

## The Inclusive Spirit of Islam Rebecca Jano - February 2008

Instead of the lovely readings that usually add a spiritual depth to our Sundays, I would like to try and set the stage for a different way of thinking about Islam. We often think we know things and we continue to think about them on the basis of previous conclusions we have drawn from life. But in reality, we may have only just scratched the surface. When making opinions about the news, our old conclusions seem to work for us, so we cling to them. While living in several Moslem nations, I learned things about a Moslem way of life which I could not have learned living here. I would like to try to give you a feeling of the inclusive spirit of Islam--the way Moslems view the spirit within their religion.

Close your eyes if you wish and follow along with me to Damascus, Syria. I am sitting by the window just as the sun is setting over an ancient Fertile Crescent plain on the edge of Damascus. From my tenth story window, I can see east way above all the suburbs of the city and into the fading desert towards Iraq. Up the plain to my right, I can see west towards the mountains of Southern Lebanon. In front of me lies a wide pass towards Jordan through which filtered Neolithic bands of early humans. These were followed by nomadic Arab tribes who engineered agriculture and built some of the first cities of the world. Through that pass flowed pharaoh's armies. In their footsteps followed the Persian army, the Greek army, the Roman army, the British army, the German army, the French...I think you get the picture. In other words, through 180 degrees, I can see across time in one sweep of the eye. With so much ancient history lying at my feet, how can I describe to you the effect of Islam on the rampages of soldiers' boots back and forth across this plain? Perhaps my view from the window at the sunset prayer time will help convey the spirit of Islam which captivated this part of the world so easily--not by the sword, as erroneously stereotyped, but by philosophy.

Moslems do a ritual prayer five times each day. You can do it anywhere you happen to be. To modern, professional men and women, it is a ten minute break in a hectic day--a time when one can clear ones mind from earthly obligations and concentrate on the bigger picture. It is a very humbling act to prostrate oneself before an invisible yet omnipresent, greater good. It is also a reminder that--no matter what your profession--what you are working at affects the entire earth.

The sunset prayer is the fourth of these five prayers. It is a perfect time to demonstrate the inclusive spirit of Islam. From my window, I can see the evening mist beginning to creep onto the plain from between the foothills and down the pass. Night comes to the far eastern end of my view first. There, on the fringes of my vision, I can barely make out a faint green light atop a distant minaret. So distant...so faint...yet sticking up above the buildings there. Its fine needle spire pierces the encroaching darkness with its light. I know there is a call to prayer from it even though I cannot hear it. Darkness creeps a wee bit closer, and another green light sends out its hopeful beam from atop another mosque nearer to me. If I listen ever so closely, I can imagine that I hear its call to put aside my troubles for a moment. The sun dips further behind the mountains in the west, and other green lights push away the threads of darkening haze passing there. The call to prayer is now within the reaches of my hearing, as several mosques join their voices like a round of "Good Night, Ladies" echoing across the plain.

"God is the Greatest. I testify that there is no god but the one God. I testify that Muhammad is God's Apostle. Come to prayer, come to success and security. God is the Greatest. There is no god but the one God."

The wave of calls advances steadily towards me, and as darkness touches one more minute of longitude, more than 90 minarets light up the darkness. Their voices ring out to remind us of our place in this wide universe. Wave after wave of the faithful--in their homes or at work...in parks and on city sidewalks--on land, in the air and on the sea--they knee in prayer for the good of all peoples of every faith everywhere on earth. For they believe that when we die, all peoples will be judged by how closely they adhered to their own religious principles. For this reason, coming as a Christian to Syria over 40 years ago, I was never harassed by anyone--neither about my own religion nor to be converted to theirs.

So, as night sweeps on in front of me, I can appreciate it's meaning to my Moslem neighbors. I watch the lights progress towards the western horizon. The calls to stop and wonder at the bigger picture of this universe march after the sun, as it trails its last rays beyond the western horizon and continues on around the entire globe.

The Moslem prayer was greatly designed so that everyone on the whole earth--pagan or believer--would constantly be wrapped in hope, for they believe that God created us all and only He knows what purpose we would serve to the betterment of us all. This call is continually reminding us--five times a day--how small we are in this revolving universe, and how grateful we must truly be to be even just a tiny blue dot in its immensity. My we all--regardless of our own religious affiliations or spiritual ties--may we all be so grateful to honor life on earth as truly something very unique and to which we owe a lifetime of good stewardship. This is the true spirit of Islam.