

## Foreword

Ever since I was a child in Baghdad, I have been fascinated by color. Like all children, I loved to draw while lying on the floor, floating in a pond of large sheets of paper, surrounded by watercolors, poster colors, crayons, pencils, pens, brushes, and plastic palettes. Such was my small, happy world. Two decades later, I took up painting as a full-time profession. This only lasted a few years, but even so, and even though it's been a long time since I last painted, colors never cease to surprise me. I still remember the excitement that washed over me when I played with them and my puzzlement at their ambiguous signals.

When I added white to the red, yellow, and blue on my palette, each mixture developed a tint that was neither white nor the original color. The more I repeated the process, the more new, different shades appeared. Little did I know then that my experiments with color would many years later help me understand the way I perceived my religion, Islam. Nevertheless, my brain kept the data crude and un-interpreted until 2001. Appalled by the intensity of the attacks on New York City, I couldn't believe my ears when I heard that they had been planned and executed by Arabs, Muslim men. For a moment, I imagined myself trapped in one of the planes as it pierced the World Trade Center tower and disintegrated into a massive ball of flame. Why would a Muslim do that? Why would any sane person do something so atrocious?

During that time of turmoil, I recalled my childhood playing with colors. I thought if the white on my plastic palette stood for religion, or any other dogma, for that matter, then the red, yellow, and blue stood for *us*, for people. The outcome of the meeting between white—which cannot be seen when put alone on a blank canvas—and color is outstandingly diverse because although white is constant, colors are not. This realization made me understand why bin Laden's Islam was so different from mine, or from that of Malcolm X, and why Mother Teresa's Christianity was different from George W. Bush's version. It also made me see that my faith has always fluctuated. My Islam now as a man in his forties is very different from my Islam as a child or an adolescent. Only God knows what it will be like when I'm fifty or sixty.

So many books have been written about Islam. After 9/11, the whole world hungered to understand the religion of the man who had given the United States of America its worst day ever. I've read several of those books and found most of them quite interesting, but something is missing. While some writers defend Islam fervently, others viciously attack it. Both groups seem confident in their judgments and conclusions; they both claim to have all the answers, reminding me of a Catholic priest I met once who insisted that there would never be peace in this world unless all Muslims were to become Christians (Catholics, in particular), even if that meant converting one quarter of the world's population.

Amid this global crescendo of conflicting theses—the detractors and supporters, the anti- and pro-Islam—the voice of lay Muslims has gotten lost. No one talks about the Muslims who have a lot of questions and who are not convinced by the clergy's answers. Or, to go back to my analogy of colors again, no one cares to listen to the Muslims in the grey zone—the ones who, in the face of daily challenges and the absence of a clear vision, had no other choice but to improvise. Muslims like myself.

A few years ago, I thought it might be time to lay bare my confusion. Whether I like it or not, religion has permeated my life. Its presence is too palpable to be ignored, so I have decided to talk about it. One final disclaimer, though: it is said that a good writer should steer clear of subjectivity, but I want this book to be subjective through and through. In the following pages, I've poured out my stories and confusion; my feelings; questions; and the choices I've made or, in many cases, failed to make. This is my testimony. These are my confessions.

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