimentary, and my Arabic nonexistent.

The Sheikh beamed as he reached for his coat. “And of course, if you’re lazy, you can’t make sense of it.”

I was frequently lazy. I thought of Carlyle, a Victorian, a Scotsman, and a philosopher—in short, a man emphatically not of lazy stock—who nonetheless warned, “Nothing but a sense of duty could carry any European through the Quran.”

* * *

As any child’s primer on world religions will tell you, Islam began as a desert faith. My time studying with the Sheikh felt a lot like desert travel. The sun can dazzle, and the air’s clearness can compress the appearance of distances. A far-off dune can look near; the horizon can loom, then recede in a blink. A strong wind can cover paths and footprints with sand. Such was the experience of studying with the Sheikh. The Quranic landscape was neither dry nor parched, but to a Western secularist like myself, unschooled in scriptures of any faith, it often lacked landmarks. I found myself setting mental boundaries, then having to reset them, again and again.

We made an odd little caravan, the Sheikh and I, a pious believer and a skeptical secularist. Yet surprisingly often, I’d pad up to a topic I’d assumed would be divisive, and we found ourselves agreeing. Some issue that mullahs or politicians had fulminated about for years would be revealed as utterly trivial. Then, just as suddenly, I’d trip across a phrase that seemed perfectly innocuous, only to discover craggy complexities lurking beneath it. I’d find myself staring across canyons of incomprehension. It could be quite dizzying.

But disorientation is a good teacher. Reexamining beliefs—most importantly, your own—lies at the heart of the Western secular tradition. Disorientation is also a sign of the power of God, and a theme of some of the Quran’s most ravishing passages.

The Sheikh was never truly disoriented. He had his *qibla*—his direction—and that direction was toward God. Having embarked on a journey of sorts, we could only move forward, together.

PART ONE

THE ORIGINS

The Quran in Twenty-Five Words

A few days before my lesson on the Quran's first sura, I went to a Sunday lunch party in North London. At the table, I met a man—I'll call him Hans—with crisp graying hair, brushed apple-green tweeds, and a languid Continental accent. Born in Vienna and educated at Cambridge, Hans had pronounced on subjects from primary school pedagogy to F. Scott Fitzgerald's prose before he'd even finished the first glass of Prosecco. After he told me about the book he'd published, on a literary journal in wartime Paris, he learned I was a journalist and asked what I was writing about. When I told him, he looked as though he'd just swallowed the backbone of his sea bream.

"The Quran," he spluttered. "But, why?"

An awkward pause. On hearing this daring dismissiveness from so refined a man, I felt flummoxed as he seemed. A year or so earlier, a British Muslim politician had charged that Islamophobia "passed the dinner-party test" and was now, disgracefully enough, an acceptable form of discrimination in polite society. I'd hoped she'd been exaggerating, since I hadn't come across it in my tiny, tolerant circle until now. I swallowed my fish and ran through the reasons. They seemed so self-evident that I restrained myself from reciting them in the singsong tones I use to chide my children to brush up to the gum line: A lifelong personal interest in Islamic societies. A worldwide population of 1.6 billion Muslims and counting, a number that was ever-growing, Islam being the planet's fastest-growing faith. Post-9/11 wars. A crucial new issue in European parliaments and American elections. The text's power, its poetry. I felt vaguely silly as I rattled off the list. Until a minute ago, I'd assumed that the sort of person who rereads *Tender Is the Night* and writes on twentieth-century intellectual history would deem reading the Quran a worthy pursuit. I finished my monologue, triumphantly forked some kale into my mouth, swallowed, and parried. "Why? What do you think about Islam?"

"They're living in the medieval ages," Hans said breezily. "They need to get up to speed with the rest of the world."

I'd heard this dozens of times before—from London taxi drivers, on Midwestern talk radio, and even from cultivated types like Hans. Had it not been for the din of kids bickering over whether to watch *Peter Pan* or *Snow White*, perhaps I would have retorted that fundamentalists can't be dismissed as medieval. That they don't exist outside modernity but are very much a part of it, with their use of technology, their sophisticated global networking, and their keen sensitivity to media cycles. Had I not been on my second Prosecco, and conscious of other guests waiting for us to tie up the strands of our conversation, I might have told Hans what various scholars have posited: that the anti-Western

antiseccular rhetoric of Muslim fundamentalists is a response to the fraying social fabric in fast-changing, increasingly polarized societies. That for new migrants to big cities or foreign countries, the mosque provides shelter from loneliness. That for people unmoored from home or family, prescriptive faith provides an anchor. I didn't launch those arguments, deciding that they were a shade heavy for a Sunday afternoon, what with our hosts taking advantage of the rare winter sunshine and opening the sliding doors onto their deck. I took an easier tack. "Well, of course, you're probably just going by what you read in the papers," I nodded. "Believe me, I know, as a journalist: Who makes the best stories, who gives the best quotes? The extremists, the crazies. So who do we tend to hear from? The people who shout the loudest."

"But where are the moderates?" he asked. "Why aren't they speaking up?"

"Well, they're there—they just don't make the headlines," I answered. "Quietism doesn't make for news. Sometimes they're writing op-eds, or working with interfaith groups or NGOs. But you're not going to hear about them, since they're not blowing things up or blowing off steam."

"But are there any Muslim moderates, really?" he asked. "I mean, real moderates?"

"Of course there are!" I said. "You've got millions and millions of Muslims who view their faith in much the same way that most Christians or Jews or Buddhists do—as a private matter. And if you're looking for Muslims trying to square their faith with universal human rights, you've got millions of reformers and reformation movements going on: women and gays and minorities going back to the Quran and reading it for themselves, not letting the local mullah tell them what to think. You've got lots of scholars, and lots of ordinary Muslims, trying to take back their religion from the radicals who've styled themselves as leaders without any training in Islamic law or tradition. There are Sufis, reacting against the strictness of the mullahs..."

"But what about Saudi Arabia?" he pursued, pushing his chair back from the table with the air of a wrestler limbering up before a match. "What about the Taliban? What they do to women ... In Saudi Arabia, women can't drive. Under the Taliban, they couldn't go anywhere without covering up..." The other guests, sensing a low hum of tension, began to gather their plates and ferry them to the sink.

"They aren't practicing Islam," I replied, perhaps a tad too smugly. "That's local or tribal custom made into national law. Yes, those laws and restrictions are terrible, but they're not Islamic. All you have to do to find out that it's got universal values—ones very much like yours and mine—is go back to the sources."

Our hosts had returned to the table bearing chocolate cake, so we came to an uneasy truce in the interests of gluttony and good cheer. Together we stepped, a bit shakily, onto the safer conversational turf of the dangers of Iranian nukes and the virtues of Neapolitan pizzas. I knew I hadn't swayed him, but I had complete confidence that the sources, as read by Akram, would reveal a just and humane faith. I left the party troubled by Hans's prejudice, but charged with righteousness, and braced by my own certainty.

* * *

I carried this clean, bright feeling to Oxford with me a few days later, where it only grew on seeing Akram again. As we walked up the steep stairs to the Nosebag, he talked about how he'd spent the day before in Leicester, meeting with women and Muslim community leaders to talk about allowing women to pray in mosques. During the Prophet's era, women prayed freely in mosques along with men, but in time, many cultures began restricting their presence. Over the centuries, the scholarly consensus that women didn't have to go to mosques to pray if they couldn't get away from home and the kids morphed into a cultural norm that said they shouldn't. In many parts of the Muslim world

women stopped going to the mosque—or were prevented from doing so.

Pointing to Islamic history, Akram challenged this. “The women were so happy, really,” he said, allowing himself a nanosecond of quiet triumph. “Not everyone was convinced, but it was a start.” Since news of his work on women scholars began to spread, Akram had been called out on scores of such diplomatic missions. The man who began his career as an expert on hadith has become a celebrated defender of Muslim women’s rights within a traditional Islamic framework.

In Leicester, he’d told the mosque authorities about his work assembling the names of historic women who didn’t just pray in mosques, but debated and lectured in them, teaching male students as well as female ones. I hoped that he also told them, as he had me, of the tenth-century Baghdad-born jurist who roved around on lecture tours, teaching women in Syria and Egypt; and of Umm al-Darda, a prominent seventh-century jurist from Damascus. Akram found that as a young woman, she used to sit with male scholars in the mosques, discussing theology. “I’ve tried to worship Allah in every way,” she wrote, “but I’ve never found a better one than sitting around debating other scholars.”

That quote alone made me want to adopt Umm al-Darda as an unofficial patron saint for this project: I loved the image of her sitting in the mosque with men, secure in her knowledge that debating was a holy thing. Akram’s research suggested she was very much her own woman. An orphan, she could go to mosque without covering her head, and for a time she could be found praying in the men’s row rather than the women’s. In her classes in Damascus and Jerusalem, she counted men, women, and even a caliph—a Muslim leader—among her students.

* * *

When we reached the café cashier, there was a gentle tussle over who would buy the tea. The bored blonde behind the register watched our friendly match of “allow mes” and “no, reallys” and “ne time, it’s mines.” As elaborate as calligraphy, as old as our acquaintance, the ritual was particularly reassuring today, after my jarring conversation on Sunday. Hans’s knowledge of Islam was shaped by the news of fundamentalists and extremists. Their certainty and anger came from a brittle interpretation of Islam, not from *adab*—the suppler, subtler concept of a humane and educated manner. The Prophet Muhammad once declared that *adab* nearly “equals two-thirds of religion.” The Sheikh’s own *adab* went beyond graciousness. I suspect it also had something to do with the quiet certainty. He enjoyed the profound peace of a man who observed his duty as a Muslim: being a “slave of God.” Over the course of the year, I would watch, not a little envious, as I saw how the enslavement brought him considerable calm.

Reverence for the Quran doesn’t always confer calm. Earlier in the year, the news had been full of riots and protests, after American soldiers at the Bagram Air Force Base outside Kabul had been discovered burning Qurans with trash. The books had been confiscated from prisoners on suspicion that they were being used to pass on extremist messages. President Barack Obama apologized, but that hadn’t prevented a furor, and the deaths of thirty Afghans and six American soldiers. This tragedy was one of several following rumors—some true, some false—of the Quran’s destruction by American troops in the tense post-9/11 world. *Adab*, like truth, is a casualty of war.

The reading for the day was short but powerful: “Al-Fatiha,” or “The Opening,” the Quran’s first sura. It’s been called Umm al-Quran—the Mother of the Quran—since the key themes of the Quran are packed into its twenty-five Arabic words. Some non-Muslims have likened it to the Lord’s Prayer, but it is more than that, so tightly knotted are its words into the fabric of Muslim life. Pious Muslims recite it seventeen times a day: twice during dawn prayers, three times while praying at sunset, and four times apiece in the three other prayers. “Al-Fatiha” can greet good news, seal a contract,

smooth bazaar negotiations. Some Muslims carve it on tombstones; others say its words while undressing to protect them from the prying eyes of jinn, or spirits. One hadith holds that the chapter “a source of healing for every ailment except death,” which is perhaps why its words make for a popular amulet, rolled up, encased in gold or silver, and worn around the neck. It hangs on the wall of Muslim homes across the world, protecting the inhabitants from harm. Once, the verse saved a woman I know during a robbery. She calmed a pair of thieves holding her at gunpoint in her bedroom by pointing to the words of Al-Fatiha, framed and hanging on the wall. She swore on it that she wouldn't scream if they left quietly. At the sound of her words—and the sight of the Quran's—one man slowly lowered the gun he had held to her head. They left soon afterward, leaving her unharmed.

I opened my Quran to the first verse and began reading:

In the Name of God, the Benevolent, the Merciful,
Praise is Proper to God, Lord of the Universe,
The Beneficent, the Merciful.
Ruler of the Day of Requital,
It is You we serve, to You we turn for help.
Show us the straight path,
The path of those You have favored;
Not of those who are objects of anger, nor of those who wander astray. (1:1-7)

“It is You we serve.” With this phrase—which in some translations is “Thee alone we worship”—the old polytheism of the Arab tribes of the Arabian Peninsula was to be replaced with one God uniting individuals from a collection of tribes into a community of faith. For the pagan Arabs of Mecca and Medina, the Quran brought not merely a new faith, but a reimagined social order. No longer were you just a member of your tribe or family, but of something much larger: a community of people called Muslims, united by worshipping a single Supreme Being. No longer would there be the scrum to worship hundreds of minor gods and goddesses, as Mecca's pagans had done until Islam arrived. In its place, there was utter submission to the all-powerful Creator.

But this statement didn't simply declare monotheism. The line proved even more radical. In few short words lay the concept of the dignity of the individual, bestowed on him by his creator. “When it says ‘Thee alone we worship,’ it means people aren't allowed to worship any angel, any man of money, or any man of power,” explained Akram. “A Muslim submits only to God.”

There. Right there lay the justification for everything from the Arab Spring revolts to the Islamic women's movement. With breathtaking linguistic economy, sitting just inside the first verse of the Quran, lay the words that punctured tyranny. They were gentle weaponry against husbands who ruled over their wives, or presidents who tortured their people. In a God-centered universe, no person had the right to rule over another person, since all were equal before their creator. It gave people an inherent dignity vis-à-vis their fellow humans. Such a satisfying sura. I wondered what Hans would make of it.

Akram pointed out that the line “to You we turn for help” is an indication of Islam's central tenet of submission. “It shows mankind asking how to worship,” he noted. “It is saying, ‘We are helpless people. We need more of your favor. We need to know how to worship You.’”

Here again was the surrender that Islam—derived from the same Arabic root word as “peace,” but literally meaning “submission”—demands of a Muslim. “When you see the word ‘worship,’ or *ibad* in Arabic, this is the sort of extreme humiliation that is only allowed in the case of God,” observed

Akram. “That’s why we have to bow in prayer. Before him, we require an extreme humbleness. While Christianity and Judaism drew their names from people, the word “Islam” refers to a relationship rather than a single figure—that between every believer and God.

Up to now, the lesson had been going well. Akram’s reading of “Al-Fatiha” described a just and expansive worldview. The verse’s emphasis on the individual’s direct association with God, unbrokered by clerical middlemen, was reassuringly democratic. The concept of extreme humility before God felt familiar, and admirable. It was only in the last three lines that I felt any disquiet:

Show us the straight path,
The path of those You have favored;
Not of those who are objects of anger, nor of those who wander astray.

“The Quran wants you to walk in the path of God,” the Sheikh explained. “The path of God is the straight path.”

“And who are those whom He’s favored?” I asked, assuming it would be pretty much anyone who stuck to the straight path. It was rather more specific than that. “God has bestowed His favor on four types of people,” said Akram.

I sat up straight, ever the eager student, fingers hovering above the laptop keyboard. “Prophets,” he transcribed.

“*Siddiqeen*. These are people who aren’t prophets, but whose true nature is so powerful that it put them on the straight path, like Maryam—the Bible’s Mary, who followed God’s instructions, with a pure and clean heart.”

Oh. Then: “Martyrs.”

Next?

“Other righteous people.”

I hoped it was a catchall category.

His elaboration—“Those whom God has favored” —was a rather narrower demographic than I had been hoping for. Wondering how broad the definition of “righteous” was, I found a clue in the next line: “Not [the path] of those who are objects of anger, nor of those who wonder astray.”

“And what kinds of people are they?” I asked, fully expecting to hear a list roughly similar to that in the Judeo-Christian tradition, beginning with *A* for adulterers and ending with *U* for usurers.

The list was far shorter than I expected. “Well, some people have said that ‘those who are objects of Thine anger’ refers to the Jews,” said Akram, whose calm suddenly grew unnerving. “God became angry with the Jews after they rejected Jesus Christ. God’s favor can be taken away from you at any time.”

“Jews” struck like a pebble. It is a hard, small, unyielding word. It always seems to jam the conversation in a way that the adjective “Jewish” doesn’t. I thought of that famous line from the British director Jonathan Miller. “I’m not a Jew,” Miller said. “Just Jewish. Not the whole hog, you know.”

The Sheikh continued. “God does not favor people who have gone astray. Some people think that part means Christians, who went to extremes by confusing their prophet Jesus with the divine. The Quran wants Muslims to remember that Jesus is only a man.”

“But aren’t the Jewish people and the Christians ‘Ahl-e-Kitab’?” I asked, plaintive now. “People of the Book?”

Islam’s famous respect for Ahl-e-Kitab, literally the People of the Book, as the followers of the

two other great monotheisms are known, was invariably invoked at interfaith events.

~~“Yes, they are,” said the Sheikh. “We respect the Jewish people and the Christian ones.”~~

The Sheikh did not believe that the last line of “Al-Fatiha” referred to Jews and Christians specifically, but to any Muslim who veered off piety’s path.

* * *

The lesson ended shortly after that. I rode back to London, queasy from hours on a stuffy bus rattled by hearing Akram recount the potentially hostile reading of that final line. Like Hans’s casual denunciations of Islam at lunch, it suggested that prejudice lurked in unlikely places. It disturbed me not as a Jew, but as a humanist. Maybe studying the Quran with Akram was too risky, like getting your parents to teach you how to drive. In unpacking the Quran’s first sura, we’d strayed from the carefully pruned list of topics we’d stuck to for twenty years. We’d veered off our own straight path and onto the hard shoulder of the road. So much of my enthusiasm for Islamic society had been born of the pleasure of finding similarities with my own outlooks. I’d reveled in finding shared values under superficial differences. So much of the pleasure of Akram’s friendship was the sheer surprise of connecting with someone whose outlook diverged so spectacularly from my own. And yet here, in our first lesson, I was already hearing things I didn’t want to hear.

Such disturbances were necessary, of course. To study with Akram was, among other things, to test the limits of my own tolerance. To date, my pluralist outlook had been a laissez-faire business, more cosmopolitan habit than a true challenge to my beliefs. It meant tacos at lunch, the mantra “Om” before yoga class, and Chinese herbs during hay fever season. Over the years, I had embraced diversity twice daily at least, on those morning commutes spent sitting on New York subways surfing on the sea of languages, or on London buses scanning the horizon of heads, some in hijabs, others bald or dreadlocked.

This first lesson with Akram hinted that my engagement with other worldviews had been more about pageantry than pluralism. I knew some old-fashioned Republicans, but none who had stuck with the GOP after George W. Bush’s presidency. I had lots of Jewish friends, but most were cultural Jews; none were Orthodox. Any Catholics I knew had lapsed long ago. Nobody in my social circle denied a woman’s right to choose an abortion. I might identify as someone who celebrated diversity, but in reality, my worldview was pretty cramped.

The bus lurched into London and let me out at my stop, sadder and less certain than when I boarded it that morning. Standing on the pavement, I hiked my backpack on my shoulder and glumly wondered what Hans would say.

The next day, with grim determination, I made straight for Bloomsbury. When I was a graduate student, I used to shake off Oxford’s straight-backed sobriety by going to work in the library of the hipper School of Oriental and Asian Studies at the University of London. Just studying there felt liberating. The students had piercings and hijabs; the halls were plastered with posters for world peace and against racism. Even the bright, clean-lined library felt less constrained by history. I made straight for the stacks devoted to *tafsirs*—commentaries on the Quran—and pulled down a stack of them. I wanted to regain the tight, bright certitude I’d felt before.

I sat with my tower of *tafsirs*, finger-scanning index columns for “Al-Fatiha” and for “Quranic attitudes to Jews and Christians.” I found some comfort in an introductory text by Fazlur Rahman, a great twentieth-century Muslim reformist. In *Major Themes of the Quran*, he cites a verse from the second sura: “Those who believe [Muslims], the Jews, the Christians and the Sabaeans—whosoever believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds, they shall have their reward from their Lord, sha

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