

Breakfast in Marrakesh

Cade A. Taylor

It took a couple of steps for my feet to adjust to the cold tiles. Tiptoeing around the papers strewn across the floor, I walked to the window and looked out at the city. Admiring the sunrise, I sat on my bed and waited for him to wake. I was hopeless on my own here, mute and illiterate. Barely able to say hello.

I watched my brother begrudgingly welcome the new day. Unlike Casey, I found this morning far from routine. As I dressed, avoiding the books and papers on the floor, I silently willed Casey to get on his feet.

Finally, we ascended the stairs into the kitchen. “As-salaam alaykum,” Casey greeted his host mother. Both unintelligible and deaf to the Arabic language, I sat silently. Thankfully, my brother’s host mother understood my meagre nods and smiles. Serving us pastries and coffee, she talked to Casey, making him laugh and blush. I later learned just how frequently she would tease him about how he ate, and about his schoolwork. It didn’t matter that she was of a different religion, spoke Arabic or lived in Africa, they shared a mutual respect, and the differences between eastern and western cultures were meaningless as we laughed and ate in harmony. Affection is universal.

It had been six months since my brother left home to live in Marrakesh, Morocco. Leading up to his departure, the idea of Morocco was abstract; I couldn’t envision it. I knew that they spoke Arabic, the language my brother was travelling there to learn. I was also aware that this was a North African country, and that 2011 was a tumultuous time for the region. It was the height of the Arab spring when my brother left, not only delaying his departure one month, but allowing me to forge some misconceptions about Morocco and Islamic countries. What I wouldn’t fully understand until I met Casey’s host family was the ways in which Islamic teachings about family exemplify how caring, educated, and compassionate the religion is. The media often portrays Islam as barbaric and oppressive due to the rise of radical jihadists, but travelling to Morocco and witnessing the family values central to Islam taught me that Islam promotes healthy societies.

Since September 11, 2001, the media has focused on Islamic countries embroiled in civil war, or the few Muslims that are radical jihadists. I believed the common narrative of inherent instability, and that traditionalist ideas were partially responsible for holding Arab countries back. This single story, echoing through the media, has led to widespread Islamophobia in the United States.

In *The Shelby Star*, Jean Warrick offered her view on Islam Victim of the single story, she wrote, “so-called ‘Islamic Centres’ in America operate with full immunity. They are, in effect, Sharia mosques that advance jihad. Often, such centres are safe-havens for terrorists, their recruitment and indoctrination”. Seeing only radicalized Muslims on the news, people worldwide have drawn to the same unsupported conclusion that Islam destroys societies and promotes violence.

The reality, though, is that Islam promotes healthy family values, and in turn, a healthy society. A translation of the Quran reads, “Serve God and join not any partners with him; and do good to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need” (Bakar 14). These religious teachings are critical to family and societal health; they are rules that promote peace.

Dr. Zainab Alwani, Founding Director of the Islamic Studies at the Howard University School of Divinity, explains, “Religion sets out guidelines for society to follow...these guidelines are a function not only of religion but of economics, politics, social behaviour and circumstances, demographics, and culture” (60). In Morocco, I witnessed religious guidelines promoting empathy both inside and out of the family. The idea of respect for the parents and promoting the wellbeing of the family as a whole was evident in the support given to every member of the family. During dinner, three generations ate together. Instead of sending their children from the house, or assuming our elders are completely autonomous, traditional Islam embraces the benefits of multigenerational support. Renowned Islamic Studies scholar Osman Bakar acknowledges the importance of family in Islam by saying, “The fundamental religious role of the family is to create a human environment conducive to spiritual and moral education for self-improvement” (29). Supportive families empower personal growth, and are the foundation of a moral society, but rarely do Western media outlets explore this aspect of Islamic culture. Those who fear that Islam is an inherently violent, destructive, or oppressive ideology have fallen victim to the one-sided, constant coverage of atrocities committed by extremists.

Unfortunately, the current rise of extremist groups such as the “Islamic State” has allowed Islamophobia to gain traction. Popular western news sources are flooded with images of violence and crimes against humanity committed by these extremist groups whose atrocities run counter to Islamic doctrines of peace. In his recent editorial in *The Kashmir Monitor*, Dr. Moin Qazi wrote, “If we had to define Islamist, it would literally be: one who is motivated to pursue the Qur’anic view of humanity in all aspects of life. One who serves humanity first, prevents harm and protects society”. The broadcast actions of the few, crazed people who identify as Muslim lead media consumers to disregard the actual teachings of Islam, and the family values they promote, which are not only progressive, but also have the potential to open our minds to new ways of viewing family structure and its relationship with society.

In his essay on Islamic family values, Bakar Osman states that family health is broken into three components; religious, educational and economic (Bakar 30). All three components of family health, and in turn the health of society, are promoted by Islam; teachings from the Quran often are related to family, either directly or indirectly. One translation reads, “And there is no living creature on earth, nor a bird that flaps its two wings except they are families/communities just like you” (Muhammad). The idea of family being an essential part of life, and the critical need to protect the family, is seen throughout the Quran.

Education is also strongly valued in Islamic communities, and starts with the family. Three different areas of teaching are common: the first is having parents as teachers, learning at a young age values that will help them later in life. The second form of teaching is school with official teachers. Here kids learn about secular knowledge, such as math and sciences, and challenges that they will face in society. The third form of teaching is society. Seen as a school without teachers, society is constantly providing new ideas and insights to the world (Bakar 31). The value placed on knowledge and learning as a process that progresses from the family structure and leads to a healthy community has the potential to produce well-educated citizenry constantly learning from and engaged in their society.

The final attribute of a strong family is economic well-being. Bakar states that Islamic teachings focus on “lawful, and healthy and clean income, self-sufficiency, moderation in spending, charitableness, and abhorrence of waste” (Bakar 31). Using religion, education,

and economic health as guidelines, Islamic families can become strong support groups that help their members succeed throughout their lives. And this religion, so often portrayed as not only violent but oppressive, is more flexible and egalitarian than most people realize.

The progressiveness of Islam and the equity that its teachings promote are often overshadowed by actions of ultraconservative and radical Islamic groups, but in “The Qur’anic Model on Social Change,” Zainab Alwani notes that, “Islamic teachings regarding family structure are unique in providing theoretical and practical answers to modern challenges and have the ability to reform any deviation” (51). The Quran has many teachings that address problems of injustice that are seen in developed countries such as the United States. The Quran reads, “Their Lord answers them, saying: I will deny no man or woman among you the reward of their labours” (Qazi). Prophet Muhammed stated: “All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab” (Qazi). These teachings from over 1,300 years ago address problems that plague society today, such as wage inequality and racism. Those that broadly view Islam as barbaric or oppressive have clearly not been exposed to a holistic portrayal of the religion. Qazi addresses the oppression of Islamic women often portrayed by western media: “In societies trapped in poverty, illiteracy and ignorance, women continue to receive abominable and oppressive treatment. But then, this is true of all societies.”

The role of women in Islam remains part of the public conversation about the religion, and indeed, cohesiveness in the traditional family is seen as essential. However, it is not uncommon for disputes to emerge between husband and wife in any culture. Once again acknowledging the necessity for stability, the Quran provides an equitable solution to disagreements within a family, stating that, “if you fear a breach between the two appoint arbiters, one from his family, and one from hers” (Bakar 19). Dr. Alwani adds that, “It is important for a successful marriage to be established with complete agreement and compatibility between the couple,” and in the case that a family’s disagreement is too great to overcome and the conditions of the marriage are not able to be met, Islamic teachings provide methods for divorce, with the objective of ending the marriage peacefully (Alwani 64, 67). When a marriage has failed to create a family that abides by the values of religious, educational, and economic stability, the marriage has failed to create a community wherein the members can find support.

When I went to Morocco I was, and currently still am, unsure about where I stand with my religious beliefs. Regardless of whether or not one believes in a god, all cultures have benefits that must be acknowledged. In the case of Islam, the idea of supporting your family educationally, economically, and by socially being present allows for a teaching of morals, expanding minds, and better financial security. The violent actions of a small, radicalized group has led to a unilaterally negative portrayal of Islam in western media, as represented by Ms. Warrick: "Today, Christians and Jews are being murdered, beheaded, crucified, cut in two and burned alive in the Middle East...and other countries." While there are indeed atrocities being committed in these tumultuous regions, the idea that terrorism and slaughter are Islamic values is hugely misguided. Media attention given to the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" has led to a sharp increase in Islamophobia in western countries, and the sad irony of this is that the word Islam comes from salaam, meaning peace in Arabic, and that is what Islam should be (Qazi).

Having breakfast in Marrakesh I was exposed to a side of a culture that I never expected to see. Six months before I sat down to drink coffee and eat breakfast with my brother and his host mother, I was afraid of the danger inherent to the instability in Arab countries; I was afraid for my brother. But I found no danger in Marrakesh. I found family and community, rooted in Islamic teachings that are as universally applicable as they are honourable.

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