If the Oceans Were Ink Study Guide

If the Oceans Were Ink by Carla Power

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Power, Carla. If the Oceans Were Ink. Henry Holt and Company, 2015, Kindle AZW file.

Carla Power spent much of her childhood traveling. The daughter of educated parents who embraced different cultures and ideas, Power already had some basic information about the Islamic faith. As an adult, Power worked for the Centre for Islamic Studies at Oxford and there met Sheikh Mohammad Akram Nadwi, a renowned scholar who became more well-known after Power wrote articles about his study of women in Muslim history. Akram unearthed names and stories of thousands of women who held major roles in the Muslim faith, including teachers, judges, and leaders. Those women make it clear that the modern-day Muslim attitude of keeping women hidden at home is not based on Muslim teachings. The Prophet Muhammad had wives in positions of power, including one who's writing became one of the major Muslim texts.

After her time at Oxford, Power became a journalist. She learned more about Muslims as she wrote about issues related to the Islam faith, but became aware that she had never written about the Quran and how Muslims related their beliefs to that ancient text. She decided to learn about the Quran personally and dedicated herself to studying for a full year with Akram as her teacher. She quickly learned that there were few definitive interpretations of verses from the Quran. Often, various people and groups interpreted the verses to mean whatever they wanted it to mean. An extremist who felt that Muslims should not associate with non-Muslims could interpret a verse to support that view, while others could interpret the same verse in an entirely different way. Akram said the most important aspect of interpretations is to keep God at the center of the interpretations. Akram said that too many people focus on themselves, and on what they want to get from the verses, ignoring what God might be trying to say.

Power includes historical information about the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad, as well as information from her exploration of Akram's interpretations and those of other writers. Through all that study, she learned that there were more similarities between the Islamic faith and other schools of thought.

Some of the major arguments against the Muslims and Quran hinge on the habit of keeping women hidden from view, out of positions of authority, and at home. The oppression of women has become a major point of contention, but Akram said that those are cultural attitudes rather than Muslim-dictated rules. The Quran says that women sometimes have duties in the home that might prevent them from attending the mosque for prayer times. Cultural traditions have changed to the point that many people no longer feel that women even have the right to attend a mosque.

By the end of her year of study with Akram, Power discovered that there was a deep message of peace and tolerance within the Quran for anyone who chose to study the word to find it. She did not become a follower of the Muslim faith, but was grateful for the deeper understanding.

“Introduction: A Map for the Journey” and “Part One: The Origins,” Chapter 1, “The Quran in Twenty-Five Words”

Summary

In the “Introduction: A Map for the Journey,” the author, Carla Power, recalls an event from her childhood. At age 11, she was in Cairo with her parents when she bought a “tiny book containing a verse from the Quran.” (1) She was enamored by the small item and used it as a book for a doll. Years later, after the terrorist attacks on American soil in 2001, she found the little book. She realized that she had been childish about her treatment of the Quran. She had become interested in Islam, as her father had been, and had worked at an Oxford program on the subject for two years.

Power talks about the various translations of the Quran, and that some people have used it for their own purposes and to justify their actions. She then gives a brief history of the Quran as a series of revelations from God to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. As Power began to study the Quran, she learned that few people have actually read it. She then cites a verse from the Quran, that says that oceans of ink would not be enough to write all the words of the Lord.

Power studied the Quran under Sheikh Mohammad Akram Nadwi, a renowned scholar and a devout Muslim. He was well versed in Arabic and had developed a reputation as an expert on the Prophet Muhammad. He had also done extensive research on females in the Muslim faith and had written 40 volumes covering the lives and deeds of thousands of women.

Power and Akram worked together at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies where they mapped the spread of Islam throughout Asia. Both were in their 20s. Power felt they were very different but they struck up a friendship. Years later, Power was a journalist and Akram continued to work at Oxford. The two talked about the fact that many people feared or hated Muslims, and many Muslims felt the same way about non-Muslims.

Power had written about Islamic issues for 17 years, but had never written more than superficially about the Quran or about the Muslim understanding of their ancient text. While she focuses on the professional reasons for deciding to study and write about the Quran, she also felt she “could be missing one of the most powerful experiences on offer” because some had proven their deep belief in the Quran (10). That was why Power asked Akram to teach her about the Quran and to discover where Muslim beliefs coincided with – or contradicted – that of non-Muslims. He was, by nature, a deeply private person, but agreed.

Power says she chose Akram to teach her for several reasons. His outlook on life seemed to be in such a contrast to her own. He had studied in a madrasa, or traditional Muslim school in India, and routinely dispensed advice to those who wanted to follow Muhammad's teachings; he taught at a mosque and at Oxford; and he felt that he was a visitor on earth and his true home lie in the afterlife.

Power spent a lot of time in foreign countries as a child and she always sought to learn about the local culture. As an adult looking back, she realized she was always looking for the similarities in an effort to feel more at home there.

Power's “own sense of religion may be confined to the houses of worship, but Islam takes a broader view” (14). She expected Akram to be dismayed to discover that she had not read the Quran, but he responded that few people had actually read the entire work. He also believed that the basic tenants of the Quran have been obscured by tradition and laws created by people who were not strictly following the Prophet Muhammad. In addition, too many people are caught up in the smallest detail instead of focusing on the major principles of the Quran and many others just look for justifications for what they want to believe.

Power ends the Introduction by saying that she found herself sometimes disoriented, and that pushes all students – Muslims and non-Muslims – to reexamine their faith and beliefs. However, Akram was so in tune to God that he never felt that disorientation.

“Part One: The Origins” opens with Chapter One, “The Quran in Twenty-Five Words.” Power talks about a social meeting with a man who questioned Power's plan to study the Quran. She said the general rule was that it was acceptable to show prejudice against Muslims, even in polite social gatherings. He showed his disapproval but Power countered, saying that mainstream media only covered extreme Muslims, giving the world a distorted view of Islam.

Power says that tradition has replaced the guidelines of the Quran in many cases, such as the rule that women should not attend mosques. The Quran said that women could pray at home, if they were unable to attend payer time at the mosques, but many have accepted the tradition of barring women from the mosque. Over the years of his career, Akram had researched and written dozens of volumes about Muslim women who held leadership roles. They prayed alongside the men and held positions of authority, including as scholars and teachers. That research made Akram known for his position on women's rights, but within the framework of the Quran.

During her first session studying the Quran, Power read the first verses. In Arabic, the verse has 25 words and is known as the “Mother of the Quran” because it includes all the major themes. Power said “pious Muslims” recite the verse 17 times each day. Muslims use the verse in times of stress or trouble. A major point was that there is one God – a great turn from the numerous idols worshiped by most of the Prophet Muhammad's contemporaries. The idea goes even farther, insisting Muslims do not worship power, money, or other deities. In addition, the verse makes everyone equal in God's eyes.

They also studied a passage that talks about those who are favored by God, including prophets, those with pure hearts who follow God, martyrs, and “other righteous people” (32). The verse also talks about “those who are objects of anger,” which some believe refers to the Jews who rejected Jesus or to the Christians who incorrectly believe Jesus was a divine being rather than a prophet. That hit home for Power because her mother was Jewish. Akram holds to the idea that the verse refers to any Muslim who has gotten away from his faith. The moderate Muslims, including Akram, have respect for the other two faiths that follow one God – the Jews and the Christians.

As this lesson came to an end, Power had already found herself uncomfortable. She realized that she had a superficial view of other cultures, looking mainly for similarities, and that she had a relatively small view of the world. None of her friends were religious. She grew unsteady in her determination to study the Quran. The next day, she began to do more research on her own and found a book that examined a verse from the Quran that states all who believe in God and live righteously will go to Heaven, including Muslims and Christians. With that verse, Power felt she had “regained my faith in Islam as being a force for harmony between faiths” (35).

Analysis

The majority of the book is written in past tense, as would be typical for a non-fiction book. However, Power occasionally switches to present tense, especially for descriptions. In the Introduction, she talks about her first study session with Akram. She uses past tense to say he was dressed in conservative Western clothing, including khaki pants, and was eating scones with his tea. She then changes to present tense as she describes his physical appearance, saying “His beard is shot through with gray, but his face retains a younger man's smooth and open quality” (15). The change of tense brings a higher focus to Akram's physical appearance than to his attire, which may have been aimed at making the reader think more about his face than his clothing. Throughout the book, Power points out differences and similarities between Muslims and non-Muslims. In this case, the reader would have to realize that Akram has the same kind of features and concerns of many Western men. His hair was graying, perhaps prematurely, but he had an “open” personality, despite the heavy responsibilities he carried.

Power frequently depends on metaphors and descriptive passages for explanations. In the Introduction, she talks at length of Islam as the “desert faith,” and compares her effort to read the Quran to a journey through the desert (20). She describes a scene from the desert, including sand dunes that seem to change from far away to near in the blink of an eye. She talks about the “Quranic landscape,” which was not “dry” (20). She seems to be pointing out that she had expected “dry” reading when she began studying the Quran, but found it was not. However, like the desert, she found the Quran was devoid of “landmarks,” indicating that she was often uncertain of her exact location. The entire passage is flowing prose, but some readers may not fully appreciate the imagery.

Power admits that she did not have a religious background going into her study of the Quran. She talks about the fact that she was often caught off guard by specific verses. Some seemed shallow at the start, but she found complexities she did not expect. Others that had been publicly debated seemed perfectly clear to her. What she is describing is exactly what many Bible students encounter if they care enough to delve into their own religious texts. That is one of many similarities between Muslims and non-Muslims, which is one of the book's themes.

The book is written solely from Power's perspective, but she depends on Akram for direction throughout her year of studying the Quran. This first-person perspective is not a limited as it might be, because of her intimate knowledge of Akram. However, there is a statement at the end of the Introduction that may prompt readers to question her perspective. She says that Akram “was never truly disoriented” (22). She cannot know that for certain, and it may be that Akram was sometimes confused but either hid that or solved it through further study. It may also be that he was always on track because of his deep faith in God. It is left to the reader to decide.

The tradition of barring women from praying at the mosques is not supported by the Quran. During the Prophet Muhammad's time, women were free to pray at the mosque, but were allowed to pray at home if their duties as wife and mother meant they could not leave the house. Over the years, the fact that women were allowed to pray at home became a requirement that they had to pray at home. This contradiction between tradition and the Quran is one of the book's themes.

Vocabulary

madrasa, conspiratorially, jurisprudence, legitimize, ambiguity, rudimentary, innocuous, craggy, eccentric, aesthetic, exotic, withered, calligraphic

“Part One: The Origins,” Chapter 2, “An American in the East” and Chapter 3, “A Muslim in the West”

Summary

Chapter Two is titled “An American in the East.” Power's father suffered from depression and he was discontented with America. Those were the main reasons he chose to travel so much when Power was young. He would take teaching jobs or other jobs in other countries and the family would live there for a year, or he would simply take a year off work for them to live abroad. Travel revived her parents from their otherwise typical Midwestern existence. They were never drawn to religious services. Power's mother was Jewish but seldom observed more than a passing observance to rituals. Her father was raised as a Quaker but discovered that the Islamic culture counteracted his depression.

The family lived in Kabul when Americans knew little about Afghanistan. Later, she looked back on her time there and wondered how her family had not seen any of the political and social issues brewing. There was a law in place called the Status of Forces Treaty by which Americans were protected from prosecution. When Power's younger brother wandered in front of a truck, police arrested the driver. The boy was not hurt and her parents accepted responsibility for allowing him to wander into the street, but the law favored Americans, regardless of facts. Despite living in these countries, Power has no memories of meaningful interaction with the people. Then wars pushed many Islamic people out of the country. They moved to new homes in new countries. They carried their religion with them and became enmeshed in the society and politics of their new homes. Despite that intermingling, non-Muslims seldom understood more than superficial facts about Muslims. For both Muslims and non-Muslims, the popular attitudes were fear and distrust of anyone different. Power hoped to show that there were similarities between Muslims and Westerners.

Chapter three is titled “A Muslim in the West.” Power said most people want to know if her Quran teacher is a moderate or fundamentalist. She found contradictions that made labels impossible. His research and attitudes about Islamic women might label him progressive but he “accepts that Islam allows polygamy” (47). Other attitudes seemed alternately progressive and moderate. Ultimately, he said that he was just a Muslim who believed everyone should turn back to the Quran for guidance. He was sometimes berated for pointing out that some Islamic dictates came from tradition rather than the Quran. One example is that women of Prophet Muhammad's time were allowed to cut their hair. Over the years, many Muslims spoke against short hair because that seemed to be a fashion of the Western world. He had the same attitude about prayer caps, which he said was tradition instead of law. He was not welcome in some mosques for a time after that statement, so he held classes in his own home, beginning in the early

morning hours. Some religious leaders asked him to refrain from speaking on specific issues to their congregants, and Akram always obeyed.

Power talks about the origin of the Quran. The Prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca in AD 570. He was intelligent and caught the eye of a wealthy widow. One day, the Angel Gabriel demanded that Muhammad “read,” and he discovered that words “tumbled out of his mouth” (54). Gabriel then informed Muhammad that he was God's messenger. His message was not well received and Muhammad and his followers were persecuted. Many people cite the Prophet Muhammad's life and deeds as examples. Some people focus on the battles he fought, which Power said “fits neatly” with the popular image of Muslim terrorists (58).

The Prophet's followers recorded his everyday actions, which resulted in the hadith. This provides a basis for everyday Muslim life. Akram said it was a general road map. He personally took the stand that he should not try to force anyone into Muslim beliefs. Power said a major difference in Akram's attitude and those of mainstream society was that most people think they can do whatever they want as long as it does not hurt anyone else. Akram's opinion was that only God has the right to judge and that people do not have the freedom to live outside the Quran's teachings.

Power talks about the difference between the sharia, or “divine” law, and the fiqh, which is a man-made set of laws that is subject to change. The fiqh set specific requirements for living, but the Prophet Muhammad saw that there was room for interpretation. Akram gave an example of a man who was unable to follow the letter of the law, but Muhammad presented him with a gift and a basic exemption from that law in that instance. Akram said the main problem with the fiqh is that Muslims get so caught up in the law that they forget the principles of the Quran. The Prophet Muhammad taught moderation, but many people believe strict adherence to the law is the only course. Akram said that strictness led to extremist views, and that the Quran taught moderation.

Power discovered that Akram's focus on his faith was an anchor that many people, including Power, were missing. Akram's popularity had grown so that students – both men and women – traveled long distances to listen to his lectures. A major point of his lectures included the instruction that Muslims were to think for themselves, even while following the “one eternal message” (71). It was even acceptable for students to have opinions different from Akram's, as long as they had a basis for their stand. Power says it took a trip to Akram's childhood home in India to understand how his faith had provided him with an anchor even while that same faith sent him away from his home and family.

Analysis

These two chapters serve as bookends for the experiences of Power and those of Akram. Power grew up traveling the world with her parents. They often spent time in the Middle East. Her father loved the Islamic culture and it served as a counter for the clinical depression. The family spent years in these countries but they never really knew

what was going on. They felt that Islam was a dying religion that few practiced. They never made friends of the natives of these countries and had no meaningful interaction. Their experiences were so superficial that they were surprised by the expansion of Islam and the political and social changes that slammed into the world news just a few years after the family had lived in the Middle East. By contrast, many Islams were forced out of their homes, fleeing the brutality and wars that plagued the country in recent years. Those people have brought aspects of their culture with them. They built mosques for worship and became knowledgeable about the politics of their adopted homes. The contrast is a general one. Not everyone who spent time in the Middle East 20 or more years ago was so blinded to the truth of that country. And not every Muslim has embraced his new country, becoming educated about the social and political issues. Still, this contrast between how Power's family interacted in Afghanistan and how Akram has embraced Britain is a sharp contrast.

Power writes about the ijaza, which is something like a certificate that proves the holder has the education to teach a specific subject to others. The person who has the ijaza is called an isnad. The isnad can typically trace the lineage of his teachers back to the original teacher, just as a genealogist might trace family names. Akram could recite dozens of names in more than 500 ijazas he holds. That shows a special kind of dedication and respect. Most Western scholars would be hard pressed to list their teachers' names, let alone a historic account of the teachers who taught their teachers.

The fiqh is a “body of laws founded on human reasoning” (Glossary). These laws were created by man and they change with changing attitudes and interpretations. The sharia does not change, but is the divine revelations directly from the Quran. These can be compared to Western moral expectations, Biblical laws, and secular laws, with some dependent on interpretations while others are generally accepted as necessary for civilization.

The hadith is briefly introduced along with the Quran. The hadith is one of the accepted sources of information for Muslims. It is basically the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. Information included in the hadith covers many things the Prophet Muhammad did during his life, which Muslims use as a guide. For example, Akram always stepped into the kitchen of his home with his right foot first, because that's what the Prophet Muhammad did. The document provides guidelines for many aspects of Muslim life.

Some religious and secular educators want to provide students with all the information, eliminating the students' need to think and reason for himself. Akram was set against that mode of thinking. He told his students that they had to learn to think for themselves because he could not cover every possible situation they might encounter in life. That makes sense and it is an important attitude for every religion. The Quran is lengthy and complex. The average person does not know it fully, just as the average Christian does not know every aspect of the Bible. That Akram encouraged his students to think for themselves is a statement of his belief that living right comes from the heart.

Power includes stories and anecdotes to relay specific points, such as the case of a man who left his camel untethered. When the Prophet Muhammad asked why the man had not taken the precaution of tying his camel, the man answered that he trusted Allah to keep his camel from wandering off. Muhammad said that the man should tie up his camel, and then put his trust in Allah. Some could say the man was exhibiting blind faith in Allah. Akram said the lesson in that story was that people should not blindly follow, but had to think for themselves.

While Akram was considered liberal in his attitudes about women, he was actually just following the example of the Prophet Muhammad. During Muhammad's time, women taught and debated religious ideas and issues with men. Akram felt that women should have the opportunity to be educated and to follow their religion as they felt was right. Despite that, there were separations and decorum to be followed. For example, Power talked to Muzzammil, Akram's brother, during a break from Akram's lecture. The attendees were getting their food as Power and Muzzammil talked, but she was told that she had to get her food from the line for women. She had not realized that the lines were segregated by gender until she was refused the food in the men's line.

Vocabulary

obeisance, perplexed, subjugation, gender, pithy, tethered, orientalist, hadith, fiqh, sharia, ossified, secular, curriculum, mutilation, seclusion, machismo

“Part One: The Origins,” Chapter 4, “Road Trip to the Indian Madrasa” and Chapter 5, “A Migrant's Prayer Mat”

Summary

Chapter Four is titled “Road Trip to the Indian Madrasa.” Power flew to India where she caught a train for a seven-hour ride to the town of Lucknow. Akram was not the only Indian to leave his home for a lucrative career elsewhere. Like some others, he built two madrasas in his home village of Jamdahan. Akram was the first student from his village to attend the prestigious Nadwat al-Ulama, but 12 students from Akram's madrasa had attended in the six years of its existence.

Power arrived at the train station nearest Jamdahan where Akram's younger brother, Muzzammil, met her with a group of young men. Shahnawaz Alam was one of those. He ran Akram's madrasa. The school boasted 65 hafizes, which are students who have memorized the entire Quran. Power talked about the stereotypical madrasa where boys were trained not to think, but to become soldiers who hated Westerners. Power had visited one of those and heard the propaganda, but said there were many madrasas aimed at true education. At Akram's madrasa, students were taught a traditional curriculum, but were also taught English.

When the time came for Power to speak to the men of the village, she was escorted to a courtyard where a goat freely roamed and young men took pictures of her on their cell phones. She was not particularly uncomfortable thanks to the years she had spent in foreign places. Despite the fact that Akram had written extensively on the role of women in the early years of the Muslim religion, there were no adult women in the mosque for Power's speech. Akram bowed to the tradition of his village to have women remain at home, though his 10-year-old niece attended, taking a seat at the back.

Power talked about the mistrust between India and the United States. She said that she wanted many of the same things as Muslims – peace, educational opportunities for her children, and a “just society” (80). She said communication is the key to achieving that for Muslims and non-Muslims. After her speech, with Akram translating, men began to ask questions. They wanted to know if Jews controlled the American media and political attitudes about Muslims. Power was careful with her answers. Later, Akram said everyone was talking about Power's speech, and that it would be a topic of conversation for a long time. He said most dislike American policies, but did not “connect those policies to” Power (91).

After her speech, Power arrived at Akram's family home. Muzzammil introduced his three sisters. Akram's mother was polite but had a “looming” presence, obviously disapproving when Power removed her headscarf. It was only later that Power

discovered that Akram had remained absent from his family home because his presence would have confined his female relatives. She also discovered that most of his family knew only that he was intelligent and famous, but knew few details. From Akram's sister, Power learned about his early life. He had been an apt student and soon outgrew the local madrasa. He began attending a larger school a couple of miles away. Encouraged by Akram, other boys attended but most dropped out.

Akram's family observed purdah, or separation by gender. In the village, the purdah was very strict. Akram's home in Britain was less strict but the women still kept a semblance of separation. Akram's daughters had much more freedom than women of the village and Akram generally let them make their own decisions. He said that many traditions, such as wearing the miqab, was tradition, often intended to create a sense of belonging. However, Akram said that it was not possible to begin changing those traditions on the village level. He hoped that new madrasas for women, providing higher education, would be the catalyst for change.

Akram and Power next traveled to Nadwat al-Ulama. Students were strictly controlled but most managed infractions to the rules, such as seeing movies. While in town, Akram and Power stopped to view a tract of land Akram had purchased when he imagined raising a family in India.

Chapter Five is titled “A Migrant's Prayer Mat.” Power recounts Akram's move to Britain. His teacher had chosen Akram for an Oxford fellowship. Akram never considered his own desires, but would do anything his teacher asked as long as it did not interfere with his religion. After he had been in Britain for a few years, his wife and two daughters got visas and joined him. Akram and his wife had four more daughters, born in Britain. He continued to work at the Centre for Islamic Studies, performing each task without complaint. He was never impressed by Oxford or visiting dignitaries, and felt his “real work” was outside the university (101).

During the early years after they met, Power was amazed that Akram was so steady. She could not imagine that he was homesick but did not go home, simply because his teacher had given him an instruction. She soon realized that the main difference was that she had grown up in a culture that emphasized personal satisfaction and Akram was focused solely on serving God. He demonstrated that by drawing a circle, saying that represented the place a person inhabited on earth. It was not important. What was important was the way a person acted in that place, and that everyone should thank Allah for everything, regardless of the circumstances. Power soon recognized the comfort that attitude offered. Akram pointed out that Muslims have often been dissatisfied with the place they occupy and put so much focus on the place that they forget the bigger picture. Many Muslims wanted to create the perfect Islamic state, but Muslims were still fleeing the Middle East to live in the United Kingdom. He goes on to point out that no government or law can prevent a person from being pious in his own home. By law, French Muslims were not allowed to wear the hajib but Akram said that a hajib is not necessary for a pious heart.

There were other instances of obeying secular laws while remaining faithful to the Muslim ways. A person who drove a car in Britain was required to have car insurance. Insurance was taboo for a Muslim, but Akram's solution was that buying insurance was not important as long as he maintained taqwa, or God consciousness. Akram had similar opinions of hajibs and beards, saying that people had begun those traditions as a Muslim identity, but tradition had become more important to many than a pious heart.

Power took all this information and realized that Akram was at home with his prayers, made five times each day, regardless of where he was.

Analysis

Power endured many strange situations during her year of studying with Akram, which is a statement of her determination to conduct her research. She was usually the only non-Muslim in the room when the groups stopped to say their ritual prayers. She stood by, watching. The trip to Akram's home was another trip into then unfamiliar and she was faced with situations that were unusual for her. This is an important aspect of her character. Most readers will be able to identify with her embarrassment when she finds herself in the men's line during a break for a meal or when her daughter makes a statement that Power believes puts them in a poor light. However, she continues with her research and learns a great deal about her subject, Akram and his family, and herself along the way.

Power talked about a Muslim teacher named Hamza Yusuf. He was American-born and taught at a madrasa in New Mexico. He taught moderation and tolerance. He was invited to the White House after the attacks on the World Trade Center and he arrived with a copy of the Quran, filled with sticky notes. Power does not elaborate further, except to say that Yusuf had been on a mission to discount the idea that all Muslims were taught hate and violence. It seems obvious that his notes were his effort to show American leaders that the Quran was not responsible for the actions of radical Muslims. The comparison between cultures, the tolerance of the Muslim people, and the stereotypes are all themes repeated throughout this book.

Many people read and recite the Quran in languages other than English. At one point, one of Akram's sisters told Power that a person who read the Quran was rewarded, even if the reader did not understand what he was reading. Power immediately dismissed that, but then reconsidered. She had heard a man reciting from the Quran earlier in her visit, and was calmed by the recitation, even though she did not understand the language. She also recounted a situation in which she had taken her daughter along on an assignment to a school where children were studying the Quran. Power's child was a toddler and was on the verge of a meltdown but immediately calmed when she listened to the recitations. Power told that story during her speech, but later realized that it meant nothing to the devout Muslim men she was addressing. She said those men accepted the basic principle that the Quran was soothing, and could not fathom a case in which that was not true.

Akram's house observed purdah, or separation of the genders. With the exception of Muzzammil and his father, there were only women and children in the home where Power stayed while visiting Jamdahan. Akram remained away and it was only after the visit that Power talked to him about that. Akram said that his female family members would have been constrained by his presence. They would not have been free to laugh and be themselves in Akram's presence. In the village, no one would think twice about that separation but Akram had lived for many years in Western culture and knew how close some families could be. Power said she felt that Akram regretted the tradition that separated him from his female family members on such a basic level, but the reader will soon learn that tradition continued – to a lesser degree – into the Akram home. One of Akram's daughter said she seldom addressed her father directly, but depended on her mother to talk to him, even on trivial matters. This seems like a contradiction but it may also be partly because both Akram and his wife were raised with the traditional values of their village, and have passed those along to her daughters.

Vocabulary

redolent, syncretic, uncanny, academic, hierarchies, obedience, conviviality, continuum, shrine, sheik, curriculum, dilapidation

“Part Two: The Home,” Chapter 6, “Pioneer Life in Oxford” and Chapter 7, “Nine Thousand Hidden Women”

Summary

Part Two is titled “The Home.” Chapter Six is titled “Pioneer Life in Oxford.” Akram believes that a good home is fundamental for a good Muslim, but many argue about the roles of women. Power and her two daughters were invited to visit Akram's wife. She took gifts, including Laura Ingalls Wilder's book, Little House on the Prairie, because she felt that Akram's family were pioneers in their own way. Both families had built lives on their love of God as well as hard work and wholesome family activities. At the time of their visit, Akram's wife Farhana was in her 40s. She spoke little English and her daughter, Fatima, interpreted the conversation as Power asked her questions. Farhana was reluctant to talk, partly because she was ill that day and partly because she was naturally hesitant to talk about herself. In later visits, she was more animated and showed her sense of humor.

Akram and Farhana's second daughter, Sumaiya, gave Power a deeper look into Farhana, who had only a rudimentary education but who took her role in the family's life very seriously. Sumaiya was a capable and educated adult. Her father had initially sent his daughters to a madrasa but decided they could have a better education if he taught them himself. They studied Muslim courses with Akram and attended a traditional school. They were never involved in extracurricular activities because Akram saw school as a place to learn, not a social outlet. Sumaiya felt, as her father did, that people needed the freedom to make choices but also needed limits. She touted her early teachings, that her life was not her own and that everything belongs to Allah. Through conversations with both Sumaiya and Akram, Power began to look at the world with the idea that nothing can really exist without the entire universe. For example, a person cannot make a cup of tea without the sun and rain to grow the tea leaves. Everything is meant as a guide for people and people are meant to appreciate everything.

Chapter Seven is titled “Nine Thousand Hidden Women.” In 1998, Power wrote about the lives of women living under the Taliban rule. One of the rules was that women over age eight could not attend school. The attitude was that women did not need an education, and that schools were nothing more than a way for them to become secularized. When Akram first began doing research about women in Muslim history, he had expected to find enough names for a small publication. It turned out there were thousands. Ten years later, Akram's examination of documents, letters, and books filled 40 volumes containing almost 9,000 women scholars, beginning at the time of the Prophet Muhammad and ending in the 20th Century. Publication would be prohibitively

expensive and, as of the time Power wrote her book, the information existed only in digital form on Akram's computer.

While Power expected that the women had mostly been overlooked, the issue was more complex. While a hijab generally referred to a head covering, it was actually an entire attitude of modestly. Muslim women were to be modest. Publishing the names of women was not a modest act. That attitude persists to modern time. Akram also said that teachers use authoritative voices, and some men say that a woman is forbidden from using a loud voice in public. These and other traditions combine to form the modern traditions of excluding women from mosques, keeping them from education, and other forms of oppression.

The fact that Akram found so many female scholars is important because Muslims base their daily practices on historical fact. The fact that women were once educated, teachers, and authorities provides a valid argument against many current traditions.

Akram bemoaned the fact that change happens slowly. He often had women in the audience when he was lecturing, especially when he was to talk about women in the Muslim history, but there were times when men dominated the audience. He cited Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard by Thomas Gray. Gray had said that many of those buried in that small cemetery might have become famous, given the education and opportunity to hone their skills. Akram said that female Muslims deprived of education were in the same situation.

Analysis

Muslims who live and work in areas that have small Muslim communities probably find themselves the subject of curiosity, fear, or hate, at least sometimes. Consider the life Farhana led prior to joining Akram in Britain. She lived in a village that accepted purdah as a way of life. She had little interaction with the outside world and probably had very limited information about what her life would be like in Britain. She might have fallen into despair borne of isolation and homesickness, but she stepped into her role as Akram's wife and lived up to his expectations. Her actions and attitude are probably because of her own faith. Akram continually insisted that faith was equal between men and women, meaning that he believed his wife and daughters were as close to Allah as he.

Akram ruled his household, but not with power. He talked about allowing his daughters to make their own choices after giving them the tools to do so. Another important aspect of his family life was seen in marriage rites. He and Fahrana entered into an arranged marriage, as was accepted in their home village. They also chose at least one of their daughters' husbands, but then allowed her to meet him and decide for herself. While this attitude may seem archaic to modern Western readers, the women Power talked to seemed healthy and happy in their roles.

Power made the point that there were thousands of Muslim women in positions of authority throughout the history of the Muslim religion. There were women who were

teachers and judges, who handed down rulings to men and who taught men. Women saw the benefit of debating about religion, just as men had done, and there were some well-educated women who engaged in debate. Power claimed that was a direct contrast to other religions. Most other established religions, she said, were dominated by men with women taking little or no authoritative roles. Then Akram went on to talk about the reason so many Muslim women had held virtually undocumented roles, including the tradition for women not to boast about their roles. The same may be true of other religions. There are important women included in Bible stories, and there may have been others who were simply not documented, just as was the case in Muslim history.

Vocabulary

Imperial, emotive, newfangled, intrinsically, flourish, infinite, secularist, gratitude, oppressive, inspiring, opt, edicts, burqa, prevailing

“Part Two: The Home,” Chapter 8, “The Little Rosy One,” Chapter 9, “Veiling and Unveiling,” and Chapter 10, “Reading 'The Women'”

Summary

Chapter Eight is titled “The Little Rosy One.” Aisha was the Prophet Muhammad's 11th wife. He received a vision instructing him to marry her. He was in his 50s and she was six or seven when they were betrothed. They did not live together until she was nine. Power says her first instinct was to turn away from the story in disgust.

Muhammad claimed that his love for Aisha was steady and enduring. Aisha became an authority on Islam, wrote texts that are still considered an integral part of the religion, and challenges everything about the role of women as submissive, quiet, wives and mothers. After Muhammad's death, she often debated what his words and actions meant. When Islam's third leader was murdered and his replacement refused to bring the murderers to justice, Aisha led the charge herself. She was defeated, which some say is an indication that women should not be leaders. Akram disagreed, pointing to her next act. After the battle, she taught women from both sides about Islam. Akram said Aisha demonstrated the ability to accept her loss and move to the next step.

Power was in the audience when Akram gave a public lecture about Aisha. When he opened the floor for questions, several people questioned her age. Power said she wanted him to talk about different attitudes during the time of Aisha's marriage, and that girls matured quickly because their lifespans were short. He did not. He said that she was never forced to marry or remain married, and that she was given the opportunity to leave, but remained. By her own accounts, she was happy.

Later, Power questioned Akram further. She wanted him to say that child marriages in modern times was child abuse. He refused. He said that unwed teens were having babies and then left to raise them on their own, and that surely having a married couple to deal with a family was preferable. He also pointed out that young people think about sex, and in some cultures, marriage is all there is to think about.

One woman at Akram's lecture on Aisha asked how to explain the child bride to non-Muslims. Akram said that she could never explain it in an acceptable way, and should not try. He followed that message with his students, saying they could not fall into the trap of trying to make Islam palatable for Westerners.

Then, over the course of several sessions with students, Akram heard about cases of little girls who were raped and gave birth at very early ages. Two of his female students

argued that a girl was allowed to object to a marriage, but that meant that a child had to stand up to her parents – an action that most Muslim children would not dare take. While the purpose of child marriages was to arrange protection for the girl, some parents did not have the child's best interest at heart, and literally sold her for money. Akram listened and conducted his own research, then announced that he had changed his position. Based on a fatwa issued against child marriages, Akram became opposed as well.

Chapter Nine is titled “Veiling and Unveiling.” Power examines the reasons and beliefs about the various kinds of veils worn by Muslim women. Akram said the purpose is to promote piety. Some use it as a tool to force women to obey rules. Others use it to set themselves apart as Muslims. Some fear it because of what it represents. Akram said that modest clothing, including veils if the women chose to wear them, meant that men and women could meet as human beings instead of men and women. That was appropriate in public, according to Akram, though they could and should be husband and wife within the privacy of their homes.

Power was surprised to find that some subjects remained off limits, such as Farhana's childhood. She was equally surprised to find that sex was more openly discussed. A verse in the Quran urges men to think of their wives as their fields, and to visit them as often as they wanted. Power was upset about the analogy until feminist Lily Munir explained the subtle meaning. A field has to be prepared for the seeds, just as men should prepare their wives for sex. This prompts a major difference between Muslims and Christians. In Christianity, sex is equated with the fall of man and sin. Muslims see sex as an “anticipation of paradise” (LOCATION 2706). A man's inability to perform can be grounds for divorce. Akram also pointed out that sex was aimed at procreation, and should be only between a man and woman within the confines of marriage. He denounced lust as an emotion that took the focus away from God and pointed out that was the reason for hanging curtains in a classroom to divide the men from the women.

On the subject of homosexuality, Akram was adamantly opposed. He said that sex was only for the continuation of family, and that a person who had homosexual desires did not have license to act on them. Power said that she was on the opposite side of that issue, but noted that it was a contentious question around the world.

Chapter 10 is titled, “Reading 'The Women.” Eventually, Power and Akram discussed the verse called “The Women.” Different translations offer different meanings. Some men use that verse to justify the oppression of women and mistreatment of wives. Akram said they are reading it incorrectly. He then led Power on an examination of the entire chapter, which began with the assertion that men and women were created at the same time, and equally. Back to the controversial verse, Akram said that there was a clear division of responsibility and that the men were to provide financially for the women.

Akram pointed out that the women of the family have specific duties – including bearing children and teaching the children – that men do not have. That is why the women have been given some options. Women are not required to go to the mosque for Friday

prayers so they can tend their other duties as wives and mothers. Men, without those responsibilities, are not given the option. However, tradition has changed the attitude so that some women are not allowed to go to the mosque.

Power argued her point repeatedly, that allowing men to have “guardianship” over women puts them in a position of power, and that too many abuse that power. Akram continued to focus on the basic point of the verses. Men and women were given different responsibilities and any who abused the power were out of line with the Quran.

Analysis

Power wanted to understand how and why some Muslim beliefs were acceptable to a man like Akram, who publicly viewed women as equal. Power argued against polygamy. Akram countered, saying that some men cheat on their wives. They might fool another young woman into sex, then leave them. The option for a second marriage means the man has to publicly acknowledge – and provide for – the second woman. Islam limits a man to no more than four wives though tradition had allowed Arabs to have as many wives as they wanted. The idea of child brides and polygamy are reprehensible to some people, but Power seemed to really want to understand. The problem is that these practices are taught to Muslims and in some other cultures, making them an inherent part of life. They are accepted because people never question them. People raised with those values cannot see anything wrong with them. That is why Akram urged students not to fall into the trap of trying to explain Muslim beliefs to non-Muslims. It is a statement of Power's determination to learn as much as she can that she questions Akram, looks into the issues, and is willing to try to see things from the Muslim perspective.

Power's mother was a scholar and teacher of women's studies, which gave Power a background in feminism. She had read all the basic texts about equality between the sexes, which probably affected her overall outlook on life. However, she told an interesting story about her mother, who had once said she sometimes wanted to close the text books and tell her students about the joys of being a wife and mother. That attitude seemed to sum up her mother's personal feelings about feminism and equal rights. She had traveled with her husband, whenever he wanted. She apparently deferred to him, especially on the subject of finances. While that can be seen as power over another person, the fact is that one person having control of the finances can work if that person does not abuse the power and takes care of the family.

Power had a tendency to take a stand against injustice and to want to legislate justice. She wanted to find outright instructions against men abusing women and wanted Akram to feel the same. Akram, however, continually returned to the need for people to act with pious hearts. The Quran clearly states that men have specific responsibilities and power, including the power to beat his family, but only under strict guidance and after a series of other steps had been taken. He was never to act in anger. The problem with that is that many people act out of anger or a desire to control, which is not in keeping with the Quran. Power had trouble understanding and accepting Akram's attitude

because she was focused on the current world. Akram, as always focused on the afterlife.

Vocabulary

astonishing, alliances, abomination, composedly, apostates, patriarchal, condone, autonomy, zealot, ossify, disingenuous, disparate, misogyny

“Part Three: The World,” Chapter 11, “A Pilgrim's Progress,” Chapter 12, “Jesus, Mary, and the Quran,” and Chapter 13, “Beyond Politics”

Summary

Part Three is titled “The World.” The first chapter of this section, Chapter 11, is titled “A Pilgrim's Progress.” Akram was leading a group of travelers, including a young convert named Shabana, on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Women were allowed to go on the trip only if they were accompanied by a male guardian. Power had hoped to go, but circumstances prohibited her. She visited with the travelers for a short time before they left, and admitted that she hated being left behind.

Akram's daughter, Sumaiya, had written a pamphlet with information and suggestions for the travelers. She was traveling with her young son, Asim, and another mother with a youngster was also going along. The women prepared for the journey, but ultimately had faith that Allah would take care of their children.

People in the traveling party, including Akram's daughters, told Power about their trip. There were problems, including a travel agent who pocketed some of their money, leaving them without hotel rooms. The heat was unbearable. Guards and others sometimes yelled at them, though most of the issues were cultural. Some of the travelers went shopping, despite the fact that they were urged to resist that temptation to observe the true purpose of their trip.

Later, Power joined Akram and other Muslims at Cambridge for itikaf, which is a “spiritual retreat” (210). Akram's daughter, Maryam, was there to guide Power. Akram warned everyone not to talk of worldly matters. The days and nights were rigorous, with hours set aside for prayer and fasting. Power was surprised to see young girls with cell phones and boys with video games. The women talked at length about all kinds of things, but everyone was kind because they were promised increased rewards during itikaf. Power said that some people criticized the event, saying there was too much talking and too many cookies, but she felt that the ability to engage in spiritual experiences was a major strength of the Muslim people.

Chapter 12 is titled “Jesus, May, and the Quran.” Akram was the speaker at a Cambridge mosque where he was preaching about the need to return to the traditional stories of Jesus, Mary, and John the Baptist. The congregation was interdenominational. The mosque's purpose was to encourage dialogue between people of different faiths. Akram said God sent multiple messengers with the same message, “to believe in God” (215). He said Muslims respect Christians and Jews as being believers, albeit of a

different community of believers. In the Muslim faith, the five major prophets are Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. The Quran states that all are equal, and that true worship belongs only to God. Historically, Abraham had two sons. Ishmael and Isaac. Isaac was the ancestor of all Israelites and Ishmael was the father of Muhammad's tribe, the Muslims. Muhammad was “commanded to follow the way of” Abraham (217).

Akram talked about Maryam, know in the Christian Bible as Mary, mother of Jesus. He said she was exceptional, even as a youngster. When she was chosen to be the mother of the prophet Jesus, she endured the greatest humiliation imaginable. Akram said that people routinely give up their possessions or lives for God, but this young girl gave up her honor. Jesus had no father, not because God was his father, but because God wanted to shake the people from their devotion to identity, turning them back to faith in God. That is the same for modern-day Muslims, who have focused so much on belonging to a group that they have forgotten God.

At this juncture, the Quran and Bible have vastly different meanings. Somewhere along the way, Jesus became identified as the son of God, but Akram said that no one was equal to God. Jesus' purpose was to remind people of God's power. Akram said that, despite Christian claims, Jesus ascended into Heaven without dying, though the Quran states that it seemed to onlookers that Jesus was crucified.

Power questioned Akram about specifics, including whether Christians who submitted to God were “true believers” in the eyes of Muslims. (223) Akram said that Christians and Jews had to also accept the Prophet Muhammad's message. She continues to ask the question in different ways, hoping that Akram would have an answer that more closely resembled the views of some progressive Muslims who believed that no one could dictate the correct method of worship. Akram was adamant that Christians had to accept the Prophet Muhammad, as a “new Messenger” (225). Otherwise, Christians would not gain admittance to paradise. Power continued to study on her own and found a verse that says, “for our God and your God is one” (226).

Power was distraught that the Quran could be so easily interpreted to mean whatever a person wanted it to mean. She said that was true not only of the Quran, but of the Torah and the Bible. The key, Power learned from Akram, was to put God at the center of the reading, rather than one's own desires.

Chapter 13 is titled “Beyond Politics.” Power recounts a Quran verse that urges Muslims to remain separate. She said many use that verse to promote the separatist attitude but Akram said that verse was applicable during a time when Muslims were being persecuted, and that it is only applicable in that situation. In addition, Akram talked at length about the need for Muslims to be involved in their communities, wherever they happen to live. He said that some get caught in their desire to live somewhere else, but that they should be active and helpful instead of segregating themselves and wishing for something different. He also talked about the need to spread Islam through kindness and peace, but without watering down the message. Another of Akram's points was that

Muslim people, like everyone, had a tendency to see things only from their own perspective.

Power also talked about the difference between Muslims and muslims, and between Islam and islam. Islam with a capital “I” are the people who identify themselves with the Islam faith while islam, with a lowercase “i” are the people who identify with God first, then with the specific religion. She ends the chapter by saying that Akram felt there was nothing wrong with Muslims being involved in politics, such as the dispute over the Palestinian border, as long as it did not interfere with the person's focus on God. However, Akram never became involved, instead remembering that his life on earth was a short-term position.

Analysis

Power makes an interesting metaphor as she watched Akram's party leave for their pilgrimage. She says that the airport was just a place where people stopped for a short while on the way to their true destination. Akram's life was like that airport. His belief in the afterlife meant he treated his human form and his time on earth as a layover on the way to his true destination. That metaphor is one of many seen in the book, and it lends a level of imagery that makes the book more interesting.

Power described what the travelers would see on their pilgrimage, including the place where Satan tried to make “Ibrahim” to “ignore God's command that he sacrifice his son.” Those who know the stories from the Christian Bible will recognize the story of Abraham who was commanded by God to sacrifice his son.

Power could not attend the pilgrimage led by Akram for multiple reasons. Mainly, the hotel where the group was staying was inside the area reserved only for Muslims. As a non-Muslim, she was not allowed inside. In addition, women were allowed to travel only in the company of a close male relative – husband, brother, or uncle. Power says that her husband could not go because of money, logistics, and ideology. She does not explain, but it seems possible that, in addition to the cost and problems of arranging their lives around the trip, he was not open to the religious aspects of the journey.

Vocabulary

renunciation, fractious, lyrical, contravened, negotiate, congregational, trenchant, pluralism, arcane, ambiguity, reverberated, sustaining, localized, hobbled

“Part Three: The World,” Chapter 14, “The Pharoah and His Wife” and Chapter 15, “War Stories”

Summary

Chapter 14 is titled, “The Pharaoh and His Wife.” A young woman named Mona had endured injustice and hardship in her home in Cairo. She experienced discrimination and violence against her self, her family, and her country. She said she wanted to be a better Muslim in order to help right the injustices of the world. Power questioned Akram about fighting injustice. He said the devout would find justice, but that it might be in the afterlife. In addition, he pointed out that fighting injustice sometimes made people more vulnerable. Those in power would never give up that power, meaning they would never willingly provide a just world but would simply find a deeper level of hatred. Instead, he advised efforts toward compromise to give the oppressed “time to heal” (243).

To demonstrate, Akram told the story of the Prophet Muhammad's approach to Mecca in 628. He planned to conduct a pilgrimage but was met by an opposing army who insisted that Muhammad accept a treaty that would bring a temporary halt to the fighting, but that forced Muhammad to wait a year before continuing his pilgrimage. He agreed though his followers saw it as a humiliating capitulation. A year later, Muhammad performed his pilgrimage. Member of the opposing army had been brainwashed into believing Muhammad and his followers were violent religious fanatics. When they saw his gentle conduct, they lay down their arms and refused to fight against him any longer. Akram said the Palestinians could enter into a treaty, giving themselves time to heal and rebuild, giving their children a chance for a peaceful life and education instead of war.

During a lecture, Akram pointed out that putting politics at the forefront was not living like the Prophet Muhammad. Instead, that was the kind of focus found in the lives and actions of the kings who were Muhammad's enemies.

Others disagreed. Mona, for example, felt it was her duty to stand up against tyranny and oppression. She and others who agreed with her were critical of Akram's attitude, which he gave from the relative freedom and peaceful existence in Britain. Mona said that someone had to dethrone the wicked leaders, or everyone would forever be under the rule of wicked leaders. Akram continued to insist that any time spent in confrontation was simply taking a person away from God. He said that a wicked leader could not keep a person from focusing on God. Later, Power interviewed Mona again. Her brother had been in prison for months by that time, and her father had also been arrested. Her family's bank accounts were frozen. Mona had turned more toward Akram's attitude, saying that she had learned that she was capable of more than she had thought, and that she had found her true source of solace lay in Allah.

Power said that many people look toward the Quran's story of the Egyptian Pharaoh and his wife. Akram felt that the wife was the important character in that story because she turned faithfully toward God. Power said that many people see that situation as the quintessential Muslim story – a husband who is fanatical and political while the wife is pious and has her attention on her home and her God. As an example of the fact that political power is overrated, Akram pointed out that the Prophets, including Jesus Christ, were not political rulers.

Chapter 15 is titled “War Stories.” Power recounts a coup that occurred in 1978 when she was 11, living in Afghanistan. She and her parents hid in a hallway all night, listening to the sounds of artillery. Two decades later, she interviewed a major in the Pakistani army, Ehsan ul-Haq. Though officially retired, he continued to fight, training young men to become mercenaries. He claimed that he would continue to fight until the entire world was Muslim. Major Ehsan ul-Haq serves as a contrasting individual to Akram. Power says the two men have some similarities because both believe the Quran should be at the center of their lives. Their differences come in their beliefs of what a Muslim state should look like and how to achieve it.

Readily available education and access to information has changed how many Muslims make decisions. Instead of consulting scholars, they search for answers for themselves, making their own interpretations of the Quran rather than calling on those who have devoted their lives to study. One result is that radical Muslims can interpret verses to justify violence. Akram recounted the story of a man who told his teacher he planned to join the mujahidin, or the guerrilla fighters. The teacher said it is an easy thing to fight so that one has to die once, but much more difficult to bow in submission to Allah on a daily basis. Akram did say there were “just conditions” for fighting (268). Soldiers could never harm noncombatants, the land, or other Muslims, and hidden guerrilla units were prohibited. In addition, the only justification for fighting was when there was an authority that prevented Muslims from worship. The final, and perhaps most important, condition for fighting was that the soldiers had to have a possibility of success.

Analysis

To a degree, the book has become repetitive by this point. While the stories and setting continue to differ, Power has repeated Akram's basic message over and over again. His focus on God trumped everything else. He believed that people should put aside their politics, fights, and worries in favor of doing what is right and just in God's eyes. Some readers may find the repetition boring by this point, despite the fact that Power continues to find new examples to demonstrate Akram's beliefs.

The young woman from Cairo named Mona provides an important contrast to Akram's attitude of peaceful existence. Akram said that people should not get so caught up in politics that they spent precious time protesting. His attitude was that the time would be better spent focusing on their relationship with God and praying. He did not feel that anything good ever came from trying to exact change. However, Mona pointed out that Akram was living a peaceful life in Britain, free from overt, violent persecution. However,

her brother was in a prison, living under deplorable conditions, because of a violent government. That prompts questions about Akram's attitude. For example, how might his attitude change if one of his daughters was being held in prison because of her beliefs. Would he still have a peaceful heart and call for prayer? Or would he be anxious to take action to exact change for his beloved family member? He insisted that the only true purpose of a devout Muslim would be a focus on God. It is left to the reader to decide if his devotion was as strong as he insisted, and whether Mona had a valid point. It is noteworthy that Mona later came more to Akram's point of view, recognizing that Allah was in control and that she was content to depend on him.

Power is well-versed in military, social, political, and global issues, and she provides some information that may surprise readers. For example, she talks about the motivations behind the Pakistani major's military actions. The man ran a factory to fund his military training camp and his goal was to fight until the entire world converted to Islam. The man claimed that a group of angels fought alongside his men in an overwhelming battle, and that prompted him to take his current course of action. Power recognized the real political attitude behind his actions. He had been among those trained by American Green Berets in the 1960s. He cited a verse from the Quran as the reason he continued to fight anyone who oppressed Muslims. Power's knowledge of world events means that she fully understands this man, and others, but her more recent study of the Quran gives her another level of insight that she passes along to the reader. This is an important part of her perspective, which is one of the book's themes.

Vocabulary

tyranny, niche, torpor, harrowing, snippets, ideology, regime, coup, guerrillas, strategist, conceded, oppressors, atheists, sheaf

“Part Three: The World,” Chapter 16, “The Last Lesson” and “Conclusion: Everlasting Reform”

Summary

Chapter 16 is titled “The Last Lesson.” Power recounts her personal feelings after attending Akram's lengthy lectures that focused on the repetitive message that each of them were traveling through the world on their way to another place. Humans need food, clothing, shelter, and companionship, but each of these served the purpose of enhancing the ability to praise Allah. Those who submitted themselves to God had the promise of Paradise, though it was not a guarantee. Those who did not, were destined for hell, which Akram interpreted very literally. Akram warned against the tendency to avoid talking about hell, reminding listeners that the two possible destinations in the afterlife were heaven and hell. Power recounts her father's death and the fact that she and her mother had tried to console themselves with the idea of her father living some sort of afterlife. Power and Akram barely knew each other at that time, but she found herself telling him about her father's death. He had recited a poem that touched Power, though it was in Arabic. She found a translation later. The poem was about the grief a child feels for a parent, knowing there was no longer anyone waiting “in my native place” and worrying (277).

Akram often mentioned Muhammad Asad in his lectures prompting Power to read Asad's book, The Road to Mecca. Asad based his belief of Islam on reason. His main problem with Christianity was the idea of the Trinity – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Being unable to explain that Christian mystery turned him to Islam. In addition, Asad had seen how miserable people were without anything to believe in other than their need to accumulate more possessions. He had opened the Quran at random and found the verse that spoke of greed that drove many people right up to the moment of death. The verse pledged that those people would understand the truth after they died. Asad took that as proof that God existed.

Power thought Akram might have agreed to teach her about the Quran with the hope that she would become a Muslim. During one of their study sessions, Power asked Akram about her fate in the afterlife. She tried to be a good person but she was ultimately a non-believer. Akram said that believing in one God was the only means by which to reach heaven. He did not mention hell at that moment, which Power says was done out of kindness. Akram also said that he wanted to be able to face God on the day of his own judgment with a clear conscience, knowing that he had given Power the information to make her own decision.

A week after their lessons concluded, Power's mother died in America. Akram expressed his condolences. A short time later, Akram's mother died. When Power and

Akram talked on the telephone, Akram pointed out that Power was with him the last time he had visited his mother. Akram was quietly reserved – the norm for Muslims in that situation. Power said she was glad their phone conversation was short because she was having trouble controlling her own emotions. Power visited at Akram's home once she returned to Britain. She and Akram had a short visit because he spent most of his time with male visitors. They shared their grief over the loss of their mothers. Power spent the rest of her visit with Akram's wife and daughters. Akram had trouble getting immediate permission to return to India and missed the burial, but the family had been praying for his mother from their home.

The final section of the book is the “Conclusion: Everlasting Reform.” Akram and Power talked at length about death during the final weeks of their study together. Akram said that everyone is moving closer to death with each second, but that few people wanted to talk about it.

Power looked back on her attitude going into the year of study with Akram. She said she had fully expected that she would read through the entire Quran and have concrete knowledge about what the book contained. She said that she had instead learned that it is more than just a series of pages in a binding. Instead, it was a place where the devout Muslims returned, just as they often returned to their prayers. And Akram had constantly reminded his students to read and think about the Quran for themselves.

Power had also expected to clash with Akram's beliefs more often than she had. She expected Akram to view science as contrary to God's will, but found that he saw science as a means of understanding the world God created. Though Akram worked to keep God in the center of his life, his actions and attitudes often mirrored Power's. That is not to say they always agreed, because they did not. But Power admitted that some of their points of contention were relatively new ways of secular thinking, such as tolerance for gays. Akram also pointed out that other cultural changes had occurred relatively recently. Just a few centuries ago, girls married early, education was optional, and children often worked in horrible conditions. He pointed out that society had changed the accepted attitudes about those things. Power concludes the book by saying that she and Akram had embraced the differences each saw in the other, and that she had come to a clearer definition of her own world because of the time she spent looking at Akram's world.

Analysis

Asad's moment of belief came after he had seen people who seemed miserable. Prior to that time, he had wished he could believe in God, but found he was simply not able to fully step out on faith. He thought about the people who were focused only on accumulating more possessions but who were still ultimately unhappy, which is a situation found in many stories of acceptance. Many believers of many faiths are driven to that point by dissatisfaction with their current lives and conditions. The fact that Asad went to the Quran for answers seems to indicate that he was ready to believe, but needed a sign that he was taking the correct step. With that, he discovered the verse

that talked about the greedy people and how they would learn the error of their ways only after death.

The meanings of words across cultural and language differences is only a few times in the book, despite the deep cultural and language differences between Power and Akram. Akram pointed out one of these in the final chapter, as he and Power were talking about taking the step toward fully believing. He described the modern secular use of the word “believe.” He set up a situation in which one person asked another if they planned to visit together. The second person might say, “I believe so,” which really meant that there was some level of doubt (282). By contrast, the person who believes in Allah through the Islamic faith must have fully belief without any doubt.

Akram's discussion of his own doubt seems to be a contrast to his insistence about the need to believe. Akram said that God is in control of all things, including a person's final destination. He indicated that he personally feared sometimes that he might not be a true believer. A few pages later, Akram said he had never doubted that God created the world. That seems like a major fault in the reasoning but it is up to the reader to decide what Akram meant.

Comparisons are one of the book's major themes. In some cases, the comparisons are opposites and in other instances, they are similarities. A series of similarities is seen when Power and Akram each mourn the loss of a mother. Akram said he and his family had planned to visit Power after her mother's death but his mother died before they could carry out that plan. Power joked that they should have just met at a halfway point between their homes. That is a powerful image of a believer and non-believer, Muslim and non-Muslim, meeting at a neutral place because of a shared grief. In addition, Power discovers that guests traditionally bring food to a Muslim home in mourning, which is very much like her mother's Jewish friends. These similarities are just a few of many seen throughout the book.

Power made a suggestion about a new way to look at people who migrate from their homes to a new land. She used the Muslims as a broad example and Akram as a specific example. She said that many people look at immigrants as having lost their homes. A different way of looking at the situation, according to Power, was to consider that these people have increased rather than diminished. She said Akram had not lost any of his original identity by moving from India to Britain, but was instead able to communicate better with people of both countries about the people of the other country. That idea – that the people have much in common and are not enemies – puts Akram in a position to share information with both countries. The idea of communicating is a theme seen throughout the book.

Vocabulary

elegiac, contours, omnipresent, mutual, ambulation, puniness, piety, shrouds, lamentation, verge, epidemic, kaddish, semblance, diminished

Important People

Carla Power

Carla Power is the author of If The Oceans Were Ink. She grew up in the Midwest, but her parents loved to travel and they spent years in foreign countries, including Egypt and Afghanistan. At the time she was writing this book, she was a mother of two and an established journalist. She had spent years writing about Islamic issues but felt she had always just scratched the surface of the Quran. As she began this book, she wanted to see how the Quran affected the lives of those who studied it, how it was interpreted, and how it was similar to other religions and beliefs.

Power first met Sheikh Mohammad Akram Nadwi when they were co-workers at the Centre for Islamic Studies at Oxford. While Power had an early interest in Islam, she was not at all interested in living the life prescribed by the Islamic faith. However, Akram soon caught her attention because of his way of life. He never tried to force her to embrace the rules of Islam, but he never wavered himself. As she saw the peace that was naturally part of his everyday life, she began to wonder what she was missing in her own life.

Power had no religious background. Her father had seemed to be very much at home in Middle Eastern culture. Power felt a similar affinity for foreign culture, but as an adult she recognized that she had always looked for the similarities with her own Midwestern upbringing. As she set out to study the Quran, she soon found many similarities to the traditional Biblical principals and guidelines for everyday living.

Sheikh Mohammad Akram Nadwi

Nadwi is an Islamic scholar who worked with Power during her early career and later became her teacher as she studied the Quran. Power sometimes refers to Akram as Sheikh. For the sake of clarity, he is referred to as Akram in this guide except in direct quotes. The term Nadwi is not part of his name, but is a designation, signifying the completion of a specific course of study. The word Sheikh is a term that means he is a teacher.

Akram first met Power when they were both working at the Centre for Islamic Studies at Oxford. From their first meetings, Power noticed that Akram was extremely intelligent and dedicated to living the life Allah prescribed. However, he was determined to look past the traditions imposed by many Islamic tribes in order to live as the Prophet Muhammad lived. He studied women in Islamic history and saw that many held important roles. Some even taught men, which would be taboo in most Islamic tribes.

While Akram believes that women have rights, he also respects the traditions that many tribes view as law. For example, Power spoke to a group in Akram's home town, but

women were not allowed to attend. Akram would never have forbidden the women to attend, but accepted the town's tradition of keeping women separate in such situations.

By the time Power was writing this book, Akram was the father of six daughters. He allowed them basic freedoms, but raised them within the guidelines of the Quran. There was limited interaction between men and women, but he educated his daughters in both Islamic and secular subjects.

Farhana

Farhana is Akram's wife. Power felt that Farhana was overly quiet and introverted, but later discovered that she was ill during their first meeting and was actually an animated person. Like most other members of Akram's family, she appears in the book only briefly. At one point, her daughters describe her pious actions during a pilgrimage, in which Farhana never brought attention to the number of times she immersed herself in holy rituals.

Sumaiya

Sumaiya was the second daughter of Akram and Farhana. She was married and a mother by the time Power was writing this book. She was self-confident and capable, which Power said was a statement of the efforts her parents put into her education, both religious and secular.

The Prophet Muhammad

Akram shaped his life after that of the Prophet Muhammad, which in the Muslim religion was one of several messengers from God. Muhammad's life is used by Muslims as examples of what their own lives should be, and Akram closely followed Muhammad's example in many things, including his attitude toward women.

Mona

Mona was a young woman from Cairo who was studying at Oxford. She had seen her home and family torn apart by war. Her brother was jailed and Mona took a leave from her studies to work with a group trying to bring justice to the region. Akram talked at length about the futility of that kind of endeavor, including that people in power would never give up that power and that weaker people could do more good with compromise that gave them time to heal and build.

Aisha

Aisha was the final wife of the Prophet Muhammad's life. She was a child when they were betrothed and that became a sticking point for many people. Her marriage to Muhammad was apparently happy, because she was given the choice to leave but remained. She was intelligent and motivated, and became an important leader, especially after Muhammad's death. Her actions prompted one of the major Muslim texts, which makes it clear that the oppression of women has arrived from tradition, rather than Muslim law.

Muzzammil

Muzzammil is Akram's brother and an educator. He is seen only briefly, mainly when Power travels to Akram's ancestral home for a visit.

Muhammad Asad

Asad was a writer who converted to Islam because he found it a more reasonable religion. He questioned the Trinity as his main fault with Christianity and believed the Quran was a divinely inspired book after he opened it to a verse that directly applied to his concerns at a specific moment.

Akram's Mother

Power met Akram's mother during her visit to Akram's home village in India. Power described her as a “looming” presence in the house, though she remained seated a great deal of the time. She was a very traditional person, as seen by her reaction when Power removed her veil inside the house. Akram's mother died shortly after Power's mother, and the two women made it clear that Akram and Power shared a similar grief over their deaths, even though the two mothers had little in common.

Power's Mother

Power's mother was Jewish though she was not overly religious. Power described her mother's occasion interest in her Jewish history when Power was young. Though Power's mother was very different from Akram's mother, the two women died just a few days apart and provided a stark comparison in the form of their children's grief.

Objects/Places

The Quran

This is the traditional Islamic manuscript. The book is a series of revelations to the prophet Muhammad. The author chose this spelling, though it is sometimes written as“Koran.”

Oxford

This is the British university where Nadwi and Power worked together as they began their friendship, and where Nadwi continued to work as an educator.

Jamdahan

This is the city in India where Nadwi's family lived. Nadwi and Power visited the city and Power spoke there. It is a smaller village and Nadwi had built two schools there, one for boys and one for girls, by the time he and Power visited.

Nadwat al-Ulama

This is the school Akram attended in Lucknow. The campus was idyllic and Akram spent his days in prayer, study, and debate with teachers and other students. The completion of his studies there qualified a man to use the word Nadwi after his name.

The Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies

This is the university-based program where Power and Akram worked on a project that tracked the movement of Islam through Asia.

Islam

This is the faith of the Muslim people based on the Quran, which includes some of the same stories as the Christian Bible. One of the main differences between Islam and Christianity is that Islam claims Jesus was a prophet, with the same authority as Abraham and the Prophet Muhammad. Mainstream conceptions put Islam as a violent religion though many, including Akram, live peacefully.

Purdah

Purdah is the act of separating men and women in daily life, including in the home where women and children spend the majority of their day isolated from the men of the family. Akram's family observed a relaxed version of this ritual in their home in Britain.

Madrasa

The madrasa is a traditional school where Muslim children are educated. Akram had built two madrasas in his home village - one for boys and one for girls. The stereotypical madrasa is a school where young Muslim boys are taught rote memorization of Quran verses to support ideals of violence and hate but most are focused instead on living in peace with a focus on Allah.

Mosque

The mosque is where Muslims pray. In some cases, only men are allowed in the mosque though that is a tradition rather than an Islamic law.

Mecca

Mecca was the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and the destination for the pilgrimage undertaken by Akram, his family, and some other Muslims.

Themes

Traditions and Laws

Muslims have become known for some specific actions and attitudes, but Akram broke down the myths about these to point out that many of these are merely traditions that have evolved over hundreds of years. The treatment of women is one of the most important examples of this theme, but Akram made it clear that God never intended for women to be the second-class citizens that some believe they have become.

Akram and Power met when they were working at the Centre for Islamic Studies at Oxford. There, they were mapping the spread of Islam in the centuries of the religion's existence. But Akram had a pet project that he worked on when he had time – the role of women in Islamic history. When he told Power about this project, he said he had expected to find a few women and that he planned to put their stories into a pamphlet. Instead, he found some 9,000 women mentioned in texts, letters, and other documents. These women held many positions of authority, including as teachers and judges. Women were free to live their lives in the presence of men and even participated in debates with male scholars. That proves, the author points out, that God had never intended for women to take a backseat to the men, and that they were not to hide themselves away from positions of responsibility.

However, the official texts governing how Muslims behave offers guidance for women who might sometimes have pressing duties at home with their families. If a woman was unable to go to the mosque to pray, she was allowed to remain at home. Akram said the problem is that many Muslims have evolved into a tradition that says women must pray at home, rather than allowing them to pray at home if it was necessary. The evolution of these traditions has become so ingrained in everyday lives of many Muslims that they are now considered law. Some Muslims use these traditions to dictate every aspect of a woman's life rather than giving her the freedoms that women had in the early days of Islam.

Another tradition is that of child marriages. Akram said that he did not see anything wrong with child marriages as he began talking about it with Power. They began their discussion because the Prophet Muhammad had married a little girl named Aisha. Akram pointed out that Aisha had lived a happy life and that child marriages were to be arranged by fathers who loved their daughters and wanted the best for them. However, after hearing arguments about the situation of these girls and that many fathers entered into arrangements without the best interests of the child, Akram changed his mind. This is another case of a tradition that was not a law, but that had become an accepted practice. Akram still did not feel there was anything wrong with arranged marriages, but felt that the father had to have the best interests of his child in mind.

An interesting aspect of this theme is seen in Akram's attitude about women in the mosque. He felt that women should be allowed to pray in the mosque if they chose, but

he did not insist that the elders of his home village adopt his attitude. He said that forcing change in a village was not the way to create long-term change, but he did not explain why he felt that way.

Living a Pious Life

Akram felt it was his duty to live a pious life, regardless of where he was or the rules governing him. While he did believe that Muslims should be active in their communities, he did not feel that they needed to have a home state to live for God. He also felt that too many people got caught up in fighting for a cause or rebelling against injustice, and that those things took away from a Muslim's first duty – to live for God.

Akram pointed out that Muslims had been fighting for their country and against oppression for centuries, and that they were so anxious to fight that they lost what should have been their focus. He repeatedly talked about death, saying that everyone was headed for death with each second that passed. No one wanted to talk about it, but that fact remained. The time spent on earth was a short period compared to eternity in paradise, which is where Akram said people should be putting their focus. Power compared Akram's attitude to an airport. She said he felt he was only passing through his earthly life, and that his real life would begin in the afterlife. Similarly, people spend a short time in an airport on their way to their real destinations.

Akram had been a very smart youngster who attended a school of higher learning. When he completed his studies there, one of his professors said that he should move to Britain. Akram took his professor's instruction as a duty, and he made the move. His wife remained in India for several years. During that time, Akram must have been lonely but he did not complain or set out to find a way to return home. Instead, he continued to live the life mapped out by his professor. Power questioned him but Akram repeated the idea that his time on earth was to be very short compared to eternity. His main job was to be close to God, regardless of where or how he lived.

Akram said that no government can keep a Muslim from living a pious life, but that many people get caught up in the details. He pointed out the French ban on the veils, but said a Muslim did not have to wear a veil in order to be close to God. Akram said Muslim law did not require that women wear the coverings, as evidenced by the fact that the Prophet Muhammad's wives did not wear them all the time. The veils have become a tradition that many Muslims use to set themselves apart from non-Muslims, and Akram said that was not necessary for a pious life.

Akram exhibited a similar attitude when he talked about interpreting the Quran. He said that many people were looking for justifications for their actions or attitudes, and that they inserted themselves into their reading. Instead, Akram opened his mind to Allah's message, allowing God to instruct him about the meaning of what he read. In that way, Akram truly accepted God's word instead of looking for a specific meaning.

The Power and Purpose of the Quran

Power had no real knowledge of the Quran prior to her year of studying with Akram. She went into that year with some preconceived notions about the Quran and what would happen by the end of the year of study. At the end of the book, Power explained what had really occurred during the year and what she had come to learn about the Quran.

One important aspect of this theme is seen as Power discusses whether the Quran is just a book. She points out that Muslims return to the Quran for information and comfort, just as they return to their prayers on a regular basis. Akram said that it was important for believers to read the Quran and to interpret for themselves, but to always keep God in the center of their thoughts as they learned.

While she was visiting Nadwi's home village, Power related a story about herself as she learned about and reported on Muslims and Islam. When her daughter, Nic, was a toddler, Power had been assigned to visit a school where youngsters were learning the Quran. Her babysitter had canceled and Power took Nic along. The child was fretful and on the verge of a meltdown as they entered the room where young children were reciting from the Quran. Both Power and her daughter sat on the floor and were completely calmed by the voices. Power found the situation strange, knowing her child and the tendency for toddlers to become completely unruly. The devout Muslims she addressed hardly noticed the story. They had spent their lives with the words of the Quran and they could not imagine any situation other than the child being soothed by the recitations. With that realization, Power knew that she had placed herself in the position of being the person with superficial belief and understanding, a direct contradiction to the men she had addressed. She did, however, understand the comfort Muslims drew from the Quran. She had felt that peaceful contentment on several occasions when she heard other people reading from or quoting the Quran, even when she did not understand the language.

Akram repeatedly said that Muslims had forgotten to focus on the Quran, and believed that returning to that focus would help many Muslims find their way back to the correct path. In addition, he said that Muslims had to read with an open mind to understand God's meaning, rather than interpreting the verses to justify their own desires.

As she drew the book to a close, Power talked about her expectations over the course of the year she studied with Akram. She said she had expected to read through the Quran completely, and to know what was in it after she was finished reading. She had not realized that it was such a powerful work with so many possible interpretations. She discovered that she had to study the verses in depth to discover the nuances and to more fully understand, even when Akram was guiding her study. With that understanding, Power realized that the Quran was more than a group of pages bound together to form a book. In some ways, it was more like a place where Muslims could turn for an array of reasons – to learn, to be closer to Allah, and to use as a guideline for everyday living.

Stereotypes

Many people have stereotypical images of Muslims while Muslims have stereotypical images of non-Muslims, especially Westerners. The non-Muslim image of Muslims was enhanced and intensified following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Fear drives many of these stereotypes, sometimes to a level of hatred and violence. Power and Akram each believed that communication was the only way to make people understand that the stereotypes do not represent the whole, and that the fear is usually unfounded.

Power was probably more open to the Muslim way of life because she was exposed to peaceful Muslims during her childhood. Her father found a level of peace when he was surrounded by Muslims, and Power felt that peace on her own terms. This made her aware of the fact that not all Muslims are violent – a stereotype that pervaded Western thought after groups of Muslim extremists became known for attacks and violence. Power talked about the stereotypical madrasa where young boys rocked back and forth, reciting verses that taught them to hate. While there were extreme groups teaching that kind of hatred, the majority of Muslims were not violent and were not interested in fighting.

This attitude spilled over to Muslims who lived peacefully in neighborhoods around the world. In many cases, neighbors, co-workers, and others who encountered these Muslims became anxious or outright hostile toward Muslims, especially those who distinguished themselves by wearing traditional Muslim clothing. These actions were largely driven by fear and Power felt that most people simply did not understand the Muslim faith.

The flip side of that is seen in the attitudes of Muslims who feared anything that felt like westernization, including people. This attitude originated from the desire to avoid things that would become distractions to their piety. Money and prestige were among those things to avoid, but many Muslims took that to the extreme and feared that any small concession would lead to a major downfall. Akram pointed out that Muslims had to be able and willing to think for themselves. Owning a car in Britain was an example. By Muslim law, Akram should not have purchased insurance because that exhibited the need to trust in a man-made insurance instead of trusting in God. However, British law required that anyone who owned a car should have insurance. Akram felt that it was acceptable to obey the British law in that case, without actually breaking one of God's laws. Many people – Muslim and non-Muslim – might see this as a compromise, but Akram felt that the compromise was insignificant because it did not actually impact his personal trust in God.

The Muslims also looked at Westerners as ungodly people, which made them basically untrustworthy. These stereotypes have made both Muslims and non-Muslims open to hate and fear, often without taking time to get to know an individual. Power hoped that her book would open the door for communication and would override some of the

stereotypes, especially those held by non-Muslims regarding Muslim attitudes and beliefs.

Similarities between Muslims and Non-Muslims

Some readers may begin this book expecting to find that the Quran is filled with orders of violence and situations calling for hate. That is not what Power conveys. Instead, she finds that there are many similarities, which she finds surprising. She chose to study with Akram specifically because she believed they would have vastly different ideas and opinions.

One of the main differences Power expected was centered around the treatment of women. Power had seen the way some Muslim women were relegated to the home, denied education, and forced to live under the rules of abusive men. She soon learned that Akram felt women were his equal, though with different roles and responsibilities. He believed that women had the ability to be close to God without the help or interference of a man, and that women could be educated and hold positions of authority. His study of women in Islamic history supported his attitude and Power was also surprised to find that there had been women in positions of power, including as teachers and judges, from centuries earlier. Power noted that the sheer number of women who had been in power was actually a contrast to other religions where relatively few women had been accepted to those roles.

Power set out to learn about the Quran with the expectation that she would read the entire book and end the year of study knowing exactly what the Quran said. She found out that the Quran is a complex book, filled with nuances and subtleties that required deeper study. That is very similar to the attitude a person would have when studying the Christian Bible, especially coming into the study with little information. At one point, Akram said that Power would see some of the same people and stories from the Christian Bible. The names were usually different but similar enough that Christians with a working knowledge of the Bible will recognize people, such as Abraham.

An important example of this theme is seen when Power's mother died. A short time later, Akram's mother also died. They each grieved over their losses and each felt the absence of an important person in their lives. A difference is seen in the way they grieved. Akram believed he should not make public displays of grief. He was allowed to shed tears, but he could not cry aloud. Power noted that during their first conversation after Akram's mother died, he was stoic but she was on the verge of crying in a way that was contrary to Muslim beliefs. Another similarity was seen when Power visited Akram's home. The family was in mourning. Power had felt the need to take a gift, but did not know what was appropriate. She took flowers but discovered that food would have been more acceptable. That was the same as when her own mother died just a short time earlier. Her mother's friends, mostly Jewish, had shown up with food just as the Muslim friends did at Akram's house.

While there were many differences, Power focused a great deal on the similarities, showing that the Muslims are just people with problems, families, hardships, and joys, just like people everywhere. According to Akram's example, Muslims constantly reminded themselves that their lives were a short-term situation and that the afterlife should be their main focus. While Power never claimed to be religious, people of other faiths have similar attitudes and believe they need to focus on God.

Styles

Structure

The book is divided into three parts. Each part is named with a number and title. “Part One: The Origins,” includes chapters one through five. “Part Two: The Home” includes Chapters six through 10. “Part Three: The World,” includes Chapters 11 through 16. The titles make the content fairly predictable. The first part focuses on how Power and Akram met and their backgrounds. Power talks at length about Akram's personality and why she chose to study with him. The second part focuses on home life, especially for Akram's family. Power talks about Akram's wife and the way she and Akram's daughters make their own choices while living within the morals Akram divines from the Quran. The third part takes a wider view of Islam. This section opens with Power arriving at a prayer room at Heathrow Airport where Akram was the teacher for a group of British Muslims making a trip to Mecca. As expected, the majority of this section focuses on ways Muslims interact with the world, political aspects of the faith, and the role of Jesus in the Islamic faith.

Chapters are also identified by number and title. The titles give hints about the contents of that chapter. The second and third chapters are largely used to identify Power and Akram. The second chapter is titled “An American in the East” and the third is “A Muslim in the West.” The first focuses on Power's childhood and her father's tendency to travel to foreign countries, prompting Power's early interest in Islam. The latter focuses on Akram.

The book also includes an introduction, titled “A Map for the Journey,” in which Power briefly introduces herself, Akram, and her reason for studying with him. The book ends with “Conclusion: Everlasting Return,” in which Power explains that she did not convert to the Muslim faith but did find moments of peace during her year of study and still attends Quran classes, mainly for the respite from her otherwise hectic life. The final sections of the book include a glossary of the common Islamic terms in the book, a page about the author, the bibliography, and acknowledgements.

Perspective

The book is written in first person from the perspective of Carla Power. Power was a journalist who had covered an array of topics related to Muslims and Islam prior to writing the book. She had lived in foreign countries as a child, meaning she was comfortable with examining other cultures and had always tried to find similarities that she could use to make herself feel at home. That means that she has a natural tendency toward looking for similarities, which might have impacted some of her interpretations of the Quran. Power said that people can interpret the Quran in different ways. An extremist who reads a specific verse can interpret that verse to support his attitudes, and a moderate can interpret the same verse in a completely different

manner. Power may have been naturally looking for similarities to her own culture. She was also highly impressed with Akram's peaceful outlook on life, and envious of that attitude, meaning she may also have been looking for ways to interpret the Quran to help her live that same kind of life.

Power did not have a strong religious background when she began studying the Quran with Akram, but she had a desire to learn. She felt she had never really delved into the Quran, despite years of studying and writing about the Islamic faith. That desire makes her a reliable perspective, but her tendency to look for similarities may make her less reliable. Overall, she seems to give indications that she thoroughly examines her thoughts, motives, and impressions to be as honest as possible with herself and the reader.

Tone

The overall tone of the book is one of peace, hope, and understanding. The author set out on a year-long study of the Quran, expecting to emerge a year later with a full understanding of the Quran as a whole. She found that was not the case, but she did learn a great deal along the way.

The writer is a journalist and seems to follow traditional writing styles, including punctuation. The book is written in modern English but the subject means that there are words, phrases, and ideas that some readers may find unfamiliar. For example, Power writes about the “fatwas” on several occasions. These are opinions issued by religious scholars and teachers. A person who has a question about the laws of the Quran may seek out a fatwa on a specific issue to determine if an action is acceptable. Different scholars would issue different rulings in some cases, depending on their own experiences and interpretations of the Quran. Power defines words such as fatwa, but then uses those words again throughout the book. That means the reader has to incorporate those words into his vocabulary, at least for the duration of the book or depend on the glossary included at the back of the book. Most of the Islamic-specific words are also easily defined with online dictionaries for readers who want a deeper understanding of terms.

The book does not necessarily flow in chronological order. Instead, the author addresses specific subjects in each chapter. She may talk about a visit with Akram's wife, then pull in information about past conversations with Akram to more fully explain a point. This method is acceptable to the subject and the book flows well through this method.

Some readers may be expecting a detailed examination of the Quran. That is not the case with this book. The action moves fairly quickly and the author does not get bogged down in technical issues or questions. Instead, she explains her thoughts, ideas, and impressions on various aspects of life and Islam. She also talks about the everyday lives of Akram, his family, and others who live by or study the Quran. This practical

examination makes the book more interesting to those who seek a working knowledge of the Quran and Islam.

Quotes

With guidelines on everything from dressing to eating to trading, Islam is woven through the world itself rather than confined to church on Sundays."
-- Power ("Introduction: A Map for the Journey" paragraph 31)

Importance: Power is talking about the extent of the Quran, which is the divine book of the Prophet Muhammad. These guides are seen in the everyday lives of Islamic people, and give instructions on everyday life. Power's perspective is from that of a secular person who is not well-versed in Christianity or other religions, and that affects some of her writing. For example, some Christians may object to this view because they believe the Bible is also meant to be followed in daily life.

During the Prophet's era, women prayed freely in mosques along with men, but in time, many cultures began restricting their presence. Over the centuries, the scholars' consensus that women didn't have to go to the mosques to pray if they couldn't get away from home and the kids morphed into a cultural norm that they shouldn't."
-- Power (Chapter One, "The Quran in Twenty-Five Words" paragraph 13)

Importance: Power talks repeatedly about the guidelines of the Quran versus the traditions and man-made laws. The oppression of women is a theme in the book and a major point of difference between tradition and the Quran.

Whether you're the new kid in the fifth grade, or the only woman to have delivered a speech at Jamdahan's madrasa, little is expected of you and most lapses are forgiven. Like my father before me, I feel most at home when I'm away from it, freed from the expectations of my own culture.
-- Power (Chapter Four, "Road Trip to the Indian Madrasa" paragraph 20)

Importance: Power was about to address the men of Akram's home village. Akram gave her virtually no advice about her speech and she must have felt like an oddity. She was the only woman in attendance in a traditionally conservative village setting. She cared deeply for Akram and only later realized the risk he took by putting her in that position. The fact that she felt at ease there is a statement of her character, which is an important part of her determination to study with Akram for a year and to learn about the Muslim beliefs.

She was puzzled by anyone who thought they had a sense of ownership over their own fate, or even absolute power over their own body. Everything belonged to Allah."
-- Power (Chapter Six, "Pioneer Life in Oxford" paragraph 58)

Importance: Power is talking about Sumaiya, Akram's second daughter. She was in the hospital giving birth when the doctors asked for her permission to perform a specific procedure. She said that her husband should decide. The doctors refused to take action unless Sumaiya gave her approval. She said that she was really in no condition to give

an answer, and was amazed at the attitude, which was far different than traditional Muslim teachings.

A decade after he'd begun work on his 'pamphlet,' Akram had a distionary spanning forty volumes and containing nearly nine thousand women scholars, stretching from the day of the Prophet to the twentieth century. His work stands as a riposte to the notion, peddled from Kabul to Mecca, that Islamic knowledge is men's work and always has been.
-- Power (Chapter Seven, “Nine Thousand Hidden Women” paragraph 12)

Importance: This refers to Akram's research into women who held positions of authority in Islam's history. He expected to find a few women, and that those would have studied separate from the men and taught only women. What he discovered was thousands of women who held positions of real power. Power goes on in this paragraph to talk about the contrast with other religions where relatively few women have been in positions of authority.

And tell the believing women to lower their eyes and guard their privates, and not to show their ornaments except the obvious ones, and to draw their coverings over their breasts.”
-- The Quran (Chapter Nine, “Veiling and Unveiling” paragraph 13)

Importance: Power says that the wording in this verse of the Quran is “so vague” that proponents and opponents of the veil have used it to underscore their beliefs. Akram is among those who believe the veil is optional. He says the “ornaments” are a woman's face and hands, and that the only requirement is for modesty.

One may debate 4:34's meanings, but one thing remains certain: men's interpretations of the verse have made millions of women miserable.”
-- Power (Chapter 10, “Reading 'The Women'” paragraph 11)

Importance: Power is talking about a verse from the Quran regarding the actions of men toward women, which include the instruction to “spank them.” Those who oppress women use the verses to justify their actions, but Akram said the verses were being misinterpreted and were really meant to set women apart with men having an ultimate responsibility to protect them.

The five major prophets – Nuh (Noah), Ibrahim (Abraham), Musa (Moses), Isa (Jesus), and Muhammad are examples for the believers, at every stage of their life. If we don't know about Maryam (Mary), or Isa, we cannot live in the world as believers.”
-- Power/Akram (Chapter 12, “Jesus, Mary, and the Quran” paragraph 7)

Importance: This is one example of the similarities between Islam and the Christian faith, which is one of the book's themes. It is also one of the main differences because Muslims believe that Jesus was a prophet, rather than the son of God, which is what Christians believe.

Similarly, the word 'Muslim' means 'one who submits,' or 'one who surrenders.' But there's a huge difference between Muslims with a capital M (a faith group) and lowercased-m muslims (monotheists who have submitted to God)."
-- Power (Chapter 13, "Beyond Politics" paragraph 9)

Importance: Power points of this difference just before talking about bin Laden's declaration of war. In that, he quoted from the Quran, saying that his soldiers should not die "unless you are Muslim." However, Thomas Cleary translated the same verse as saying that a person should not die "without your having surrendered to God."

When he was done with jihad in Kashmir, he said, he and his men would move on. Perhaps to India. Perhaps beyond. Wherever they were needed, they would keep fighting, forever, until the whole earth became Muslim."
-- Power (Chapter 15, "War Stories" paragraph 22)

Importance: Power was interviewing Major Ehsan ul-Haq about his involvement in a conflict. He cited verses from the Quran to justify the violence. He serves as a contrast to Akram's personal attitudes of peace.

With the advent of modernity, many people simply stopped consulting traditional scholars. Rising literacy rates and new technology allowed ordinary Muslims to begin interpreting texts for themselves."
-- Power (Chapter 15, "War Stories" paragraph 36)

Importance: Power goes on to say that anyone who has access to the Internet can get information from an online source, who is probably far less educated than traditional Muslim scholars. The increased options for reading and interpreting for oneself is good in a way, but the Muslims depend so heavily on interpretations that it also means people are missing out on the information a scholar has to offer.

Unlike the man who became Sheikh Abdalhaqq Bewley, I didn't convert. But my year with my own sheikh and the Quran provided me with many moments of grace."
-- Power (Conclusion, "Everlasting Return" paragraph 5)

Importance: Power told the story of a shepherd who underwent a miraculous transformation and converted to Islam. Power says that did not happen to her, but that she did gain some insight during her year of studying with Akram.

Topics for Discussion

Why did Power set out to spend a year studying the Quran?

Power had lived in foreign countries as a child, worked in the Centre for Islamic Studies at Oxford, and wrote about Islam as a journalist, but had never really written about the Quran. She wanted to know more about the book that dictated the lives of Muslim people. The reader should talk about her personal attitudes and her desire to learn.

How did Power and Akram meet? Why did Power choose Akram to teach her about the Quran?

They worked together at the Centre for Islamic Studies at Oxford. This answer should focus on the differences Power saw between herself and Akram, and how she hoped to learn from him. The reader could also talk about Power's motivations for studying the Quran.

What do Muslims believe about the role of Jesus in their religion?

The reader should talk about the fact that Muslims believe Jesus was a prophet, not the Son of God as Christians believe. This part of the answer should also delve into the explanation that Muslims believe Jesus' actions should be a guide for daily living, just as the Prophet Muhammad's life is a guide. The reader can also talk about the traditional Christian belief of the Trinity and the fact that Muslims believe it is wrong to put Jesus on an equal footing with God.

What is a madrasa? What does Power say about the stereotypical madrasa compared to the reality?

Madrasas are schools for Muslim children. The reader should talk about the facts, including that they are usually segregated by gender and that they have a basic curriculum in common, though the madrasas built by Akram included English in their curriculum. The stereotypical madrasa is that of young boys learning to recite pieces of the Quran aimed at justifying hate and violence. Power talked about that image becoming so common after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States.

Describe Akram's early life and how he came to be at Oxford.

Akram lived in a small village but was dedicated to learning, even at an early age when it would have been acceptable for him to leave a formal education behind. He was one of the first in his village to seek a higher degree and he excelled. The reader should talk about Akram's attitude about his teachers, which led him to move to Britain because one of his teachers said he should. This answer could also delve into Akram's attitude about Muslims being content wherever they live.

What was Akram's attitude about life on earth?

The reader should talk about Akram's faith in God, and that a Muslim's real life begins after death. Akram said people should accept their lives on earth as a short period of time on the way to their real lives, meaning they should not care so much about what their earthly lives are like.

What does Power say about those who interpret the Quran to support violence and hatred?

Different people can interpret specific verses in the Quran to mean different things. People can find almost any meaning in the Quran they choose. The reader can talk about Akram's attitude that people fail to keep God in the midst of their study, and put their own desires ahead of God's thoughts. Those people are able to justify violence and hatred by misinterpreting the Quran. The reader could also talk about stereotypes and how these violent interpretations have made non-Muslims fear Muslims.

How have tradition and law become confused? How has this impacted Muslims, especially women?

The reader should talk about the Prophet Muhammad's attitude of tolerance for the individual needs of people. He said that women were sometimes busy with their duties related to the home and family, and might not be able to attend prayers at the mosque. It was, therefore, acceptable for them to pray at home. Over the years, the tradition transformed from allowing them to pray at home, to demanding that they only pray at home. Those traditions have become so enmeshed in many Muslim societies that people consider them laws. The reader could talk about other traditions, including covering the woman from view.

What was Akram's main area of study? What did he learn from his studies?

Akram focused on women in the history of Islam and found thousands of women who held positions of authority. Through his study, he learned about the women who were judges and teachers, among other things, and that the role of women has changed mainly because of traditions. The reader could talk about specific women, including Aisha, who held important roles in Muslim history.

What was the story Power related to the men of Akram's home village about her cranky toddler? Why did she later realize that the story meant nothing to the men?

Power told about taking her toddler to an assignment where children were reciting verses from the Quran. The toddler was cranky when they arrived but settled in and listened as the children recited. The reader should talk about Power's belief that this was something akin to a miracle, considering her child and how near she was to a tantrum when they arrived. However, Power later realized that these devout men had full faith in the power of the Quran and could not imagine any scenario other than the one with the child settling down.