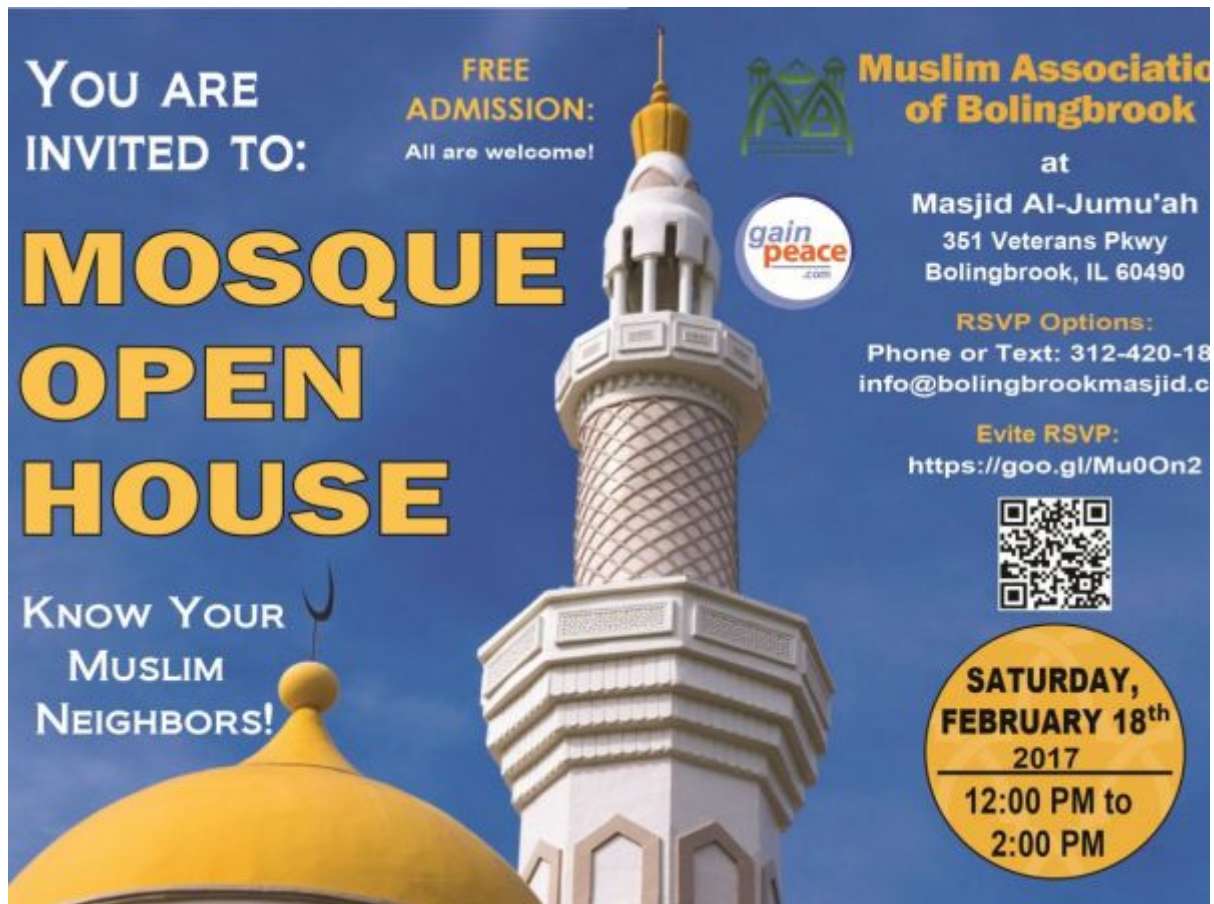


# A Few Scenes, Drawn from Life, of the Latest in Muslim Outreach (Part I)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



## 1. “Islam Is Not A Monolith”

You’ve just decided to attend a Meet-Your-Muslim-Neighbor gathering at a local mosque, the one that was built a few years ago to accommodate a swelling population of Believers. When the plans for the new mosque had first been announced, some people objected to its being built, but they were denounced in the local paper as being “Islamophobes.” They had actually been worried only about increased traffic in a residential area, and said so, but few believed their story, and the local Muslims publicly decried this act of “bigotry,”

even though the same objections had been raised previously by the same people about traffic problems resulting from the construction of other, non-Muslim buildings. Only a few intrepid souls were prepared to withstand the ordeal of being labelled as “Islamophobes,” and those few who continued to object to the mosque were quickly silenced.

You’ve prepared for the evening by jotting on a notecard a few verses from the Qur’an that you are hoping to discuss with your Muslim hosts. At the mosque, many Muslims are already there to welcome their guests. The master of ceremonies turns out to be Mohammed Al-Noor, not a cleric but a layman. He’s an attractive fellow, jovial, known to many in the town; the owner of both a real estate business and a halal grocery; he was elected last year to the School Committee and has been involved in the choice of “more inclusive” social studies textbooks for the high school in order to avoid “otherizing.” In Chaucerian terms, he’s “a smyler with the knyfe under the cloke.” He’s eager to welcome his visitors, as he puts it in his welcoming words: “I want tonight to clear up some misconceptions you might have about Islam, and about Muslims, which are perfectly understandable, given what the mass media are always practically screaming at you about Islam. Tonight, I won’t have time to discuss everything, but at least let me make a start, and hope that if you are interested, you will want to continue our conversation both at the mosque – I hope this will be the first of many such meetings – and in informal gatherings at the houses of our members, who came out to be with you tonight” (he points to several rows of seats where, to judge by hijabs and beards, members of the mosque are seated).

“I’m very glad so many of you could come out tonight and I know you all want to get behind the headlines, which always seem to have something unpleasant about Islam. There’s so much confusion, so much *noise*. In the first place, there’s this notion that ‘Islam is a monolith.’ So I thought I’d start by

showing you something of the *diversity* of Islam.” A giant television set has been set up in front of the room. He moves to the right of the screen, so as not to block the view. Now your host clicks on his remote, and the videos start: a dozen or so of the most famous mosques, not just in Istanbul and Medina and Mecca and Karachi and Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta and Kano, but also in London and New York and Lanham, Maryland, each with its own crowd of worshippers, with some prostrate in prayer inside the mosque, others walking in the courtyard outside, still others performing *wudu* at a fountain. “As you can see, we come in every color and race, all shapes and sizes, for Islam is a message for all, a message that does not belong to any one group but is meant to be shared by all humanity.” Murmurs of assent from the crowd of Infidels.

“And now, take a look at this white cloud of humanity” (it’s a word he likes, and uses a lot). On the screen, a sea of Believers – tens of thousands? hundreds of thousands? – all robed in white, appears; these are Muslims, white, brown, black, yellow – making the hajj, walking widdershins round the Magic Wonderstone in Mecca, casting pebbles at three walls as they Stone the Devil. Another scene: now they are prostrating themselves in prayer at the Grand Mosque of Mecca itself. “Did you know, folks, that there was a paper in a medical journal about how Muslims get much less back trouble because of the way they pray? That’s something to think about. Maybe you should give it a try.” (He gives a little laugh, not entirely joking.) Then more scenes on the screen: young Muslim boys, each intently studying a text – the Qur’an, of course – open before him, while a bearded and benevolent teacher looks on. “Where do you think that photograph was taken?” “Cairo?” suggests one lady. “No.” “Baghdad?” asks her husband. “No.” “Maybe in Riyadh?” asks another Infidel. “No. I thought you’d be surprised. Remember, this is a madrasa, a kind of Muslim Sunday school. This one on the screen could be in Cairo or Baghdad, you’re right, but it happens to be right here, in our state capitol. I’m especially fond of this photo because it

was at the capitol where I became an American citizen – I'll never forget that day, I was so proud – sometimes I think we who have given up everything to become Americans appreciate it more than those who can take it for granted. That's why I've wanted to give something back and why I'm here tonight. I finally figured out that the most useful thing I can do is to share with you folks, my non-Muslim friends and neighbors, my understanding of Islam. Obviously we can't cover all the bases tonight, but I can make a start. For let's face it, Islam doesn't always get a good press. And it's just so sad and so unfair." Faces of non-Muslims expressive of "yes, unfortunately that's true" and "I'm so glad I came." And murmurs of sympathy.

"Of course we all know that the media thrives on sensationalism. Not just about Islam, but about everything. But in this age of so much fake news and when anyone can anonymously post hate speech, it's easy to lead people astray. One thing I would like to remind you of is this: so many of our leaders who, as you know, are privy to secret information about real security threats, and who have actually taken the time to study Islam, have almost to a man declared that Islam is not the problem. It's the outliers, people who are mentally unbalanced, who put the worst possible interpretation on everything in the Qur'an and exploit religion as a way to justify their own criminality, who *use* Islam. Call them misunderstanders, perverters, defamers – they've been called all of these things, and more, and quite rightly – but the point is they are trying to start wars wherever they go – look at the so-called Islamic State – and we, you and I, are just not going to let them get away with it. They want to create conditions so that normally peaceful Muslims will be lured into committing acts of aggression. They thrive, the terrorists and their mirror images, the Islamophobes, on divisiveness, and on otherizing. Hatred between Muslims and non-Muslims, that's their goal. It's up to all of us, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, to keep them from succeeding. And

meetings like these, I hope you will conclude by the end of this evening, can help us stop them. Education about Islam, the real Islam, is the key.”

Now he segues to a list of leaders who “know about Islam”: “Did you know that Tony Blair never goes anywhere without his Qur’an? Or that President Bush, and President Obama, and Angela Merkel, and Theresa May, and Pope Francis – these are leaders, the people who are in a position to know what’s really going on behind the scenes, and they keep telling us that Islam has nothing to do with terrorism. Why shouldn’t we assume that they know what they’re talking about? Why would they want to misinform us?” “True,” “Of course,” “Yes,” “You’re right,” from various non-Muslims in the audience. On their faces, expressions of indignation and sympathy at the raw deal Muslims have been getting from the media and other spreaders of confusion and hate.

“But I didn’t invite you here tonight to complain. That doesn’t get us anywhere. Let’s have a few more views of Muslim life. Here’s a short tour of Al-Azhar, the center of Islamic learning. Think of it as our Vatican. Look: you can see the courtyards, the fountains, the main mosque, the, study halls, the classrooms, the library with its Qur’ans, and Hadith collections, and *tafsirs*, that is Qur’anic commentaries.” “Did you know, by the way, that if a Muslim manages to memorize the whole Qur’an, he is given the title of ‘hafiz’? I believe that more than ten million Muslims worldwide have managed to do so.” (A few looks of amazement on the faces of his guests). “And along with the Qur’an, which is the immutable word of Allah sent to Muhammad, ‘the Messenger of God,’ you should know about the Hadith. These are stories about what Muhammad said and did. They help us understand how to rightly interpret the Qur’anic verses. They were collected long ago, and inevitably some of them are more reliable than others, and we have Muslim scholars who study the likely reliability of each Hadith, and winnow down their number, based on that study.

Some of these Hadith scholars are believed to be more authoritative than others – the two considered to be most trustworthy are Bukhari and Muslim. But again, to fully explain this matter would take up most of the evening, and I want tonight to simply give you an overview.”

He goes on: “Now, here are a few videos of ‘ordinary Muslims’ at work: here’s a doctor” (white-coated Muslim doctor, clean-shaven, listening intently with his stethoscope to someone’s – a kuffar’s? – chest) “from Egypt. He’s a graduate of Harvard Medical School, now a resident at the Mass General. He’s planning on staying here – there’s a shortage of G.P.s, and there are quite a few Muslim doctors taking up the slack. Four of them in this mosque alone...And here’s a computer engineer from M.I.T....Ten years ago he was in high school in Karachi, and now he’s got his own startup in Cambridge; it’s doubled in size in the last year.. And here are two hijabbed women, with their children, shopping at a halal food market – it’s not the one I own, by the way. Any of you find the hijab scary?” “No-o-o, of course not” several people answer at once. “No, I didn’t think you would, but you know there are people who do...And here’s something new: our first Muslim member of the state legislature, Ahmed Al-Noor, who was elected last year, speaking at a rally, about the need for greater diversity in state government to truly reflect our changing population. Of course, he would say that, wouldn’t he? But didn’t he have a point? You can see these are all perfectly normal people, not a supporter of ISIS among them. I didn’t see a single suicide belt.” (Laughter from the audience.)

“And here’s more video about the younger members of our mosque: here are our teenagers. yes, the girls are wearing hijabs, but because they want to, no one is forcing them. And look – they are not segregated from the boys, as you might have thought from reading the newspapers. They’re all engaged in collecting for a clothing drive – see the sign on the door of the truck – ‘for Syrian victims of the civil war.’ Last

year they sent eight truckloads of clothes, including almost 250 winter coats, to northern Syria. And here are Muslims of all ages running in a half-marathon to raise money for cancer research. Not exactly a security threat.” (More laughter from the audience.)

“Oh, and now, just this last video. It’s our imam delivering a sermon (*khutba*) at Friday Prayers in this very mosque.” But it’s in Arabic. What can he be saying? Your host explains: “He’s talking about the need for an end to the civil war in Syria, and Iraq, and Yemen. He wants – we all want, don’t we – a durable peace, with justice, all over the Middle East.” Who could disagree with that? That endless Syrian conflict. Those wars in Iraq and Yemen. If you listen closely, you will hear the word “jihad” repeated four or times in his sermon. And another word comes up even more often. “Yahud.” What could it mean? Must remember at some point to ask him.

## **2. The Five Pillars**

Now with the audio-visual part of the evening out of the way, it’s time for the “Introduction to Islam” lecture. The Infidel visitors are told first about the Five Pillars of Islam: Shehada, Zakat, Salat, Sawm, Hajj. They’re invited to recite the Shehada along with their hosts. What fun! “And don’t worry, my friends. This won’t turn you into a Muslim, as some people claim. You have to want to believe, deeply and truly, and not just recite a single verse.” Muslim women are now distributing hijabs through the audience, handing them out to any of their female guests who want to try them on, and then showing them just how to wrap the scarves around their heads, in an Islamic game of Let’s Pretend. Even more fun!

And we’ve come now to the discussion of “Zakat” – this is charitable giving by Muslims “which is just like your charities, except that we Muslims are *required* to give a certain amount to charity every year to the less fortunate. It’s very important.” Sounds good, except that there is no

mention of the fact that Zakat, according to many Muslims, should be given only for fellow Muslims, or to those who are on the verge of converting to Islam, or in order to further the cause of Islam. That gives quite a different feel to the requirement of Zakat. If you don't know about this, your Muslim host is not about to enlighten you.

A similar silence occurs in the discussion of *Salat*, the five canonical prayers, for nothing is said about the fact that seventeen times a day, Muslims – saying those daily prayers – actually curse the Kuffar. Robert Spencer explains:

*“Now – what about those prayers? In the course of praying the requisite five prayers a day, an observant Muslim will recite the Fatihah, the first surah of the Qur'an and the most common prayer in Islam, seventeen times. The final two verses of the Fatihah ask Allah: 'Show us the straight path, the path of those whom Thou hast favoured; not the (path) of those who earn Thine anger nor of those who go astray.' The traditional Islamic understanding of this is that the 'straight path' is Islam – cf. Islamic apologist John Esposito's book Islam: The Straight Path. The path of those who have earned Allah's anger are the Jews, and those who have gone astray are the Christians.”*

Nothing about this cursing of kuffar will be mentioned by any Muslim apologist, and certainly not by anyone at the Meet-Your-Muslim-Neighbors night. It is up to non-Muslims to raise the issue, to quote the last two verses of the Fatihah and to show that they understand their significance, and that every Muslim, in saying his five daily prayers, curses the kuffar seventeen times a day. If you can make that known to, and understood by, your fellow Infidels, despite the attempts of your Muslim hosts to deflect attention from the matter, it could have a bracing and salutary effect. It's worth trying, even if means interrupting the proceedings. Or perhaps you can try to smuggle it in during a final Q and A, as an innocent



inquiry.

Then your Muslim host will explain that *Sawm*, another of the Five Pillars, is the period of fasting during Ramadan. “And here’s something I bet you didn’t know,” he says, “the first Iftar dinner was not that given by Barack Obama, but by President Thomas Jefferson himself back in 1805.”

But that story, or fable, more properly belongs to the next movement of the Meet-Your-Muslim-Neighbors overview. To wit: “The History of Islam In America Is As Old As America Itself.”

First published in [Part II is here](#).