

Islamic School of Miami

Masjid al-Noor (Sunni)

By

Sheila Basu

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Even though I did not know much about Islam, the impression I had received from both the media and the general public was largely negative. There have been many strong stereotypes associated with Islam, especially during my lifetime, and I wanted to discover the truth for myself. What I realized was that not only do Americans misinterpret the true meaning of Islam, but some Muslims do as well. The message of nonviolence and tolerance is often distorted for personal benefit, but this represents a small fraction of the Muslim world. Most Muslims believe in the peaceful coexistence of people with different beliefs and lifestyles. My visit to the mosque, my conversations with the Imam and members of the mosque, and my subsequent readings have helped me better understand and appreciate the fundamental beliefs of Sunni Islam, the different forms of Islam in the world, its religious practices, rituals and ceremonies, and the uniqueness of Islamic art and its symbols. I specifically visited a Sunni mosque. The Sunnis form the largest community of Islam and are found worldwide. South Florida, mainly Miami, is a melting pot for every religion, race, and life style. It was inevitable for Islam to expand to a city like this. The Islamic community began here in the sixties and has continued to grow. Like any other community, economical reasons are usually the basis for expansion to other places in the world.

All Muslims share the same fundamental beliefs. These fundamental beliefs include the five pillars of Islam and the seven core beliefs. The five pillars of Islam explain the duties that all Muslims should have a faithful commitment to. The first pillar of Islam is shahada, the belief in the statement, "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet"[1]. The second pillar, salat, requires performing five prayers a day facing Mecca at set times: dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and night. The Qu'ran states that prayer can keep a person from performing unacceptable acts. There is always a specific place on the wall in a mosque which distinguishes the correct direction to pray towards[2]. The third pillar, Zakat, is the duty of giving charity to the poor if the

funds are available, thereby creating greater equality between the rich and the poor. The fourth pillar, Sawm, requires fasting from sunrise to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar that commemorates the revelation of the Qu'ran to Mohammed. Worship and rituals during this month focus on forgiveness, sacrifice, divine guidance, charity, and purity of thought. The fast includes refraining from food, drink, and sex. Gratitude, self improvement and devotion to Allah are expected outcomes[3]. The fifth pillar, or Hajj, is the pilgrimage to Mecca that all Muslims should try to take at least once in their life. All Muslims are urged to take this journey, although it is not mandatory. This pilgrimage is a special time because Muslims of all branches of Islam come together, despite theological and political differences, in peace and respect for one another [4]. Other similarities that are found throughout Islam are the seven core beliefs which every Muslim must accept. These beliefs are the belief in God, angels, the books of God, God's prophets, especially Muhammad, the inevitability of a judgment day, the belief in an afterlife, and the divine power of God [5].

Because of the universality of these beliefs among members of Islam, it is difficult to believe that there is divisiveness among different groups. Nevertheless, after Muhammad's death, Islam divided into two main branches: Sunni and Shia, because of leadership issues. The question arose as to who was the true caliph, or rightful successor, to Muhammad. Sunnis believed that the new leader should be elected, Abu Bakr, Mohammed's companion and good friend, was elected as the first Muslim caliph. In contrast, Shia Muslims believed at the time of Mohammed's death that leadership should fall to one of Mohammed's relations – his cousin Ali. Shia leadership to this day falls to a line of Imams, appointed by Mohammed and God [6]. Sunni and Shia forms of Islam cannot, therefore, really be considered sects of Islam, but rather expressions of the true Islam, where the differences are mainly political and of historical origin.

Four schools of law within Sunnism were started in the first four centuries of Islam by four scholars. Although they have the same basic beliefs they differ in practice, execution of rituals, and “divine principals”. Still, they are all believed to be equally significant. These differences occurred

mostly because of the spread of Islam to different areas of the world where there were different social and economic circumstances. The Hanafi School is followed mostly in Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, and Central Asia and was founded by Imam Abu Hanifa. The Maliki School is a doctrine that is recorded in Muwatta, found in some areas of Africa and was founded by Imam Malik. The Shafi'i School emphasizes the Sunnah of Muhammad as a source of the Shariah or “the path” and was founded by [Muhammad ibn Idris ash-Shafi'i \[7\]](#). The Hanbali School focuses on doctrine and is found in throughout the Arabian Peninsula. This is the most extreme out of the four and often is intolerant towards the other schools [8].

Islamic art is the greatest visual expression of Islamic doctrine and is most distinguished by its elaborate geometric design, underscoring the logic, devotion and adherence to rules that characterize Islam, the early preoccupation of Islamic scholars with the mathematical works of Euclid and Pythagoras and a religious passion for unity between the material and spiritual worlds [9]. The development of this exquisitely complex design was also determined by the Muslim belief that depicting images could lead to idolatry [10]. The rules of geometry, the starting point of Islamic patterns being the circle and the use of repetition symbolize for Muslims order, one God, eternity, equality, and harmony. The use of the star represents the spread of Islam worldwide. The triangle represents human consciousness and harmony, the square the material world, the hexagon heaven[11]. Islamic geometric design can be found in both architecture and artisan work(woodwork, textiles, ceramics, etc.) Another art form that is highly developed in Islam is calligraphy, considered to be the noblest form of art because it represents the word of God as written in the Qu'ran [12]. I was told by Muhammad, one of the members of the mosque, that there are ninety nine different names for God in Arabic which can be found in mosques around the world inscribed in wood, carved in marble, or engraved in stucco. There are many different scripts that have been developed over the centuries ranging from thick angular scripts to thin and flowing scripts. Many scripts were influenced by the languages and lettering's of the different countries that became part of the Islamic empire.

The status of women in Islam seems to be controversial. Based on my own perceptions from the media, I visited the mosque with the opinion that women were not respected and were delegated to an inferior position in society. However, the fact that there have been so many women heads of state in the Islamic world confused me. My impression at the mosque was that women, though separated during prayer, were held in high regard and considered equal to men. Practices such as covering the head are often viewed by Western women as degrading. I did not get this impression. Rather, I understood it to be a practice that promoted modesty and respect between men and women and reduced temptation. Early Islam afforded many rights to women such as education, property ownership, inheritance, consensual marriage and divorce, long before the west even began to address these issues in the twentieth century. While the segregation of unmarried, unrelated men and women may be encouraged in many parts of the Islamic world, the practice may not always be related to the lower status for women, but rather to the propensity of human beings to fall prey to their animal instincts, undermining chastity, family values and social mores [13]. The practice of purdah (strict segregation of the sexes) and the treatment of women by the Taliban seem to be limited to some, but not all, Islamic cultures and societies and may also be related to socio-economics, the higher the socio-economical status the less restricted a woman is [14].

When I arrived at the Mosque I was greeted by some members who were outside the main entrance. Beside the doors were shelves where everyone entering put their shoes, which must be removed. As I entered I saw that there was a room to the left that was designated for women and to the right was a larger room for the men. Because no prayers were currently being held I was able to enter the men's room. What most stood out was the bare simplicity of the surroundings. There were beautiful Arabic scriptures from the Quran encircling the interior of a small dome as well as above the mehrab, a central arch where the imam stands. Within the mehrab are steps called member where the imam stands when he is holding a service. On the wall there were two designs similar to stars, one with the name Allah and the other with the name Mohammad. I was told that this is something found universally in every mosque. The floor was covered in carpeting with the geometric designs

similar in style to those previously described. Attire worn ranged from casual western to conservative Muslim clothing. The Imam explained that clothing must only be adequately modest and loose fitting. Soon after I was shown around the prayer room, I heard a man calling from outside. I was told that before the prayer begins someone always summons everyone to the prayer room. Prior to the beginning of the prayer, I moved into the hallway in anticipation of the performance of salat or prayer. The Imam entered and knelt in front of the mehrab while all the other men stood in a perfect line behind him. The prayer included facing Mecca and the Ka'abah, or house of God, reciting portions of the Qu'ran in Arabic and performing clearly defined physical postures in a set order. The prayer only lasted about ten minutes.

My expectations concerning Islam prior to my site visit did not match up to my experiences in the mosque as I became familiar with its members, who were all very open and friendly. Immediately after the prayers had been completed the Imam took me aside into the women's prayer room, which was similar to the men's room but a little smaller. He spoke with me for over an hour about a wide range of topics including Islam, politics, personal beliefs, and world issues. I was anxious to meet with the Imam, thinking he would hold overly conservative views. But as we conversed it became clear that our world views were not dissimilar. The foundations of his beliefs on tolerance, humanity, racism, and other concerns were things I believed in as well. Upon inquiring about discrimination he faced he replied it was not a problem for him. I knew that he was discriminated against, but by replying in this manner I saw that he was a person that did not allow himself to be lowered by such issues. We then spoke of how throughout history Muslims have been tolerant of others of different religions, races, or lifestyles, even though this is not the general perception of the public. One of Islam's principles is that regardless of race or nationality, all mankind is created equal. Another thing that really surprised me was the fact that Islam does not deny Christianity and Judaism, but rather accepts their prophets and scriptures as being true. He spoke of India as a great example of this, in which a diverse population composed of many religious groups, mostly Hindu and Muslim, has coexisted for thousands of years with relatively little conflict.

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