

## I am a Muslim

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I had my first lessons in religion, Islam, on my mother's lap, and learnt to utter a few verses from the Qur'an by heart. Her recitations of the Qur'an in the early hours of the morning left a lasting impression on me, which resounds in my ears to this day whenever I remember her. I lost my father when I was barely one year old, and my young mother had a hard time bringing up a family of six children, hence she sought refuge in religion and prayers, and took special care in our religious education. The verses she memorized carry us through in our daily prayers all our life.

During my youth and working life I was not a particularly devout Muslim. My religion has become much more important following my retirement. Part of this rekindled interest is undoubtedly influenced by my association with fellow Muslims. Even so, I wouldn't call myself a strict follower of the faith. I shun some of the practices and puritanical teachings of the so-called 'fundamentalists'. I pray daily, but wouldn't like to be coerced into religious rituals. Rather, I find comfort and solace in praying to Allah in solitude. Although praying in congregations can be inspiring, I sometimes find it too repetitive and ritualistic.

I have a family with two grown-up children, both born in the West. Being raised in a Western society made a significant difference in their upbringing. In particular, compared to my upbringing in India, they had minimal religious teaching. This concerns me, as I feel responsible for alienating them from their faith. I now believe that religious education is an essential part in moulding the character of a person, irrespective of the religion they decide to follow. The moral and religious aspects of life have become all the more important in the present-day world, where families struggle to stay together and societies seem to be going through a period of upheaval. My wife and I are, therefore, taking extra care with our grandchildren, making sure that they receive basic lessons in religious and moral education.

A few years ago I performed the *Hajj* pilgrimage with my family, which has left another lasting impression on me. The annual *Hajj* is a once in a lifetime occasion for Muslims to meet fellow pilgrims from all over the world. Although things have improved nowadays, it is an experience that tests one's patience, tolerance and physical endurance. It also inspired a sense of fellow feeling for others.

A mosque is supposed to be a place for prayers and social contact. Unfortunately, I find there is little scope to talk with and enquire about others. The only other way to socialize with fellow Muslims is at private parties or weddings. There seem to be few clubs or community centres within the communities of the ethnic minorities, especially amongst the Muslim communities in the United Kingdom.

Muslims have very few religious festivals, the main two being after Ramadan and *Bakrid* ('*Id-al-Adha*'). Therefore, young and old, rich and poor alike meet to celebrate these with great fervour. My recollection of '*Id* (*Eid*)' celebrations

in childhood is one of rejoicing and excitement, as well as days of preparations. We all dressed in our new clothes and visited friends and relations. I remember there being plenty of delicious food, which was prepared and exchanged. The best part for the children was collecting money from the elders and then all visiting the cinema house. Everybody knew everybody else in the town, and it was important to visit them to make up any differences. It was a time of renewing ties and friendships. Unfortunately, I find that there is little community life in this country. It is probably this feeling of isolation that impels us to our religion.

Although my religion is not so important to me, at times of trouble my thoughts go automatically towards religion. A feeling of helplessness makes me submit to God Almighty.

I feel that my religion is my personal affair and I don't like the intervention of a third person, but I do regard the prophet Muhammad as a good role model who has left marvellous examples of compassion, piety, simplicity and honesty. There is no walk of life for which he has not left guidance. Although I pray daily, I only read the scriptures occasionally. Because the Qur'an is written in Arabic, which I hardly understand, I read translations, as well as various interpretations and commentaries.

I get comfort in submission to Allah and thank Him for His bounty, my good health, the air we breathe, the water we drink, the sunshine and the seasons we enjoy without our asking or paying for it. If living in a secular society means not recognizing these gifts of God, then I don't want to live in such a society. I would much rather be a religious person.

As a religious person, I observe certain food regulations. Islam has strict guidelines about what to eat and what not to eat. For example, it forbids the consumption of any intoxicating drinks. I wear Western clothes for the convenience and climatic reasons and I think it is everyone's right to wear (and eat) what they want. That said, I think it is good for people to dress in a way that reflects their distinctive culture. Otherwise this world becomes a monotonous and boring place to live in.

I'm not a strict follower of Islam, yet our family life is very much influenced by our faith. We follow our religion in matters relating to marriage, birth and death. My wife performs prayers five times a day and recites the Qur'an daily. My son also attends the mosque once a week, work permitting. However, living in a Western society it is not always possible to meet the requirement that a Muslim should pray five times a day. Again, there is no fixed day for our festivals (unlike, say, 25 December, a fixed day for Christians to celebrate Christmas) and sometimes they fall on a workday. This can present difficulties. For example, during the month of Ramadan a Muslim is supposed to fast from daybreak to sunset. Because this may mean sixteen or seventeen hours of fasting, depending on the season, it becomes very strenuous for a working person. Hence, there are limitations to following our religion in the strictest terms.