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## FINDING MY RELIGION

### A Silicon Valley imam is on his way to the hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca

David Ian Miller, Special to SF Gate

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Imagine standing in a crowd of 2 million people whose most cherished dream has just come true. For many Muslims, participating in the hajj -- the annual journey to the physical and spiritual heart of Islam -- is the most central spiritual experience of their lives.

All Muslims are expected to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their life if they are financially and physically able. Attending the world's largest annual spiritual gathering -- which begins on the eighth day of Dhu al-Hijjah, the 12th month of the Islamic year -- is no vacation. However, pilgrims say that despite the crowds and associated inconveniences, the hajj is primarily a time of great joy.

Imam Tahir Anwar, spiritual leader of Silicon Valley's South Bay Islamic Association, is leaving for the hajj on Dec. 19 with 150 members of his congregation. Anwar, 28, who teaches part-time at Granada Islamic School in Santa Clara, spoke with me by phone last week about the joys and frustrations of the hajj and his life as an imam in America.

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**You're leaving for the hajj in a couple of weeks. How do you feel about the trip? Nervous? Excited? Blissful?**

I'm definitely very excited. This year, the hajj falls during the holiday season, so people are able to take time off from work to be there. A large number of my congregation will be going with me.

**I was reading a guide to the hajj that suggested pilgrims think of the aggravation they encounter at the Saudi airport as retribution for their sins. It seems that making hajj is not easy or comfortable.**

It's definitely not. But then it depends on how you look at it. A lot of Americans or Westerners are so used to the comforts of life and get frustrated when they can't do something as simple as going to the bathroom in the morning and turning on a tap where hot water comes out. Or they are used to walking through immigration at the airport, flashing their passport and going right through. There they have to ask you a lot of questions and it can take quite a long time. So it's definitely not an easy trip. That being said, some people think of it as a lot of fun. So any hardship they go through, they are laughing and smiling.

### **What is it about going to Mecca that you find most rewarding?**

In this day and age, we are so engrossed in the work we do and all our daily responsibilities that I personally sometimes feel that I'm not able to give enough to God in terms of worship. Going to hajj is the only time when I can really do that. It's a time when I can get away from everything else and devote myself to God.

### **There will be millions of other people there as well, from around the world. What's that like?**

When you are walking in Mecca or Medina, for 10 seconds or so you may feel like you're in Pakistan, and then 10 seconds later you could be in Nigeria because there are large groups of people there from each country, and there are restaurants with every kind of cuisine you can imagine. It's like being at an international conference.

That said, a few million people doing the same thing at the same time at the same place can definitely be a challenge. People have been hurt in stampedes. The Saudi government does a very good job of organizing the crowd and controlling the traffic. But that being said, you are dealing with millions of people, and it's definitely not easy to do.

### **Last year, at least 345 people were killed and 289 were injured in a stampede during hajj, according to news reports. Thousands have died in stampedes since 1990. So are you ever afraid to be at Mecca?**

No, although I have been caught up in a stampede.

### **What happened?**

I still don't know what really happened. I just got stuck in the middle of [a crowd]. My cousin from Sacramento and I happened to be together, and we just held on to each other really tightly. At one point, we thought for a few moments that, you know, this may be it. This may be the end.

### **And you weren't afraid? Why not?**

We had come there [to Mecca] and we were spiritually very strong.

We also believe as Muslims that all our sins have been forgiven. So at that point in time, very briefly, I asked myself, "Am I ready to go or not?" And I was able to very quickly, without any hesitation, answer myself that spiritually this is the best state that I could be in to meet my creator.

### **But I assume you still wanted to live.**

Well, yeah. Naturally, you do want to come back to your family and your children. But there is no

feeling of sadness, because that is the best state you could be in.

**Non-Muslims are not allowed to enter the gates of Mecca. What do you think are the main misconceptions that they may have about the hajj?**

That it's just a very large meeting of all these people who are doing a lot of crazy things. A lot of people don't understand that the rituals we are doing there were taught us by the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and that we are reiterating actions that Abraham did thousands of years ago,

**Tell me about some of the rituals you do.**

We begin the five days of hajj by going to the city of Mina, and we spend the first day in prayer. And then the next day we go to the Valley of Arafat, where again the entire day is spent in prayer. That day is considered to be the most sacred. It's only a few miles between the two cities, but it may take us up to two or three hours to get there by bus, because of the crowds.

From there, we head back to Mina, and then we have the pelting of the Satan. We believe that this is one of the three places where Abraham was going to sacrifice his son Ishmael and that Satan came to him in these different places to tell him that he did not need to sacrifice his son. And so we throw stones at the stone pillar that signifies the Satan -- the place where Satan tried to deviate Abraham. That's where most of the stampedes happen.

**What is Umrah? I know it's the first thing a pilgrim does when he arrives at Mecca.**

Yes. Basically, the Umrah consists of walking seven times around the [Kaaba](#), the building inside the grand mosque. We believe Hagar did that when she was looking for water for her son.

**What is it like returning to home after making the hajj?**

I think many people come back feeling spiritually very strengthened by the experience. It's an indescribable feeling, and you want to keep that spirit alive. Everyone tries to do that to the best of their ability, to be as right and as dutiful as possible in all aspects of their life. And it definitely changes some people.

**How did you become an imam? What did you study, and with whom?**

I come from a family of imams. In the Muslim faith, a lot of Islamic knowledge is passed on from generation to generation. My grandfather is a scholar of Islam. And my father was an imam. They came from India -- my father migrated to London in the '70s, and I was born there. Then my father was offered a position here, and we moved to California in the late '70s.

**Did you always plan to take up the family business?**

No. Growing up, I went through the kind of identity crisis that people have, trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I had a lot of different ideas. At one point, I wanted to be a pilot in the U.S. Air Force. I just loved speed!

**What changed your mind?**

I decided that it was an honor that a lot of the folks in our family had memorized the Koran. Around the time I started high school, I decided to leave this country to go back to India to memorize the Koran there. One thing led to another, and I started studying the Arabic language because I wanted to understand what the Koran meant. Then that led to Islamic theology. I graduated from a university in India in 1999 with a B.A. in Islamic theology.

**So you memorized the entire Koran in its original Arabic? Do you still remember it, word for word?**

Oh yes!

**Do many imams memorize the Koran?**

A lot of them do, but it isn't a requirement.

**One of the things that you hear some non-Muslims say is that the Koran preaches violence. Or the Koran preaches hate. How do you feel about that?**

I would just say: "Give me a specific verse. You have to understand it in context." We could all look into any religious text and find things that we can quote out of context or misunderstand. There is a background to everything. I mean, the exegesis of the Koran is a science within itself. We have experts just in that field.

**Do you ever feel that people are judging you and your religion based on a limited understanding of it? And if so, how do you address this?**

Yes and no. A lot of people, a lot of Americans, rely on the media for the information that they have [about Islam]. I personally don't feel that it's justified to judge a cause or understand anything just by relying on the media. I would need to talk to locals to understand any situation. I'm not just talking about my faith. It could be ... AIDS in Africa. I would need to do a little research if I wanted to find out [that]. I might even need to go to Africa to see what's actually happening.

**Given the state of the world today, is it a difficult time to be an imam?**

I started [working as an imam] in 2000, a year before 9/11. When 9/11 happened, I felt like a minor leaguer who got thrown into the majors overnight. I had no idea what I was doing. I'm 28 now, so I was very young when I got hired. I'm still a new kid in the game. I've learned a lot, but I have a long

way to go.

*This story has been changed since its original posting - Ed.*

*Finding My Religion wants to hear from you. Send comments on stories and suggestions for interview subjects to [miller@sfgate.com](mailto:miller@sfgate.com).*

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During his far-flung career in journalism, Bay Area writer and editor [David Ian Miller](#) has worked as a city hall reporter, personal finance writer, cable television executive and managing editor of a technology news site. His writing credits include Salon.com, Wired News and The New York Observer.

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