

MY STORY

UNTOLD PERSONAL STORIES OF FAITH AND SPIRITUALITY



FAITH MATTERS
WORKING GLOBALLY, IMPACTING LOCALLY

My Story is a new campaign from the interfaith and counter-extremism NGO Faith Matters, which brings forward the untold stories of faith and spirituality within local, national, and international contexts. If the stories are separated by distance, they are bound by a unifying aim: to promote change and to promote tolerance and understanding in their communities, and in communities abroad.

Through My Story, Faith Matters hopes to empower young activists and bring their unique voices forward and support them in reaching a wider audience.

We believe in pluralism and valuing the contributions of others.

In this project, we would like to offer our audience a close-up experience of personal stories, encouraging listening and opportunities to reflect on the experiences of others. The main aim of My Story is to challenge those who seek to divide communities by offering a different story, an individual, personal, and honest story.

Participants explain, in their own words and images, how their faith is not a passive act, but an act that is both deeply personal and a way of being.

To get involved in My Story email elias@faith-matters.org



**LIFE ISN'T AS BLACK AND
WHITE AS WE CHRISTIANS
OFTEN CLAIM IT IS**

DORRIN GINGERICH

I started my Christian journey believing that God, at best, tolerated me and, at worst, hated me. Imagine the utter horror of being raised in a faith tradition in which every person you look up to declares in one singular voice, "people like you will never please God." As a gay man, that was my reality. To keep the love and respect of those closest to me, I lied and hid who I was. On top of that, I discovered I had been living with a rare disease called dystonia. It's a neurological movement disorder that primarily affects my back, neck, and tongue. I was so physically exhausted and in pain that I eventually lost my ability to work and support myself. During my twenties, life seemed overwhelming and cruel. Even so, I gradually learned to accept the challenges of my new life with disabilities, and I was finally determined to face my sexuality head-on. I took a year to study perspectives on homosexuality from many sides. In the end, what swayed me to become fully accepting of my sexuality came down to "good fruit" - Matthew 7:15-20. I saw significantly more "good fruit" health and wholeness in those who completely accepted themselves and had honest, authentic relationships.

Not that living within a place of personal acceptance in the face of other's rejection is easy. It isn't. A family member told me recently, "I've been raised to believe being gay is a sin, so I don't want to hear your story." That perspective comes from a place of privilege. It's easy to ignore someone's pain and the harm you've caused when you refuse to listen. By learning to listen to other oppressed groups and their histories, I've learned so much. At my best moments, I am grateful to be gay and disabled because my experiences have taught me empathy: I can now better identify with other oppressed groups.

This summer, I spoke on a panel with other gay people at a forum for a church seeking to understand the LGBT+ community and to learn how to better minister to them. I shared the story about the family member who wasn't willing to hear my story. I pleaded with the audience to show their LGBT+ child, friend, or colleague respect and love, to risk feeling uncomfortable for the other's sake, to admit that life isn't as black and white as we Christians often claim it is.

I'd like to think that my social media presence inspires other gay Christians. Some days the burden that I may be someone's only model of a gay Christian feels too heavy to bear. But then I remember the tremendous opportunities I must minister to those who have been hurt by the church and to those doing the hurting. My health has improved because I am getting plenty of rest and no longer deal with the stress of hiding in the closet. I recently attended the 2019 Q Christian Conference where I continued to learn and grow spiritually while making some new friends!

I have since discovered a God of mystery, who cries with me in my pain, who loves me more than I've ever known. Since learning to take culture into consideration and to look at the original meaning of its words, the Bible has become new to me. I love learning and wrestling with the text. I feel free to ask questions and no longer feel shame for doing so. I really can't imagine my life separate from God.

I have a dream: to write a book about my journey and God's redemption of my life!





**WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY
TO MAKE OUR VOICES BE
HEARD AGAINST INJUSTICE.**

PRAVINI BABOERAM-MAHES

My name is Pravini Baboeram-Mahes. I'm an artist and activist, and I create art to engage people in issues on social justice. My main focus is to combat institutional racism and empower people to stand up against a system of oppression. This drive to contribute to an inclusive society comes from my spiritual beliefs, which are based on the Hindu philosophy.

I carry the idea of "dharma", which I summarise as "the right thing to do", with me every single day. Doing the right thing doesn't necessarily mean you will achieve your goals. On the contrary, eradicating racism in society almost seems impossible, if not overwhelming. But not knowing if you will make an impact and achieve your goals isn't the deciding factor for me to act. It's knowing it's the right thing to do. So even if we don't achieve our goals, even if we get frustrated in the process, even if we face obstacles or worse, a backlash, it remains the right thing to do.

I didn't grow up in a religious household. When we celebrated Hindu festivals, it was more connected to the cultural aspect of a Hindustani identity, rather than a religious one. My mum was raised a Catholic and my dad considers himself to be an atheist. My parents allowed me to choose my own spiritual identity. For a long time, I didn't know what that identity was. I knew I had moral principles and I believed in a higher power. But I didn't know what to call this belief.

Until I fell in love, the man who conquered my heart did grow up in a Hindu household. It was in our relationship where I felt more encouraged to explore the spiritual side of my Hindustani heritage. And so, when we bought a house together and he suggested to do a puja, a ceremony to bless the house, I happily agreed. It was during that ceremony I felt that spiritual connection for the first time. It was a sense of calm, strength, and pride. From that moment on I started to do my research about the Hindu philosophy, I watched Mahabharat and Ramayan and read about the Hindu deities. I realised that everything I already believed and stood for was reflected in the stories and attributes of the gods.

The principles that I recognised in the philosophy of Hinduism were ideals reflected in my upbringing. My parents own experiences as activists in the anti-racism movement shaped my sense of social justice. And so, when I got word of European festival organisers transforming the Hindu spring festival Holi into a summer dance festival without any spiritual connection or acknowledgement, I felt compelled to take a stand against this. I co-founded the action committee 'Holi is not a House party'. This campaign aims to stop the cultural appropriation of Holi. Our goal is to achieve a name change that removes the link with Holi and respects the spiritual context of the Hindu festival. Our campaign is based on the empowerment of people to challenge cultural appropriation with debates, protest campaigns, and education through discussion toolkits and articles.

During this campaign, I visited mandirs, (Hindu temples), talked to pandits, (Hindu priests), and spoke with a lot of representatives of Hindu organisations in The Netherlands. Even though many of them weren't sure if big corporations would take a small action committee like us seriously, most of them supported our campaign because they felt it was the right thing to do. I was inspired by their spirit of resistance and activism and I realised it was because of that spiritual foundation they called Hinduism.

When connecting the dots of my childhood memories of Hindu celebrations with my family, my principles reflected in the stories of the gods and my activism that is inspired by the concept of dharma, I have come to identify as a proud Hindu woman of colour. And I know that what I call Hinduism, might be Islam or Judaism or something else to different people, but we all have this moral compass that helps us navigate through life. It allows us to move beyond man-made laws that dehumanise people and reminds us that we have a responsibility to make our voices heard against injustice. Because it's the right thing to do.





HANNAH MYERSON

I'm Hannah, a 25-year-old gal from Leeds living in London. I work in the charity sector, currently at a mental health research charity called MQ.

I'm also a modern Orthodox Jew. Leeds has a fairly big Jewish community, but it's not particularly religious and there wasn't a Jewish school when I was growing up. Despite being from one of the few observant families in the city, my life was pretty similar to my classmates' — except for some crucial differences.

One - we knew the secret of the best bread in the land: challah.

Two - every Friday night and Saturday were spent surrounded by family and friends, getting really good at eating and board games.

Three - during winter Fridays when the Sabbath (which begins at sundown) began in school hours, I got to leave early. Win.

My sisters and I were always encouraged to embrace these differences rather than resent them - even if that meant missing out on going to town with our friends to meet boys from the local school or being 'restricted' by keeping kosher or Shabbat.

I was also taught to be proud of my faith and share it with the people around me. I remember bringing matzo to school on Passover (which, on reflection, probably triggered a class-wide epidemic of constipation) and having 'Shabbat sleepovers' where friends came for Friday night dinner, then to synagogue the next morning.

Being interested and accepting of other people's religious beliefs is something that was instilled in me, as well as the Jewish value of regularly giving charity and being aware of what's happening beyond your own community — and trying to fix it. This played a big part in my choice to start a career in the third sector.

Today, even though we're technically more connected than we've ever been, I think it's easy to feel lonely, especially in big cities like London. Being part of a community - a network of people with shared values - is a real gift. Equally, disconnecting from the outside world by switching off technology one day a week during Shabbat is something I've grown to welcome — particularly now I work.

There have been times where I've questioned if there is a God - I don't think that's unusual. As Jews, we're encouraged to question the world, and God isn't off limits. But I really like the idea that there's something higher than us that expects us to follow a set of moral guidelines - it gives my life purpose.

I remember speaking to my dad a few years ago about struggling to connect spiritually in a synagogue. His response really stayed with me; the idea that, for hundreds of thousands of years, Jews all over the world have been going to synagogue and reciting the same prayers every week.

This rich history, and the fact we've continued to practise Judaism against the odds - throughout so much persecution - is significant. It's one of the things that inspires me and makes me determined to continue the chain. And, obviously, it's also the food. Because what's being Jewish without a good chicken soup?



**“THAT ALL OF THEM MAY
BE ONE, FATHER, JUST AS
YOU ARE IN ME AND I AM
IN YOU”
- JOHN 17:21**



MAROUN MAA'LOUF

My name is Maroun Maa'louf, I am 24-years-old, and I come from the Biblical city of Nazareth in the northern part of the Holy Land. In my profession, I am a lawyer, having gained my bachelor's degree in law in 2015 from the University of Haifa and got admitted into the Israeli Bar Association a year later. In 2018, I gained my master's degree in International Law and Justice from the University of Fordham in New York in 2018. As a Fulbright scholar and was an adviser at the Holy See Permanent Observer Mission to the United Nations in the summer of 2018.

I was born to a Greek-Melkite Catholic family in Nazareth, and I am the second child of five. For those who don't know this very specific denomination of Catholicism: with 1.6 million adherents, mostly in the Middle East, it's one of the oldest rites in the Eastern Catholic tradition.

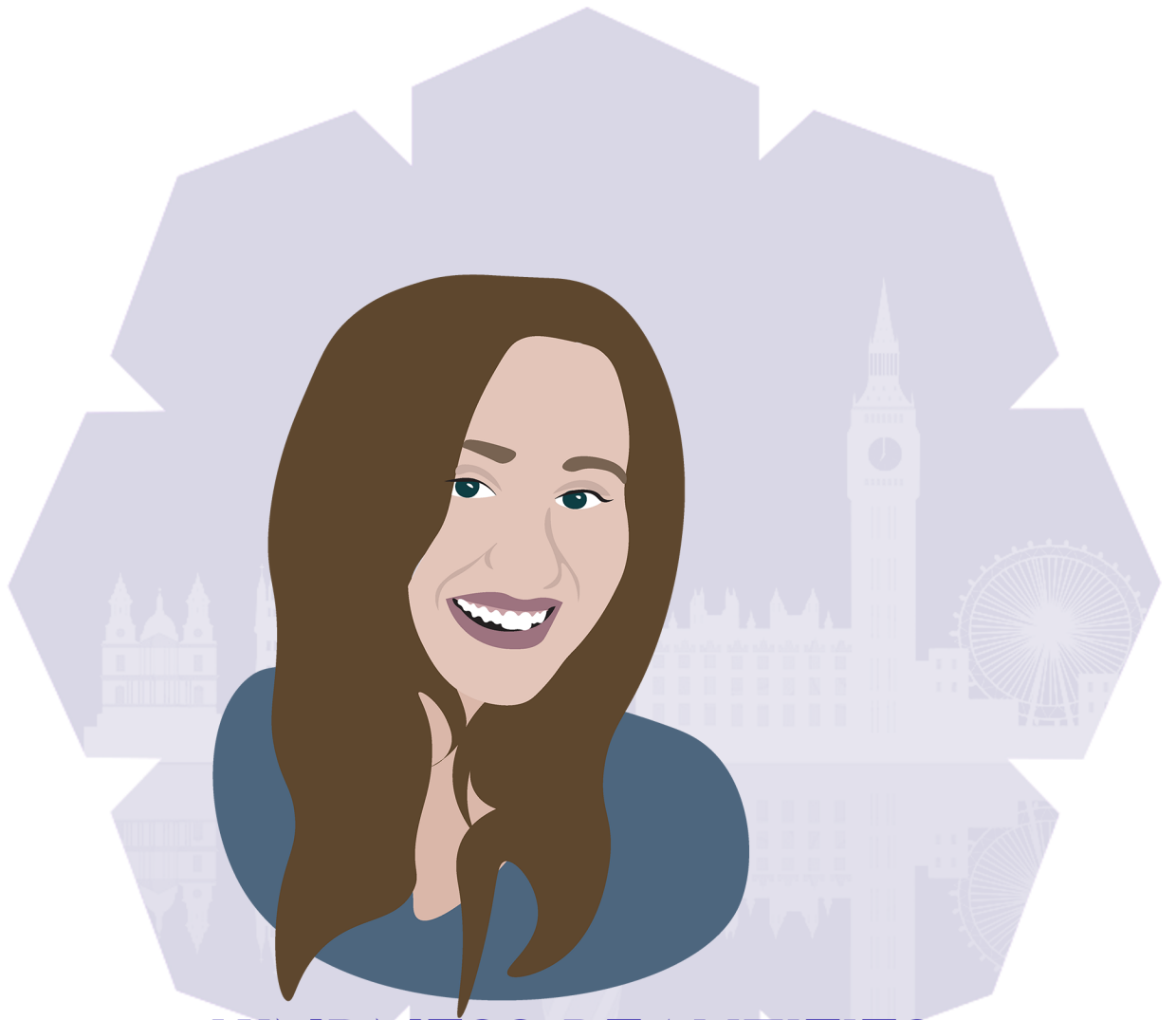
My faith has always had a great impact on my life. Growing up as an Arab in Israel in an Arab town, many basic services were not provided, due to many reasons. The Church has always helped to fill that void when nobody else was willing to. I was born in a Catholic hospital and attended a Catholic primary school, middle school and high school. My faith always made me more curious to learn more about the mosaic of different cultures, languages, and faiths around the world. When some people talk about "narrow-minded religious people", I am always amazed by how different my approach to faith and religion is, since it made me an open-minded, welcoming, and curious person. From a young age, I was always taught at home, at my local church, at my Catholic school and Sunday school to welcome the stranger and the other. Moreover, I was taught that every "other" and "stranger" is not really that different from me and that at the end of the day, we all belong to one family and one human race. I learned to love difference and diversity, since it made the human mosaic a more colourful and beautiful one, in my head.

I grew up in Israel amidst the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in a country where Christians make up 2% of the population, and the rest are mostly Muslims and Jews. I grew up in an inter-religious town. Thus, I can't really recall one event where my faith had an impact on my decision. Rather, it impacts every decision and every act I take – from childhood until today. My willingness to accept, embrace and encourage diversity comes from the teachings of Jesus in the Bible and the teachings of the Church. My respectful behaviour with all my surroundings regardless of their background is a direct result of my faith-based upbringing and the faith-based organisations I was enrolled in. My desire to pursue international law and be involved in the international community at the United Nations was also heavily affected by my faith; to achieve justice, peace and tolerance in the world.

My faith is a testimony that religion, faith and spirituality can and should lead us all to respect one another and live in harmony with one another, rather than pursue division, intolerance, and hatred.

I grew up as an Arab in Israel, which is a predominantly Jewish country. I was raised in the city of Nazareth, which most of its inhabitants nowadays are Muslims. I was born to a Christian Catholic family, belonging to a very small rite of the Catholic Church. This unique background helped to shape my own understanding of my religion and created the identity I have today.

"That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you." – John 17:21.



**KINDNESS BEAUTIFIES
ALL ACTIONS**

JAMILLA HEKMOUN

My name is Jamilla Hekmoun and I am a researcher based in London. I am an avid mental health advocate and I volunteer with several mental health charities. I have a BA in Arabic and Middle East Studies from the University of Exeter and an MA in Islam in Contemporary Britain from Cardiff University. I have written a chapter about mental health in the Muslim community in the forthcoming book about Muslim women, "It's Not About the Burqa", which is published in February 2019.

My faith impacts everything I do, and I try to express my religion through being kind and helping those around me. As Islam believes that kindness beautifies all actions, it's so important to me to try and exemplify this in my everyday life.

In 2015, I was "officially" diagnosed with anxiety and depression - though I suffered this before - and I questioned how it would impact my religion and if it meant I was a bad Muslim. Luckily, I had an imam who explained that mental illness was just as valid as physical illness and stressed the importance of getting better. Unfortunately, many other Muslims aren't so lucky, being told that their mental illness is because of their weak Imaan or lack of faith. This led me to want to get involved in Muslim mental health organisations to try and support Muslims going through these difficulties. I've been involved in Muslim mental health for over two years and I now run a blog and offer training for those who want to understand more about mental health in the Muslim community. Recently, I've given talks to a branch of the Samaritans and schools to increase knowledge of the subject.

"Trust Allah (SWT) but tie your camel."

It's a Hadith (the stories and traditions of Muhammad's life), which I thought about a lot when I got my diagnosis of depression and anxiety. To me, it meant that I should continue to make Dua and have faith, but also take the necessary steps to make myself better such as medication and therapies.



@JamillaTweets



@muslimmental



HOPE DIES LAST

BISHARA EBEID

I was born in a village called Ibillin, near Haifa (حيفا) to a Greek Orthodox father and Maronite Catholic mother in 1985. From a young age, I was active in my local church activities, Sunday schools and youth programs. I got my education in the public school of Ibillin, where my family was living, after I graduated I got a scholarship from the Greek government to study Orthodox Theology at the University of Aristotle of Thessaloniki. I finished my BA studies and got another scholarship from the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity to do an MA and doctorate studies at the Pontifical Oriental Institute of Rome, with a specialisation in Patristic Theology, Coptic, Syriac and Arabic Christian literature. I defended with success my PhD dissertation with the title "The Christological 'dialogue' in the Arabic language between the Melkite Sa' id Ibn Baṭṭīq, the Coptic Sāwī rūs Ibn al -Muqaffa' and the Nestorian Elias of Nisibin". Now I am finishing my second PhD dissertation at the University of Aristotle of Thessaloniki on the Arabic Christian apocryphal tradition and its relation to the ancient apocryphal literature; examining the case of the Martyrdom of Pontius Pilate. I also teach patristic theology, Church History and Christian-Muslim dialogue through the Arabic Christian sources at the Pontifical Oriental Institute of Rome, and Arabic language at the Pontifical Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, Rome. Recently I published my first monograph under the title: EBEID Bishara, *La Tunica di al-Masiḥ. La Cristologia delle grandi confessioni cristiane dell'Oriente nel X e XI secolo*, Valore Italiano - Edizioni Orientalia Christiana, Roma 2018, pp. 740. ISBN 978-88-97789-61-1

From my early childhood I learned to live with the others, the different, my best friends are Muslims, Druzs, Jews, and Christians of all confessions. My faith helped me to respect all people and to live with them in peace. To understand them and to accept them as they are. I was taught by my own not to reject anyone. I knew I was different in every company I was in, but this diversity was never a problem for me, it was always something else, it was the way through which I understood myself better. I learned to live the diversity through unity. Difficult but not impossible. The Christian faith of the incarnation of God was very helpful for me: If God did not become a man, he would never understand the nature of his creation as he understood it with His incarnation. If we do not get out of ourselves and meet the other, the different, we will never understand who we really are.

Being a Christian I believe in the Triune God, in God who, for our salvation, became one like us. Following the example of Christ who founded His Church and being a member of His Church, His body, I believe that I have to witness the Love of God, to be emptied, and to be ready even to bear the cross for the others, whoever he is. Believing that we are all brothers in humanity there is no place for discrimination, we are all equal. I believe that my role is to build bridges of love and hope. Only with our lives, with our testimony we can give life to place, where there is no love or peace, and ... Hope dies last!

"A person who claims to be religious condemns himself to hell if he does not see, in love, the light of God on the face of one who is different."



GOOD THOUGHTS
GOOD WORDS
GOOD DEEDS.

SANAYA MASTER

I was five-years-old when my father asked me: "What would you like to be when you grow up"? And while I struggled with adult career choices, he helped me out by saying, "Well, all I'd like is for you to be is a good human being. That's all that matters." This anecdote was recently narrated to me by an aunt, who thought it was so meaningful that even after 25 years, that she remembers the conversation that she eavesdropped on so many years ago. This pretty much sums up my faith in being born a Zoroastrian. An ancient religion that simply stands beautifully on the tenets of Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds.

To me, that represents both my religion and spirituality.

Our religion was founded by the Prophet Zarathustra in Persia approximately 3,500 years ago. For 1,000 years, Zoroastrianism was one of the most powerful religions in the world. It was the official religion of Persia from 600 BCE to 650 CE, but today is one of the world's smallest religions. Mahatma Gandhi had once described Parsees (Zoroastrians who took refuge in India during the 10th century) as small in numbers but significant in contribution. "In numbers, Parsis are beneath contempt, but in contribution, beyond compare. Parsi thy name is charity," he said.

A special moment in my young life was my initiation into the faith.

The Navjot (initiation ceremony) is a significant event in a Zoroastrian's life as the person being initiated is considered to have the mental capacity and maturity accepts the Zoroastrian faith and its tenants through free will, to make reasoned choices, and to be responsible thereafter, for their decisions. As part of my Navjot ceremony, I was given my sudrah and kusti, articles of faith that are meant to be worn as undergarments from the initiation ceremony onwards. The sudrah is a white muslin singlet with a small pocket at the 'v' of the neckline symbolic collection of a person's good deeds. Before making a moral and ethical judgment on the actions of others, a person is asked to consider their own repository of deeds and assess whether they have the moral standing with which to make that judgement. The kusti is a cord made from seventy-two threads of lamb's wool. It is wrapped three times around the waist, over the sudrah. The significance of wrapping the kusti three times around the waist is to wrap oneself in the pledge to live by Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds. Every morning when I wear my sudrah and kusti, I am reminded of where I come from, what I believe in and my moral obligation to be of service.

My faith has always been a huge part of my identity, and I believe it has made me a better person. Because of my faith, I am always striving to be the best version of myself.

Zoroastrianism is all about action for a positive change. This belief and the unstinted support of Zerbanoo Gifford led me to organise the first ever World Zoroastrian Youth Leaders Forum (WZYLFF) in April 2018 at the ASHA Centre in the Forest of Dean, UK. The purpose of the Forum was to harness the collective intelligence of our young Zoroastrian leaders from around the world to work towards a future that we are inspired by. A project that Zerbanoo is very passionate about too. It was during the process of scouting for young leaders for the Forum that I, for the first time, learnt about the outstanding calibre of the next generation of young Zoroastrians and the excellent work they do in the world. Although I had met some of these young leaders at different Zoroastrian World Congresses held in different parts of the world, I had little knowledge about the magnitude of community projects they were involved with.

It was fascinating to hear about the groundbreaking work young Zoroastrians are engaged in within the fields of science, medicine, journalism, law, drama, architecture, the military, psychology, art and business. The final twenty attendees were handpicked, and we couldn't be prouder of what we achieved. The meeting of brilliant minds, the celebration of being young and the overpowering desire to make a difference. A deep sense of inclusiveness and sharing was something that every participant was touched by. The reason I believe the Forum was a success was that although we discussed the challenges we face as a community, we never let them derail us from our purpose which was to join forces and work towards a better tomorrow. We did this by staying connected to the true essence of Zoroastrianism.

What we need now is more gathering like the WZYLFF to bring brilliant young minds together - so full of hope, ambition and determination - to work cohesively towards a bright, flourishing future. There is a call for a new narrative that is greater and more nuanced, one that can hold many perspectives and move us all towards a space of greater love, integration, interconnection and collaboration. One of my favourite quotes by Margaret Mead is: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."



SVEVA BASIRAH BALZINI

I am a young woman born and raised in Livorno, a fiercely mixed city but today overwhelmed by the wave of intolerance brought by the propaganda of our Italian government. I discovered volunteering years ago, then I discovered feminism, activism and then Islam and Islamic feminism. Today my life is made of these things and my activism is completely intersectional, even though I dedicate a lot of energy to LGBT issues and to victims of violence because I have an important experience, a violent relationship that changed my life. I founded the Sono l'unica mia (SLUM), an intersectional feminism project in 2015 and today I am very proud of our articles, our community and our events on the self-determination of peoples and bodies. I continue to work for several other volunteer and activist realities. Sveva is my first name, Basirah is the name of my rebirth.

Once a friend, a fight mate, after reading my tarot cards told me that I have "a green aura", a sign of faith that protects me, and I believe that she's right. I've been an atheist, an agnostic, and a sceptic. Knowing Islam, studying it and accepting it has brought down my scepticism and has favoured my openness. My life has changed a lot, today I am the object of Islamophobia from my fellow citizens, and of hatred by traditionalist Muslims and/or extremists. It has become all very difficult for me, even in stagnant activism movements full of power dynamics. Bringing certain messages to events and demonstrations, writing certain articles and exposing certain ideas is always exciting, but it subjects me to insults, virtual stoning and bullying. Yet, my faith never leaves me and warms my heart.

Islam is a more liberal of religion than people think. I can't always do my duty, or I can't always do it well, but I feel the value and the depth of religion in which I believe. This for me is an always active engine and it's fantastic for me to know that I must be afraid only of Allah and that Allah will always listen to my tears and my cries of joy. Praying and submitting to right precepts is, for me, a happy choice: when I want to judge, I know that judgment is not up to me and not judging I won't feel and create pain, when I feel very frustrated I remember that being limited is normal and a gift, when my depressive tendencies take over I remember that I'm loved. I can always count on my values and my spiritual life.

Being a revert (convert), and a feminist has helped me a lot in the fight against gender violence, and more. The Prophet (SWS) is an example of virtue and wisdom - I agree with those who say he was a feminist! - and the women of Islam and Islamic history are truly inspirational. Many Muslim women have trusted me, and I have had the opportunity to go into many cultures and work better. Even the Muslim people I taught Italian to felt understood by me, I collaborated with LGBT Muslims, progressive believers or atheists belonging to Muslim families who felt at ease with my way of living the faith. I really like studying Islam and I have good insights about Islamic feminism; thanks to them I have learned the value of contexts, of "the thousand points of view" and intentions - very useful elements for analysing, understanding and informing! My contribution as an activist and a religious person was very important for campaigns like #Allahlovesequality, and I think it has value also for my community. Patience and inner growth (the most important jihad) preached by Islam have "forced" and "pushed" me to improve my way of relating to others. These are necessary things if I want to relate myself to survivors and people in the struggle without overdetermining them or compare myself with different realities (like my tiring and extensive work for the #TruthForSana campaign). I also believe that my adaptations defined as progressive can feed a network of believers that speaks of burning issues obscured by many Islamic communities, from sexuality to polyamory. In this regard, I'm also working on my project "The veil and the eros".

My life is a continuous deconstruction and reconstruction. Sometimes my ideas and my life choices make me feel like a stranger. I love to adopt the positive aspects of the cultures I know and the culture that has grown me, but above all, I love to create culture. Alhamdulillah, I met many people who like the same things in feminist movements, in communities and in their intersections. If it's true that sometimes I feel stuck between many sources of hatred, it's also true that I often feel a "hybrid" - of love and support by beautiful people. And by Allah, I hope. We're all shades of a huge and beautiful rainbow.

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WAJAHAT ABBAS KAZMI

A Human Rights Activist at Amnesty International, Co-founder of Il Grande Colibri (NGO for LGBT rights). A Filmmaker, Blogger and Author of Allah Loves Equality.

My story started when I opened eyes in a traditional Pakistani household, where my father was always absent because of his job in Europe, and at the age of 15, I moved to Europe with my family. We were economic immigrants, I grew up with strict Shia Islamic values. My family was scattered all around Europe, and my parents used to compare me with my cousin's participation's in Muharram and other religious events. I knew my bond with Allah was beyond participation in different religious events. I connected with Allah in a more spiritual way rather than how I was told to be. I knew from the very start that I was gay, but always took it as a temporary phase and expected it to pass soon. My connection with Allah was getting stronger day by day, and so was my sexual orientation. I started asking religious clerics about my "certain" sexual interests, and I was told that the only place where I can end up with such thoughts is Hell. The fight between my faith, my sexuality and my circumstances kept getting worst. I came out to the world as an openly gay person. I was judged by religious clerics. I was told I have opted the way to Hell. firmly believed that "ALLAH LOVES EQUALITY". I started looking for other Queer Muslims like me struggling with their sexuality and religion. The more I explored the Muslim queer culture, the more I realised what my purpose was in this world. My thoughts and ideology of believing that Allah has created all of us in the same manner with a different vision, different destination, different gender and different sexual orientation. I realised later how this one statement changed the lives of many queer Muslims. I was glad to know that a lot found peace between their sexuality and religion, just when they had started taking religion in its true meaning.

Then I launched the campaign Allah Loves Equality to support LGBT Muslims like me, those who believe in Allah and they love Islam but at the same time they are confused if they are on the right path, or they can be LGBTQ and Muslim at the same time, Today, Allah Loves Equality has become a belief rather than a mere thought. The world has recognized me with this campaign and I wake up every morning with so many positive emails and messages from around the world, and all I have to answer to everyone approaching me is to stay positive, surround yourself with those who understand you and give you strength and believe that Allah is with you, as Allah is a belief that we have in our lives. At this stage, I can take all the credit of my accomplishments, but I won't as I know that the supreme power we call Allah has been there for me and with me throughout, and it is all because of his blessings.

My message to all LGBTQ people around the world is: just be what you are. Allah loves us, we are his creations. Your religious belief has nothing to do with your sexuality. You can be Muslim and at the same time, be LGBTQ, live your sexuality happily. We don't need any certificate by any other Muslim to get us approved as a Muslim. Allah is with us because Allah Loves Equality.

www.wajahatkazmi.it



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**KEEP LIVING YOUR PASSION
AND YOUR DREAMS**

NURA ARABI

Growing up, I have always loved meeting people from different backgrounds, getting to know them, and being able to learn so much from them. But moving from middle school to high school was never easy, especially when trying to make new friends. I remember in high school when I wanted to get to know other people, I had to sit and brainstorm how I can make friends from different backgrounds. My mother advised me to join a sports team. I was not fond of sports activities, however, but I was surrounded by a family that loves sports and grew up going with my mother and siblings to team practices like volleyball, soccer, and basketball.

So, I took her advice and went to my Physical Education teacher, who was coaching the cross-country team at that time and requested to join. I told him that I am interested in joining, but didn't want to be competitive, as I simply wanted to be part of the team. He told me that it's all about participation in the end and that I can join! I was so happy that day and couldn't wait to start and meet everyone on the team. I loved everything about our group: the practices, the coach and, eventually, even the competitions that I participated in. I got to make new friends and I loved the sport. But there was something different about me that made me stand out in any crowd. I am a Muslim girl who wears the hijab (Islamic headscarf). Wherever I go, people are concerned about my headscarf and "if I am okay in there" especially in sporting activities. I continued running, even in university. I was the only girl with a headscarf on the running track. Of course, I would get the same reaction from people: Are you okay in there? Is it too hot? Are you safe? How can you run in that? On occasions, sadly, I would hear racist comments.

Practising my faith as I carry on with sports is a surprise for my people. The participation of Muslim women in sports is low. Even though, Islam promotes good health and fitness and encourages a healthy lifestyle. Many Muslim girls are discouraged from participating and worry about reactions of others especially those of a racist nature, in addition to misunderstandings around the hijab.

As a Muslim woman, I chose to wear my hijab, and I am aware of the challenges that come with it, especially in the fitness world. Those challenges are not a problem. It is a problem when I am misunderstood and labelled with certain stereotypes that do not represent me nor my faith.

Throughout my experience, I learned something very important: stereotypes stem from fear of the unknown or what is being different. The world is full of different people and that makes it a better place to live in. Unfortunately, that scares some. Regardless of what others fear and what faith you follow, or ethnicity you represent, don't be scared to show it. Being different makes the world more interesting and a better place to live in.

No matter what others label you, you must keep living your passions and your dreams. In the end, it is all comes down to communication and education.



**REJOICE IN OUR FAITH AND THE
VIRTUE IT CREATES IN THE WORLD**

TASHI CHOEDUP

Negating many labels the conventional world imposed on me, identifying with many other labels that help me narrate my existence, it is always tricky to describe myself, but two things that always made me feel comfortable and safe are my faith and my queerness (beyond sexuality and gender), and so in few simple and yet complex labels to say what I am: I am a Queer Buddhist Activist! I am a practising Buddhist Monastic, non-practising homosexual, performing queer person!

From childhood, it was my faith that kept me grounded in this world, and gradually gave a sense of belongingness to self and to rest of the world. Born in Hindu family, I grew up saying I would become a monastic and enthusiastically studying other religions along with Hinduism. Even before I began narrating my sexuality and gender identity, the first queer thing I began experiencing and navigating was my faith. My practice and study of the faith itself was queer, in a way that I did not subscribe to any mainstream notions of faith but rather always made my own reading of it in my every day lived reality. All the queerness that I so unapologetically identify with and own up to was shaped and strengthened by my faith and its journey and my human rights activism and my hope on humanity itself for building a kind and compassionate world are because of this very faith.

One teaching for which I am ever grateful to my faith is that it taught me that my activism, advocacy, and human rights fight cannot be rooted in anger or hatred or vengeance on self or anyone! It is rooted in the unconditioned kindness, love, and compassion my spiritual teachers continue to help me nurture and in the righteousness of the work. There is no scope for othering here, there is no us and them, Human rights/Queer rights activism is not just for the people who are marginalised on lines gender, caste, race, class, sex, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and so on, but for everyone, because whether people realise it or not, an inclusive world with equality, justice, kindness, compassion, and love benefits everyone. It takes away everyone's suffering and makes space for everyone's happiness. Who doesn't seek happiness and who doesn't want to be free of suffering? No matter of what race, religion, sex, gender, caste, class, sexuality or for that matter species you belong to?

I have searched for the sense of home for a long time in life only to realise that if I am not at home with myself, where I am, regardless of location, or who I am with I can never be at home and it is my faith that continues to help me realise it in every moment of my life. I believe everyone's faith has a wonderful capacity to help everyone to be at home with oneself and always. No matter what other identities you have, no matter what the world says and no matter how modern the world gets, let us all joyfully take refuge in our faith, for our sake and for everyone else.

Rejoice in our faith and the virtue it creates in the world with every moment of our practice.

 @BuddhistandQueer



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