

Telling my Story – Shammi

I was born into a traditional Bangladeshi Muslim home. Bengali is the language I make du'a (supplications) and communicate with my close family in, including discussions about faith. My parents owned an Indian restaurant, and I grew up in the flat above where I often looked out the window as a child to see the nuns lining up outside the beautiful church at the top of the road. To this day it still fills me with warmth when I think about it. My parents were devout Muslims, who leaned towards the Sufi way. They did their best to bring us up in the Muslim faith and respect Bengali culture and traditions. I have learned a lot from growing up with diversity at my doorstep and making friends within the plural nature of my local community which has all played a part in shaping my worldview.

In Bangladesh, my mum's neighbours were Hindu. It is not unusual to find my mum walking alongside her friends taking part in Hindu festivals. She attended processions and speaks very fondly of Durga Ma. In fact, she once talked about her grandmother who believed in reincarnation and that she also believed reincarnation could be possible. Growing up I had Bengali Hindu and Christian 'aunties' who were close family friends and I grew up watching Bollywood films. I particularly liked the prayers that were dedicated to a different deity at the start of each film. My Kashmiri friends (both Sunni and Shi'a) would often fast forward this part because they felt watching Hindu prayers was 'haram' and that it wasn't appropriate. I loved visiting the Hindu temple with my Hindu friends to take part in the wonderful 'stick dance' as we called the 'Dhandiya' back then. When shopping in the local Indian grocery stores, my dad would refer to the Hindu shop owners as his brothers. Every time we walked past the local Synagogue, he would point and tell me that this was the place where our 'Yahoudi cousins' prayed.

In primary school, morning assemblies were my favourite part of the school day. I loved singing hymns every morning and traditional Christmas carols. Every Christmas and Easter, my dad took us shopping to buy all our teachers a card and a box of chocolates. My parents constantly reminded us of the high status of teachers in Islam and the role they play in passing on knowledge. My parents also taught us to respect other faiths and celebrations and insisted that we took part in prayers at school, so that we would learn to respect the values and beliefs of Christians. They also sent us to a madrasa to learn how to pray and read the Quran. My brother and I found the lessons incredibly boring, we didn't understand the Bengali teacher because he was from Calcutta and spoke a different dialect to Sylheti. So, like in the film 'East is East', we both would hide under the bed hoping our parents wouldn't find us so we didn't have to go. After a couple of weeks of this, my parents pulled us out of the classes and mum taught us how to pray and read classical Arabic. We would recite prayers at bedtime which I have also done with my children. My parents had instilled in us that 'there is no compulsion in religion' and that we not only respect the beliefs of others but embrace them.

My RE teachers introduced me to the Bible and the Qur'an in English and filled me with inspiration when they talked about Khadijah and Aisha (peach be upon them). In the sixth form, I visited the Islamic Civilization room at the British Museum where my teacher introduced me to the wonderful world of scientific discoveries that were made during the Golden Age of Islam. I loved studying philosophy and religion and my love for studying continued into university which has certainly shaped my Islamic worldview. The exposure to diversity in Islam happened quite early where I was moved by the words of the British Muslim scholar, Professor Tim Winters and the American Muslim teacher, Hamza Yusuf who often visited my local university and delivered the most fascinating lectures. This certainly helped me direct my spiritual path and worldview.

Encouraged by my great school teachers, I went to university. I used to love sitting outside the main chapel, listening to the choir but I was never brave enough to walk in. In my final year, I decided to wear a hijab, pray five times a day, join the King's College Islamic society and take my faith seriously. I stopped listening to music other than Islamic music for a couple of years and travelled to Jordan with a group of amazing people. We visited Jerusalem, studied Arabic (which I was not very good at) and in the same year, I visited my family in Bangladesh. My Muslim family in Bangladesh did not approve of me wearing a hijab. They insisted that covering the hair was completely unnecessary and only required when praying. They also associated long beards and women wearing hijabs or any sort of heavy covering with fundamentalism. I didn't like their approach and felt that I should be free to wear what I want and therefore it was not for my family to tell me whether I can wear a hijab or not. However, after losing all my hair from chemotherapy, I stopped wearing my hijab. This was a real turning point as I felt that there are many different ways of demonstrating 'modesty' and women can display modesty the way they choose is right for them. My Islamic worldview was changing and for me, it was through good character and demonstrating modesty in our attitudes that mattered more.

Having grown up in a community where many restrictions were placed on my female Muslim friends, I was quite outspoken about the lack of freedom for women with my family and friends. It sometimes got me into trouble because I questioned the values of my own community and the serious lack of education in religious matters. I felt that there was a need for a feminism that worked for Muslim women. I was blown away to learn about Aisha, who led an army and was one of the greatest female Muslim scholars who taught both men and women. I was shocked to learn that an extraordinary wealthy and successful businesswoman in Arabia had proposed to the prophet Muhammad. I loved to hear about the West African 18th century scholar and intellectual, Nana Asma'u, who was a highly respected public figure, active in politics, education, and social reform and set up a network of women teachers.

Through my life journey, I have come across many different Islamic worldviews. My worldview is rooted in traditional Islamic teachings inspired by great western teachers like the late Hasan Le Gai Eaton. I believe in the importance of the study of philosophy and questioning one's faith. I believe in standing up for social justice, fighting poverty and inequality in all its forms. My Islamic worldview is driven by basic human values of promoting freedom of thought and having faith in something greater than myself. The Islamic prayer moves me to tears just as the words of Christ do. I have celebrated New Year's Eve in the Buddhist monastery in Great Gaddesdon. I have felt inspired during Sufi gatherings and music concerts. Music and dance are a big part of my life and although I grew up listening to R'n'B, Soul, Rap and trance music, I still love singing hymns, listening to beautiful recitations of the Quran, Jewish songs and reading the prayers of St Francis of Assisi. I am Muslim, my worldview is shaped by my interests and for me, educating oneself out of ignorance can free us to find our own worldview that works for us. Nothing is fixed and therefore neither is my worldview.