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Imagining the Prophet

Interview by DEBORAH SOLOMON

As a leader of alternative medicine who was born in India and raised as a Hindu before opening a wellness center in California, what led you to write your new book, “Muhammad,” a fictionalized biography of the Muslim prophet?

I had previously written “Jesus,” and I grew up in an environment where the kids in my school were either Muslim or Jewish or Zoroastrian. New Delhi has a very eclectic mix. There wasn’t any animosity. Having said that, my grandparents were prejudiced and Islamophobic. If a Muslim’s shadow crossed my grandmother’s body — she lived with us — she would go and take a shower.



No!

Yes! My father was a doctor, an army cardiologist. He was very secular, and we discussed how prejudiced my grandparents were and how we would never be like that. So that was my upbringing. I was always interested in going deeply into the life of the Prophet.

The Muhammad who emerges from your book is not completely admirable. He’s a fearful and illiterate orphan who runs from his visions before he finally becomes a warrior. Are you concerned someone will issue a fatwa against you?

I wrote the book factually and with respect. Beyond that, I can’t control anyone’s reaction.

You are pretty inventive in a chapter narrated by Eli, a Jewish scribe who is employed by Muhammad to follow him around and write down his every observation.

Medina had a Jewish population. The Jews were the ones who knew how to read and write. The Arabs, including the Prophet, were mostly illiterate. A writer of historical fiction has poetic license.

Do you think it is possible that the Koran was actually written by Jews?

How come there are so many references to Moses and the prophets in the Koran? I would not be surprised if Jewish scribes inserted a lot of that.

The Persians, too, were very literate. They gave us the poems of Rumi, the Sufi mystic.

Everyone says there are no Muslim moderates, and if there are, they never speak up. The Sufis are indeed the reformers. Imam Rauf and his wife are Sufis and reformers and have been doing great work for years.

You refer to Feisal Abdul Rauf, who is overseeing the planned Islamic center in Lower Manhattan. Are you saying Sufism represents the reform branch of Islam?

Yes. Traditional Islam is a mixture of all obedience to Allah, and if that requires militancy, so be it. Whereas Sufism exalts beauty, intuition, tenderness, affection, nurturing and love, which we associate with feminine qualities.

Do you see any parallels between Sufi and New Age philosophies?

New Age is such a mixed bag. I don't like the term because in many ways it bastardizes some of the great traditions.

How do you define your practice?

I was trained as a medical doctor. I went to medical school because I wanted to ask the big questions. Do we have a soul? Does God exist? What happens after death? And so I gradually moved in the direction of what I can only call a secular spirituality.

Do you think God exists?

Yes, but not as a dead white male.

How would you define spirituality as opposed to religion?

Self-awareness and awareness of other people's needs.

If someone asks what religion you are, what do you say?

I say God gave humans the truth, and the Devil came and said, "Let's organize it, we'll call it religion."

At least religion is free to worshipers. Isn't it costly to attend a meditation retreat at the Chopra Center?

I hardly break even. It's very labor-intensive, and insurance does not cover it, although there is some progress. Religions take donations and don't pay taxes. Look at the wealth of the Vatican!

Should insurance companies cover meditation classes?

Yes. If insurance companies paid for lifestyle-management classes, they would save huge sums of money. We need to see that alternative medicine is now mainstream.

INTERVIEW HAS BEEN CONDENSED AND EDITED.