

Sheikh Fehmi talked me out of going to war

IRFAN YUSUF, EUREKA STREET, 3 OCTOBER 2016

There's an old Indian folk tale about a conversation between an imam and a parishioner businessman who happens to be a financial benefactor of the imam's religious school (madrassah).



'Imam Sahib, please explain to me why our imams preach such impractical nonsense?'

The imam's students, sporting smaller turbans and shorter beards, grumbled at the parishioner's rudeness. After calming them down, the imam responded to the query.

'It is true. We do talk impractical nonsense. But tell me this. You have two sons, one smart and the other a bit slow. Which

would you send to Oxford to study medicine, and which to my madrassah to study religion?'

In many 'ethnic' and 'migrant' Australian Muslim communities, religion isn't a high priority and religious people were regarded as the fish in a mainstream society that rejected them. My peers and I in the Urdu-speaking community were taught to read the Qur'an in Arabic, after which we plunged into calculus and Shakespeare. Out of respect, the scripture was placed on the top shelf. Out of indifference, it was rarely taken down.

If we weren't heading off overseas during the summer holidays, we packed our bags for the national Muslim youth camp. For many of us, it was the only time we got to meet Muslim kids outside our parents' ethnic circle.

My first camp was at the end of year 10 in the Christmas/New Year of 1985/86. It was the first time I discovered the existence of white-skinned Muslims from Turkey, Albania and (what was then) Yugoslavia. Even many of the Lebanese and Syrians had white skin, light brown or red hair and green eyes.

Among the European-looking Muslims was an older gentleman who led the prayers and spoke to us afterwards in crisp English. We knew of him as Sheikh Fehmi or Imam Fehmi. Strangely, his surname was el-Imam, and I wondered whether I should address him as Imam Imam (or even Imam squared!).

Unlike the Indian imams of folktale and Sydney's Indo-Pakistani reality, Fehmi spoke to us about very practical issues. He spoke in fluent English. He didn't need an interpreter. He spoke at our level. And unlike the imported imams at our mosques, who often were here on short-term visas and completely beholden to mosque management committees and/or foreign governments, Fehmi had lived in Melbourne since 1951.

Fehmi taught us at a time when we had no internet and when books on Islam were limited. Politicised religion was all the craze. The Iranians were busy exporting their version of Islamic revolution, sending free books to young Australians while sending young Iranians to

their deaths on the battlefield against the Western-backed Saddam Hussein. Saudi Arabia was also exporting free books and training imams to promote its own sectarian vision which, though far more hostile to the West, was welcomed in Western countries like Australia with open arms, an antidote to Iranian radicalism.

In Afghanistan, a coalition of local militias and foreign fighters collectively known as the Mujahideen were receiving support from Western leaders. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the head of one Afghan mujahideen faction, visited Australia twice and even delivered speeches at the Imam Ali mosque in Lakemba. Conservative politicians and columnists were praising the Mujahideen for bravely taking on those nasty Soviet Communists we were taught to hate.

It was easy to be carried away in all this political religion, to have one's faith shaped by overseas events. I almost did. Some of my contemporaries had headed to the battlefields of Afghanistan, and I wanted to join them. I saw myself bravely fighting and dying at the hands of the Russians. I put my case to Sheikh Fehmi, confident he would support me and perhaps arrange my passage.

But he had seen it all before. He explained to me that the first person to be judged on the Day of Judgment was a martyr who would be sent to hell because his intention was to die for glory and bravado. He told me that it was forbidden to go for armed jihad without parental consent and if one's parents were old and needed support. He told me that the most important jihad was to fight my inner evils and to speak the truth to tyrants.

He then got into the politics, explaining to me that the anti-Communist pro-Mujahideen propaganda I was being fed wasn't all true. He said the Mujahideen factions were fighting among themselves, that many were fighting for tribal and territorial reasons. And he predicted that if the Soviets were defeated, these same factions would fight among themselves.

Of course, I was in a minority. Most kids wanted to know if it was okay to have girlfriends and whether McDonald's cheeseburgers were halal. Fehmi patiently answered all our questions just as he had the questions of generations of Muslim kids since he had established his first religious school in 1957, hardly six years after he first arrived.

Sheikh Fehmi was a realist. He wanted us to be realistic, to build strong alliances and relationships with people across the religious and political spectrum. Most importantly, he wanted us to follow his example by treating Australia as our home. We had just as much right to be here as anyone else. He wanted young Muslims to regard Islam as an Australian faith, regardless as what anyone else thought.

Fehmi Naji El-Imam was the Grand Mufti of Australia from June 2007 to September 2011. He died peacefully on 24 September 2016.



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