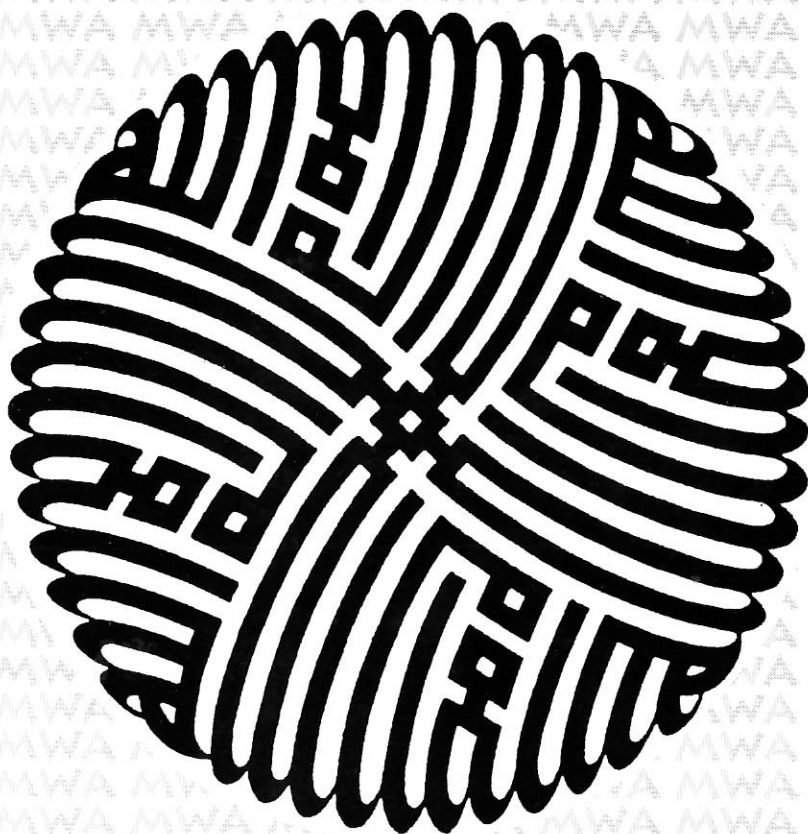


# *The* **MUSLIM WOMAN**

VOLUME XXXV No.1

February 2002



A quarterly journal published by The Muslim Women's Association (Regd. Charity)

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### MEMBERSHIP

The Muslim Women's Association is open to all Muslim Women. Membership Fees (which includes the subscription to *The Muslim Woman*) are: Annual UK £15 Overseas £20 Life membership UK £100 Overseas £120. Meetings of the Muslim Women's Association take place on the second Sunday of each month

### ALL CORRESPONDENCE

should be sent to our address, THE MUSLIM WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION, P.O.Box 100, London W5 2XU. Articles, letters and other matter appearing in this publication do not necessarily express the official views of the Executive Committee of The Muslim Women's Association.

## EID DINNER

Sunday 10th March 2002

5 pm - 7.30 pm

Islamic Cultural Centre,

146 Park Road,

London NW8 7RG.

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH, THE BENEFICENT, THE MERCIFUL

## EDITORIAL

Dear Readers

*Assalamu Alaykum,*

Could Muslims and Christians work together in pursuit of peace and justice? Could nationalist or racial tension be put aside but instead concentrate on core values of all peace, justice, equity, etc.? The recent seminar at the Lambeth Palace entitled 'Building Bridges: Overcoming obstacles in Muslim-Christian relations,' was focussing for a better understanding of Islam and Christianity and how it helps, shape and motivate attitudes and perceptions as well as a willingness to work together for peace and justice. Is it important in the 21st century for those who lead the political, economic and social life of nations to understand both faith communities? Dialogue involves not just a reaching out to members of a different faith, but also a willingness to turn to challenges like globalisation, the environment and poverty. Grass-root credibility of different faith communities can be harnessed in shared action to address some of the world's most pressing problems.

The seminar ended with the creation of a 'Joint-Committee' between the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Dr Mohamed Tantawie and the Archbishop of Canterbury. It established a framework to carry forward the interfaith dialogue between the two institutions

in a more structured manner and encourage institutions on both sides to play a positive role in development. Let us also wait for the creation of the Council of Muslims and Christians.

Swadeka Ahsun (Swadeka is working towards her first publication on 'Dialogue, Muslim-Christian Relations').

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## PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION

INDIA — PIONEERING PHOTOGRAPHERS 1850-1900 is the first major exhibition in London of Indian photography from this period, a time when India was at the forefront of photographic development. Drawn from the holdings of the British Library and the Howard and Jane Ricketts Collections, the exhibit is divided into four groups: early amateurs; documentation of India's architectural and ethnic diversity; commercial photographers; and princely India. Catalogue, Brunei Gallery, London; through December 15 2002.

Dear Members,

We, the Muslim Women's Association are trying to raise **ADVERTISING** for the newsletter. You can help by: calling attention to the adverts you see in 'The Muslim Woman' and asking your business acquaintances and family if they would wish to advertise. Please contact the editor for rates.

## AN IDENTITY REDUCED TO A BURKA

By LAILA AL-MARAYATI and SEMEEN ISSA

LA Times Sunday Opinion, January 20, 2002

A FEW YEARS AGO, someone from the Feminist Majority Foundation called the Muslim Women's League asked if she could "borrow a burka" for a photo shoot the organisation was doing to draw attention to the plight of women in Afghanistan under the Taliban. When we told her that we didn't have one, and that none of our Afghan friends did either, she expressed surprise, as if she'd assumed that all Muslim women keep burkas in their closets in case a militant Islamist comes to dinner. She didn't seem to understand that her assumption was the equivalent of assuming that every Latino has a Mexican sombrero in their closet.

We don't mean to make light of the suffering of our sisters in Afghanistan, but the burka was – and is – not their major focus of concern. Their priorities are more basic, like feeding their children, becoming literate and living free from violence. Nevertheless, recent articles in the Western media suggest the burka means everything to Muslim women, because they routinely express bewilderment at the fact that all Afghan women didn't cast off their burkas when the Taliban was defeated. The Western press' obsession with the dress of Muslim women is not surprising, however, since the press tends to view Muslims, in general, simplistically. Headlines in the mainstream media have reduced Muslim female identity to an article of clothing – "the veil." One is hard-pressed to find an article, book or film about women in Islam that doesn't have "veil" in the title: "Behind the Veil," "Beyond the Veil," "At the Drop of a Veil" and more. The

use of the term borders on the absurd: Perhaps next will come "What Colour is Your Veil?" or "Rebel Without a Veil" or "Whose Veil is it, Anyway?"

The word "veil" does not even have a universal meaning. In some cultures it refers to a face-covering known as niqab; in others, to a simple head scarf known as hijab. Other manifestations of "the veil" include all-encompassing outer garments like the ankle-length abaya from the Persian Gulf states, the chador in Iran or the burka in Afghanistan.

Like the differences in our clothing from one region to another, Muslim women are diverse. Stereotypical assumptions about Muslim women are as inaccurate as the assumption that all American women are personified by the bikini-clad cast of "Baywatch." Anyone who has spent time interacting with Muslims knows that, despite numerous obstacles, Muslim women are active, assertive and engaged in society. In Qatar, women make up the majority of graduate-school students. The Iranian parliament has more women members than the U.S. Senate. Throughout the world, many Muslim women are educated and professionally trained; they participate in public debates, are often catalysts for reform and champions for their own rights. At the same time, there is no denying that in many Muslim countries, dress has been used as a tool to wield power over women.

What doesn't penetrate Western consciousness, however, is that forced uncovering is also a tool of oppression. During the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in Iran, wearing the veil was prohibited. As an expression of their opposition to his repressive regime, women who supported the 1979 Islamic Revolution

marched in the street clothed in chadors. Many of them did not expect to have this "dress code" institutionalised by those who led the revolution and then took power in the new government.

In Turkey, the secular regime considers the head scarf a symbol of extremist elements that want to overthrow the government. Accordingly, women who wear any type of head-covering are banned from public office, government jobs and academia, including graduate school. Turkish women who believe the head-covering is a religious obligation are unfairly forced to give up public life or opportunities for higher education and career advancement.

Dress should not bar Muslim women from exercising their Islam-guaranteed rights, like the right to be educated, to earn a living and to move about safely in society. Unfortunately, some governments impose a strict dress code along with other restrictions, like limiting education for women, to appear "authentically Islamic." Such laws, in fact, are inconsistent with Islam. Nevertheless, these associations lead to the general perception that "behind the veil" lurk other, more insidious examples of the repression of women, and that wearing the veil somehow causes the social ills that plague Muslim women around the world.

Many Muslim men and women alike are subjugated by despotic, dictatorial regimes. Their lot in life is worsened by extreme poverty and illiteracy, two conditions that are not caused by Islam but are sometimes exploited in the name of religion. Helping Muslim women overcome their misery is a major task. The reconstruction of Muslim Afghanistan will be a test case for the Afghan people and for the international community dedicated

to making Afghan society work for everyone. To some, Islam is the root cause of the problems faced by women in Afghanistan. But what is truly at fault is a misguided, narrow interpretation of Islam designed to serve a rigid patriarchal system.

Traditional Muslim populations will be more receptive to change that is based on Islamic principles of justice, as expressed in the Koran, than they will be to change that abandons religion altogether or confines it to private life. Muslim scholars and leaders who emphasise Islamic principles that support women's rights to education, health care, marriage and divorce, equal pay for equal work and participation in public life could fill the vacuum now occupied by those who impose a vision of Islam that infringes on the rights of women.

Given the opportunity, Muslim women, like women everywhere, will become educated, pursue careers, strive to do what is best for their families and contribute positively according to their abilities. How they dress is irrelevant. It should be obvious that the critical element Muslim women need is freedom, especially the freedom to make choices that enable them to be independent agents of positive change. Choosing to dress modestly, including wearing a head scarf, should be as respected as choosing not to cover. Accusations that modestly dressed Muslim women are caving in to male-dominated understandings of Islam neglect the reality that most Muslim women who cover by choice do so out of subservience to God, not to any human being.

The worth of a woman – any woman – should not be determined by the length of her skirt, but by the dedication, knowledge and skills she brings to the task at hand.

## HEALTH PAGE



### AIR TRAVEL—ADVICE FOR HAJJIS

IT IS A well known fact that travelling long distances in a pressurised cabin at altitude does have some effects on the human body.

Move about. Change position often and avoid crossing your legs. Immobility poses the greatest risk in developing clotting disorders such as deep vein thrombosis (DVT) – whether you are on a plane, train, car or bus.

Walk around. Get out of your seat and walk around the cabin regularly to improve circulation.

Stretch out. Exercise your toes/feet.

No pills. Unless expressly recommended by your own doctor who is aware of your intention to fly, do not take sleeping tablets on the flight – this will reduce your mobility and make you feel sluggish.

Mind your ears. Avoid flying with a heavy cold, sinusitis or ear problems as cabin pressure changes during the flight may cause discomfort. If you experience problems during the flight, suck a sweet, chew or hold your nostrils and gently blow through your nose – this should equalise the pressure in most healthy people. If you are still experiencing problems, speak to a member of the cabin crew.

Drink plenty! Drink water and/or fruit juice. Avoid, tea, coffee or carbonated drinks (or alcohol), as they will dehydrate you.

Eat light. Avoid heavy meals and foods – air expands at altitude and heavy meals will result in that bloated feeling.



. Wear loose fitting, comfortable clothes and shoes.  
e. Your skin, especially your lips and nostrils, may feel  
turising creams may help. If you wear contact lenses,  
y your glasses with you, as your eyes may feel dryer  
ou're already there! To minimise the effects of jet lag,  
ch to your destination time as soon as you board the  
try to adjust your eating, sleeping pattern accordingly.  
are excerpts from "in-flight health—made plane and simple" by  
Virgin Atlantic

## Eid al-Adha Dinner

ers, their Families and Friends are cordially invited  
celebrate Eid al-Adha with a sumptuous dinner

at the Islamic Cultural Centre,  
146 Park Road, London NW8 7RG,

on Sunday, 10th March 2002

at 5 pm - 7.30 pm.

**Tickets at the Door:**

Under 5's: free

5-12 years of age: £3.00

Adults: £5.50



## HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN'S GOLDEN JUBILEE

THE YEAR 2002 will mark the 50th anniversary of Her Majesty The Queen's Accession to the Throne. This will be an occasion both to look back at the role that The Queen has played in the affairs of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth over the last 50 years and to look forward.

The Queen has expressed the wish that her Golden Jubilee should be an occasion for celebration involving the whole community in this country and throughout the Commonwealth. The focal point of the celebrations will be the National Service of Thanksgiving at St Paul's Cathedral on Tuesday 4 June 2002 on the final day of the Jubilee weekend of special events Golden Jubilee starting on Saturday 1 June. The summer of 2002, from May to July, will be given over to celebrations in every city, region, county, town and village across the United Kingdom.

The Queen has said that she sees her Golden Jubilee as an opportunity to express her thanks for the support and loyalty she has enjoyed during her reign. This is a central theme of the celebrations. Through Her Majesty's visits around the United Kingdom and Overseas during this summer there will be many opportunities to pay tribute to all those who have supported The Queen over the past 50 years. Her Majesty's tours will also provide citizens of this country and the Commonwealth nations

with opportunities to thank her for 50 years of dedicated service.

The Golden Jubilee celebrations will provide a special opportunity to acknowledge all those who support and contribute to their communities through public service and voluntary endeavour.

The Queen hopes that the celebrations will reach into every community and involve everyone no matter what their background, age, culture, ethnic origin, religion or other status. It is hoped that the Golden Jubilee will be an inclusive occasion; that the celebrations will be accessible to all those who want to participate; and that they will reflect the multi-culturalism in our society today and the diversity we see around us.

The celebration of a 50-year reign is a time for reflection on the ways in which our lives have changed over half a century. It also offers us the chance to take stock of where we stand today and to look to the future. The Golden Jubilee is as much for young people in our communities as it is for the older generation. Celebrating the achievements of the youth of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth and looking ahead to the contribution of youth to our society are important aspects of the Golden Jubilee.

The significance of the Commonwealth to the development and modern life of our nation is central to the programme of Jubilee events scheduled for the year. There is an important Commonwealth dimension to each of the other themes, which places the Commonwealth at the heart of the Jubilee.

## OFFICIAL HOLIDAYS

The Queen has agreed that there should be an extra Bank Holiday for the Golden Jubilee on Monday 3 June 2002. The late May Bank Holiday, which would otherwise fall on Monday 27 May, will be moved to Tuesday 4 June. The dates were selected to allow as many people as possible to join in the celebrations.

The Queen will attend a National Service of Thanksgiving in St Paul's Cathedral, London on Tuesday 4 June. Her Majesty hopes to tour the United Kingdom from May to July. She will visit the Armed Forces in Portsmouth on 27 June, open the Commonwealth Games in Manchester on 25 July and close them on 4 August.

It is hoped that the Golden Jubilee will be an occasion for celebrations across the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. The public are invited to come forward with their ideas for celebrations.

If you are planning a party or event of any kind please check out the official website, for it is full of useful ideas as well as a celebration tool-kit available to download at [www.goldenjubilee.gov.uk](http://www.goldenjubilee.gov.uk)

\* \* \*

## EL-HAJJ: SOME RECOLLECTIONS

*by Jasmine Ansari\**

MUSLIMS FROM ALL over the World visited Makkah this year in order to perform the Hajj. For many it was the first time, and, as I arrived at Heathrow airport ready for departure I was overjoyed to see so many pilgrims like myself – queuing patiently as the lines grew longer and longer in front of the check-in desks. Finally the call came and we were ready to board the plane.

I was fortunate to sit next to a knowledgeable Muslim sister who lent me a beautifully illustrated booklet that covered all the rites of Hajj to read and make notes during the flight. I had memories of performing umrah many years ago when I lived in Saudi Arabia. I felt I would be fine as I was going with a group, I would get all the advice and support from the organisers.

On arrival at Jeddah airport I was fascinated by the architecture of the Hajj terminal. The ceiling of the terminal looked like one gigantic umbrella and there were benches for pilgrims that looked like plastic bubbles creating a feeling of being “out in space”. This feeling of being in another “realm” remained with me throughout the days I was a pilgrim in the Kingdom.

The journey to Makkah by coach and the first sight of the Ka’ba was awesome! I sat in the coach gazing at hundreds of people – men, women and children all walking in the direction of the Ka’ba. The time was Friday mid-day and it was hot but that did not seem to bother the flow of the crowd heading for the Mosque (al-Haram al-Masjid). It seemed as if a giant magnet was pulling them in one direction. There was a dignity in the way the crowd

moved, skillfully avoiding the coaches and cars as they weaved their way through the twisting and hilly roads of the bustling town of Makkah. I felt a surge of joy run through me and I wanted to be amongst that crowd.

My thoughts revolved around getting to our hotel quickly and then getting to the Mosque in time for the Friday prayer. My first steps towards the direction of the Ka’ba were unforgettable. I had not prepared myself for the heat or the crowd! I could only move a few hundred yards from my hotel when I came across rows of worshippers lining the streets. In a vain attempt to reach the Mosque I managed to squeeze in an alleyway – just in time to join in the prayers. Afterwards I staggered back to the hotel, the heat was overwhelming.

I fell ill and did not venture out of the hotel later that day. During the next few days, preceding the Hajj, I enjoyed visiting the Bayt al-Haram in the evenings – just to sit in front of the Ka’ba and gaze at it! The atmosphere in the Haram during the tahajud and fajr prayers was unforgettable. Crowds moved gently among the worshippers who had arrived before them – some had been there all night sitting on their prayer mats in neat and orderly fashion. Only the slight echo of sandals could be heard as they touched the white marble floor of the courtyard. There were hardly any voices raised or aggressive behaviour displayed during the early part of the mornings. A strong sense of harmony and unity prevailed. The worshippers seemed wrapped in silent devotion. I do not remember even hearing a child’s cry or an animal’s sound during this period.

The actual Hajj went by so quickly, beginning on the 8th through to the 12th of Dhu’l Hijja. The scene changed from day

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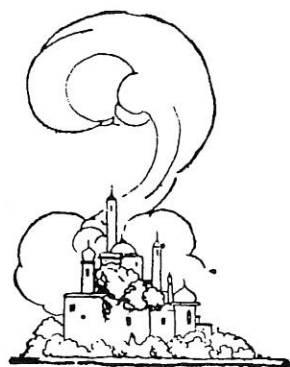
\* Jasmine Ansari performed Hajj a few years ago.



to day just like in a movie: Mina – the town of tents – Arafat and the scorching heat – Muzdalifah and the collecting of pebbles for the jamrat – back to Mina to stone the “devil” – the sacrifice of an animal – the shaving or shortening of hair – removing ihram – returning to Makkah to perform umrah – once more to Mina – the stoning of “devils” – and lastly, the performance of tawaf al-wada’ in Makkah.

The Hajj is a series of short journeys making us reflect upon our individual lives, which starts from the womb and culminates in the journey to the grave. The final journey is back to our Creator. During the Hajj we have the chance to reflect upon our lifestyle and invoke Allah’s help. Many pilgrims, like me, return back to their homes with the resolve to improve ourselves as we aspire for greater spiritual awareness for the rest of our lives.

Most pilgrims pay their homage to the Prophet’s Mosque in Madina after the Hajj. This is a very different experience and perhaps it will be left for another time to talk about it.



## KITCHEN TALK

The Confusing world of Cauliflowers

*Cauliflowers — “nothing but a cabbage with a college education”.*

Mark Twain.

### A FEW SNIPPETS.

THE NAME CAULIFLOWER comes from the Italian caoli fiori meaning cabbage flower. What we eat is the flower head of this plant. Like all members of the curciferous family of vegetables, the cauliflower is a rich source of nutrients, including vitamin C. It also contains sulphurous compounds that may help to protect against various cancers – particularly cancer of the colon.

Like other fibrous vegetables, cauliflower may cause flatulence as the gut breaks down the cellulose. Eating it with spicy accompaniments such as garlic, caraway, ground coriander and cumin will ease digestive discomfort; herbs which help the digestion include bay, fennel and tarragon.

There are different varieties of cauliflower. For example, one is called “overwintered broccoli”. The name was coined over 150 years ago, before green (calabrese) broccoli had arrived in Britain. So it wasn’t so confusing back then. Overwintered broccoli needs exposure to the cold in order to form the flowers which we eat; this is called vernalisation. They develop thick layers of leaves around the developing flower which protects them from frost.

Another variety is the Romanesque of which a sub-variety is called ‘Minaret’, describing the spiralling centre of the flower

head. It tastes like a cross between cauliflower and broccoli. This variety does not like the very cold winter months. Let us look out for the different varieties in the shops next time we go shopping.

Below are a few cauliflower dishes to whet your appetite.

Crispy Cauliflower with Olives, Capers and Parsley

Cauliflower and Fennel with Coriander Vinaigrette

Cumin Cauliflower

Curried Cauliflower Soup

Cauliflower Vichyssoise

Cauliflower with Sesame Seeds and Ginger

Cauliflower Casserole

Mexican-Style Cauliflower Bake

Cauliflower Italian Style

Cauliflower al-Shami

Cauliflower with Honey & Sesame



THE 'MINARET'

VARIETY

## WHY SHOULD WE EAT 5 A DAY?

Fruit and vegetables are nature's Original Fast Food. Research has shown that eating 5 a Day reduces the risk of cancer, heart diseases, and other illnesses. Cancer, heart disease and stroke are the three leading causes of death in this country. All three are diet-related due to diets high in fat and too low in fruits and vegetables. People who eat 5 a Day have half the risk of developing cancer compared with those who eat only 1-2 servings a day. In fact, according to the Produce for Better Health Foundation, eating a diet rich in fruits and vegetables could prevent more than one-third of the 500,000 cancer deaths each year.

### WHAT IS A PORTION?

It is generally recommended that we eat 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day.

A portion of fruit is one medium-size fruit, such as an apple or banana, a slice of a large fruit such as a melon or two small fruits such as plums. With berries and grapes you need a cupful and two to three tablespoons for fresh fruit salad or cooked and canned fruits.

Two tablespoons of vegetables is a portion, so too is a bowl of salad and a 150ml glass of fruit or vegetable juice.

## AN APPEAL

# MADINA HOUSE

### A MUSLIM HOME FOR CHILDREN IN NEED OF CARE IN LONDON

**Madina House** is a Muslim home for children in need of care, established in 1981 under the auspices of the Muslim Women's Association (a registered charity which has been functioning since 1962)

From its inception the organisers worked closely with the Department of Health and Social Security and all other Social Services Agencies in order to comply with the current guidelines on the running of Children's Homes. Subsequently Madina House was registered by the Department of S.S.I. under the Child Care Act.

**Aim**—The main aim of Madina House is to provide an alternative home for children who for whatever reason, are temporarily unable to live with their parent/s. At Madina House we provide a stable, caring background, founded on Islamic principles and practices. Since its founding we have cared for over 400 children.

The present home does no longer comply with today's regulations and we have been asked to find more suitable accommodation. Thus, we are in desperate need of finance to buy an appropriate building. Failing to do so, the future of Madina House is in question.

Please help us by giving generously to continue to care for our children in need.

**Donations, whether by Cheques or Banker's Orders would be greatly appreciated.**

## AN APPEAL

# MADINA HOUSE

*"You shall not attain righteousness unless you spend on others of that which you love, and whatever you spend, verily God has knowledge of it."*

The Qur'an 3:92

From.....

Name.....

Address .....

.....

.....

Telephone .....

I would like to make a donation/Zakat and enclose a cheque for the amount of £.....payable to **Madina House Trust**.

**To be send either to:**

**Madina House Trust**, PO Box 29891 London SW20 0SS

**or direct to:**

The National Westminster Bank, Royal Garden Branch, Kensington High

Street, London W8 5EQ

Account Number 77946405; Sort Number 50-30-101 a

## A MESSAGE TO THE MWA

*A message to the Muslim Women's Association from the  
Spirituality Group of the Kensington Chelsea Women's Club.*

WE ARE A diverse group of Christians (Lutheran, Episcopal, Catholic, Orthodox) who have met for the past four years to better understand our own personal faith through study and discussion. We have read spiritual books, gone on field trips to Anglican religious sites, attended lectures on icons of the Orthodox faith and last spring undertook a "comparison course" on the religions of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. This self-led exercise included a visit to your Regent's Park Mosque, thanks to Muhammad Risaluddin, who had spoken to us earlier about Islam. On Friday, 16th November (2001), the first day of Ramadan, we were very pleased that Mrs. Unaiza Malik was able to visit us and discuss what it means to be a Muslim woman.

Our group has been particularly upset that, since September, Christianity and Islam, our two religions, have seemed so far apart spiritually when on paper they seem very similar. We wanted to both understand better the Muslim faith as well as understand how stereotypes and misunderstandings lead to conflict between our faiths.

Our discussion with Mrs. Unaiza Malik, who was introduced to our group by a mutual friend, Mrs. Mona Aslam, was lively. We talked about how we all believe that Abraham was the father of all religions, that there is a heaven and hell, and that we should lead a life of good deeds, be of good character and fear God. We also touched on how our faiths differ and how our faiths are organised (and how women are a church's/mosque's backbone!). We were

most interested in how Islam views the secular world and how stereotypes of our faiths have soured our relations. The hour and a half went by too fast and we hope that in the coming months we can continue these dialogues in an effort to better understand our two important faiths. We welcome any members of your organisation to our meetings, which are held Monday mornings at a member's house.

We send our many thanks, again, to you, Unaiza, for spending time with us. We wish you all a fruitful Ramadan and thank you for this opportunity to address you.

29th November 2001.

## DAUGHTERS OF ABRAHAM – DIALOGUE GROUP

THE DAUGHTERS OF ABRAHAM act as a forum for Muslim and Jewish women to meet and develop a series of exchanges, focussing on the shared agenda for mutual understanding. The agenda, led by the group, falls under the reprint of the Maimonides Foundation. For our next meeting we'll be concentrating on the theme of Sara and Hagar within the Muslim and Jewish perspective. In the past the group met formally and informally and held a number of public events.

Swadeka Ahsun.

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## JUNIOR'S CORNER

### PUT TO THE TEST

*Story from a Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad*

HERE ONCE three men of the tribe of Isra'il. One had a dreadful disease which made his skin grow crusty and covered in sores and scabs. Another was bald, with no hair. The third was blind.

God wanted to test these three men and see if they were good, so He sent an angel to them. The angel asked the first man, "What do you want most in the world?" The man replied, "I would like my skin clear, with a good colour, so that people would like me". The angel stroked the man's skin and the scabs disappeared, leaving his skin clear with a good colour, so that he was no longer looked at with disgust.

Then the angel said, "What would you like to have as a present?" "Oh, camels please", said the man. "I can make my living if I have camels". So the man was given a she-camel which was about to have a calf and the angel said, "May the Blessing of God go with this camel".

Then the angel went to the man who was bald, and said, "What do you want most in all the world?" The bald man replied, "I would like a good head of hair, so that I would not be hateful to people".

The angel stroked his head and he was given a good head of hair. Then the angel said, "What would you like as a present?" "Cows please", said the man, "I can make my living if I have cows". So he was given a cow that was about to have a calf, and the angel said, "May

the Blessing of God go with the cow".

Lastly, the angel went to the blind man, and said, "What do you want most in the whole world?" "I wish that God would give me back my sight", said the man, "so that I can see people".

So the angel stroked his eyes and God made him able to see again. "Now, what would you like as a present?" said the angel. "Oh sheep please", said the man who had been blind, "I can make my living with sheep".

So he was given a sheep which was just about to have lambs, and the angel said, "May the Blessing of God go with the sheep".

Each of the animals which the angel had given to the men had many babies so that there were herds of camels and cattle, and flocks of sheep. All three men became very rich. The first had a farm with camels, the second a farm with cows, and the third a farm with sheep.

Then the angel came back to test the men. He disguised himself as a leper and went to the man who had been a leper himself, and said, "I am a poor man, and all that I had has been spent on my journey. The only way I can get to the place I am going is by God's help and then yours. So I ask you for God's sake who gave you a clear skin, please give me a camel to help me on my journey". But the rich man who had once been a leper replied, "I have many duties to pay". Then the angel said, "I seem to recognise you. Were you not once a leper who looked hateful to people, who was poor, and did not God give you riches?"

"No, no!" the man replied indignantly, "I inherited this property in a respectable way from a respectable man". The angel said, "If you are lying, may God make you just as you were before", and the man became once again a leper.



Then, disguised as a bald man, he went on to the one who had been bald, and said the same thing to him, asking for help, but the man said, "No, I have many bills to pay", and would not admit that he had ever been bald and poor and despised, so the angel said to him, "If you are lying, may God make you just as you were before".

Then the angel pretended to be a blind man and went on to where the man lived who had once been blind. He said, "I am a poor man and all my money and food have been used up on my journey. I cannot get to where I am going except by God's help and yours, so I ask you, by God who restored your sight, to help me by giving me a sheep".

The man replied, "I have been blind too, and God gave my sight back to me, so take what you wish and leave what you wish. I swear by God I will never ask you to pay me back for anything you take, as I give it for God's sake".

The angel said, "Keep your property, for you have all simply put to a test, and God is pleased with you, and displeased with your two companions".

Retold by Harfiyah Ball, 1980.

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## ALI WAS NO GANDHI

ON THE NIGHT in 1964 when 22 year-old Cassius Clay defeated heavyweight champion Sonny Liston, the brash newcomer did a victory dance in the ring and claimed that he was not only the greatest boxer in history but also the prettiest. In a sport dominated by hulking men with battered faces, the sleek young fighter was indeed as pretty as they come. "Don't have a mark on me!" he boasted, and stuck out his smooth jaw as proof.

Four decades later, that jubilant kid - who soon remade himself as Muhammad Ali - is a quiet, seemingly gentle figure hobbled by Parkinson's disease and those afflictions common to old boxers, who have taken one punch too many. But so potent is the legend of the "Louisville Lip" that his career is now the subject of Hollywood's biggest "biopic" in years, *Ali*, which stars charismatic Will Smith as - to quote the published screenplay - "the warrior saint in the revolt of the black athlete". This very expensive, very long and very uncritical film is the kind of reverential tribute that Hollywood used to reserve for statesmen, war heroes and nuns.

The young champ's big smiles and funny rhymes ("You want to lose your money, bet on Sonny") are as entertaining as ever, but there is a darker side to him that is anything but pretty. You won't see much of it in this new film, however, because in the sanitised factory of Hollywood myth-making only sweetness and light prevail.

Director Michael Mann downplays, for example, Ali the ruthless self-promoter, and glosses over the fighter's devotion to the thuggish cult leader Elijah Mohammed. He also ignores the

egregious racebaiting that Ali typically used to taunt boxing rivals.

At the height of his fame, Ali loved to portray himself as the true black man whose faithfulness to his race made him superior to other fighters. Sonny Liston was an ugly bear, Ali ranted, who lived in white neighbourhood and didn't like his own people. Joe Louis was a shuffling Uncle Tom. Floyd Patterson was "a white man's Negro, a yellow Negro" and George Foreman fought for "White, America, Christianity, the flag and pork".

Under the influence of Elijah Mohammed – who preached that blacks should refuse to integrate with "white devils" – Ali made a point of dating only black women and lashed out at men and women who engaged in interracial sex. In an interview with *Playboy* he declared: "A black man should be killed if he's messing with a white woman." When the interviewer asked about black women crossing the colour barrier, Ali responded. "Then she dies. Kill her, too."

'It's unlikely that a white athlete who made such remarks would receive the praise that Michael Mann heaps on Ali. He says. that the fighter "personified racial pride and a self-knowledge". The *Playboy* journalist, who interviewed the boxer, was closer to the mark when he observed of his subject: "You're beginning to sound like a carbon copy of a white racist."

But images are more powerful than words, and Ali's unfortunate remarks do not diminish the mesmerising beauty of his moves in the ring. Unlike almost all competitors he was an elegantly powerful fighter who had a real sense of style and was not afraid to revel in it. In the art of boxing he made dancing almost as important as throwing a punch, and was able to wear down his opponents with elusive moves as well as sudden blows.

The problem is that neither he nor his admirers can accept that he was the "greatest" only in the ring. They want him to be a social hero who changed the world by fighting injustice.

Ali is increasingly portrayed in the media as just such a hero, an icon of courage and integrity – Michael Mann's film is meant to give this trend an enormous boost and thus to propel Ali into the orbit of superheroes who demand unquestioning admiration.

But – to be honest – outside the ring, what is there to admire? His domestic life has been a shambles. During his heyday, he ran through wives (four in all) and girlfriends (too numerous to count) with amazing speed, never allowing, his, sex life to be impeded by his conversion to Islam or his vows to be faithful to one woman.

His first wife, Sonji Roi, left him after little more than a year of marriage claiming that he had coerced her into adopting Muslim dress and customs.

After the divorce, she complained that Elijah Mohammed's Nation of Islam had "stolen" Ali's mind and threatened her with reprisals. "I wasn't going to take on all the Muslims. If I had, I probably would have ended up dead."

When Elijah and his henchmen threatened Malcolm X with death for daring to oppose the Nation of Islam, Ali stayed silent. In the early years of his career, he and Malcolm X were very close – almost like brothers - yet he kept his distance after Elijah turned against his friend and did not break with the Nation of Islam after Malcolm was assassinated. Although all signs point to Elijah's thugs as the killers, Michael Mann suggests that the FBI murdered Malcolm.

Ali's own father, Cassius Clay Sr, repeatedly warned him that

the Nation of Islam was brainwashing him and taking advantage of his fame and wealth. Complaining bitterly that his "boy" had been ruined by association with the group, the elder Clay snarled: "They should run those Black Muslims out of the country before they ruin other fine people."

One reason that Ali turned against his former hero Floyd Patterson is that the older boxer was so unsparing in his criticisms of the Black Muslims. A kind and dignified man, Patterson tried his best to lure Ali away from the fold, but soon gave up in frustration. "Clay is so young and has been misled by the wrong people," he said, "He might as well have joined the Klu Klux Klan."

Joe Louis was also alarmed by the racist attitudes of the group and warned Ali that he was being exploited. Like Patterson, he made a point of calling the Young fighter by his original name. "Clay is a good enough fighter, but it's unfortunately that he's a Black Muslim. A champion should represent all sects, not one."

It was apparently his devotion to his new religion that prompted Ali to refuse military induction in 1967. He protested that he was opposed to war in general and the Vietnam War in particular. It was a matter of conscience, he insisted, and he claimed that he would not fight any one without good reason. He suffered, for his stand, sacrificing three years of his career while he fought his case with the American government.

His admirers – often cite his opposition to the war as an example of his social importance. But lots of people opposed the war and went to prison for their beliefs. Ali, however, eventually won his case and was treated with much more deference than many other war resisters. Moreover, when he went back to

boxing, he never explained why, in principle, it was acceptable to fight strangers in the ring, but not on the battlefield.

How could he reconcile his pacifist claims with his often brutal aggressiveness against other boxers? A pacifist usually isn't found at a boxing match screaming, as Ali once did: "Somebody's gonna die at ringside tonight." But this contradiction in the fighter's position is now rarely mentioned. In the 1960s, however, it was difficult to ignore and the absurdity of it was widely ridiculed.

The transformation of Ali from a fighter to a celebrated man of conscience and social purpose has succeeded so well because the actual history of his career has been altered to reflect the kinder, gentler man of today. Unpleasant remarks or facts from the past have been swept away or excused.

In a kind of history-free zone, the contemporary mythmakers in Hollywood and elsewhere blithely craft their heroes to suit some political agenda or cinematic formula. And, then, endowed with the smiling face of a film star, the retooled historical figure becomes difficult to resist. It's one thing to criticise the real Ali, but who wants to question the charming Will Smith?

At the end of Mann's film, we see an amiable Ali sparring with young street kids after his "Rumble, in the Jungle" with George Foreman. Corrupt and impoverished Zaire is made to seem like the Holy Land, a place where the great fighter has finally found his roots and a renewed sense of purpose. Little effort is made to show that the local strongman, President Mobutu, was a rapacious tyrant who robbed his country blind and who exploited Ali with as much zest as Elijah Mohammed.

Instead, as dawn rises over the Congo river, Will Smith walks off the screen like a romantic hero from some ancient legend,

triumphant and secure in the knowledge that his legacy is safe. There are no questions lingering in the air about Mobutu or even about the fight's unsavoury promoter, Don King. Everything is washed clean in the blue dawn.

A more historically accurate appraisal of Ali would conclude that he was far from heroic outside the ring and was pitifully misused by his master in the Nation of Islam. For his purposes, Elijah hijacked the impressionable young man's career and filled his head with racist nonsense.

By the time he finally broke free of the old Nation of Islam, in the 1970s, his career was in its last stages. He continued to fight long past his prime, in part to recover money and time he had lost in his misadventures with the Black Muslims. Today he is paying the price of his mistakes, suffering from health problems exacerbated by overstaying his time in boxing. Looking at the sad toll that his life has exacted from his body, anyone should be able to see that his career was not that of a Hollywood romance but of an old fashioned tragedy.

*M. Sheldon*

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## A PERSONAL RESPONSE TO SEPTEMBER 11TH

*Swadeka Ahsun*

IT WAS UNBELIEVABLE to witness the events of Tuesday, 11th September 2001 unfolding.

The future of the whole world is overcast due to these atrocities that day.

Anti-Muslim prejudice may have grown but so has the emergence of genuine curiosity about Islam. What makes people do such horrible things? Who are the Islamic fundamentalists who are associated with this tragedy? Islam's fundamentalist's roots go way back. Early Islam witnessed schisms, with the Mu'tazilites, adopting a rationalistic notion of divine justice. Asharism, broke away from Mutazilism in the 4/9th century, allowing for the incorporation within its system of certain qualities rationalistic elements from Mutazilism, insisting on divine omnipotence, leading to a rejection of belief in free-will and causality, therefore entailing the notion of objective intellectuality discernible good and evil.

The Khawaridj, the earliest of the religious sects of Islam whose importance lies from the point of view of the dogma in the formulation of questions relative to the theory of Caliphate, were known for extreme fanaticism. They manifested in a series of extremist proclamation and terrorist actions. These were the focus of rigorous debate during the long period in the history of Islamic dialectical theology and is often characterised as one of the stagnation and of progressive petrification of dogma.

History unfolded itself with a series of uprisings. With the

emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood, (Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun), the Hizb al-Tahrir (Mujahiroon), the Jamat al-Tabligh, the Wahabi movement and others, the world witnessed a second upsurge of Islamic fundamentalism. Wahabism itself is split, but it is still able to dominate Saudi Arabia and be successfully exported all over the world.

The Qur'an clearly condemns the actions of the hijackers. My sympathy not only lies with their victims, but the innocent people of Afghanistan, especially during the month of Ramadan. The West, Islam and women have a history of conflict due to ignorance and prejudice fuelled by narrow-mindedness. These misunderstandings have a tendency to lead to conflicts, not just economic and political but cultural and in our every-day life.

Therefore, let us Muslims find ways of fighting the conflicts within our diversities and work on all sides to understand and tolerate each other better. Let all sensible people stand for justice and make concerted efforts to fight terrorism and attacks on all injustices and exploitations in the world. Without a revival of moral values, nurturing a shared sense of forgiveness and understanding we may face an even greater challenge.

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