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ONCE WERE RADICALS

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My years as a teenage Islamo-fascist

IRFAN YUSUF



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Without meaning to give too much of the story away, I flirted with and ultimately rejected the political Islam of my mother's extremely generous aunt, who supplied our family with a huge amount of English-language literature. Most of these books were purely religious and devotional, but a few wack had very strong political overtones. Naani Amma (as I was taught to call her) passed away last year. This book is dedicated to her memory, and would never have been possible without her.

This book is also dedicated to the memory of my late *murshid* (Sufi teacher), Professor Mahmud Esat Cosan. Professor Cosan encouraged Muslims to de-ghettoise themselves and settle in other cities and in regional towns. I knew nothing of his own politics in Turkey, which he never sought to impose on his non-Turkish students in any event. He died in February 2001 on the outskirts of Dubbo, soon after establishing a small Sufi hospice there.

May God fill both of their graves with His Light and show them mercy on the day when we'll all need God's mercy in bucket loads.

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Believe it or not, the first person I'd like to thank is former US President George W. Bush for popularising the clumsy term 'Islamofascist'. This delightfully hysterical label has joined an awesome array of spontaneous phrases we have come to know (and mostly love) as 'Bushisms'. Indeed, these days the term has been adopted by an incredible array of whackos and fruitloops who clearly aren't (in Bush's words) among our 'best and brightest' nor have more pressing concerns such as 'putting food on their families'.

I'd also like to thank Hassan Butt, a UK-based alleged ex-jihadi who became a darling of certain sections of the media after claiming he'd radicalised many British Muslim youth and channelled them into al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Butt also justified and vindicated that minority of prejudiced pundits who used national security as a tool with which to spread hatred against ordinary citizens who happen to be Muslim. Butt recently admitted to a UK court that he had lied all along, happily accepting hundreds of thousands of dollars from media outlets in return for imbecilic spin on how the problem isn't with terrorists but rather with Islam itself. Until his admission before a UK court, Butt was writing his own exciting action-packed memoir which would have made my own memoir sound like a song from The Wiggles. I look forward to the publication of what will now probably be Butt's debut novel.

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I was fortunate to be surrounded by people who recognised both the benefits and detriments of various strains of Islamic thought, and who shared with me a passion for collecting and devouring just about any book with even the most tenuous relation with the faith. Most prominent among them was Mahmud Kurkcu, who has for some time led the Melbourne-based Young Muslims of Australia (YMA). Mahmud was and remains one of the pioneers in communicating mainstream Islam to young Australians.

A number of people have helped and encouraged me along in my journey as something resembling a writer. Among them is my old school buddy, Don. Don and I are the closest thing to those two old men sitting up on the balcony of the *Muppet Show*, laughing at everyone on stage when we aren't laughing at each other.

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Prologue

Before I reached my teens, I never had much interest in exactly how or why I ended up carrying the label of 'Muslim'. I just knew that I did. It never occurred to me that being Muslim made me any different to anyone else having my combination of skin colour, ethnic and cultural background, let alone any of the other kids I grew up with. Well, apart from the refusing to eat pork. And getting inebriated just by inhaling alcohol fumes, a skill I honed at university parties and political functions of the Young Liberals.

Being Muslim wasn't such a bad 'difference' ... until September 11, 2001. That was when two planes hit the World Trade Center, a third plane hit the Pentagon and a fourth crashed onto a field in Pennsylvania as it headed for the White House. Ever since, ordinary Muslim citizens have been held personally responsible for the actions of a handful of madmen. It didn't matter that Muslims were among the people who died on September 11. It didn't matter that the perpetrators regard ordinary Muslims as just as 'infidelic' as their non-Muslim countrymen and women. It didn't matter that, for years and in years to come, more Muslims would be killed by these terrorists than non-Muslims. We were blamed and hated and pilloried to intolerable degrees.

Every ordinary person who ticked the 'Muslim' box on their census form felt it. So did many people who might 'look' Muslim. The first victim of a hate-crime after September 11 was an American Sikh man who was planting flowers in the garden of his family's business. After the 2005 London bombings, many British Sikh men sporting beards and turbans started wearing badges that said 'Don't freak, I'm a Sikh!' Arab churches across the Western world were spray-painted with graffiti and even firebombed just as mosques were. Orthodox Jewish men in beards and women in headscarves were subjected to abuse just as were orthodox Muslim men and women.

In this environment of hysteria, the Australian government released TV advertisements about terrorism, asking us to 'be alert but not alarmed'. But politicians from the same government, together with their allies on talkback radio and in the media were creating an environment where we were also too alarmed to be alert. Irresponsible Muslim spokespeople and imams also did not help the situation.

It seemed like all Muslims were suddenly on trial. I personally felt it. I may well believe in liberal democracy; I might have a track record of service to the broader community and even to a mainstream political party; I may be committed to Australia and never have held any other citizenship or nationality. But, because my names are 'Irfan' and 'Yusuf', anything I do will, naturally, be presumed to be some kind of deception or cover. I am part of some giant conspiracy to destroy the West, one of Osama bin Ladin's henchmen. I am part of the 'Muslim question'.

The first time I heard the term 'Muslim question' was in December 2006 during a seminar in Parliament House, NSW, on 'The Journalist and Islam'. There, a conservative opinion editor of a broadsheet newspaper talked about Australia's need to 'resolve its Muslim question'. He wasn't very happy when I asked him what he proposed would be the 'Final Solution', and he certainly didn't have an answer.

But before you start making up your mind about me, let me tell you, this book is no 'poor Muslim' story. I simply refuse to be a victim, but I also refuse to be described as a 'problem' or a 'question' or a 'challenge'. I also refuse to see cultural Muslims pretending to understand what I have gone through. I am part of the broad and varied Australian landscape, even though I once dabbled and experimented in an ideology that could have seen me having tea, or even carrying arms in solidarity, with other

who didn't grow out of that ideology, many of whom found themselves fighting on the same side as Osama bin Ladin.



In 1985, I made an important decision. At age sixteen, I decided the time had come to join those prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice. I was confident my decision was the right one and would be blessed by at least some members of my extended family in Pakistan. True, if my parents found out they would lock me in my room and throw away the keys, but then, I didn't want to tell them.

I did, however, want to tell the imam at the first national Muslim youth camp I attended in Harrierville in country Victoria. Sheikh Fehmi el-Imam was a softly spoken religious scholar of Lebanese background who spoke flawless English and had lived in Australia for decades. Sheikh Fehmi had been camp imam at some fifteen previous youth camps and was accustomed to dealing with kids of my age.

Confident of my resolution, I consulted with some friends who shared the same wish and we decided to approach Sheikh Fehmi as a group in private, away from the other camp participants. Of course, I did the talking.

'Sheikh Fehmi, you know there is a jihad going on in Afghanistan. The mujahideen are fighting for liberation from the communists. We would like to join the mujahideen. What do you think? Can you help us?'

The sheikh stared at us in silence. He looked somewhat perturbed by my question. I continued.

'But Sheikh, this is jihad. If we die, we will go straight to paradise. We are fighting communists. We aren't asking to do anything wrong.'

After another moment of quiet contemplation, the sheikh sat us down and addressed us in his usual calm manner. He took out his notebook and read two sayings of the Prophet Muhammad called *ahadith* (plural of *hadith*) in Arabic.

The first *hadith* was as follows. A young man approached the Prophet wanting permission to fight in the Muslim army to defend the Prophet's city. The Prophet asked the boy two questions: Do you have elderly parents who need you to look after them? Do you have your parents' permission? The boy replied that he had elderly parents who needed him. The Prophet then said: 'Look after them. That will be your jihad.'

Just as the sheikh finished this story, I interrupted him. 'Sheikh, my mum reads that *hadith* to me all the time. She uses it as an excuse to stop me from getting involved in Muslim activities. If I listen to her, how will I be a good Muslim? Why should I miss out on paradise because of my mum?'

The sheikh then became a little impatient.

'So Irfan, you think that martyrs automatically go to *jannah* [paradise]? You think that by running away from your duties and dying on the battlefield, you will earn God's pleasure? You don't understand your religion.'

'The Prophet did not say that all martyrs go to *jannah*. If you die as a martyr, all your sins are forgiven. All your obligations are satisfied. All with one exception. Do you know what that is?'

We shook our heads.

'Debt. If you owe money to someone, you must pay it back. You can't avoid paying your debts just

by flying off to Afghanistan. And who do you owe a greater debt to than your parents?

‘The Prophet also taught us that the first man to be brought for judgment on the Last Day will be someone who died in jihad. God will remind the man of all the divine favours the man has been given. God will then ask the man what he has to offer God in return. The man will say: “God, I gave my life for you. I fought your enemies and died as a martyr so that your word could be proclaimed.” God will then say to the man: “You are lying. You only died so that people would glorify you after you were gone. You wanted people to sing your praises and write eulogies to your sacrifices. And they did. You’ve already received your reward, and I have no reward to offer you. Go to hell.”

‘This martyr will then be dragged by the face and thrown into hell. You see, boys? He was a martyr and he went to hell. Why? Because he had the wrong intentions. Even people prepared to give their lives can have wrong intentions and motives. They will be punished for this.’

I was familiar with all the *ahadith* Sheikh Fehmi had cited, but had never thought of them in this manner.

‘But Sheikh, there are so many people dying in Afghanistan. Innocent kids. Women. Who will save them?’

The sheikh responded in his calm way. ‘Irfan, they are being protected by their men folk, by the mujahideen and by Allah.’

I still wasn’t persuaded by the theology. The sheikh then addressed the politics.

‘Irfan, do you think all the mujahideen are united into one army?’

‘Of course they are, Sheikh. They are also getting weapons and support from outside.’

‘Yes, Irfan, they are getting support from the United States. But if you think all the mujahideen are united, you are mistaken. You remember my words. The mujahideen will win this jihad *insh’Allah* [God-willing]. But if they are not fighting for the right reasons, they will start fighting each other.’

Sheikh Fehmi’s prediction became a reality. Within a few years, the Soviets withdrew and the major Afghan factions started fighting each other. Soon, the city of Kabul was locked into a brutal civil war, with neither side showing any mercy towards civilians. The mujahideen I so desperately wanted to join had turned into tribal thugs. The jihad I thought so worthwhile had turned into a war of innocent civilians. The sheikh was right. I was wrong. My youthful vigour could have led me to hell.



It is not difficult to understand why I had reached the conclusion that jihad was for me. Powerful forces were responsible for creating powerful images which I adopted as truths. In other words, I was sucked in by conservative American news and propaganda.

I remember watching episodes of *60 Minutes* on TV showing images of the bravery and sacrifice of the mujahideen, of their being forced to buy expensive bullets and other small arms from Pakistani arms dealers, of Afghan refugees telling horrific stories of their children being blown to bits by landmines shaped as toys, of mujahideen leaders dressed in turbans and sporting beards being called to the White House and hailed as freedom fighters by the then US President Ronald Reagan.

When the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan, I was in Year 5. And like most people of my age, I grew to hate the Soviets. Some years later, during my mid-teens, I attended ‘Afghan Jihad’ nights at the King Faisal Mosque in Surry Hills. These were held once a month and were addressed by

representatives of both major Afghan factions. I presumed all these factions were united as one, just like their Australian representatives and the media had made out. Ironically, today the Hizb-i-Islami leads the current government in Iran in exile. The Jamiat-i-Islami leads the current Western-backed Northern Alliance government and, by default, Afghanistan's lucrative drug trade.

I was actively encouraged to embrace this jihad in order to keep well away from another jihad led by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini. I believed what I was fed by news outlets that the Afghan Muslim fighters were good while the Iranians fighting against Iraq were evil and were engaged in a futile war. It wasn't until George Bush the elder declared Saddam Hussein to be 'that evil dictator' (his exact words) that I learned that all the Iranian propaganda about Iraq invading Iran and using chemical weapons was in fact true.

As a young man growing up in a spiritual and cultural pendulum—swinging between being Indian, Pakistani, Muslim, Australian—I was confused. Political Islam, in the form of the Afghan jihad, provided some certainty and direction, even if it meant potentially cutting my life short.

But Sheikh Fehmi was able to see through the façade of propaganda and emotion, and luckily for me and my friends, he steered us away from the idea.

Sheikh Fehmi grew up in a Muslim family in Lebanon, a country whose culture and language have long hosted a large indigenous Muslim presence. Islam was as Lebanese as fefel and hommu. Sheikh Fehmi learned Islam not just from books but also from the general environment. He absorbed mainstream Islam from Lebanese culture just as his Maronite or Malekite or Orthodox neighbours had absorbed Christianity. I couldn't question the orthodoxy of his arguments as he tried to discourage me from travelling to Afghanistan. Although I knew the *ahadith* he was quoting, at sixteen years old and outside a culture accustomed to Islam, I didn't understand the wisdom behind them. I also didn't understand the process of extracting rules and principles from religious sources.

Instead, I was falling for a theology of jihad that had been written by CIA propagandists. That same theology was adopted by the likes of Osama bin Ladin, who really should be named Osama bin Reagan. That's not to say the Afghan jihad ('struggle for justice') against the former Soviet Union was wrong or false or unworthy. It's just that the reasons presented to young people like myself about joining the jihad had their own political agenda.

This same propaganda was being promoted by anti-Soviet politicians and columnists in Australia, including by the man I always knew of as my local member, John Winston Howard.

Young Muslims like me, brought up in culturally Muslim families and with little exposure to mainstream Islamic theology, could easily get sucked into heterodox fringe cults. Today, conservative columnists and politicians harp on about the dangers of Saudi-style Wahhabi Islam. I wonder when these conservatives were back in the mid-1980s when Wahhabi Islam was regarded as an excellent antidote to communism and Iranian-style revolutionary Shia Islam. Then again, it doesn't surprise me that many Australian conservatives still maintain friendly relations with Saudi religious and political authorities. After all, old alliances are as hard to kill as old habits. And, of course, there is that minor issue of access to cheap oil.

Not much has changed in our society: Muslim kids and converts continue to get sucked into fringe Islam; Western governments are still picking and choosing which fringe Muslim group they wish to deal with; Australian Islam remains largely an ethno-religious relic; mosques are still run along ethnic and cultural lines of little relevance to most young Muslims; and women are still barred from many mosques.

Regardless of which religion or non-religion you are affiliated with, we all need a source of certainty. As a minority group, it's hard enough for Muslim kids like me to always stand out in the crowd because of our skin colour and our names which no one seems to know how to pronounce (is it 'Eefaan' or 'Urfaan' or 'Earphone' or 'iPhone'?) let alone having to swing between the cultural expectations of my parents and the cultural realities of Australian life. Islam provided me with that certainty. The problem was that I needed to learn Islam from somewhere.

I couldn't relate to most imams (apart from Sheikh Fehmi, but then he lived in faraway Melbourne) so I had to rely on books, newspapers, magazines and other sources. I read widely, struggling to understand the competing arguments and trying to find common ground somewhere, but reading is a lonely exercise.

When I was in my late teens and early twenties, I got involved in Muslim organisations and became a community activist. It was here that I discovered another kind of Islam: the ethnic cultural Islam of mosques and institutions that were run like ethnic and tribal fiefdoms. I discovered nepotism, corruption and sleazy political deals with foreign governments.

By 1991, I was burnt out. I left the Muslim organisational scene and focused on mainstream politics. I decided to take my thus far casual involvement in the Liberal Party more seriously.

By this time, the war in the new Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina had broken out. It was a time of enormous disillusionment. I could see these innocent people—Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox Christians—committed to setting up a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state where power was shared between the three communities, yet they were being fought by forces of brutal medieval tribalism from the outside.

I never saw Bosnia as a Muslim conflict. Rather, it was a conflict in which indigenous European Muslims played a leading role in defending a liberal democratic state. I also knew that most of the victims of this vicious war were culturally Muslims, even if they had lost all the religious and spiritual trappings of their faith.

Still, I saw and heard the patronising manner in which the media referred to Bosnia's 'Muslim-led' government, its 'devoutly Muslim' president Alija Izetbegovic, of its 'mainly Muslim' army. I also saw how the international arms embargo effectively worked in favour of Serbia which already had plenty of weapons to provide its cronies.

I couldn't help wondering whether the West in general and Europe in particular really had room for Muslims. The hypocrisy and inaction of Europe and the West in Bosnia has led to many in the Muslim world losing all faith and trust in the West. Even in Australia, when Muslims imagine a time when they might be persecuted, they refer to Bosnia. Here were these Muslims who drank, ate pork, intermarried with other faiths and had completely lost their own faith. Yet they were still being murdered just because they had some ancestral link to Islam. I told a non-Muslim friend at the time, 'Seriously, if Europeans hate us even when we make compromises and try to be like them, why should we even try? We might as well be what we are.'

Perhaps in this environment of tribal warfare, I was retreating into a kind of Muslim tribalism of my own. After Bosnia, I grew a beard. It was my act of defiance, of showing that I was prepared to stand with a culture that was being subjected to genocide. How ironic it is that beards are a religious symbol of both Jewish and Muslim men. Even more ironic was that few Bosnians, including the devout president, sported beards on their faces.

For me, Bosnia was confirmation that with some people, Muslims can never do the right thing. And

with the advent of September 11 and the more recent Bali and London bombings and their aftermath, knew that I could no longer be silent.

After the London bombings, ordinary Australians were quite naturally scared of the possibility of home-grown terrorism. Muslim religious elders, virtually all of them middle-aged migrant men, simply had no idea how to address these understandable fears. Instead, they gave conditional condemnations: 'Yes, we'll condemn Islamist terrorism if you support us in Palestine.' As if some tradeoff was necessary.

There have been plenty of Muslim voices in Australia and across the Western world. Australian novelist Randa Abdel Fattah and British comic Shazia Mirza are great examples of young Muslim women emerging and talking about their experiences. I don't agree with everything they say, but I'd rather engage with them than with middle-aged leaders and imams who patronise me and refuse to accept their own limited communication skills.

What follows is therefore just one Muslim voice. I don't pretend to speak for anyone except myself, nor do I claim to be an expert on Islam. I have no doubts that some will read this with a view to finding words with which to hang me as a former or current security risk or extremist. They will hold up the book and issue a fatwa against me declaring that I am not a 'moderate' enough Muslim. Some will even claim I am an apologist for the process which recruits for terrorist groups. That I am doing al-Qaeda's work.

Let me get this out of the way: I've never met Osama bin Ladin (are you relieved now?), but I have read books about him written by people who have spent extended periods of time with him and his lieutenants (got you worried again?). I understand that al-Qaeda and similar groups recruit young Muslims by convincing them that their host communities will never accept them, that the governments are opposed to Islam and that they will never live as equals in Western liberal democratic states.

Bin Ladin and his ilk try to convince me to join their false jihad by telling me that the powers that be in Australia hate me. Now I ask readers to honestly ask themselves: Who is doing bin Ladin's work? Is it people like me who want others to know why some kids get caught up in the false jihads, or is it writers and columnists and editors and shock jocks and politicians whose words and articles and statements confirm bin Ladin's claims?

I have tried to make this book as accessible as possible, and have deliberately employed simple language. I have written about the books I read (as well as the videos I viewed, the places I visited and the people I spent time with) over my long journey inside Islam, a journey that took me to Pakistan, the United States, various Muslim youth camps and university libraries. No doubt readers more familiar with authors of these books may challenge my conclusions as simplistic or even inaccurate. However, what I am describing isn't so much the books and authors themselves but more the impression they left me with at that time. This is an exploration of youthful reflections, not a work of scholarship.

The bulk of material in this book is original. Only in a few places have I drawn upon material contained in articles I have written elsewhere. Furthermore, all events described in this book took place well before the turn of the twenty-first century. By the time the first jets hit the World Trade Center on September 11, I was well over the kinds of political Islamist movement politics that is often blamed for such attacks.

In the so-called 'War on Terror', the claim that any and all forms of political Islam are necessari-

dangerous has become commonplace. There is even the belief that political Islam is a monolith. As show in this book, nothing could be further from the truth. Many political Islamist groups operate within the mainstream democratic processes of their countries. Many of yesterday's political Islamists are today's mainstream democratic conservatives. The people who were once religious politicians opposed to the Turkish constitution are now mainstream democrats protecting liberty from the encroachment of allegedly secular generals and seeking Turkey's entry into the European Union. These so-called 'Islamists' speak of Turkey's Islamic heritage in the same manner as many conservative politicians in Western countries speak of their nations' Christian (or in a rare moment of ecumenism, Judeo-Christian) heritage.

The fact is that people's politics are often informed by their religious faith and values. Not all forms of political Christianity represent an attack on our democratic freedoms. Not all Christian politicians want to start illegal wars in other people's countries or limit the availability of abortion for women who need it. Not all Christian politicians insist true Christianity involves voting for right-wing parties. Not all Christian politicians view their nation's foreign policy as a prelude to Divine genocide and Armageddon. Not all Christian politicians wish to play sectarian wedge politics and make non-Christians feel uncomfortable. There is a huge difference between Christian politicians Kevin Rudd and Peter Costello, and between Christian politicotheologians Fred Nile and Tim Costello.

Similarly, when the politics of Muslims is informed by their faith, it doesn't always lead to jumping into buildings or bombs going off in nightclubs. One of my favourite Muslim religious scholars is a man who spent much of his youth with an Indian Muslim missionary movement called the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ). His TJ involvement led him to study in Pakistan and complete the long and difficult course before he was given the scholarly title of 'Maulana' (religious scholar and jurist). Yet throughout much of this time, this scholar was also active in the struggle against apartheid in his home country of South Africa. His Islamic beliefs led him to campaign for the rights of Christians in Pakistan. His Islamic values led him to be appointed by President Nelson Mandela as South Africa's first post-apartheid gender equity commissioner. Those who claim that political Islam leads to suicidal plane crashes should show us where such terror can be found in the work of someone like Maulana Farid Esack. There is no comparison between Turkey's President Recep Erdogan and Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad. Nor can one compare Swiss theologian Dr Tariq Ramadan and Indonesia's Jemaah Islamiyah leader Abu Bakar Bashir.

Indeed, one may ask exactly where does religious faith end, and political or economic faith begin? Is there a clear distinction between different kinds of belief? And why are followers of one religion allowed to ask such questions but not followers of another?

We all have layers of identity. Our religious faith (for those of us who have one) isn't all that defines us, and our religions affect us in different ways. In this day and age, Muslims come in all colours and sizes and viewpoints and opinions. Some are more observant than others, and some are less observant in different ways.

Yet hysteria about Muslims has become so extreme that allegedly conservative analysts made an issue about the religion of the Democratic candidate in the 2008 US presidential elections. They claimed that Barack Obama had to be Muslim because his middle name was 'Hussein' and because his father belonged to a Kenyan tribe who were known to be Muslim. The fact that a man with a name like Hussein could well be Christian (or in the case of a rabbi who was a contemporary of the Prophet Muhammad, even Jewish) was irrelevant.

Hatred of Islam has become so intense that being labelled Muslim is a slur, a political liability. Newspapers are openly printing opinion articles predicting Europe will become Eurabia, overrun by Muslims out-breeding Christians. There is talk of *taqiyya*, a doctrine which supposedly allows Muslims to lie about their faith just as Jews were once accused of praying to God to relieve them of their commercial contracts. Yesterday's conspiracies about Jewish bankers have been replaced by today's conspiracy theories about Muslim financiers, Muslim 'clerics', Muslim terrorists, Islamist radical Islamists, Islamo-fascists, etc. At least one media mogul has made statements to the effect that Muslims cannot be trusted as they always put their religion before patriotism. This kind of rhetoric is also used by politicians and in election campaigns.

The result is that the most nominal Muslims are now beginning to feel uneasy. They are suddenly expected to understand all the nuances of their faith and any politics remotely associated with it. Muslims who have never been to Indonesia are suddenly expected to explain the motives of the Bali bombers. Anyone deemed Muslim is now pigeonholed in a manner that would be considered absurd (and not racist or bigoted) if applied to other groups.

This book does not in any way suggest that my own experiences and ideological flirtations are reflective of any other Australian or Western Muslim. Obviously, not every Muslim experience is the same. But I hope this book might be reflective of all of us.

Before this book went to print, I showed a draft to one of my older sisters. She could hardly believe some of the phases in my life I had written about. She is half a generation older than me, and left home for work and marriage when I was still in my mid-teens. Although she did not go through the same phases of religious and political exploration that I did, she could relate to the general experience of searching for one's identity when growing up. This search afflicts all of us, regardless of whether we feel part of a majority or a minority. Perhaps adolescence and early adulthood could be described as the feeling that one belongs to a minority of one, and the ultimate goal is to discover exactly who that one is.

This book is the story of my search for who I was. I had to decide how I would balance and manifest the sometimes competing layers of culture and religion. Hopefully other readers can recognise aspects of their own journey in this work.

Cultural Islam and spicy pilgrimages

I was five months old when we landed in Sydney. Obviously I can't recall the landing or the first week we spent staying in a motel before moving to a rental house in Ryde and eventually to our own house in East Ryde, but I do have very early memories of how different we were to everyone around us.

We looked different. My skin was darker than any other kid's on our street. Mum wore looser and stranger clothes than other women. She never wore dresses or skirts like they did. Dad wore trendy Western clothes and funky sunglasses all the time, and he drove a rather sporty-looking and loud car he called an 'MGB' that had a large leather and plastic demountable roof we helped him assemble when it rained.

Virtually all our family friends were different to most other Australians in the same way we were different. Most of our family friends were from the northern end of the Indian subcontinent—Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Parsees (descendants of ancient Iranian Zoroastrians), Catholics, Jews and even a Pakistani Anglican priest. My parents and their friends spoke the same language, listened to the same music (lots of sitar), watched the same lengthy movies with predictable story lines and ate the same spicy food.

We often celebrated each other's religious festivals. For our parents, religious differences mattered a little; the common language and culture were far more important.



When the British divided India in 1947 into the two nations India and Pakistan in a deliberate colonial 'divide and rule' policy, they pitted Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs against each other. Indians of all faiths and no faith in particular who had previously fought shoulder to shoulder against the British Raj were now raping and pillaging and slaughtering each other.

Partition made a mess of everything. Predictably, Indian independence leaders were split along sectarian lines. The Indian Congress (informally led by Mahatma Gandhi and formally by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru) was firmly opposed to what became known as 'Partition'. The Congress never painted itself as a sectarian or separatist entity, and had some prominent Muslim representatives. The Muslim League (led by a Bombay barrister named Mohammad Ali Jinnah) wanted a separate Muslim state carved out in those territories where the majority of the population was Muslim.

Indian Muslims were bitterly divided on the Muslim League's support for Partition. Many bought into the Muslim League's message that Muslims represented a singular and separate nation from the rest of India. Others (including Indian Muslim religious authorities) regarded such ideas as grossly ridiculous and destructive. Indeed, the scholars of one ultra-orthodox religious institution known as Darul Uloom Deoband, an institute for higher Islamic learning located in the North Indian town of Deoband, were most vocal in their opposition to the idea. They regarded Jinnah as a sinful man who could hardly speak a language or dialect commonly spoken by Indian Muslims (whether Sindhi, Pashto, Urdu, Bengali or Punjabi), and who openly flouted Islamic sacred law in his personal life.

My own family sits on the Partition fence. Dad's family ended up in Pakistan, while Mum's family stayed in India.

I'm not sure where my late Dada Abba (a respectful Urdu title which literally means 'father of father') stood in relation to the Partition. My guess is that he was probably disinterested in the politics and wanted to be left to live peacefully where he was. He had a successful career as a barrister based in the semi-rural village of Gurgaon, on the outskirts of Delhi. It was a cosy job, and he also built up a thriving practice in land disputes and criminal law.

Dada Abba would have had little incentive to go to Pakistan. He was perhaps one of India's most senior Muslim criminal lawyers, with a good reputation amongst India's legal elite. Being located so close to the political capital, Dada Abba may well have been appointed to the bench had he stayed behind.

When the riots started in Delhi, Dada Abba and his family fled to the border town of Multan in Punjab. At that stage, Partition borders had already been announced, leading to much rioting especially in towns and cities close to the border. Imagine being part of a Sikh family living in a small town and suddenly finding out you had become part of a vulnerable minority at the mercy of Muslim neighbours, some of whom were hell-bent on murdering any Sikh they could find as retribution for family members massacred by other Sikhs you never even knew existed. And imagine living in such an environment with no properly functioning police force or army to protect you.

Dada Abba always intended moving his family to Pakistan, and was a staunch supporter of Mr Jinnah's Muslim League. Dada Abba and his family eventually settled in a home in Samnabad, a middle-class Lahore suburb. Dada Abba is buried in a cemetery across the road from his Lahore house.

Despite living in a middle-class home, Dada Abba struggled to provide his family with something resembling a middle-class existence. Unlike other lawyers in Lahore, he did not have the benefit of a steady client base from a nearby village. Despite impeccable criminal law credentials and experience, Dada Abba had no contacts in the local Lahore legal fraternity. He had to start his business again from scratch, often having to make money doing the work of junior barristers or clerks.

Dada Abba was of Mughal (a mixture of Turkish and Mongol) ancestry. He had a typical Turkish name—Mirza Yusuf Beg. My paternal grandmother (Dadi Amma, literally 'dad's mum') was from the north-west province of Kashmir at the feet of the Himalayan mountains. Dada Abba died when my father was just sixteen years old. He suffered a heart attack whilst in court cross-examining a witness in a murder trial.

I refer to my maternal grandfather by the respectful Urdu title of 'Nana Abba' (literally 'mum of dad'). His name was Mirza Yaqub Beg Nami and he was also of Mughal ancestry. He taught philosophy at the Aligarh Muslim University, situated hundreds of miles from the border with Pakistan. He had no plans of moving his family to Pakistan and leaving behind the cushy job and comfortable home provided by the university. So he remained in India with his family following the Partition.

Mum grew up in a large family, with five brothers and three sisters. Nana Abba wasn't terribly religious in his personal life, but he did insist on certain cultural practices often associated with Islam. Among these was *purdah*, the strict segregation of women from public life, which was practised by aristocratic Indian families of all faiths including Hindus and Sikhs.

The word *purdah* literally means 'curtain'. The institution of *purdah* involved families guarding the

honour of their women by not allowing them to appear in public except in a manner where they could not be seen. For poorer families, especially farmers who had both male and female members working on the land, practising purdah was impossible. And with the vast majority of India's population employed in farming, purdah was a luxury only the wealthy could afford.

It was common in those days for wealthy women to go out shopping whilst seated in a special compartment called a *dohli*. This was basically a large comfortable box-like structure with plenty of cushions for women to laze in whilst their male servants (or even male relatives) carried them. The curtains around the box had a screen through which the women could peek and decide which shop they would visit.

Women would also have their own private quarters in their home which no man (apart from direct relatives) dared enter. I guess this was the Indian equivalent of what some people call a harem although I never heard that term being used by any South Asian relatives.

I wasn't brought up to understand purdah as something oppressive to women, and was surprised that anyone could. My mother always spoke of purdah as an essential part of the luxurious existence that aristocratic women of that time enjoyed. In fact, Mum would tell me how much fun it was to be carried in the *dohli* by her brothers (though Dad often speculates as to whether carrying Mum even at that age may have caused them some back injuries).

Mum's father seemed obsessed with planes and would always make her go inside each time a plane flew over their house.

'Daddy, I can't see the people in the planes. Why should you be worried?' she would say.

'You may not be able to see them but how do you know they cannot see you?' he would reply. It's amazing what bionic vision Indian men could achieve in full flight.

Mum recalls the women's quarters being a place where women enjoyed themselves. They were freed of any domestic duties, their husbands or fathers employing servants to perform all cooking and other chores. Men were expected to lavish gifts on their female relatives (and in-laws) using their household income which women were usually responsible for managing (no doubt to their own advantage). Men were also expected to do all the shopping for food and other household needs. Women only shopped to buy clothes, jewellery and other luxury items for themselves.

I imagined my mother and her friends reclining like Roman aristocrats on sofas holding bunches of grapes above their mouths, lazily chewing one grape at a time. Mum's privileged existence came to an abrupt end when her father died without leaving much of an inheritance for his children. Mum and her family were forced to vacate their home provided by the university and they soon started to live on a rather hand-to-mouth existence.

Mum moved to Pakistan in the early 1960s when she was in her early twenties. Her move was more out of necessity than any political consideration. She was invited to stay with her maternal uncle in Karachi who had a large home and a thriving business. It was around this time that she met, fell madly in love with and married a young scholar who would become my father.

Dad was quite a catch. He had finished a science degree from Punjab University and was granted a scholarship to study at the Australian National University. He finished his doctoral studies in Canberra in the mid-1960s, before I was born.

Mum's own academic achievements were impressive. Despite being home-schooled by her father until Year 9, she completed a Bachelors degree in Urdu and Islamic Studies at Aligarh Muslim

University, following this with a Masters degree in Urdu literature from Punjab University.

Mum spoke impeccable and polished Urdu. When I was very young, she'd often boast of how she astonished Dad with her education and erudition.

'Your jokes about my English language skills are misplaced,' she would say in the king's Urdu. 'You must realise that your father was a dashing young man who could easily have married any number of beautiful women from families of the highest status. However, he chose to marry me for my eloquence and my educational accomplishments as well as my beauty and refined fashion sense. At the time, I was in the roue of high fashion and class.'

My elder siblings would be impressed by Mum's words. I would look on like a stunned mule unable to understand Urdu. Mum would then repeat the same words in her DIY Hindlish (English with a very strong Indian accent), and we would all try our best not to roll around in absolute hysterics.

'Your faadher he could marree any biyootifal voomun, but he marree me beecuz I only biyootifal voomun hoo hav maastarr dig-gree!'

We were terrible, and we laughed at her pronunciation.

'Might I remind you,' she would say in her haughty Urdu, 'that I spent much of my young adult years ensuring that you, my beloved children, could converse fluently in Urdu.'

Our anticipatory giggles would lead her to become frustrated and declare in Hindlish: 'I nevar lu piraapar English as I ulwez is-spending time teaching yoo all to spik Hindi and Urdu!'

This was true. Many of her South Asian friends spoke much better English, though their kids couldn't string together even a simple Urdu sentence. Instead of teaching their children Urdu, the mothers improved their own skills by always speaking English to their children.

After completing his PhD, Dad returned to Pakistan with his young family, to work in a research organisation in Karachi. That's why I was born in Karachi, the southern port city of Pakistan, on September 1969.

I wasn't the first boy in the family. Two years before my birth, my parents had a son named Imran who died at the age of two. Both my parents were shattered by Imran's death.

Pakistanis (and other South Asians) have a strange relationship with white skin. Everyone wants to be as fair-skinned as possible as it is regarded as the epitome of beauty. Yet for some reason, white-skinned people of European ancestry (including North Americans, Aussies and New Zealanders) are sometimes referred to using the derogatory term of *gora* ('white man'), *gori* ('white woman') and collectively as *gorey*.

Imran was fortunate enough to have fair skin. He was also quite tall and slim for his age. Mum sometimes speculated that Imran would have survived a bout of severe illness had he been a little chubbier. She says that after Imran passed away, she'd get up in the middle of the night to pray for another son, one who wasn't as good-looking and fair-skinned. She actually wanted God to give her a chubby son. She also says she wanted a son who was devout. She certainly got the chubby part, but I guess she couldn't have all her prayers answered!

In 1969 my father was about to be transferred to Dhaka, a town in the then troubled province of East Pakistan. Within months, that area was to erupt in nationalist fervour that would lead to a civil war and eventual war with India. Luckily Dad was able to avoid the war by taking up the offer of a job at an Australian university.

Unlike other migrants, including the first English convict fleets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, our family didn't arrive on a boat. We flew here. Though our luggage did get to sail the high seas.



Mum says that the first word she taught me to say was 'Allah'. Most Indian parents teach the children to say 'Abba' (meaning 'Daddy') or something similar. However, Mum had a strong attachment to her religious devotions, even if her expression of these strongly resembled the religious devotion of her Hindu and Sikh friends.

This generation of Indians lived and breathed religious pluralism, so Mum often talked of her many classmates at Aligarh Muslim University who were from Hindu and Sikh families. It wasn't an Australian-specific situation either. Before Partition in 1947, both of my paternal grandparents had many colleagues and friends from Hindu, Sikh and other religious communities.

That's probably why my early Islamic upbringing was really a typical middle-class South Asian upbringing. The Indian subcontinent (also known as South Asia and consisting of Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka) is home to people from many different ethnic and religious groups. People from all these countries, as well as families from Indian communities outside South Asia (such as Kenya and Fiji) formed part of our social circle and I knew them collectively to be 'Indian'.

I was taught to refer to my South Asian elders as 'uncle' and 'aunty' out of respect. My parents and siblings were given special Urdu labels of respect (I didn't actually learn these labels until I landed in Pakistan in 1976).

The middle-class Indians I grew up with in Sydney had a unique approach to religion. In some ways, Indians are happy to show off the external trappings of their faith. It's common, for instance, to see Indian men outwardly observing and expressing their faith in what Westerners would regard as over-the-top and loud. My Sikh uncles almost all sported turbans and beards and my Muslim uncles often wore ceremonial skullcaps even when they were not praying, especially if they were getting old. However, we never regarded such outward expressions of religious difference (at least among men) as signs of religious fanaticism. It was all quite normal.

Apart from ceremonial headgear, Indian uncles wore Western clothes. In the seventies that usually consisted of flared pants and ties wide enough to cover half their chests. Uncles who doubled as medical doctors often wore—you guessed it—safari suits. My South Asian aunts wore traditional Indian dress—saris or *shalwar kameez* (baggy trousers with a shirt long enough to fall to the thighs and knees). Women and girls who wore Western dress were regarded as loose (or 'modern') and uncultured. We always presumed that Indian aunts who wore Western-style skirts were probably from Christian communities who had adopted European ways. Still, many of my Indian Christian aunts would wear traditional Indian dress.

Indeed, we never distinguished between Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, Parsee, Jew, Christian or Jain. What we all cared more about was the culture and language we shared.

I had a friend at the age of five, Pankaj, whose father died suddenly overseas. Pankaj's family were Indian of Hindu faith and we attended the funeral in the traditional way. I, with my mum, went to his house dressed in ceremonial white. Mum helped organise the ceremonial prayers and comforted

Pankaj's grieving mother. Mum also helped cook for the event and lit the ceremonial incense sticks. Some prayers were said in a language I didn't quite understand.

A few years later, another close family friend of Pakistani Muslim heritage also passed away. As before, I attended his house wearing ceremonial white, Mum cooked for the event and lit the ceremonial incense sticks, and prayers were said in a foreign language.

There wasn't much variation in how we expressed our faith on important occasions. That's not to say there weren't religious divisions: my Hindu, Muslim and Sikh uncles made sure I knew of the communal bloodbath that claimed over one million lives during the 1947 Partition.

One image featured prominently in the harrowing stories they told me—trains arriving at Lahore and Amritsar railway stations filled the air with the stench of death, carriages turned coffins of innocent Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs massacred by religious militants. The irony is that these two cities are hardly 40 kilometres apart and, before Partition, had thriving Muslim and Sikh communities that shared a common language and culture and whose faiths were very similar.

But were all Partition massacres always initiated by militants? Or did they represent the response of otherwise innocent people manipulated by militants spreading rumours? Or by survivors of massacres who saw family members butchered and raped and burned alive before their eyes?

Who knows. My uncles certainly had no idea who started all the madness. But they did want me to know that it happened. And that members of all communities suffered.



Because my parents wanted to make sure I could speak their mother tongue, we weren't allowed to speak English at home or in the presence of our Indian and Pakistani aunties and uncles. It was instilled in us that to speak English in their company was rude, especially if you could speak even a tiny amount of Hindi or Urdu. This again reinforced in me the notion that what really mattered was language, not religion.

One of my Sikh uncles (let's call him Dr Singh) loved telling jokes. South Asians tell Sikh jokes in the same way as English speakers tell Irish jokes. Sikhs were laughed at for being a little slow but they were known to be earnest and sincere. And in real life, they were ever prepared to take the piss out of themselves. And as always, the best Sikh jokes were told by Sikhs.

Politically correct Westerners tend to pronounce the word Sikh as 'seek'. South Asians aren't as sensitive, as I discovered one day when I was at Dr Singh's place with my parents for dinner. I was five years old and had the flu. We'd just arrived when Dr Singh spoke to me in Hindlish and offered me a glass of coke.

'Irfan, how bout gil-lass coke?'

'No thank you, Uncle.'

'Vy not, Irfan?'

'Because I'm sick, Uncle.'

'No, yoo not. Yoo Muslim!'

My dad, who also loved joking around, found this most amusing. 'Boom boom! That was a good joke, Dr Singh,' he declared. He still uses that line to this day when his grandsons fall ill.

I was quite confused and thought they were laughing at me, and like any full-blooded mummy boy, I started crying. After we got home, my parents explained what the joke was about. They told me that Sikhs were somehow different to us Muslims. Their religious men grow beards and wear turbans like religious Muslim men, and their women wear the same loose clothes as my mum. They even worship the same God, speak the same language and eat the same food. Their religious songs sounded like our Sufi *qawwali* songs.

In fact, Guru Nanak (the founder of the Sikh faith and regarded by many Indian Muslims as a Sufi saint) performed the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca at least once. And in terms of popular stereotype, Sikhs were even more Islamic than we were. After all, they carry daggers (albeit ceremonial ones, but still rather sharp), while we don't. But according to my parents, Sikhs and Muslims were different. For a five-year-old it was a case of 'Go figure'!

My Sikh uncle and all our other South Asian family friends would make a special pilgrimage once a month. As always, it was a truly ecumenical affair, though the object of our worship was more associated with our worldly (or should that be culinary?) desires.

The place of pilgrimage was in a faraway place at the end of Sydney's famous Bondi beach. We used to travel for at least an hour in my mother's Volkswagen from our East Ryde home to buy our supply of basmati rice, various kinds of *masala* (spices) and *achar* (pickles).

The store was owned by an Indian family who rarely spoke Urdu or Hindi unless they were addressed in Urdu. The man wore an embroidered skullcap, and his wife would sometimes cover her head with a small scarf. She used to give my siblings and I free ice cream and would greet us with *khudahafiz* (a traditional Indo-Pakistani greeting which meant 'may God keep you under His protection').

I assumed that Mr and Mrs Moses, who ran the spice store, were Muslims, just like us. They had to be Muslims—they had relatively dark skin like us, they apparently never sold or ate pork, they could speak Urdu/Hindi and they sold and ate spicy food. They even greeted us with *khudahafiz*, which I always thought was a Muslim greeting. It wasn't until years later that Mum explained to me that our spice vendors were in fact Jewish.



I was brought up in the electorate of a man who was to become Australia's most conservative prime minister, John Howard. The 1970s was a time when Christian sectarianism was still strong in 'white Australia' and Catholic school children were bullied for being the wrong ... um ... who knows? The bullies certainly didn't.

My first school was the local Ryde East Public School where I copped plenty of bullying. Mostly it was due to the colour of my skin. Kids can be very cruel, and one kid in particular insisted on pushing me around and labelling me 'nigger' and 'boong'. He also used to tease my mum, who would pick me up each day in her Volkswagen Beetle. Mum's insistence on wearing saris meant that everyone poked fun at just how different we looked.

One day, I was walking home from school when I was approached by a white-skinned Anglo-Australian boy wearing a different school uniform to mine: he wore a blue shirt with a yellow cross embroidered on the shirt pocket, and his school bag had the words 'Spiritus Sanctus' sewn into them. I knew that he lived up the road from me, so when he asked if he could walk home with me, I said yes.

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