

The Mosque, the *Imam*, and Lessons in Islam: A Skeptic's Inquiry into Muslim Religious Concepts, Rituals, and Practices

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WRITER'S COMMENT: *Conservative Western media's post-9/11 denouncement of Muslims en masse was impetus for me to seek the truth about Islam. Since then, I've seen Islam from several points of view, but none were as real-life and relevant as imam Abubakr Elgarguri's perspectives in our interviews; they expanded my knowledge of Islam in America and provided bountiful food for thought. I am grateful for his participation in this project. Pulling together the interviews, research, and commentary for this piece was an enormous challenge, but the patience and wise advice of Cynthia Bates, through many revisions, helped me to craft a satisfying article. I am grateful for her guidance.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *When Marla Greenway enrolled in UWP 104C (Writing in the Professions: Journalism), she was already a skilled writer, but that didn't stop her from working tirelessly throughout the quarter to revise and refine her writing further. For all her articles, Marla chose topics she found fascinating—regardless of how challenging they might be. When, for the course's final full-length feature article assignment, Marla told me she planned to write about the Davis Islamic Center and Islam, I was concerned that the topic would prove difficult to narrow effectively. But Marla was more than equal to the task. Guided by her unwavering interest and curiosity, she conducted extensive research and interviews before developing a focus for the piece that allowed her to integrate place, person, and religion. The resulting article—richly detailed and masterfully written—allows us to share her illuminating journey and to appreciate the skills of a budding professional writer.*

—Cynthia Bates, University Writing Program

The first time I saw the aqua-blue dome of the Islamic Center of Davis (ICD), California, it was gleaming in the sunshine. I wanted to go in, but didn't dare. I was afraid I wouldn't be welcome because I'm agnostic, not Muslim. Other non-Muslims have undoubtedly passed by and noticed the mosque; they may have seen the beams of light shoot through the front façade's cut-out geometric designs and wondered, as I have, what Islam and Muslims are really all about. The mosque is highly enigmatic, which stands to reason because it is, after all, God's house, and God supposedly works in mysterious ways. Several months after I first saw the beautiful blue mosque, I happened to meet, in a communication class, a young *imam* who had worked there.

Abubakr Elgarguri is *imam* of the Brentwood Muslim Community Center (BMCC) and former *imam* of the ICD. He is the leader of the Muslim community, conducts prayer services, and provides counseling, among a wide variety of other duties. As society goes through changes, the *imam's* job can be especially challenging. Elgarguri recognizes the need for younger, American-born *imams*. "Some *imams* are older and from a different culture," he said. "They don't understand how to deal with people in American culture, and they do and say things that can alienate a lot of people." A recent Associated Press article also frames the change as a pronounced need for more youth-savvy American-born *imams*, and, if the need isn't met, the future of Islamic communities across America could be jeopardized. In the article, a young *imam* said, "That's all you hear in every mosque around the country now: 'We need someone who can connect with the youth.' And everyone is waiting for that person, like he's a superhero who can come and save the day."

While he may not be a superhero, Elgarguri is making a heroic effort to present Islam as relevant for everyone, particularly today's youth. He was initially terrified of public speaking, and he hadn't planned to be an *imam*, but he's been doing it well and devotedly for years. "I was born into it," he said, "but I never intended to do the job. *Never*." His parents homeschooled him until he went to high school at the age of eleven. He later left high school without graduating to devote a year and a half to studying the *Qur'an* in Dubai. When he returned to the U.S., he tested out of high school with a GED score in the top one percent, and continued his studies with Islamic scholars. He has remarkable intellectual and experiential knowledge of Islam.

Islam itself is remarkable because it is the fastest spreading religion

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in the world today. The word *Islam*, which means peace or submission, is the religion that Muslims follow, and their holy book—and book of law—is the *Qur'an*. In Arabic, the word for God is *Allah*, and Christians who speak Arabic also use the word *Allah* to refer to God. Muslims say their God is the same as the God of Christians and Jews, though some Christians challenge the idea. The “Oneness of God” is an Islamic principle; as explained on the ICD website, “He is One and the Only One. He is not two in one or three in one. This means that Islam rejects the idea of trinity or such a unity of God which implies more than one God in one.” Christians who believe in the Trinity would probably take offense at both statements, since their “three-in-one” God, and the God of Islam, cannot be the same. Islam seems to attract this type of controversy.

At just twenty-two years old, Elgarguri is an ideal candidate for responding to controversy and creating positive change, as well as stability, in the Muslim community. In addition to his highly demanding job as *imam*, he is a high-achieving student at the University of California, Davis, graduating this month with departmental honors and a double major in Psychology and Communication. Elgarguri believes that most *imams* should have a background in psychology because they're dealing with a wide variety of issues that are not exclusive to Muslims, such as schizophrenia and potential suicides, marital difficulties, and identity issues. He employs a combination of Islamic principles and science because he believes that they're an extremely effective way to help people. He will refer people with serious health issues to a doctor, but overall he believes people benefit more from his counseling because he gives them a specialized level of care. In his experience, prayers and verses also have a profoundly positive effect. “In the Islamic tradition,” he explained, “there is no disconnect between the scientific and the spiritual. Therefore, the prophetic advice is to seek the best worldly methods of treatment while connecting everything back to *Allah* and seeking divine guidance.” For this reason, the Islamic community, the *imam*, and prayer are essential for Muslims.

To become Muslim, a person must recite *shahadah*, a declaration of faith that there is only one God, and Muhammad is His Messenger. *Shahadah* is the first of Five Pillars of Islam, which guide Muslims in devotion and worship. The second pillar, *salat*, is prayer, practiced five times a day. *Zakat* (charity) is the third pillar, *Ramadan* (fasting) is the fourth pillar, and *hajj* (pilgrimage) is the fifth pillar. While all of the

pillars are essential for demonstrating obedience, devotion, and worship, *salat* is central to Islam because, as “Worship and Devotional Life” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* states, “Whenever Muslims engage in prayer[,] they form a chain of piety back to the very origins of Islam and affirm a single ritual community with all other Muslims both spatially and temporally. It ...links together all Muslims into a common devotional community.”

Elgarguri has a clear perception of Islamic fellowship. “Community is very important in Islam,” he said. “It’s a fundamental principle from the beginning of the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him). If you go to Muslim countries at this moment [in history], they have lost... their sense of community to a certain extent because everybody’s Muslim. It’s not the environment that Islam thrived on in the beginning.” It stands to reason that when Islam was a minority religion, its numbers were few, and attention to creating a unified community was paramount. As Islam grew and supplanted native religions, the sense of community, although still vital to cohesiveness, required less focus than it did in the beginning. Elgarguri explains how Muslims today experience community in the U.S.:

When you come to America, or when you go to the UK, you see the community again becoming important because once you’re surrounded by people who are not the way you are, your identity as a Muslim becomes salient. Over here everyone is aware that they are Muslim... a lot of people come from overseas and... here, they think they’re different. They will either act different or assimilate. [Being part of] the community helps them maintain their identity, religion, and connection with God.

To help Muslims maintain their connection with God, Elgarguri tries to make the mosque like a second home by creating a harmonious atmosphere. His regular presence in the mosque, greeting people and getting to know newcomers, is sometimes all that’s necessary to help people feel at home. He gives them a welcoming place to come together, to seek guidance, and to pray, so that they don’t begin to lose their identities or become stressed and depressed. One of his strategies is to discover new ways of helping Muslims affirm their religious identities, which is why creating a healthy atmosphere that brings out the best in people and instills strong, positive, pro-social norms is essential. A leader must be present to pre-emptively curtail negativity and set a standard for the community

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by embodying positive norms. Otherwise, cohesiveness disintegrates, and discord, complaints, and fights ensue. Elgarguri illustrates how positive behavior ideals are strongly emphasized in Islamic tradition:

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "None of you shall enter paradise until you believe, and you will not believe until you love one another. Should I not tell you of something, which, if you do it, you will love one another? Spread *salaam* (peace, harmony, greeting) amongst yourselves." He (peace be upon him) also said, "a smile in the face of your brother is a charity" and "you should say that which is good (and leads to good) or remain silent."

Silence is particularly important on Friday, which is a special day at the mosque. Elgarguri gives a special sermon (*khutba*) and leads *jumu'ah* prayer. The congregation must be silent during the sermon and prayer or the *jumu'ah* is invalidated. Only male Muslims are required to attend Friday services; when females do attend, they enter through a separate door, and have their own private area to pray and interact. Sometimes families bring small children, but it's usually discouraged because, if the children make noise, they render the special Friday prayer null and void.

For Elgarguri, Friday is a different kind of special. Between holding his morning office hours, leading the Friday sermon and prayer and the afternoon meetings, fielding questions and planning events via social networking, and conducting the Friday night program, he sometimes wishes he could turn it off. "I get calls at midnight," he said. "My job is 24/7. I'm always dealing with it, but I'm going to school to be better at it. I rarely get enough sleep. The job involves helping people, and I love doing that. I enjoy being at the mosque, leading the prayers, and interacting with others. It's really awesome. It's not as high stress in terms of worrying about things. God makes it easy." It's a paid position, but sometimes *imams*, including Elgarguri, will receive job offers for more money elsewhere. The salary isn't a deciding factor for Elgarguri, however, because he's personally invested in the community.

Part of his personal investment is to be there for young folks in the community who struggle to abide by Qur'anic law, which is often a difficult task because the Islamic standards and norms of gender interaction and separation are very different from what is common in American society. "In Islam, gender interactions are much more conservative," Elgarguri said. Cross-gender interactions are discouraged unless men and women

are, for example, working on a professional project or conducting business. Male and female Muslims are not supposed to freely socialize with one another, and their interactions are usually limited to necessity. “The advantage of having certain conduct limitations is to prevent problems,” Elgarguri explained. “We live in an environment where anything goes, and people are often judged and valued by their physical appearance.” As a result, Muslims might be inclined to conduct themselves in ways that are not in line with their religious obligations. While cross-gender interactions and attractions are normal, natural, and acceptable for non-Muslims, such interactions and attractions are illogical and forbidden for Muslims. As Elgarguri sees it, society informs us that “it’s OK [to] interact as much as you want, but [avoid] harming yourself. Slowly, the norm changes, and instead of changing their behavior, people change their attitudes about their behavior. All the good, moral [behaviors] begin to disappear.” One of those good, moral behaviors is abstaining from sex before marriage, hence the Islamic standards of discouraging or limiting cross-gender interactions and prohibiting behaviors that may lead to premarital sex. As Elgarguri said, “Many societal problems stem from irresponsible gender interactions.”

Problems stemming from the differences between the conservative religious obligations of Muslim Americans and the substantial personal freedoms of non-Muslim Americans are self-evident, but such problems are far from the larger global controversy surrounding Islam. In his article, “A World without Islam,” Graham Fuller explores the nature of the volatile relationship between the Middle East and the West, and how the negative attitudes towards the West have been misattributed to Islam. Fuller asks if it would be so difficult to imagine 9/11 without Islam, considering that Arabs in the Middle East, no matter their religion, were already fired up about foreign occupation and oppression. Fuller asserts, “Without Islam, the face of the Middle East still remains complex and conflicted. Struggles over power, territory, influence, and trade existed long before Islam arrived.” Clearly, the Middle East’s negativity toward the West preceded Islam. Although Islam certainly plays a role in today’s conflicts, the discord would not be very different if Islam didn’t exist.

As long as Islamic and American social norms clash, problems will arise, but Elgarguri seems ready to deal with them as they come. He wants to raise the non-Muslim community’s awareness of Muslims and create a place where people can go to interact. Ideally, he’d like the

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BMCC to have a huge mosque, fitness center, school for kids, and a larger community center for Muslims and non-Muslims. He's currently working on a one-day introduction to Islam course, which includes the Five Pillars, functions of Islam, and views towards the world and God. He wants to be more involved in the broader community, and he hopes that one day the BMCC will be strong enough to provide financial assistance to community members in need—Muslim or non-Muslim.

I may never know enough to truly believe in God, but I'm fascinated with religious practices and rituals. I started out wanting to knock on the door of a mosque and ended up having meaningful, informative interviews with a young, modern *imam* who happened to sit next to me in class one day. I hope to attend his introduction-to-Islam course because I'm sure it will be interesting and very educational. I've learned a lot from him already, and I'm fortunate to have had the opportunity to explore a religion—and its concepts, rituals, and practices—via one of its leaders. Still, I'd like to see the inside of that beautiful blue mosque...

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