

I was excited from the moment Severine invited me to witness her ordination as a rabbi. Severine is a young French woman I met in 2003 at the Jewish Christian Muslim (JCM) Inter-faith Conference that takes place every year in Germany. I don't know why but we just 'clicked' and had a mutual admiration, fuelled by our curiosity regarding each other's faiths. My curiosity and longing to know more about Judaism returned when Severine spoke to me about the ceremony on the telephone. I told her without hesitation I would love to see her being ordained, especially as I had never before visited a synagogue. Inside I was ecstatic. "Finally I would be in a synagogue!"

My clothes had to be selected. I chose a *shalwaar kameez* suit that I knew had dazzled participants at the JCM Conference. My mother had bought the material and had it made by a Karachi

On first visiting a synagogue

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tailor and I just love the maroony purple colour and the silk feel of its cloth and the bright gold, red and yellow patterns on the front of the outfit.

Dressed and ready, I did not leave my house until I prayed *Zuhr* (prayed after noon but before mid-afternoon). I also chose to wear a golden chain with a pendant with *Allah* inscribed in Arabic. I think my choice of clothes and jewellery and the decision not to delay my prayer and merge it with *Asr* (another of the five daily Islamic ritual prayers), as I sometimes do when taking a trip to Central London, was because I knew I would be venturing into unknown territory. To feel secure in myself, I needed the anchor of familiar garments and jewellery. I felt the ritual Islamic prayer, as sent down to Muhammad (may God bless him and grant him peace) performed in Arabic, rooted me in the most perfect fashion.

Outside West London Synagogue I was met with warm and welcoming smiles and



soft and defecting to the west and being lost by taking up western liberal values.

I believe these political activists or Islamists freely band about the label *kafir* because they have no awareness and understanding of the consequences. Accusing another Muslim of being a *kafir* and not confirming this without being 100% certain, is a grave matter in Allah's eyes. Because it leads to discord and mistrust within the Muslim community, it can also lead to one's hereafter being gravely affected.

Inside I saw a familiar face, Irit. I cannot forget her because she was especially helpful to me during the JCM Conference. She went out of her way to buy me

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inside by efficient but friendly-looking security guards. I gladly offered my bag as I saw everyone's bag being searched and knew that this must be a regular procedure. After all we all live in an age where terrorism is an ugly reality. A thought popped into my head: "If Muslims live with the awful reality of Islamophobia and being demonised, Jews must live in fear of terrorists?"

On the way to the Synagogue, I recall passing some Muslim men, the type I refer to as the *salafi* (see box) bunch, the ones with the trousers up to the ankles and the long beards and *topis* (the urdu word for the hats Muslim men wear when praying). I wondered what they would say if I told them that I was going to a synagogue. I thought if they were the *salafi* type, they would accuse me of being a *kafir* (see box). If they were not *salafis* but men that are infected with the common disease of Islamism (see box), they would not only accuse me of being a *kafir* but also of going

washing-up liquid so I could wash the bottles for my toddler son. This act of hers in one moment banished years of prejudice that I had held regarding Jews. I feel my family and probably Muslim folklore have fuelled this prejudice – that Jews are stingy. I recall that I was embarrassed and disgusted at my prejudice.

So seeing Irit, my shoulders relaxed and my nerves lessened. Kind, warm, motherly, affectionate Irit! She guided me into the synagogue after I greeted Severine who looked nervous despite her usual French charm and warm smile. I entered the prayer hall reciting God's name Allah in Arabic, not because I was afraid but because I knew I was entering the sacred part of the building where God's name is praised and celebrated. After all the *Quran* refers to the synagogues and churches as places where "God's name is extolled".

Indeed inside the prayer area, I felt the holiness and peace of the place and a feeling of familiarity greeted me. The same

Salafi is an ideology based on the idea that pure Islam was embodied in the past by the Salaf i.e. the first four generations after Muhammed and that to return to the way Muslims lived then is to follow Muhammed's example and be a good Muslim. Salafis are usually very literalist in their understanding of Quran and Hadith. They understand Islam according to the letter of the law, leaving very little room for interpretation and rely heavily on the scholars that they follow rejecting other scholars from other schools of thought.

Kafir in Arabic means someone who covers or rejects truth. Most Muslims however nowadays unfortunately understand this Arabic term as unbeliever rather than a rejecter of faith or truth which leads them to adopt a holier than thou and arrogant attitude to those of other faiths or no faith or even to those other Muslims that don't share their interpretation of Islam.

"The revivalism movements are modern not just in their methods which may include sophisticated techniques of organisation as well as the use of guns, rockets and bombs. They are modern in that they have absorbed into a "traditional" Islamic discourse many ideas imported from outside the Islamic intellectual tradition. The decline in traditional forms of spirituality represented by the Sufi brotherhoods has been accompanied by the ideologisation of Islam at the political level- the construction of a political ideology using some symbols culled from the historical repertoire of Islam to the exclusion of others. The ideology sometimes referred to as Islamic fundamentalism is better described as Islamism, the Latin suffix attachment to the Arabic original, more accurately expresses the relationship between the pre-existing reality (in this case a religion) its translation into a political ideology; just as communism ideologises the reality of the commune, socialism the social, fascism the ancient symbol of Roman Consular Authority. Islamism is not Islam."

Islam A Very Short Introduction, Ruthven, 1997, Oxford

feeling I get when I enter a mosque, though this time I was in a synagogue and surrounded by primarily English Jews.

Although there was no *mihrab* (prayer niche or recess in a mosque indicating the direction of prayer), no prayer carpets, no Arabic calligraphy around the dome, there was calligraphy in Hebrew around a dome. I wished, seeing the golden lettering, with all my heart, my mind and soul that I could read Hebrew. What I loved about the synagogue was not just the beauty of the mosaics, the golden Hebrew lettering, the blue stars of David, the lights of the candles, but the distinct absence of human images. There were just letters and symbols. And with the blue contrasting with the gold, amid the glow of the candlelight, it was breathtaking.

I was not allowed to be awe struck for long, as the ceremony commenced. Throughout I felt I was witnessing history and suddenly I was in awe of Leo Baeck College's monumental work in training rabbis from all over the world to return to serve their communities. And from what diverse backgrounds were the rabbis being ordained: a French woman with Arab Maghreb ancestry; a Belarus man; a Russian man.

Frustration crept into my heart. "Why don't we have an equivalent Muslim college?" I know there are Muslim colleges in Egypt, Malaysia, India but I thought: "We desperately need an institution in this country that is progressive, modern, liberal and open to women being imams, open to inter-faith dialogue, open to truth and justice, open to Ijtihad, open to reason, an institution that is familiar with the reality facing Muslims today and not busy running away from reality and preaching academic knowledge or passing *fatwas* from its ivory tower".

I remember particularly liking Severine's speech that included the words: "Your enemy could become your friend". Thought provoking stuff! I loved her insistence upon truth and justice. It was interesting and inspirational to hear the speeches of the others being ordained and how their dream of becoming a rabbi just a few years ago had become reality. This was attributed to their struggle, hard work, prayer and sheer persistence.

I loved the Hebrew prayers and songs. I thought "These people praise God, they surrender to God, and they ask God for help. They return to God. They do all this just like we do but in another language, in another way, according to another law, given to

another Messenger, another human example of the ideal human".

I loved the bible stories that were related. I thought: "These biblical prophets who were sent to the children of Israel are human examples". I liked the fact that they are remembered as teachers. As Muslims, I feel we respect and venerate the Prophets and the Messengers to such an extent that we forget their humanity. Because some of us feel we cannot reach their incredible heights and cannot live up to their immense ideals, we give up and spend the rest of our lives feeling guilty and becoming destructive instead of being constructive.

Soon the ceremony was over and Rabbi Professor Jonathan Magonet delivered the final words in four languages French, English, Hebrew and Russian. I took a last glance at the breathtaking dome, the blue stars and candles and followed everyone out of the prayer area to where the refreshments were being served. This took some time as there was a large crowd gathered outside in the corridor. No one seemed to know where he or she was going. No one seemed to know where the refreshments were. I thought, "The Jews are just as disorganised as the Muslims."

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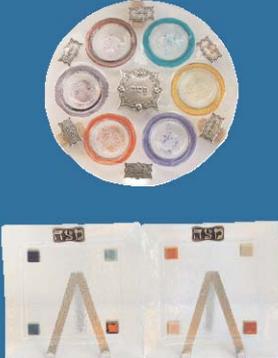
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