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Muslims Next Door

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INTRODUCTION

Why I've Written This Book

Eileen, a stunning brunette in her thirties, caught my attention in the checkout line of an Albertson's store one crisp fall morning. I watched as she freely conversed with customers. I found myself drawn to her jewel-black eyes, olive coloring, and inviting smile, all of which reminded me of the many exotic women I had met over the years as I traveled in the Middle East: Mina from Iran, Leila from Tunisia, Hulya from Turkey. Eileen, however, is not of Middle Eastern origin, but Latino and, like me, is part of the browning of America.

A few months later, Eileen and I ran into one another at a Christmas tea hosted by my church. It intrigued Eileen to learn that I was to be the guest speaker that night. She thought of me as just a customer in the checkout line. Before the evening ended, she thanked me for my talk, which she said had touched her. Little did I know how profoundly.

The following week, Eileen pulled me aside at the checkout line and gave me a small gift. Inside a red box was a silver angel pendant. The gift, she said, was her way of expressing her gratitude for the things I had shared at the tea. My Middle Eastern background fascinated her, and she asked if we could get together sometime for coffee. She had a few questions, questions about Islam.

Over the years, various people who have been curious about Muslims have been brought into my path—parents of my childhood friends, a math teacher in junior high, businessmen at dinner parties, members of an adult Sunday school class, friends in my book club.

It took a few weeks to coordinate our schedules, but finally one afternoon Eileen made her way to my home. Eileen wondered if I could help her understand why Muslims are so angry with America. She has friends who are Muslims, and she wanted to learn about their point of

view. After we were comfortably seated in my living room, I began to tell her about my background as a daughter of an Iranian-Muslim father and an Irish-Catholic mother. She heard for the first time an insider's view of Muslim life.

When the topic of 9-11 came up, she wondered about America's response. "Revenge? Strike back militarily? And how do we respond now to Muslims living in the United States?"

I turned the questions over in my mind, trying to think of the best way to respond. "Most Americans can't identify with the complex issues that fuel Muslims' mistrust toward the West and toward the American government in particular," I said. "We'd have to cover hundreds and hundreds of years of history to understand Muslim animosity. But regardless of how America responds to terrorism, there is an issue that is far more important, and one that each of us can do something about. We need to cultivate peace with Muslims living in our homeland. We need to make them feel a part of America. Make them feel like they belong. They aren't going to go away."

She nodded, trying to grasp the issues confronting our Muslim neighbors. I went on to explain that the Muslims shown on the news as gun-toting, flag-burning religious fanatics in some Middle Eastern country are not typical followers of Islam. The truth is that millions of North Americans and Europeans study with, work with, and live near Muslims. It's no longer uncommon to hear the names Fatima or Mohammed on campus, at a neighborhood park, or in a boardroom. In the past, Muslims have been marginalized in our homeland, seen as resident aliens and not as part of the fabric of our country. Christians in the West rarely have any close contact with practicing Muslims, leaving all discussions of religion and faith to missionaries overseas. But times have changed.

Our World After 9-11

When historians look back, it will be radical Islam and the war on terrorism that will mark our times. In our post-9-11 world, many Westerners are suspicious of their Muslim neighbors. Public anger against Muslims has increased. *Newsweek* reported a 1,700 percent rise in hate crimes against Arab-Americans since 9-11.¹ An ABC News poll showed

that since the bombing of the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, and the downing of the plane in a field in Pennsylvania, Americans have an unfavorable view of Islam and think the Muslim faith encourages violence.² But many Americans, like Eileen, want to understand how Muslims think. Some want to know how to establish friendships that can point Muslims to Christ.

Times have changed, and Islam has become a presence in Western society. Since 1999, for example, Muslims have been conducting prayer inside the United States Capitol on Fridays. The number of Muslim chaplains in the United States military has tripled, serving 4,000 personnel.³ In 2000, the United States Postal Service issued a postal stamp commemorating Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic year and the Muslim month of fasting. According to *Islamic Horizons*, an influential Muslim journal with more than 60,000 readers, “Muslim Americans represent \$75 billion of collective income, more than any Muslim country can produce.”⁴

Westerners are realizing that we can no longer be ignorant of the fastest-growing religion in the world. The number of Muslims worldwide is estimated to be over one billion, which is nearly one-sixth of the world’s population.⁵ United Nations statistics report that in Europe the Muslim population grew by more than 100 percent between the years of 1989 and 1998.⁶ Nearly six million Muslims live in France, and three million in Germany, contributing to a total of fourteen million in all of Europe.⁷ That’s nearly four times as many Muslims as are in the United States.

The presence of nearly ten million Muslims in France and Germany helps shed light on why Europeans might see their relationship with the Middle East differently than do people in the United States. I often tell my friends in California, “Imagine how you’d feel if the world suddenly became hostile toward Mexico and the Mexicans who inhabit our communities, schools, and workplaces. The sentiment you’d feel, whether shock, sympathy, or fear, is comparable to how Europeans now feel toward the Muslims who have lived among them for centuries.” Whether in Paris, Berlin, London, or Brussels, European Muslims are becoming a powerful political force, making world leaders understandably anxious to keep the peace and secure their votes.

Growth of the Muslim population is occurring not only in Europe. The percentage of Muslims in the United States is on the rise too, up 25 percent from 1989 to 1998. Why? Changes in immigration laws since 1960 and a demand for workers have encouraged Muslims to seek prosperity in our nation.⁸ Estimates from *The Christian Science Monitor* put the current number of Muslims in this country at four million.⁹ The number of mosques in North America is approaching 2,500.¹⁰ A large number of Muslims populate our biggest cities, with principal concentrations found in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. There are 400,000 in the Chicago area, and another 400,000 residing in New Jersey.¹¹ Twenty percent of American Muslims live in California, and 16 percent in New York.¹² African-American converts make up nearly 45 percent of the Muslims in America.¹³ Given this rapid growth, if there isn't already a Muslim living on your street or working near you or attending school with your children, there likely will be in the near future.

As an Iranian-American, I wonder how we might change our nation's perceptions of and ways of relating to the followers of Islam. I wonder if some of the answers to peaceful coexistence with Muslims lie in a change of heart and values by our nation's families and churches. I can't help but think of the powerful example of repentance and healing given to us by Pope John Paul II when he asked the Jews for forgiveness for the Holocaust and the Crusades.

Understanding the Issues

Learning to empathize with Muslims and to understand the issues that trouble them can help smother the flames of suspicion and the fear of terrorism. Too often when Muslims have caused violence against our country, Americans have blamed all Muslims, ignoring the fact that only a small minority acted violently against our nation. Some people have joined the ranks of talk-show hosts who berate Islam. Many believe everything negative they've ever heard about Muslims.

I've written this book out of deep respect for my Muslim family members and friends. My goal is to help readers in the West to better understand a Muslim perspective and to learn how to take steps to estab-

lish friendships which can point to Christ. I have avoided delving into Muslim-Christian theological differences, since other books already cover that ground in great detail; instead I have focused on points of commonality. My desire is to help facilitate understanding and mutual respect in our living and working situations and to help Westerners feel that Muslims are approachable. I want to encourage my readers to identify with their Muslim neighbors in a way that reveals the love and compassion of Christ.

Recalling the words of President George W. Bush, let us remember that “when we think of Islam, we think of a faith that brings comfort to millions of people, that’s made up of brothers and sisters of every race. America counts millions of Muslims amongst our citizens, and Muslims make up an incredibly valuable contribution to our country. Muslims are doctors, lawyers, law professors, and members of the military, entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, moms and dads. And they need to be treated with respect. In our anger and emotion, our fellow Americans must treat each other with respect.”¹⁴

In the pages that follow, you’ll read the stories of people I know, like Ahmed and Leila, Hossein and Maryam. I’ll take you into homes, universities, and offices in our nation’s neighborhoods and cities where Westerners rub elbows with Muslims. My prayer is that by the time you reach the end of this book, you will have a better understanding of the Muslims in your sphere of relationships and you’ll desire to befriend Muslims, enjoy the richness of their culture and values, and feel more equipped to point them to Christ in a gentle and respectful manner. As you read, ask God to open your heart and draw you closer to his love for Muslims. So turn the page and let’s take a look inside the world of *Muslims Next Door*.

across the street and next door

Be kind to orphans,
and to the needy,
and to the neighbor who is kin,
and to the neighbor who is a stranger,
and to the companion at your side,
and to the traveler,
and to those whom your right hands own.

—*THE KORAN*, 4:36

Even though my mother was Catholic and had me baptized before my first birthday, I was born a Muslim because my father is a Muslim. He is from Iran, and I lived in Iran for five years as a child. Through a most unusual set of circumstances, I was exposed to a personal faith in Christ in my teen years. Let me tell you the story so you can catch a glimpse into the passion and emotion that drove my writing of this book.

The Story of Two Neighbors

It was 1979, just prior to the taking of fifty-two American hostages in Iran. Most afternoons, our neighbor Pamela walked across the street, knocked on the door of our home, and let herself in. With kids at school, Pamela and my mother were able to spend a peaceful hour or two before the demands of family life took over. Most days in Seattle, it drizzled and a light fog hovered above Lake Sammamish, which our home overlooked.

Over the years, Pamela had become accustomed to the unique furnishings in our home: Persian carpets, gold samovars, colorful ceramic and glass water pipes, and oriental artwork. When my father was home (once every three to four months from his work as an airline representative in Iran for Iran Air), the house smelled of saffron, cumin, dill, and mint. *Zereshk polo* or *ghormeh sabzee* gently cooked on the stove top. A kettle of water simmered contentedly throughout the day, ready for the preparation of hot tea—in our Middle Eastern home in the Northwest.

At times my mother, an American and a Catholic, felt overwhelmed by her multicultural marriage. Pamela was there to offer a listening ear and advice. It wasn't that Pamela's marriage was perfect, but she had a certainty about life which strengthened my mother and, most of all, gave her hope.

My father was due home again from Iran before Easter. Normally a time for rejoicing and happy reunions at Sea-Tac Airport, this time my mother felt unprepared for his visit. She worried that she might be losing him. She worried about her weight. They had been apart for two years because of my father's work for Iran Air. The separation had taken a toll on their marriage. Too much time apart had allowed his heart to wander.

As if in the fog that often gathered around the house, making familiar evergreens and the lake view disappear, my mother felt uncertain of the path ahead of her. She told Pamela of the years she had sacrificed her happiness to live in my father's country, enabling him to climb the corporate ladder. Because of his work, we lived in both Iran and the United States. A dozen times she had traversed the Atlantic Ocean with three small children, living like a nomad because of her commitment to her man. Now her sacrifices and her commitment seemed pointless. Divorce seemed imminent. How would she raise three children alone? What legal recourse would she have to collect child support as the spouse of a foreigner who lived five thousand miles away ten months out of the year? And as a Catholic, could she marry again?

Pamela listened and prayed for wisdom to help her friend. These were uncharted waters. She wondered where the answers were and how God could ever provide.

A Turning Point

The women continued to meet in the afternoons, plotting the revival of my parents' marriage. Together they went to Weight Watchers. They improved my mother's wardrobe, makeup, and, most important, her self-esteem. For a time, happy married life seemed in reach. But things took an unexpected turn when my mother became ill. She felt tired all the time. Eventually she found it hard to keep up with her secretarial work, and her employer asked her to leave her job. A few weeks later, she was so weak and tired that she had difficulty picking up us kids from school. Some mornings she could hardly get out of bed to pack our lunches. She became depressed and was terrified of what might be wrong. Her family doctor told her she was going through early menopause.

My mother became so weak that my father and I finally took her to an urgent-care facility. After blood tests, my mother was taken by ambulance to a hospital emergency room. Over the next days and weeks, blood transfusions and IVs, a respirator, emergency surgeries, and chemotherapy followed. Nothing helped. My mother died three months later from leukemia at the age of thirty-nine. I was fourteen.

My father was devastated. The loss seemed too great. He had just fled his country because of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, leaving a prestigious airline career. He worried about how he would care for his children. He was a man without a country, without a source of income. And now he had lost his wife.

Pamela quickly organized family and neighbors to make funeral arrangements and provide temporary child care for my brothers and me. She had often talked with my mother about the need to turn to Christ during a time of great need. Now she focused her efforts on my brothers and me. She cared for us, along with her own three children, with supernatural love. She fed us at her home, transported us to athletic events and on our paper routes, and, when our father returned to Iran to salvage his assets and look for a new wife, Pamela and her husband let us move in with them.

Back in Iran there would have been grandparents and uncles and aunts to stand in the gap for this Middle Eastern family, but in the

United States, with no relatives nearby, it took neighbors, teachers, coaches, and church volunteers to help raise three motherless Iranian-American children whose father was far away some of the time, in Iran. At times Pamela felt overwhelmed, nearly breaking down from exhaustion as she tried to raise six young adolescents. Never once did she allow cultural barriers and prejudices to stand in the way of God's calling to care for a family very different from her own. Lifted up by the prayers of other concerned families, she persisted and shared with us our need to know God personally, just as she had done with our mother. Through Pamela's influence, I, at the age of fifteen, began to take my faith more personally and started attending an evangelical church.

This story of my mother and Pamela—two women, two neighbors—has touched me deeply and served as my motivation for writing this book. I want to let others know how to approach Muslims in our country with the same grace and compassion that was shown to my family. I want to let others know how to help bring down the walls of suspicion and fear that inhibit us from demonstrating the love of Christ with our neighbors.

Who Is Your Neighbor?

Muslims are living among us. Countless Muslim families have immigrated to Western countries, including the United States. Perhaps you're curious about the personal life and beliefs of a Muslim colleague at your place of employment or a fellow student at your university and, while

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perusing the Islam section of titles in a bookstore, you picked up this book. You want to know more about Muslims, maybe even how to become friends with a Muslim family.

The stories of the Muslims among us are all different. But the one constant for all is their desire to be accepted in this new country they've chosen. Muslims want to be included in the daily life of their

neighborhoods, of their friends and coworkers. As Muslims navigate life's challenges in a culture that is not their own, opportunities abound for Christians to build bridges to their Muslim neighbors.

It's no longer necessary to go to the Middle East as a tourist, a Peace Corps worker, or a missionary to learn about Muslim culture and the followers of Islam. God has brought them to the United States, enriching our nation with their talents and way of life. In order to give you a glimpse into what life is like for Muslims in this country, let me give you some quick examples of the variety of Muslims I've met:

- Ahmed and Leila live in Montréal with their three children. They moved to Canada from Jordan five years ago. Ahmed is worried that his wife has not learned to speak English properly. Leila has become melancholy, stuck at home with a toddler with asthma. She does not have a driver's license. Ahmed wishes his wife could develop a close friendship with one of the women in their apartment complex, but everyone seems so busy. Most of the women work outside the home.
- Rashid is a struggling Lebanese student in Houston. Thanks to a relative, he was able to come to the United States to study two years ago. He goes to class during the day and works two jobs the rest of the week. He's homesick, misses an old girlfriend back home, and feels disconnected from American students on campus. He'd like to join a fraternity, but fears he'd be shunned. He second-guesses his decision to try to make a new life for himself in this country but fears there are no options for him back home.
- Hulya, a Turkish woman, works as an accountant for a large firm in Los Angeles. She recently married, and her husband has asked her to wear a head scarf as a symbol of purity. She feels torn because of the rise in hostility toward Muslims in the United States since 9-11. She loves her husband but doesn't want to be ridiculed or make waves at work.
- Two brothers, Ferhad and Murat, are among the fifteen thousand Iraqis in America whom the FBI interviewed as part of the

Homeland Security Department's Operation Liberty Shield. Like most Iraqi immigrants, they fled to this country to escape Saddam Hussein's brutal regime. Now they are terrified that they may be detained and possibly deported.

■ Maryam and Hossein are from Iran and are expecting their first child. Originally it was their plan to have Maryam's mother fly over from Iran for the birth and to help care for the baby. The mother now has heart problems and cannot make the long journey by plane. Maryam feels unprepared to care for the baby alone. In their culture, it is customary for grandparents and older women in the family to help young women make the transition to motherhood. She feels nervous about hiring a nanny and concerned about the expense of full-time child care.

A New Era of Fear and Suspicion

Since the horror of 9-11 and all the media coverage of anti-American protests, many Westerners look at Muslims, even ones like those I've mentioned above, with unease. In the back of some people's minds, maybe in your own mind, is mistrust of Muslims. In the past, Muslims hung on the fringes of society like dark shadows, but now the light of current events casts a glare of suspicion on them. Some may wonder, as they walk past a group of Muslim students on campus and see the length of the men's beards and the scarves worn by the women, whether

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the students are tied to terrorism or to some fundamentalist Muslim sect that is out to destroy this country.

Let me assure you that the majority of Muslims in America are like any typical American. They love the United States, and whether or not they become citizens, they want a chance to pursue their dreams and find happiness. They should not be judged by the actions of other Muslims. To do so would be the same as judging American Catholics and Protestants for the violence in Ireland, or to look suspiciously upon

Korean-Americans for weapons of mass destruction harbored in North Korea. We must resist any temptation to blame all Muslims residing among us for atrocities that originated outside our borders, sponsored by radical sects halfway around the world.

American poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “No people can be explained by their national religion. They do not feel responsible for it; it lies outside of them.”¹ Emerson had the insight not to pass sweeping judgment on an entire group of people. To be American is to be Italian, Chinese, Irish, Japanese, Pakistani, Mexican, Greek, English, or dozens of other nationalities. Americans are Hindu, Buddhist, Catholic, Jewish, Protestant. Each of these world religions has something to be ashamed of in its past.

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Muslims are living among us. We run into them at the laundromat, the post office, in taxis, and at doctors’ offices. We rely on many of the services they provide. They are our doctors, architects, grocers, taxi drivers, and engineers. Our country is greater for all of their contributions. Our relationships are more diverse; our worldview has become broader.

I invite you to join me in the coming chapters in taking an honest look at some common myths about our Muslim neighbors so that we may overcome any barriers of suspicion and fear and live together in harmony—sit with one another in classes, live by each other in dorms, conduct business negotiations together, and as parents coordinate play groups, sporting events, and volunteer efforts at local schools. We’ll look at misconceptions that many Christians have about Muslim spiritual beliefs.

As we examine these myths, it is my hope that you will begin to feel more comfortable to move toward Muslims in friendship and even be able to look for opportunities to share the heart of the gospel.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR DISCUSSION

1. In the story of Pamela and my mother at the beginning of this chapter, what do you admire most about Pamela in her effort to reach out to her neighbor?
2. The chapter mentions several examples of Muslims living in North America. What examples can you add from your sphere of relationships? What are some of the needs of these people?
3. What might be some reasons why Christians are suspicious of Muslims?
4. Name some other people groups that have been mistrusted in the past. What can we learn from these other situations to help us now to relate to Muslims in our nation?