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Day 27: The Muslims in Memphis (Part 1)

08

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By Aman Ali | [21 Comments »](#)



Chip Ordman is a reform Jew and his wife Eunice is a Christian. The couple attend mosques in Memphis 2-3 times a month for Friday prayers, potluck dinners and other events.

“The more people get to know each other, the more they’ll get along,” Eunice said.

I first met Chip in April this year for [a standup show I did](#) for [the Memphis Islamic Center](#), a ridiculously awesome mosque being built here that we’ll talk about in a coming post. The Ordmans are a part of the [Memphis InterReligious Group](#) that encourage Muslims, Christians and Jews to hang out with each other and attend each other’s services. I’ve done a lot of traveling across the country and I’ve never seen an interfaith community like

Memphis where a guy like Chip comes to mosques for Friday prayers and chat about the khutbah sermons afterwards with congregants.

“When it comes to visiting mosques, churches and synagogues, I often find that questions I have about one religion are answered by another,” he said.

Chip and Eunice met us to break our fast at the [Muslim Society of Memphis](#), a simple mosque packed with congregants. He was wearing a north African Jewish yarmulke that I initially mistook for a kufi, a hat Muslim men often wear during prayer. Seeing him at the mosque with his hat and fluffy cotton beard made him blend in with just about everyone there.



After dinner, the Ordman's invite us into their home nearby. Their home is actually two condos they combined – one to live in and another to host interfaith gatherings in. Chip's a goofy guy that loves to tell whacky stories about him and his wife's travels around the world and points to many of the global souvenirs around the house that they've collected.





Chip and I begin talking about religious attire and he's quick to pull out several items that many orthodox Jews wear during their regular morning prayers.





The Ordmans are actively concerned with the Israeli Palestinian peace issue and regularly got involved in the Muslim community here about 2-3 years ago. At the time, a group of Israelis crashed a peaceful pro-Palestine rally and sprayed protesters with tear gas. In 2008, the Muslim community in Memphis honored the couple with an award that Eunice proudly pulled out of her cloth bag during our conversation with her.

I asked the Ordmans how they've been received by Muslims as they regularly frequent Islamic events. Chip said he's been received well but Eunice said she couldn't say the same.

“Many of the women here will criticize me because I have a few strands of hair showing from my headscarf,” she said. “I’ll be sitting in a chair to the side of the room while they’re praying so clearly they know that I’m not Muslim.”



What I admire about the Ordmans is their passion for building interfaith relations in the community. But all religions embracing each other here is a common trait here, according to one of my friends Danish who lives here.

“The Christians here are very welcoming of Muslims because they actually adhere to what they believe,” he said.

It’s hard to believe, only a few hours away in Murfreesboro, a small town outside of Nashville, a national spotlight has been placed on those [Muslims’ struggle to build a mosque amidst community opposition](#). But Murfreesboro isn’t the only community dealing with mosque opposition in this country, so I asked Chip how Muslims can avoid it.

“Before you build a mosque, you need to start by listening,” he said. “Go out into the community and make clear to everyone that you just want to listen.”



I admire the Ordman's wholehearted and sincere interest in hanging out with Muslims here in Memphis. I ask him if he thinks Muslims here reciprocate that interest and hang out in churches and temples.

"They do, but I'd like to see more," he said. "But I understand, many Muslims might feel a little nervous coming to a church because they might not understand the theology. But what I'd like to see is a mosque calling up a church and saying 'Hi, we'd like to send one of our youth groups to attend one of your church services.'"

With all the time the Ordmans spend at mosques, I have to ask if any Muslims have tried to convert them. Chip lets out a chuckle and responds.

"I'm quite happy with my tribe," he said. "There's so much mutual understanding and interfaith work that needs to be done. I feel like converting would disqualify myself from doing that."

Chip is 65 and Eunice is 86. The two married in the 1980s and their chemistry is unmistakable. In just about every conversation, Chip would begin by saying something and Eunice would segway right in and finish his sentence. I love speaking to happy older couples and always have to ask what's their secret.

"Instead of compromising, in a marriage you each have to give 100 percent," she said as she grasped her husband's hand.

Go ahead and say it, "Awwwww."



posted on September 8th, 2010 under [Featured](#), [Uncategorized](#).

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Comments

1. September 8th, 2010 | *SS* says:

So adorable! Loved this post!! Great job. 😊

2. September 8th, 2010 | *Sam* says:

loved this! what an inspiring couple.

3. September 8th, 2010 | *Neman* says:

What a beautiful story! It's so nice to read so much positive stuff coming out of your travels, and this is just one of the many highlights.

It's interesting how Chip has identified the common hesitation Muslims have of going into synagogues and churches. We're *so* touchy about shirk that it sometimes prevents us from exploring opportunities for bridge-building.

It's disappointing how Eunice has experienced the common experience women seem to have (this is all second-hand, so forgive me) of being criticized by other women in the mosque. (Not excusing men – she just focused on this.) As far as I can tell, the common thread is clothing, not character. A strand of hair here, a misaligned scarf there, all results in the stink eye. Can we not be pleased about the fact that someone's in the mosque instead of in the bar and encourage them in instead of pushing them out?

Mazel tov to you on another great story, and Shana Tova to Chip & Eunice!

4. September 8th, 2010 | *Barbara* says:

Great story!

5. September 8th, 2010 | *qa* says:

Aww, what an adorable post. 😊

6. September 8th, 2010 | *Tsbish A.* says:

What an awesome story man... Loved this post... It's great to see all different religions working together to create something positive... Keep up the great work guys

7. September 9th, 2010 | *Heidi* says:

Hi Grammie and Grandpa Chip!

Read it. I'm sure you guys are thrilled. Happy Rosh Hashanah and end of Ramadan. Hugs and kisses.

8. September 9th, 2010 | *Missy* says:

Another beautiful day in your journey – thanks for sharing it. For those who are interested, I'm a non-Muslim who met up with Aman and Bassam in Charlotte (NC) and attended break fast with them – it was a marvelous experience for me. I was able to interview them – here it is if you're interested:

<http://melibeeglobal.com/2010/08/interview-with-aman-ali-and-bassam-tariq-from-30mosques-com/>

9. September 9th, 2010 | *Abdurrahman* says:

Another informative post as always alhamdulillah! I agree that it is disappointing how judgmental we can be of (relatively) minor issues, especially the scarf of a woman who is nearly 90!

I do however submit that being “touchy” about shirk is prudent. While we should seek to understand and respect our neighbors and seek to do so through dialogue and interaction, we should not forget that the main mission of the Prophet (sallallahu alaihi wa sallam) was to bring people away from the worship of the creation to the worship of the Creator. Often when people delve deeply into interfaith work we make bridge-building the end-goal and entirely forsake sharing our message. May Allah guide us & this sweet couple to what He loves, ameen!

10. September 9th, 2010 | [Tasneem](#) says:

Assalamu’alaikum wrwbth,

What an uplifting story! I just adored Chip and Eunice! It is indeed wonderful to see Interfaith work in action. I lived in Memphis for a while, and the Muslims there are awesome people! FYI – even Shk. Yasir Qadhi has moved to this great city!

I am addicted to your posts. I will miss them dearly. You two have done a great favor for Muslims and Islam in the US. May Allah azza wajal reward you guys immensely.

11. September 9th, 2010 | [A_H](#) says:

“Taqabballallahu Minna Wa Minkum” (May Allah accept it from us and you).

Eid Mubarak From South Africa

12. September 9th, 2010 | [Marya](#) says:

Check out this non-Muslim family: http://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation_id=annotation_51746&v=M-UQFFsJPRM&feature=iv

13. September 9th, 2010 | [Mindy](#) says:

Oh! What sweeties! <3 <3 <3 I can't wait to read part 2.

This years blog has been amazing you guys! Please keep doing this in the years to come! I think all of us who are reading it, Muslims and us non-Muslims alike, are really learning a lot about the very diverse American-Muslim communities across the country.

14. September 9th, 2010 | [abena](#) says:

this is a very touching post

15. September 11th, 2010 | [Anne](#) says:

This post highlights a pet belief of mine. We need to spend time with each other, and we will lose our fear and mistrust. I flippantly sometimes say if we ate each other’s dinners for a month, we would get past that fear and misunderstanding. (I’m Greek-anybody up for some moussaka?)

Ramadan is one thing I greatly admire about Islam. Thanks for spending your Ramadan in such a interesting way, and sharing it with the world.

16. September 11th, 2010 | [Chip Ordman](#) says:

My wife and I have really enjoyed both the original post and the comments. Is this a good place to continue some discussions, or can people suggest another site? For example, I had to go look up “shirk” to understand some of the remarks. By way of illustration, I’m Jewish; I’m comfortable praying in a mosque or a church, but I do not kneel in churches. I’m uncomfortable with some Christian language of the “Jesus is God” variety and much more comfortable with much of their other language, discussing the various ways in which the One God expresses himself or is perceived by humans: no one thinks that the 99 Names of Allah are 99 different Gods, and I am inclined to think of the three terms the Christians use in much the same way. I am comfortable kneeling in mosques, but many Jews are not, because of family stories dating back to times and places where

a Jew did not dare be mistaken for a Muslim, for fear of later being accused of apostasy by a Muslim ruler (even at times when Jews who were clearly identified as Jews were treated quite well.)

In my grandparent's day, and even when my parents were young, many Christian Americans were as uncomfortable with or hostile to Jews as they are to Muslims today (and the hostility was more socially and legally acceptable). By now, they are more comfortable, although not 100 percent. One reason is that by now many Jews have visited churches, and many Christians have visited synagogues; the other group is better understood. I look forward to the day when enough Muslims are comfortable visiting a friend's church or synagogue, and enough Jews and Christians are comfortable visiting a friend's mosque, that more Americans regard Islam as something understood and more compatible with their own beliefs.

But as I was quoted above, the way to start a dialogue is to first show you can listen. Ask a friend to take you to their church or synagogue, their Sunday School class, ask questions. Not all of them, but enough of them, will respond by asking you questions about Islam or visiting the mosque or a dawah class with you.

Chip Ordman

17. September 12th, 2010 | *Edie* says:

You guys are EXACTLY what this country needs right now. Thank You! and God Bless You in all of your journey's towards unity and understanding.

18. September 13th, 2010 | *Fayez* says:

I know Eunice and Chip Ordman and have been in their house and places of worship. It has been so pleasure knowing them and they are among the best when it comes to interfaith dialogue. Great story and very humble people to know. Thank you for blogging and informing others of Islam around the country. May Allah reward you good, keep up the good work and best wishes in your future blogging.
Fayez

19. September 13th, 2010 | *RAJ* says:

I also had to find the definition of shirk to understand the connotation of some of the remarks. The definition I found mentioned that for Muslims shirk was the only unforgivable sin. I found that particularly interesting, because although I do not practice my faith I was raised to the rule that suicide was the only unforgivable sin. However, if accurate, then the juxtaposition of these two beliefs would be a interesting interfaith study.

Personally, I do not want to believe that God would not forgive without first taking the circumstances into consideration. Nor do I think that one should exclude the other.

20. September 28th, 2010 | [thy bilet fiyatları](#) says:

Ne güzel bir gezi yapmışsınız tebrik ederim doğrusu keşke doğru düzgün ingilizcem olsada türkceye çevirebilsem bu yazdıklarınızıda ülkemizde yayınlasam turkey

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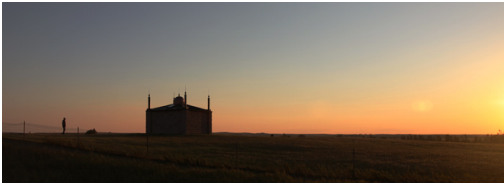
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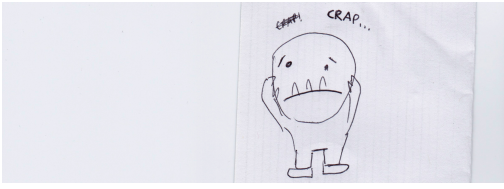
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