

C*PEN

Interpretations

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A newsletter about Islam from a progressive
and sometimes interfaith perspective.

Let me introduce myself...

by Stephanie Roy [Ottawa, Canada]
Editorial

As humans, we each have to find our own identity which defines us individually and as part of the society. I strongly believe that the Creator has made us each uniquely beautiful and it is in part to celebrate this beauty that I wanted Open Interpretations to look into the topic of Identity.

The authors of this newsletter are all beautiful people who, in some way, identify themselves within Islam. I knew how this part of our identity was important to each author, but I did not expect the depth of the introspection which resulted from this theme. For the first time, thinking of my own identity, I felt the need to write a full article beyond my editorial. My authors dug into a place of conflict within themselves and within their societies and found what made them innately connected to themselves and to their faiths.

Moreover, Open Interpretations has been graced with its first guest contribution from famous Youtuber, Gothmummi who explores Islam within her Christian identity in her videos and now in our newsletter.

I also have the immense pleasure of featuring, for the first time, to poetry from one of our author, Aymen Ben Cheikh.

Please enjoy this special edition and may you find wonderful peace with yourself and the Creator!

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.wordpress.com

A Christian Muslim

By Gothmummi [London, United Kingdom]

www.youtube.com/gothmummi

When I was asked to write this article, I gave deep thought to my appearance. 'How does Islam help shape my identity?' I pondered. Well, I wear hijab, in the literal sense. To me, hijab is not just a scarf covering the hair. It is covering our 'adornments' as women, although I do occasionally show from my elbow to my wrist, that is as much as I will dare to bear!. I wear an abaya more often than not when leaving the house, and very, very rarely wear trousers or jeans in public, especially if I am not with my fiancé.

After pondering 'how much can one write about their dress sense, even if there is religious reasons behind it?' It suddenly came to me. Is my identity simply my attire? I am just a 'hijabi' and nothing more? Of course not! Despite what the media and Islamophobes will try to indoctrinate into the masses, hijabi women are not the silent, abused servants to all of mankind, shy figures shrouded in secrecy and billowing fabrics that you see depicted on the news. My view is this: Much of Islam and Christianity are extremely similar. The laws and the expectations are quite often more of or less the same. After all, we come from, and worship the same, the only and all powerful, God. The phrase 'people of the book' encompasses the Abrahamic religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

However, Christianity has changed and evolved a lot more than Islam, rightly or wrongly, but I feel a lot of Christianity's basic and purposeful commands have been lost, whereas Islam more or less, has kept them close at heart, and in the forefront of the mind.

The Qur'an teaches us to be modest in our apparel and our behaviour. It teaches us to be kind to others, to be respectful, to care for those less fortunate than ourselves:

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'Show Kindness To Your Parents And Kinsfolk, To The Orphans And The Needy, And Exhort To Righteousness' [Qu'ran 55:9]

to be good, loving and obedient to our loving, hard-working husbands:

"Men are the supporters of women, because Allah has stowed on the one more than the other, and for what they have to provide (for them) from their sources. So the righteous women are obedient and protect in the absence of their husbands that which God ordains to be protected." [Qu'ran 4:34]

to be supportive, good mothers to our children, to guide them in the ways of right and wrong and being a mother, how could it not fill my heart with joy to read:

"A man came to the Prophet and said: O Messenger of Allah! Who from amongst mankind warrants the best companionship from me? He replied: "Your mother." The man asked: Then who? So he replied: "Your mother." The man then asked: Then who? So the Prophet replied again: "Your mother." The man then asked: Then who? So he replied: "Then your father." [Sahih Bukhâri 5971 and Sahih Muslim 7/2]

We are to be honoured! How could I possibly not be inspired by all that?! How could I read and know these things, and not apply them to my own life? These are only some of the joys and inspirations in the Qur'an, I encourage you to open yours today, and see which verses speak to your heart!

I'll never remain silent

by Aymen Ben Cheikh [Tunis, Tunisia]

They always talk about me
I don't know why they hate me
They talk about me on TV
but they never wanna hear me
They say things about me
Things you must believe
"Don't listen to him people
Or you're gonna be deceived"
That's what they think
That's what they say
But at least this time let me explain it my way
Bism ullah
I'm a Muslim, I believe in one god
He has 99 names, the first one is Allah
Creator of the universe,
the only worthy of worship
the fashioner, the maker,
the all knowing, the blessing
I ask him to forgive me
For all the sins I deed
I ask him for guidance
I ask him for peace
I don't care about the money
Don't tell me who you are
I see only your deeds
I don't care about your car
Your god is the cash, my god is the guide
Your god is the power, my god is the light
"Don't oppress, and don't be oppressed"
The words of our prophet
That's why I'll be patient
But I'll never remain silent
Even without a pen, I'll write with my tears,
I'll write with my blood
Until the angel of death
comes and Tells me to stop

My Refuge in Islam

by Stephanie Roy [Ottawa, Ontario]

When my father first announced that we would be travelling to my hometown to see my grandmother before her passing, my brain fired in all directions: I began to obsess with various meaningless details such as the articles for this newsletter, the colour of the clothing I would be bringing and whether my family would accept my hijab. Yes, my hijab, symbol of my Muslim identity, became a subject of concern. I wear hijab as a reminder of God's presence in my life, and after deep reflection, I decided that that I would wear my hijab as I would require God's presence even more so during this difficult time.

During the trip, I was glad that neither my dad nor my uncle mentioned my headscarf. We arrived by my grand-mother's bedside late at night; exhausted from the trip and wary of the long and emotional nights ahead. When we entered the room, my grand-mother had just woken up from agitated sleep. She was clearly in ill-health and slightly confused. She hadn't seen my father since my grand-father's passing and did not recognize him right away. When she did, she smiled from ear to ear. She then turned to my uncle, then to me. When I noticed she did not recognize me with the veil, I removed it immediately. Her expression of joy said it all: this moment of happiness was God-given.

I left the hospital in the hopes of seeing my grand-mother the next day; unfortunately she fell into a coma before I was given the opportunity to see her again. My dad and his siblings had a chance to see her before the doctors put her under sedation, leaving my cousins and me feeling uneasy, even angry. Regardless, we were determined to spend all the time we could by my grand-mother's side. As I needed to feel God's presence, I put my hijab back on my head. I hoped and prayed that I

would get to see my grand-mother's eyes again, even for just a moment. When the parents left the room for a moment, I took the opportunity to take my cousin's hand and pray. We pronounced the "Our Father" and then made du'a out loud. I mentioned my deep regret to have missed a chance to see my grand-mother's eyes one last time and my hope that she was at least sleeping peacefully and without pain. I leaned in to kiss my grand-mother's cheek, then so did my cousin, at this exact moment, my grand-mother opened her eyes, just for a brief moment and my cousin and I finally had the chance to hurry her back to sleep.

Turns out, this would not be the last time that my grand-mother would wake up momentarily. They would inject her every 3 to 6 hours to induce sleep. As we all spent the night at the hospital, I felt a strange compulsion to stay awake. I feared my grand-mother would pass while everyone was asleep. Alone and in the dark, surrounded by sleeping bodies and keeping guard on my grand-mother, I prayed in silence that God would give me the strength to stay awake. I had remembered to bring a copy of the Qu'ran and would read it while listening closely to my grand-mother's every breath. I would put aside the Qu'ran to check on my grand-mother or give space to the attending nurses. During one instance, a nurse placed some filled syringes on top of the Qu'ran which I had placed on the night table. I first felt a little uneasy about syringes being placed on this Holy book, then quickly began to pray that the medication they contained would appease my grand-mother and provide her with restful sleep, by God's will. I know that the book itself does not contain any magical power to cure or assist, but I prayed that in ever so little a way, the syringes placed on it just might.

Her expression of joy said it all: this moment of happiness was God-given.

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Someone once told me that there was great reward in reading the Qu'ran beautifully but that those who struggled in reading it would have double the reward. I took refuge in those words that night as I had a hard time focussing on the words, falling asleep or startled by my grand-mother's wheezing breaths. I got up once in a while to stretch my legs and place blankets on my sleeping relatives. The numerous interruptions only came to reassert the need for comfort which I drew from the various chapters. I probably skipped a number of verses due to distraction, but paid close attention to those describing paradise, hoping that, when time would come, God would open the gates of the ever-lasting gardens for my grand-mother.

During those long nights, keeping guard on my grand-mother's bedside, I was more than just a believer. I was a grand-daughter, a daughter, a cousin and a niece. I was a night-watcher, a time-

keeper, and a blanket-giving, pillow-fluffing machine. I hugged my cousin as she cried, patted my aunt's back during emotional moments, held my grand-mother's hand while she fought back pain to stay with us a little longer. I am a Muslim, and I take refuge in the one and only God and His message passed on through Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) but I have now realized that my faith is nothing if it does not transcend in my actions. My faith is not my Hijab or my Qu'an, it is not even my ability to recite Islamic prayers in beautiful Arabic; my faith is my longing for God's Eternal Love and Compassion for myself and others and actively seeking it.

My grand-mother has now passed away and I pray that God, in His infinite Mercy, grants her paradise.

*Ina ilahi wa ina ilahi rajioun
From God we come and to God is our return*

The Two Ways of Being Muslim — Identity Crisis and Conciliation

by Farouk A. Peru [London, England]

Through language, we may communicate our thoughts to people and help them understand our human experience. However, the limitations of language can be our stumbling block in the very same task and worse still, make people misunderstand our words. This is basically what my essay is about – maximising the effectiveness of language so as to communicate with maximum efficiency. I feel that the terms 'Islam' and 'Muslim' are used in certain ways which relates to a certain identity that limit their benefit. Thus, we must rethink their usage.

Take the term 'gay'. When the great philosopher Nietzsche wrote 'the Gay Science' in 1882, he meant it to be the science of writing

poetry! Of course, English speakers also used it to mean joy and happiness. Then, in the next hundred years or so, the word gradually evolved to become an acceptable term for homosexuals. How exactly

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this happened is a matter of debate. Then, in post-immigration London, 'gay' has been negatively loaded with a sense of "uncoolness" in street language perhaps as a mockery of homosexual subculture. Words as container of meanings change as society changes.

It is the same as the term 'Muslim'. There may have been a time when people referred to the World of Islam as a place of enlightenment even if begrudgingly so. These days however, Islam and Muslim are not often used in a

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positive way in the media. The latest debacle is the case where a mother is sentenced to life imprisonment for killing her child for failing to memorise the Qu'ran. It is amazing that something so inspiring and positive like the Qu'ran can become the reason for such an evil act.

My reason for writing this essay is to liberate these terms Islam and Muslims, to effectively remove them from human influence in order to be able to study them as concepts; in other words, to break ideology from cultural expression. The existence of Islamic and Muslim identity is also its limitation. Allow me to explicate:

I was born in a Muslim family. My name is Farouk, a Muslim name. I eat hallal foods; this is mostly of Muslim culture. I even celebrate Muslim special days like Eid. In Malaysia, my identity card has 'Islam' written on it. I pray with other Muslims from time to time, fast during Ramadan and will be allowed in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina to do the Hajj and Umrah without any sort of 'conversion papers' if I choose to go there (regardless of whether I'm a mass murderer or rapist. It wouldn't matter – my Muslim name is my passport!).

These descriptions above are merely a few of the infinite descriptions of 'Islam' and 'Muslims' but they do have one thing in common: none of these cultural expressions are from the Qu'ran. Many readers would disagree with me since praying, fasting and the pilgrimages are mentioned in the Qu'ran according to Traditional understanding. However, even if I agreed with that, I wish to point out that their details are not mentioned and therefore as far as the Qu'ran goes, they are not explained.

In any case, this shows that many of the things we consider signifiers to the terms 'Islam' and 'Muslims' are not in the Qu'ran. What is the significance of this point? On this level, Islam and Muslims are dissociated from theology and ethics – the primary content of the Qu'ran.

There are many other things which bear the tags of 'Islam' and 'Muslims' but which can be

questioned as to whether they really deserve the term. 'Islamic State', 'Islamic Law (Sharia)', 'Islamic Politics', 'Islamic economics' all have Muslims advocating or participating in them but also have Muslims disagreeing as to what they are. This disagreement shows that these concepts are human products once again.

This shows that many of the things we consider signifiers to the terms 'Islam' and 'Muslims' are not in the Qu'ran.

Of course, the problem with this is the tyranny of the majority. However the majority of Islam and Muslims choose to act, we minorities are dragged along with it. Media images of Muslims stoning women to death, calling for death of writers and blasphemers and proclaiming Islam's rise to dominate the world do not help the positive connotations of these terms 'Islam' and 'Muslims'.

This is why I suggest that these terms when used in this way should be given a capitalisation, that is 'Islam' with a capital 'I' and 'Muslim' with a capital 'M'. They are simply names and names should be capitalised. A man named Tall may be called 'Tall' but it can never mean he is necessarily tall in height. The capitalised 'T' in his name shows that it is simply a name and not a physical or a behavioural description.

This of course leaves us with the question of the essential description of what the term 'islam' means and who is really a 'muslim'. If you notice, I am deliberately leaving the 'i' in 'islam' and 'm' in 'muslim' with the small letters. The reason for this is that I seek for it a descriptive definition and not simply a nominal (name-based) one. Another reason

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is that I wish to reground these definitions back to the Qu'ran. Traditionalist Muslims would no doubt wish to ground these definitions with the hadith as well but I cannot agree, being a Qu'ranist. However, our common source is still the Qu'ran and that is where I believe we must begin.

[Islam] refers to the principle of peace in this world.

In the Qu'ran, islam is not something solely associated with Prophet Muhammad but is rather a universal principle. It refers to the principle of peace in this world. When various Qu'ranic personalities such as Nuh, Ibrahim, Musa were delivered and made safe, 'salam' ('islam's root word) is said on them. 'aslama' (another form of the word) is said to be the state of being of everything in the universe.

The term muslim , also closely related to the term 'islam' comes from the word 'silm' which means to be sound or whole. A muslim therefore is one who works towards a state of wholeness and soundness. Once again, we can see in the world most if, not all religions and ideologies work towards this state. Therefore, what justification do we have to deny them the use of the terms 'islam' and 'muslims' (with small letters, if you note).

And indeed, this is our problem, the limitations in language have effectively rendered our usages of these powerful terms. We have conflated 'Islam' with 'islam' and 'Muslim' with 'muslim' and the result isn't pretty. We have Muslims saying things like 'Mother Theresa was a wonderful human being but since she wasn't Muslim, she won't be going to heaven'. While Mother Theresa certainly wasn't of the Muslim culture, she did exhibit the muslim trait. She spent her life working to repair society and free it from poverty.

Muslims all over the world point to Qu'ranic verses like 3/19 (which says 'the religion in the sight of Allah is islam') and believe that they are the only people who are saved. However, the Qu'ran was referring to the cultural product called 'Islam' (with the Islamic names etc) but rather the principle of islam, the acquirement of peace. While this doesn't exclude the Muslims, it certainly doesn't make them the sole recipients of that claim. In fact, whoever works towards peace is equally entitled.

In short, while I am of the Islamic culture and identify as a Muslim, that is different from being of the islamic ideology and being a muslim. The first is automatic and doesn't afford any spiritual benefit. The second is theological, ethical and ideological. I am automatically of the first and working for the second.

Want to write for *Open Interpretations*? Contact us at

LoveGodDiversity@gmail.com for the next edition's theme and deadline!