

MY "NIGHT OF POWER"-- IN MACKAY

Assalamu alaykum everyone,

Inch'Allah I hope to share with you a wonderful & blessed experience that I had in Mackay this weekend. (Shared with Imad, who invited me there.) Since my conversion (making shahada) a year ago, I have learned many things; and have also encountered many spiritual struggles, and obstacles too. Becoming a Muslim has been about the best journey in my life, and the initial step into the religion felt profound and joyful. But until this weekend, I felt more that I have been 'practicing Islam'; for the first time now, I believe I can see myself AS a Muslim! My faith was profoundly confirmed, and strengthened during this trip. And many of my questions about the religion have been answered; in ways that help me see more the beauty & wisdom of this religion.

So Imad and I drove to Mackay after fajr (the morning prayer), and met up with the brothers there at the mosque for lunch. He introduced me to some lovely believers, ...Badr and Fareeh from Indonesia, 'Mustafa' from Australia; and the amazing imam there.

Imam Eshfaq Akbar kindly invited us both to lunch and dinner. ...Unfortunately we don't have a scholar leading in the Townsville mosque. (Which is not so bad, because the doctor who gives many of the sermons always says inspiring things; which is helpful for someone like myself with limited knowledge, who doesn't have a deep grasp of the theology anyway.)

[...]

Basically since reading the Qur'an, and believing that this book had to be written by God (and that God was speaking to the prophet); I've had a lot of culture shocks and unanswered questions, about why things are done a certain way. ...And especially, why there is such a large difference between Western culture, and how the Muslims at the mosque (and elsewhere) were living their lives. Much of the religion's 'cultural aspects' were beyond my comprehension, and there were several times where it was just "too much" and I had to step away from the mosque for a few weeks or more!

As many already know, I have some pretty big concerns about Islam and how it is expressed in the lives of women, or at least the Muslim women I had met in the past.

In Christianity, even if people are basically hypocritical- it is a fundamental requirement that they ALWAYS act in a sympathetic, friendly way.

But in Islam (as I had experienced it to date), the opposite seemed to be true.

...But more than that, I felt like "the love of God" should have a positive effect, should make people happy and loving, NECESSARILY. So I wasn't sure 'where was the love' in the way that most Muslim women never talk to, or acknowledge men in public.

But I had many other concerns besides this. The rituals, which are an essential aspect of the religion, were a miracle to me. I felt that they were an added proof that this faith was the true Faith. But it appeared to my Western eyes, that many Muslims (men this time!) were so fixated on rituals- that they never really went any deeper. Like Islam was some new, monotheistic version of yoga or something!?

(And possibly unique to the Townsville mosque- where most at the mosque are here for the uni, so are not local and have no ties beyond themselves- I felt really out of place. Like people weren't socializing, or sharing the lived experience of the faith. It was kind of a lonely experience; though to be fair, it would also be pretty hard for Somalis who don't speak English; and people with families, to devote a lot of time to 'the church'- in the way that Christians usually do. The Muslim students in town, they are pretty open and kind; though even here there is not yet a strong student activism. So people "just see each other around", and there is really not a functioning community as such- to help us foster our Unity.)

The religion is about God though, and I didn't want to get too hung up about flawed relationships; even in Christianity we are aware that we can only truly depend upon God. But the whole experience was, let's just say, less than what I had expected.

So anyway, lunch and dinner at imam Akbar's house was a very pleasant experience. He is a very amiable, gentle-man, very considerate and always listening rather than just talking down to you. At first I didn't even know he was the imam, and was just talking to him like anyone else. (He is also quite young, in his mid-twenties.)

[...]

My questions during our first time together mostly focussed upon the issues I felt, around the topic of women and how men should relate to them; and also what Muslim men should expect about them. He attentively listened, and thoughtfully responded, without judgement and in a way that made it seem like these were natural questions. (Which is sadly an experience that, before that, I had not had when trying to communicate these things.) He explored for us the concepts of the Muslim family/marriage; and also about how in human nature we are just

designed to always 'make concessions' to our weaknesses, even if we are perfectly well-meaning, without any sinful intentions in mind.

>> On marriage, In Islam it is believed that men and women have different natures. Or perhaps it could be said 'complimentary' natures. So that instead of it being about better or worse, "right and wrong" even: we are built to be kind of like 'yin and yang'. (NOT the imam's terminology!!!)

We are truly two halves of a whole.

So when men and women associate in ways that are not "out of necessity" (eg. going to the shops, or when the Community or families get together): then what happens is that non-family members are automatically drawn to the opposite sex, because that is 'where their needs are met'.

(Which is true. Because even men who are "a man's man" still talk about women a lot.)

This doesn't lead immediately to lust of course; and especially to a Westerner who is surrounded by partial nudity and promiscuity all the time, we become very desensitized to the opposite sexes' attractions in general.

But the reason why Muslims limit (not forbid) encounters is not because they fear lust; but first and most importantly because God simply requires it of us, **WHATEVER THE WISDOM OF THIS**. And yet secondly, the wisdom of this is: that every little window or door is **DESIGNED** to be a way in, for temptation.

...I always saw this as hyper-sensitivity. But the imam explained that because of our natures, it is actually meant to be 'the natural place to go'. Lust is not inevitable, but it is eventually going to become an eventual temptation. NOT in every circumstance, with every pair of individuals; but in general, and 'on the balance of probabilities'.

So we firstly have an obligation to God; then we have an obligation to the Community; to try and avoid anything that could (and this is important) hurt someone else, even if our own intentions are harmless. But finally, it is about our own expression of the religion, our own experience of the faith, that we simply cancel out the **OPPORTUNITIES** for temptation. (Because God made us in a sense, very 'temptable' creatures. ...Plus we have the devil to contend with, in addition to that.)

>> The imam comforted my concerns (or complaints) about this, by agreeing that it is perfectly normal and natural that (many) men in fact do long for **JUST** companionship with women, that it is not often or always

just about physical tensions. He agreed that that was what I myself was looking for; and (like many others who I have discussed it with) he recommended that ...once I get married, one woman's friendship will meet all of my needs. So there is no need or cause for alarm if, in the meantime, I am a little lonesome for the complexities and subtleties that women offer us, (via their personalities).

>> After these initial questions, masha'Allah we moved on to some more important topics like: how do we find out more about God? through God's names, or is there extra ways and means. This led into some discussion about the power, and importance of the ritual aspects of the faith. In effect his words led me to appreciate better, that we can worship God with our bodies as well as our hearts; and we can also worship as individuals or collectively. From my western/Christian background, this was a bit of a revelation, because I'd always just assumed that the only 'real' emotion worthy for God ...was worship.

We discussed especially prayer, the different kinds (ritualistic, theological, appreciating God, and making requests). And the many ways that each can be subjectively practiced. (Plus of course, it is essential to mix them up. And the imam reassured me that indeed there is a reason for it; but that Muslims DO indeed tend to focus too little on just "talking with God".)

It was thus comforting to understand, not just a much broader and deeper way of communicating with God; but from a more selfish perspective too, WHY it is that Muslims do things so differently. They are drilled from an early stage to get the external, the physical aspects of the religion right (rather than the emotional-theological), Because... EVERYONE BRINGS THEIR OWN OPINIONS AND EXPERIENCE to the religion.

But what binds us all together is, that God has designed and commanded that (whatever path that takes), we are all Rightly Guided.

>> By God's commands. So that, the wisdom may change/accommodate for us from moment-to-moment: but the Command upon all Muslims is all-wise, and applicable to us all, all the time.

Finally we reverted back to issues about Islamic 'culture'.

In Australia we are very multi-cultural; but there is an underlying presumption that we will work together, and have some shared common values. That we will 'compromise'.

>> Islam is a religion that doesn't compromise, NOT because Muslims are arrogant. But because they believe that the shared values are the

commands of God. For non-believers the 'shared values' may be humanistic, like fairness or equality, or humility? As such these are emotional. Islam does not negate the emotional; it just gives primacy to the behavioural, to our actions! Love and kindness, empathy is commanded to follow.

>> But if Muslims appear rigid or uncompromising, it is not because they (necessarily) reject such values. They are just emphasizing the first or most important element. ...And if they require further grace in learning the best expression of all this; everything is determined by God alone! We cannot do God's work, and change others. We are actually required to not 'meddle' too much. But just be loving, be open, and give a gracious example. Tell people about every aspect of God's will, emotional and behaviour.

But make no demands: because at the end of the day, the only journey we can truly share is our own ...with God!

We may be a Community, but it is not the sort of community described in the Bible (John chapter 15).

It is about God being beyond us; and so we look beyond ourselves. And only then can we focus upon all of God's plans and commands, to see how they meet our needs individually and collectively.

For too long I was focussed on why those needs weren't being met, because I was 'over-reaching'. Due to not understanding where God's wisdom lay.

So these and many other wonderful encounters were both a great encouragement, and a comfort.

...I don't know if this should be called my (first) 'night of power'?? But I returned today with so much conviction, strength and new ways of seeing, that (God willing) I really feel as though I have stepped out of a famine- and into a feast. This is my first 'spiritual Eid'.

Alhamdulillah- God be thanked and praised!