



I began my interview by assuring my informant, Anna, that the interview would be confidential, and to that end I have not included her last name. I also informed her that if at any time a question was too probing or personal, she should feel free to decline to answer. I also told her that there were likely many areas where we would see things differently but that this was to be expected and she should not be concerned with offending me in any way. The purpose of the interview was for me to gather information about her culture and religion and I was personally interested in learning more about both. She was very forthcoming and excited to share with me her life and her faith.

INTERVIEWEE: Anna  
COMMUNITY: Muslim  
ETHNIC GROUP: Pakistani American

## LIFE HISTORY

Anna was born in Karachi, Pakistan and came to the United States when she was thirteen-years-old. Today she is twenty-eight. She speaks English and Urdu. She can read Arabic and also a little Spanish. She learned Spanish while working in a doctor's office in our community where she now lives with her husband and two-year-old son. When she moved to the United States, the first place she lived was in a neighboring state.

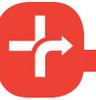
One of the things she misses least about Pakistan is the corruption of the government. What she misses most about her homeland is the friendly and warm environment of the neighbors and neighborhoods. The neighbors had open doors and lively interchange. Her neighbors were like her family and they were much less private and secluded than we are here in the United States. One of her favorite memories is of the holiday called "Eid" (pronounced: "aid") which begins the day after Ramadan ends. It is the biggest holiday of the year and it is a festive environment where the people wear new clothes and celebrate the end of a season of fasting, praying, and abstaining from sin.

## FAMILY

Anna is the youngest of her four sisters and three brothers. Her oldest sister still lives in Pakistan and two of her brothers and parents now live nearby. The Pakistani culture and Muslim religion place a high value on honoring parents. One form this takes is in arranged marriages. It is considered an important duty and the responsibility of the parents to find a spouse for their male or female child.

Early marriage is a high value, primarily for the purpose of avoiding the sin of fornication. Most marriages are arranged and neither premarital sex nor divorce are considered options. There is no such thing as dating among the religiously devout. A man and woman cannot be alone together prior to marriage. Love is expected to develop after the marriage takes place but is not considered a reason to get married, although this is changing among younger people as their expectations are growing. In her family, there is still a choice regarding whether to marry, but the pressure is to get married. Most parents would not be pleased if a child remained single beyond the early twenties.

Anna and her husband now have a two-year-old boy and another baby on the way. I met them when they moved into an adjoining town home shortly after they were married a little over three years ago. They moved to the area to be near the mosque which is within walking distance from our town homes. There has been a tremendous influx of Muslims into the area since this mosque was built.



## FRIENDSHIPS OR NETWORKS OR COMMUNITY

As observed earlier, family and community are extremely important in Anna's culture. Her parents and older brother live close so she sees them often. She is closest to her middle sister, who lives nearby and her younger brother, who still lives in another state. Her in-laws often visit from Pakistan. Because her husband is very active in the Mosque, they often have large gatherings of families and friends and a houseful of happily screaming children in the evenings! They are also friendly with the Palestinian Muslim neighbors who recently moved into the building and from whom Anna gets Middle Eastern news via their satellite connection to Al Jazeera television.

## INTERESTS AND ACTIVITIES

At this time, Anna is a stay-at-home mom but she seems discontent with her daily routine of cooking, cleaning, and childcare. She has a Bachelors degree in Graphic Arts and would like to get a Masters in Early Childhood Education or Child Development or possibly go into Nursing. She has an interest in doing something in terms of a future career although she is unclear at this time regarding what specific direction that might take. Her husband is supportive of whatever she would like to pursue.

## BELIEFS AND VALUES

Anna and her husband are devout Sunni Muslims. Sunni is the larger of the two sects of Islam which comprises approximately 85-90 percent of all Muslims. The other is Shia which is distinct because of its emphasis on the need for Muhammad's successors to be related to him and because they do not believe in the Caliphate. Sunnis believe in the Caliphate, which is the governing head of the worldwide Islamic Community and practices rule by Shari'ah law.

Anna's morals and life decisions are based on both her culture and her Islamic belief system. She takes her religion very seriously and unlike some Muslims whose faith is merely external, her faith is an expression of her internal convictions.

At about the age of 20, she was the first in her family to choose to wear the head covering called the hijab. It was a difficult and awkward decision for her to make because it is uncommon within the American community. In addition, many of her Muslim relatives also saw it as unnecessary, but Anna felt personally convicted that it was important to her modesty, her values, and her spiritual growth. She explains that the hijab is worn to cover a woman's beauty and to help keep her from stumbling or temptation. It is also a way to appear less approachable to men and is a form of protection. Anna's faith teaches that a woman's beauty is reserved for her husband and family. After puberty, only her brothers, father, and uncles should see her with her head uncovered.

In regard to prayer, Anna prays five times a day during given windows of time, not just because it is expected, but because she desires to grow spiritually. She explains that each prayer begins with the same introduction each time and then continues with verses from the Koran that can vary as desired. The prayer begins with her hands in the air in an act of surrender, then hands on the heart, and then a bow to the ground. This is repeated five times for each of the five daily prayers.

When I asked Anna to describe Allah, I must confess that I was surprised to hear her say that he is forgiving toward those who are trying to do what's right. She also pointed out that to continue to sin for this reason is unacceptable. This sounded similar to Paul's exhortation to Christians in Romans 6:1-2! When I tried to ascertain whether grace existed within Islam, she did not understand the question, but as I explained the



concepts of grace as a free, unearned gift she replied in the negative.

Anna believes heaven and hell are literal places and that one gets to heaven by believing that Allah is the one true god and that Muhammad is his messenger. Also, obeying his orders, avoiding sin, and doing good deeds such as treating one's parents well is essential. She cannot say with certainty that she can ever be "good enough" to get to heaven, but she believes Allah is forgiving and he loves 70 times more than a mother does. Even if someone is sent to hell, after they are punished they will be sent to heaven (which is surprisingly similar to the Catholic version of purgatory!). She believes Jesus was a prophet and that all the other prophets who came before him were Allah's messengers. She also says that Muhammad suffered as Jesus did, for the spread of Islam.

When I asked her if she ever has questions about her faith, she says she questions a lot. One example is on the Koran's teaching about homosexuality. She says she had a cousin with whom she was close, but who was gay. Due to the inner conflict this caused him he eventually committed suicide. Similar to many post-modern Christians today, she is conflicted about the idea that homosexuality has a biological origin as she was taught in her public school biology class, and the fact that homosexuality is forbidden by the Koran.

## BIBLICAL VIEWPOINT

### *Acts 17:16*

Just as Paul was distressed to see the city of Athens full of idols, my spirit grieves whenever I drive past the mosque in my neighborhood. When I think of or see all of the people who are held captive by the false teachings of Muhammad, I am truly burdened to pray for truth, salvation and deliverance for my neighborhoods and all who enter there.

### *1 Peter 3:15*

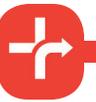
Christians are called upon to always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks the reason for the hope that we have. We must prepare ourselves to explain the points of attack or of questioning by Muslims (and others). The best tool we have toward this end is through the study of God's Word and apologetics. In addition, we are called to do this with gentleness and respect. One way for this to best happen is to begin by asking relevant questions, listening well and establishing trust. The ethnography interview is an extremely valuable tool toward this end.

### *1 Corinthians 9:19-23*

We must be willing to serve and affirm those we are trying to save. When Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:22, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some," I believe he was speaking of respecting and affirming the beliefs of others without compromising truth (as I have tried to practice here in a Muslim context). Paul seemed to search for the common nugget of truth upon which he agreed with those to whom he was ministering and to build upon that in order to point them toward Christ. Today we would call this "exegeting the community." Paul has taught us that information, common ground, and respect is a strong platform from which to share the love and truth of Jesus Christ.

### *Acts 17:1-4*

Paul not only did his best to find common ground and even adapt to the community to which he preached, but in the case of the Jews, he reasoned with them from the scriptures which were common to both faiths in order to explain and prove that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. There are also common scriptures among Muslims and Christians in the Old Testament and in some cases it may be possible to reason with a Muslim from that point. For example, they believe in Moses and Abraham. Or even, beginning with



their respect for Jesus as a prophet, to reason with them based on Jesus' own teaching from his biographies in the New Testament.

## MINISTRY STRATEGY

I need to continue to build relationship and find areas of common belief which open up opportunities for discussing the similarities and differences in the belief systems between myself and my Muslim neighbors. I have several avenues through which I can continue to reach out. Since Anna stays home with her two-year-old son, I can stop by any time to visit. When I have him, I can bring my two-year-old grandson over to play or invite them to walk to the park. I can also invite her to lunch or to work out, both of which she has expressed a desire to do. I can also invite our Palestinian Muslim neighbor to join us. I can also look for opportunities to visit the mosque when it is opened to visitors as is sometimes the case.

I must reach out with areas of common ground. We share the common values of taking faith seriously, praying to God regularly, surrendering our will to God's will, desiring purity, avoiding sin, honoring our parents, and valuing children and family. We also share a common struggle within American secular society which is hostile to all exclusive faith systems including both Islam and Christianity. We can even explore some theological concepts and surprising points of similarity such as "God's forgiveness" and "God's love" with the ultimate goal of discussing how those diverge between the two faiths.

Most importantly, I must prepare myself from the scriptures and in areas of apologetics in those essential points of difference between the Christian and Muslim faiths. Both knowledge of the Bible and books on the distinction between the faiths, such as *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross* by Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, are good resources for preparation. Some primary examples of distinctions between the two faiths for which I should be prepared include: How Jesus embodies both justice and mercy by giving His life so our sins can be forgiven, (Rom 6:23); How Christianity is the only faith with the concept of grace which is an unearned and undeserved gift, (Eph. 2:8-9, Titus 3:5); How God can be monotheistic but have a Trinitarian nature which allows us to know Him personally: God as sovereign over all (Father), God next to us (Jesus) and also God intimately alive inside us in the Holy Spirit, (2 Cor. 13:14).

## APPLICATION TO MINISTRY

This process has been an invaluable tool from which I have learned much. I realize the beliefs between myself and my Muslim neighbors though vast, do have some points of common ground from which we can converse. This tool has opened the door to build trust and a closer relationship where genuine conversations about faith and Jesus Christ can happen. In addition, by asking relevant questions and humbly listening, my Muslim friend has felt free to ask questions of me in return. In some cases these are questions she would not otherwise have considered, such as "What is grace?" In other cases, they are common points of questions for which I must be prepared such as, "Don't Christians worship three Gods?" Or, "How can God die?" This process has removed my hesitancy to open the door to such conversations and any fear of offending as I have seen that beginning with questions and a genuine desire to learn is an approach to which people respond enthusiastically.