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## “Keeping the Faith or Not Keeping the Faith? is the Question in a Western Secular Society

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# “Keeping the Faith or Not Keeping the Faith? is the Question in a Western Secular Society

Riyaz Gayasaddin

## **Abstract**

Islam in the Western world has been one of the fastest and largest growing religions. However, many Muslims, including myself, have found it difficult to balance the lifestyles between following the path of Islam or straying away from the path. It was not easy for me to be a Muslim growing up in a small Midwest city during my childhood. Even though my parents taught me Islam well it was not the same without any Muslim my age except my sister and brother. After high school and moving to Macalester College, I thought I would be surrounded by a large Muslim community; but this was not the case. Since coming to college I have begun to question if I can keep my faith in a Western world. Tariq Ramadan, a Muslim scholar from Europe, believes that a Muslim can keep his faith in the Western world. On the contrary, there are many apostates, Muslims who deviated from Islam and never came back, believe Islam is not function with the Western lifestyle. This essay explores the torn feelings that many Muslims in the Western world feel daily with their faith in Islam and the Western lifestyle.

**KEYWORDS:** Islam, faith, midwest, Tariq Ramadan

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Islam in the Western world has been one of the fastest and largest growing religions. However, many Muslims, including myself, have found it difficult to balance the lifestyles between following the path of Islam or straying away from the path. It was not easy for me to be a Muslim growing up in a small Midwest city during my childhood. Even though my parents taught me Islam well it was not the same without any Muslim my age except my sister and brother. After high school and moving to Macalester College, I thought I would be surrounded by a large Muslim community; but this was not the case. Since coming to college I have begun to question if I can keep my faith in a Western world. Tariq Ramadan, a Muslim scholar from Europe, believes that a Muslim can keep his faith in the Western world. On the contrary, there are many apostates, Muslims who deviated from Islam and never came back, believe Islam is not function with the Western lifestyle. This essay explores the torn feelings that many Muslims in the Western world feel daily with their faith in Islam and the Western lifestyle.

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Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in both America and Europe. “There are, for example, more Muslims in America than in Kuwait, Qatar, and Libya” (Haddad, 3). In 1492, the first few Muslims were expelled from Spain and may have arrived in America; however, the known first wave of Muslims to America is known to have occurred around the year 1918 (Smith, 204). In America, there is an estimated 7 to 8 million Muslims, which makes up only 3% of the population. The three large groups of Muslims in America include Black-Americans, Indo-Pakistanis, Arab and Middle Eastern Muslims. In Western Europe, more than 12 million Muslims occupy this area. Most of the Muslims in Europe came during the 1960’s from the colonial empires in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean.

Muslims in the West have been faced with numerous challenges from 9/11 in America to the banning of the Islamic scarf in France. Some of the other challenges include prayer, diet, and faith. Most of the challenges faced by Muslims in the West are able to be solved or fixed, like prayer and diet; however, faith, is an element of Islam that can be hard to keep in areas like America and Europe where Muslims are the minority. Some Muslims are able to keep their practice while other decide Islam is not worth their time and abandon the religion as a whole.

As a Muslim in the West, I have faced some of these challenges in my life so far. As I was growing up, I was brought up by parents who immigrate from Hyderabad, India. India is a Hindu dominated country; however, in the area where my parents were born and raised it is a Muslim dominated part of India. Even though my parents and their families were minorities as Muslims in India, they still lived in an area where the majority of their neighbors and friends were Muslim. They

had so much support around them that they never questioned Allah or Islam. I believe because of this both of them developed a strong faith, because had no other opposing influence from any other religion around them. Both my father and mother went to school in India. After their marriage, my father went to medical school in India then decided that he wanted to leave India to find greater opportunity in his field and for his family.

In 1978, my parents decided to move to America to have a better life than they had in India. When they arrived in the United States, they went to Omaha, Nebraska where my father specialized in Cardiology and my older sister was born. One year after my sister was born, my father had opportunity to move to northwestern North Dakota to start a large practice. His intent was only to move to Minot, North Dakota for three years and then move to another city, like Chicago or New York. He only intended to stay in North Dakota for such a short period because he wanted his children to grow up with more of a Muslim population. My father's practice then started to flourish in three years and he decided to wait a couple more years to move. However, a couple of years turned into over 20 years. During these 20 years, both my brother and I were born. For all of my pre-college life, including my siblings, we grew up in the city of Minot.

Minot, North Dakota is a small city which has approximately 36,000 residents. Over 93% of the people are White and the next closest racial groups of people are Native Americans (2.76%) and African Americans (1.34%). Growing up in Minot, I was surrounded by all White, Christian friends. My mother would make us read Qur'an, pray, and memorize different surrahs daily. I recall number of days where I would not want to read the Qur'an, but my mother would punish me if I did not do my "religious duties." I do not know what age I realized that I do not celebrate Christmas, or I do not eat pig, or that my parents did not have alcohol in the refrigerator, but I did know that I was different than all of my friends. Throughout middle school and high school, I realized more and more that I was the token Muslim in my school. There were only a maximum of 5 Muslim families at a time in Minot: no

family would stay long either. Therefore, I never had Muslim peers except my brother and sister around.

Growing up in an all White city with Christianity as the only religion, my family did give into this way of life. During Christmas time, my mother would put Christmas lights up on our house. Also, at my father's office, we would decorate the office in Christmas décor and we would actually put up a Christmas tree and bake cookies. Even though we were not at all Christian, my parents performed the traditions that Christmas season brought.

I realized that even though my cousins lived in Chicago and Detroit, they still had a large Muslim community and influence around them. However, in Minot, the only teacher of religion were my parents. Even though my parents did a superb job raising Muslim children in a Non-Muslim city like Minot, it was not the same as growing up with Muslim peers. Therefore, I have always felt that my cousins, just like my parents growing up in India, were able to hold on to their faith more easily than my siblings and I had.

However, once I came to college I think my struggle with my faith became even harder. When I was searching for colleges, my father was persistent in telling me that I needed to go to a place where they have a strong Muslim community. I respected his thinking, and that is why I chose a school in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. I researched and knew that Macalester College was not the most religious school but I did notice in one of the many college brochures that Macalester had a Muslim Student Association (MSA), which gave me hope of connecting with more Muslims more on a daily basis.

When I came to Macalester, I discovered that the MSA was not as functional as I thought it was. The students who showed up did not talk much about faith or religion, but mostly talked about Ramadan and Eid dinner. Not to mention that they were less than seven people at the meeting. I knew then, along with another Muslim first-year, that it was not a very efficient religious organization. As my first-year of college went on, I noticed that I did not practice Islam like I used to. I did not pray as much or even at all and also I did not think about religion as much as I use to. I realized that I began to question

Islam at times too, which was a new concept to me. It seemed as though I was struggling with my faith. This trend of losing faith is something that I have realized more each day here at Macalester with the Muslim students. Most of the MSA students were brought up in a Muslim country, like Pakistan, and seemed to have strong faith back home but once they came to Mac, their faith seemed to diminish. One scholar, Tariq Ramadan, has studied that it actually is possible to retain your faith as a minority in a Western secular society.

Tariq Ramadan is a scholar from Europe who used to be a Professor of Philosophy at the College of Geneva and Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. Also, in 2000 he was named one of *Time's* 100 most important innovators of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In his book, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, Ramadan reveals that a Muslim can keep and practice his faith without losing it in the Western world. Ramadan makes a point to tell Muslims that they can remain true to both their faith and loyal to the secular societies they live in. He constantly reminds Muslims that the Qur'an is the word of Allah, as revealed to Muhammad. However, Ramadan does not mean taking everything in the book word for word. Ramadan says that, "A dogmatic approach to the text has nothing to do with the text, but with the mind of the reader," (Ford). To me, this means, that a follower of Islam has to be able to adapt to changing times and know that the Qur'an is a source and a guide not an instruction manual. Muslims seem to live in pockets of Muslims and become self-segregated because they feel that this is the only way to preserve Islam and have faith in Allah. In an article by Peter Ford, Ramadan explains that Muslims should embrace the societies that they live in and play as full a role as they can. Ramadan says that in the few Muslim-majority countries, the citizens are not offered a chance to play a role in the government, because the country governs under a dictatorship. However, he says that places like in Europe and in America "we have rights; the democratic process helps us, through freedom of speech, both to participate in politics and break new ground in thinking about Islam," (Ford). In his book, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, speaks about how the West creates two universes, one of

Muslims and another of non-Muslims, which creates boundaries between the groups. Ramadan says:

“First of all, because it [Western society] is built on a dualistic vision of two universes that do not mingle and that make compromised at their boundaries, or in the limited area where they intersect, it assumes that it is Muslims, being in the numerical minority, who must adapt by force of circumstances. This approach carries the idea that (even if the discourse says the complete opposite) that Muslims must think of themselves as a minority, on the margin, in their societies, which will continue to be the societies of ‘the Other’...” (52).

Ramadan explains, that in the beginning when Muslims came to Europe and the West it was normal to protect and seclude themselves because they needed to preserve their religious identity. However, in today’s day an age he feels that Muslims should be proud and be able to practice freely. He also explains that there are a number of organizations that are at the assistance of Muslims to help them keep their faith in these Western societies. This is why the Fiqh Council of North America and the European Council for Research and Fatwas were created in the 1990’s. There are also other organizations like the Islamic Center of North America (ICNA) and Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) that have conferences and other useful sources for Muslims to keep their faith in the West. The goals of these organizations are to unify and better the development of the Muslim community and society at large. Another organization called Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) was established around 1994. This is a useful organization because CAIR assists Muslims with law suits or negotiation between the Muslim and the party that offended the Muslim’s rights. According to the CAIR website, CAIR is an advocacy group that seeks “to enhance understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.”

Ramadan states that these services in Western societies are fundamental and particularly helpful for Muslims to be able to practice their faith. Ramadan's conclusion is that as Muslims we can have faith but only if we do not get into three traps: the dualist approach, minority thinking, and integration thought of only in terms of adaptation. Ramadan says, "We must clearly overcome the dualistic vision and reject our sense of being eternal foreigners, living in parallel, on the margins or as reclusive minorities; in order to make way for the global vision of universal Islam that integrates and allows the Other to flourish confidently" (Ramadan, 54).

Ramadan is a Muslim intellectual who gives hope to Muslims wanting to preserve their faith in a Western society. Nonetheless, there are groups of followers who deviate from the path of Islam and never come back. These people, called apostates, discovered that their faith in Islam was not the way to live their life in the West. In *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out*, Ibn Warraq compiles stories of former followers of Islam and the reason that they left the religion.

One interesting narrative was from a convert from the United States, Michael Muhammad Knight, who later became an apostate. At a young age of sixteen, he decided that he wanted to leave the Roman Catholic church and convert to Islam. Before he converted and performed his *shahadah*, he memorized the prayers and Qur'anic verses before stepping into the mosque. After his conversion, many of the *imams* were impressed with his thirst of knowledge. He even went to Pakistan for a couple months in his senior year of high school to study Islam. After he came back from Pakistan, he decided that he wanted to become a well-known Islamic scholar. Therefore, Knight started to apply to different Islamic universities around the globe. However, during this time he felt that Islam and modern day Muslims in the West were harsh. He began to feel that modern Islamic practice in the West was rigid and strict. He recalled that when he was in Pakistan studying Islam, his teacher would always say "stick with the Qur'an," which meant read it as a guide. As he grew up in his Islamic life, he felt that he was losing his faith and not caring about religion because of the Christian world around him. He no longer got mad at his

mother for keeping a dog in the house and that the angels would not enter. Another example he gave was that he started not to care that his female cousin would wear shorts in the summertime. Knight decided that he wanted to be a free man and could not hand the Islamic life in a Western society.

So where do I fit in this? Ever since coming to college and being away from a home where I was constantly told to pray and read the Qur'an and be absorbed with Allah, I have started to question my own faith. As left that first MSA meeting and journeyed deeper into my college career I felt that I started to leave my faith on the back burner. I agree with what Ramadan says about speaking out about your religion and being a part of society and not "the Other." However, it is hard to think that you can bend the rules of Allah and the Prophet Muhammad to fit your own lifestyle. Is this the right way to live Islamicly? And if you do bend the rules, how far do you bend them to still be in the spectrum of living an Islamic life and having full faith in the religion. To a point, the narrative by Knight has been a struggle I have been dealing with all my life.

I still consider myself to be Muslim and do practice when I can, but being a minority on this campus and especially in the West is what I find most difficult to be able to keep my faith. It also does not help that I grew up in Minot, North Dakota, a city with a Muslim population of 10. Even though I have grown up in an Islamic family in a non-Islamic society, I am grateful for my parents for teaching me about Islam. On the other hand, growing up in this Western society has a challenge of staying on the path of Islam and retaining your faith. This struggle is a struggle that many Muslim teens are facing today. As for me, this is a continuous inner struggle which I have been battling for the past 3 years.

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