

## Penomee (Dr. Kari Ann Owen), Ex-Jew, USA



“There is no god but God, and Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, is his messenger.”

These are the words of the Shahadah oath, I believe.

The Creator is known by many names. His wisdom is always recognizable, and his presence made manifest in the love, tolerance and compassion present in our community.

His profound ability to guide us from a war-like individualism so rampant in American society to a belief in the glory and dignity of the Creator’s human family, and our obligations to and membership within that family. This describes the maturation of a spiritual personality, and perhaps the most desirable maturation of the psychological self, also.

My road to Shahadah began when an admired director, Tony Richardson, died of AIDS. Mr. Richardson was already a brilliant and internationally recognized professional when I almost met him backstage at the play *Luther* at age 14.

Playwriting for me has always been a way of finding degrees of spiritual and emotional reconciliation, both within myself and between myself and a world I found rather brutal due to childhood circumstances. Instead of fighting with the world, I let my conflicts fight it out in my plays. Amazingly, some of us have even grown up together!

So, as I began accumulating stage credits (productions and staged readings), beginning at age 17, I always retained the hope that I would someday fulfill my childhood dream of studying and working with Mr. Richardson. When he followed his homosexuality to America (from England) and a promiscuous community, AIDS killed him, and with him went another portion of my sense of belonging to and within American society.

I began to look outside American and Western society to Islamic culture for moral guidance.

## **Why Islam and not somewhere else?**

My birthmother's ancestors were Spanish Jews who lived among Muslims until the Inquisition expelled the Jewish community in 1492. In my historical memory, which I feel at a deep level, the call of the muezzin is as deep as the lull of the ocean and the swaying of ships, the pounding of horses' hooves across the desert, the assertion of love in the face of oppression.

I felt the birth of a story within me, and the drama took form as I began to learn of an Ottoman caliph's humanity toward Jewish refugees at the time of my ancestors' expulsions. God guided my learning, and I was taught about Islam by figures as diverse as Imam Siddiqi of the South Bay Islamic Association; Sister Hussein of Rahima; and my beloved adopted Sister, Maria Abdin, who is Native American, Muslim and a writer for the SBIA magazine, IQRA. My first research interview was in a halal [meat regarded as lawful in Islamic law] butcher shop in San Francisco's Mission District, where my understanding of living Islam was profoundly affected by the first Muslim lady I had ever met: a customer who was in hijab, behaved with a sweet kindness and grace and also read, wrote and spoke four languages.

Her brilliance, coupled with her amazing (to me) freedom from arrogance, had a profound effect on the beginnings of my knowledge of how Islam can affect human behavior.

Little did I know then that not only would a play be born, but a new Muslim.

The course of my research introduced me to much more about Islam than a set of facts, for Islam is a living religion. I learned how Muslims conduct themselves with a dignity and kindness which lifts them above the American slave market of sexual competition and violence. I learned that Muslim men and women can actually be in each others' presence without tearing each other to pieces, verbally and physically. And I learned that modest dress, perceived as a spiritual state, can uplift human behavior and grant to both men and women a sense of their own spiritual worth.

## **Why did this seem so astonishing, and so astonishingly new?**

Like most American females, I grew up in a slave market, comprised not only of the sexual sicknesses of my family, but the constant negative judging of my appearance by peers beginning at ages younger than seven. I was taught from a very early age by American society that my human worth consisted solely of my attractiveness (or, in my case, lack of it) to others. Needless to say, in this atmosphere, boys and girls, men and women, often grew to resent each other very deeply, given the desperate desire for peer acceptance, which

seemed almost if not totally dependent not on one's kindness or compassion or even intelligence, but on looks and the perception of those looks by others.

While I do not expect or look for human perfection among Muslims, the social differences are profound, and almost unbelievable to someone like myself.

I do not pretend to have any answers to the conflicts of the Middle East, except what the prophets, beloved in Islam, have already expressed. My disabilities prevent me from fasting, and from praying in the same prayer postures as most [Muslims].

But I love and respect the Islam I have come to know through the behavior and words of the men and women I have come to know in AMILA (American Muslims Intent on Learning and Activism) and elsewhere, where I find a freedom from cruel emotional conflicts and a sense of imminent spirituality.

### **What else do I feel and believe about Islam?**

I support and deeply admire Islam's respect for same sex education; for the rights of women as well as men in society; for modest dress; and above all for sobriety and marriage, the two most profound foundations of my life, for I am 21 1/2 years sober and happily married. How wonderful to feel that one and half billion Muslims share my faith in the character development which marriage allows us, and also in my decision to remain drug- and alcohol-free.

### **What, then, is Islam's greatest gift in a larger sense?**

In a society which presents us with constant pressure to immolate ourselves on the altars of unbridled instinct without respect for consequences, Islam asks us to regard ourselves as human persons created by God with the capacity for responsibility in our relations with others. Through prayer, charity and a commitment to sobriety and education, if we follow the path of Islam, we stand a good chance of raising children who will be free from the violence and exploitation which is robbing parents and children of safe schools and neighborhoods, and often of their lives.