



from the August 16, 2006 edition - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0816/p20s01-lire.html>

Backstory: What it means to be Muslim

They went to the same school in Saudi Arabia - so how did they turn out so differently?

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COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

Yasir Kazi was the last person I wanted to sit next to on the plane taking us from the US to Copenhagen for the Muslim Leaders of Tomorrow (MLT) conference last month. But airline ticket counter agents - and divine intervention perhaps - determined otherwise, for there he was, on the aisle seat of my row as we boarded a connecting flight from Iceland to Denmark.

I spotted him immediately at Kennedy Airport. His beard screamed "Muslim." No. More than that, it screamed the kind of judgmental Muslim who would give me a hard time because nothing about me screamed "Muslim." So I had an unfair advantage knowing he was Muslim: If he knew I was, perhaps he, too, would have wished a flight free of conversation with me.

We'd been called to Copenhagen to discuss the integration of Muslims in the West. But it was really the question "What does being a Muslim mean?" that boarded the plane and sat in the empty seat between Yasir and me. The brainchild of the not-for-profit New York-based American Society for Muslim Advancement and the multifaith Cordoba Initiative, the conference brought 100 Muslims of diverse backgrounds from 15 countries to Denmark to discuss how Muslims are faring in integrating in Western societies, in light of the clash of civilizations mentality that has set in since the terrorist attacks in London, Madrid, and New York.

But Yasir and I hadn't even landed yet. We'll get to Denmark later.

I'm a board member of the Progressive Muslim Union of North America. A core tenet of our mission is that anyone who calls him or herself a Muslim is a Muslim - no litmus test, no scorecard for ritual or dogma. Self identity is all we consider. Perhaps it really was divine intervention that I was seated by the window and Yasir by the aisle - that empty chair between us couldn't even begin to convey the space between our outlooks on religion and life.

"Are you going to the MLT conference?" he asked as he made way for me to take my seat. "I guessed you were from your Arabic jewelry." So something about me *did* scream "Muslim"? Or give a hint, at least? When he said his name, I realized he was someone rumored to be balking at even speaking to some of the liberal women attendees. So I hesitated, unsure whether to extend a hand to shake because some conservative Muslims don't want to touch a woman's hand.

After tentative conversation about the panels that awaited us at the conference and polite questions about our backgrounds - he's pursuing a PhD in Islamic studies at Yale, I'm a journalist - we found what appeared to be common ground: Saudi Arabia. But "never trust appearances" seemed to be the aphorism that we both were trying to prove. If you saw him (the Muslim man with the big beard) and me (the Muslim woman without the head scarf) would you figure he was the American and I the Egyptian?

It turned out we went to the same school in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia - though a few years apart, and he in the boys' section which was several miles from the girls' section that I attended. Our brothers might have been in the same grade, and our fathers surely taught and worked together at the King Abdul-Aziz Medical School.

"It's a long way from Saudi Arabia to the Progressive Muslim Union of North America," Yasir said after our

memories had drawn such mirror images. "Saudi Arabia is the reason I am what I am," I replied quickly. "Saudi Arabia is the reason I am what I am, too," he said.

How did one starting point lead to such different lives? That may sound like the inverse of the integration debate, but it's really the heart of it. It's not about Muslims' ability to talk to the "West." In Copenhagen, when a group exercise brought together at my table Muslims from Australia, Portugal, France, Belgium, Germany, and Canada, there was no monolithic "Muslim" and there was no monolithic "West." It was about Muslims' ability to talk to one another.

Yasir and I had to talk. In his view, "liberal" Muslims outnumbered "conservatives" at the conference. What a relief, I thought. I'm fed up with Muslim conferences at which conservative views are presented as the "real" Islam and against which liberal views must justify their validity.

But to Yasir's credit, he wasn't beyond making a joke out of the stereotypes that many of us hold of conservatives. A conference assignment was to talk to those we normally wouldn't talk to. So at a coffee break, there I was - a woman wearing T-shirt and jeans attempting to schmooze with Yasir, in his traditional Pakistani-style tunic and baggy pants, and his friend Abu Eesa Niamatullah, a British Muslim in a flowing white robe.

I asked them how they thought the conference was going. "I wasn't going to come at first," said Abu Eesa, founder of an educational institute and publishing house and author of a Muslim blog, who'd been outspoken in conference sessions about how he didn't think Muslims had a problem integrating. "I've been writing an essay called 'No to Integration, Yes to Disintegration.' "

Immediately Yasir jokingly interjected with a suggestion: "Explain to her what you mean by that. You know what she'll think."

Was Yasir joking about the assumption that Muslim men who have long beards blow things up? Now we're talking, Yasir!

It was true - I'd stereotyped the men with big beards.

"People always assume I'm very conservative, but I'm actually quite liberal," California Imam Tahir Anwar said in an exercise that had us place ourselves along a liberal-conservative continuum according to how others see us.

"Yeah, right!" was my gut reaction to Tahir, whose beard was even longer than Yasir's.

As a young man he'd wanted to be a US Air Force pilot, he said. His love for speed has him zooming around California highways, he confessed, where his car is the only one with the license plate "IMAM."

I couldn't resist confessing to him over lunch my "yeah, right" reaction to his assertion that he was quite liberal. He smiled like he was used to hearing that. It had been my gut reaction to his conservative appearance as well as the dismaying feeling that many Muslims are reluctant to embrace the liberal label with pride because it sounds somehow less authentic or wishy-washy.

During the exercise, I stepped forward and said that people assume I'm a liberal Muslim, I'm indeed a liberal and I'm proud of it and I wished more people would openly embrace the term.

At the end of the conference, I found out that my definition of a Muslim - that anyone, including an atheist, who identifies themselves as Muslim is a Muslim - had made me an atheist courtesy of some conservative Muslims who I'd debated with on the point. They'd stereotyped me right back, deciding I must be an atheist. You see why we need to talk?

"Believers are like the bricks of a building. They hold each other up." That saying of the prophet Muhammad was posted on an easel next to a panel on pluralism that included Yasir and his ideological and theological polar opposites.

At a coffee break soon after the panel, I ran into Yasir, fresh from an hour-long meeting with one of the liberal women I had heard he didn't want to meet. He looked stunned.

"But did you shake her hand?" asked another attendee after Yasir told us of the meeting.

"Yes."

It was my turn to be stunned: "You shake women's hands? I didn't offer mine on the plane because I wasn't sure."

Yasir stuck his hand out for a firm shake.

I plan on writing to Yasir to continue our conversation.

Maybe I'll even suggest that we write a book together on how Saudi Arabia made us who we are today.

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