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University College Cork, Ireland
Christ Church Cathedral
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In the name of God, the most merciful, the most kind. All praise is for God, Lord of the worlds, the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful. Master of the Day of Judgment, you alone we worship and you alone we ask for help, guide us along the straight path, the path of those you have blessed, not those you are displeased with, or those who go astray. Amen

Darkness into Light. A reflection on Qur'an 2:257

'God is the protector of those who believe. God brings them out of the darkness into the light.'

In Islamic traditions, light refers to faith and darkness to disbelief and denial. As I read some commentaries, I found light also meaning 'guidance'. God is light. Faith is an act. Time and time again in the Qur'an, Muslims are instructed to ponder and reflect on the word of God in order to unveil the light away from darkness. To discern good and evil, stand up for justice and spread love and beauty within ourselves and all those that surround us.

The first word of the Qur'an was to 'Read', *Iqra*

Biblical monotheism set in motion by Judaism, extended to Christianity and then Islam all have some key features – such as scripture, creation, covenant and identity, commandment: ritual and ethics. Our shared biblical monotheism demands action, not merely a belief that remains stagnant.

These are the mysteries of faith and action that God sets for us. We are blessed to meet certain people in life who are the characteristic of this light and guidance.

My parents hail from a small village in the Punjab in the city of Sialkot in Pakistan. A city with a learned history of theologians, poets and great skills in making leather footballs! My Mother was educated to what we might say is primary four or five, in our schooling systems. My Dad passed his Matriculation exams in high school. Both made Glasgow their home. Dad arrived to the UK in 1952 and Mum in 1969. My Dad, after traveling the world and doing all sorts of menial jobs, ran a grocery shop in the south side of the city for 23 years. In a community that was largely Jewish. I remember the great number of *Jewish Chronicle* and *Jewish Telegraph* newspapers that he sold to our customers. My Mum had 7 kids, a highly talented seamstress. She would sell loose material from the house and then sew them in the traditional way for the first generation of Pakistanis in Glasgow. My Dad would read the Daily Urdu newspaper, *The Jang* in the shop. I remember being so amazed as a wee boy looking up at him reading every line.

Every morning, my Mum would read the Qur'an loudly as we, all 7 of us, would be getting ready for school. She would be sitting on the bed, reading her the Qur'an that sat in a beautiful wooden holder, the 'Rehal'. Mum would be rocking to-and-fro as she read. On occasions she would read passages of the Qur'an and blow on us as she warded off evil, bringing light to our bodies in health and peace.

Some have called it a clash of civilisations, I call it a dazzling mix of God's light. From listening to those cassettes that arrived from my aging aunt to my Dad that he played over and again in his shop to my Mum making clear that there was absolutely no holidays from school without a compelling reason. At the end of the school day, we also went to the Mosque to read the Qur'an. Completing a full reading of the Qur'an was important. Another part of the education was my Mum's insistence on speaking Punjabi at home. "Speak whatever you want outside, at home you'll speak Punjabi". I think it was a complex balancing act at the time. I returned to Pakistan this year after 24 years and the ability to converse with family and friends was beautiful. What my parents had guided us toward is now, slowly making sense.

I wasn't the most academic student at school. I remember early in high school I was told that I might not be able to take Biology, Chemistry or Physics but would be put into a subject named just 'science' – the word around school was that it was for the 'thickos'. It was around this time that I was at my Dad's shop one day when I saw a beautifully handwritten letter arrive addressed to my Dad. I opened it to read it was from a F.E McGlade. Floria was writing to let my Dad know that she had moved to St. Thomas' Hospice and that the nuns were looking after her. "Who is Floria, Dad?", I asked him. "That's Mac", he said, "she was a great customer and she lived just down that street, Afton Street for a long time". I wanted to meet her. Dad agreed and packed me off to St. Thomas' in Royston with tuna sandwiches, a fruit cake and a bottle of Lucozade in a taxi. Mac became the Granny I never met. I would go to visit her every weekend. We even went to watch 'Home Alone' at the cinema one night. We were planning a visit to the Trossachs to go fishing when she told me one day that the medicine wasn't working.

Mac died a week or so later. Mum got me a black blazer for the funeral from a charity shop and we both went to the Chapel. We were told to sit at the front. The bouquet of flowers we took were so enormous that I had difficulty holding them. Someone came up to my Mum and asked if I'd like to read a Bible passage and if it was ok. "Of course", my Mum literally pushed me forward. A few weeks later a letter arrived from the solicitor explaining that Mac had left the remainder of her estate in my name with a particular instruction that the money was to be used for my education. I was also sent all her old passports, C.Vs, and a beautiful bunch of photographs of Mac from her travels all over the world. It was all making sense to me. Mac was quite accomplished. She was private secretary to Sir. Julian Huxley who was the first Director of UNESCO. Mac had never married and held a committed faith.

I studied Arabic in France with some of the money Mac left me when I had basically given up on school at 17. The year in France was amazing. I returned to find myself enrolled for religious studies with education studies and the diploma in education at Stirling University. I didn't have the grades but got in through clearance. The few spots left in a course allowed admissions to lower the grades and let in students like me. I had tried to get into primary school teaching but kept getting rejected. It was the lecturer in Religious Education at the then Jordanhill College of Education, who happens to be a Methodist Minister, now retired but a someone I regard as a mentor as we speak regularly to gain his advice and guidance – it was his push to go to Stirling.

We are blessed to meet certain people in life who are the characteristic of this light and guidance. When I was studying for my Masters on the history of Jerusalem in Dundee and subsequently my PhD at Glasgow, I learnt so much from texts but it was the people I sat with having those informal conversations which brought so much light to my path. I was once invited to a dinner held for a visiting Apostolic Nuncio at Glasgow University. I was in the thick of my research looking at masculinities studies and Islamic studies and was having quite the conversation at my table. After dinner, when I got up to leave, I was stopped by a distinguished gentleman, who said "we should have coffee some time". And we did. I met regularly, and continue to do so, with Alexander Broadie, Emeritus Professor of Logic and Rhetoric at Glasgow University at the French Patisserie to discuss life, the universe and all things Scottish enlightenment. We continue to joke every Christmas about a Jew and a Muslim having Christmas lunch.

God bless immigrant parents navigating, nurturing God's light between cultures. God bless the teachers, Imams, Rabbis, Ministers, Priests and Nuns who guide toward God's light. The customers who become friends and Grannies. At this sacred time of Hannukah and Christmas, I hope we continue to encounter, unveil, darkness into God's light in all its forms, including human as we spread and embody love, peace and justice for all.