

Breaking Bread: The Pink Iftar Movement

By Kafah Bachari Manna

Growing up in the 1980s as an Iranian in America often overshadowed my experience of growing up as a Muslim in America. Back then, being a Muslim was not quite as interesting or dangerous as being an Iranian on U.S. soil. Indeed, I got a kick out of telling fellow Americans that their movies and fashions were a big hit in Iran and that all this hullabaloo about “Down with the Great Satan” did not resonate with the average Ali Reza on the street in Tehran.

After September 11th, more often people questioned me about my faith than about my national or ethnic origins; although occasionally these elements were merged and confused (e.g. Iranian = Muslim or Iranian = Arab = Muslim). And the narrative people approached me with, the ideas that informed their questions, often went against everything I knew and understood about how my faith shaped my view of the world and my place

in it. It became routine to get asked whether I had been subjected to female genital mutilation, how I managed to marry a man out of love versus by arrangement, or whether I had to fight my family (as enforcers of my supposed faith) to get an education.

I did not always know how to begin to answer these questions and to address what was at the heart of them: a basic misunderstanding of Islam. Fringe extremist groups, purporting to be Islamic, created this narrative; and poorly informed and fearful non-Muslims, looking for a way to categorize and understand a group of people presented to them as the “other” in a post-9/11 framework, embraced it. Eventually, I learned to talk through the misconceptions and offer my experience as part of the broader experiences of the women in my family and of my generation (as opposed to offering my experience as a fluke or exception to the narrative of Islam as a faith inherently oppressive of women). Despite



Guests and conversationalists in Christ Church Cathedral listen to Dr. Elora Shehabuddin speak about women and Islam.

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Conversationalists Shaden Yousef Newton and Farah Shah praying with other observant Muslim women after breaking fast with tea and dates.

this, however, I never felt that my isolated encounters were enough. I believed that this narrative of Islam as repressive of women also constrained other women who felt as I did, but who did not quite know how to attack it in a systematic and effective way.

It was against this backdrop that I attended an Interfaith Women's Seder Dinner at Christ Church Cathedral in the spring of 2009. The dinner was a unique approach to the Seder tradition. Jewish women, not men, led tables of ten to fifteen non-Jewish women and with the aid of a feminist liturgy, discussed the contributions of Jewish matriarchs in the Old Testament story of exodus and deliverance. These Jewish women also discussed their own families, their mothers and grandmothers, and their faith experiences as women. As one might expect, their experiences were nuanced and reflective of the multitude of factors that shape a person's life and views. It got me to thinking, which in turn, got me to talking with some friends. By the fall of that year my friends and I assembled a group of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish women to meet regularly and plan an interfaith dinner showcasing the lives and experiences of Muslim women in Houston as well as the contributions Muslim women have made to the arts, sciences, religious and academic scholarship, politics, and everyday life.

What resulted in August of last year was the first Interfaith Women's Ramadan Iftar at Christ Church Cathedral. Women of all faith backgrounds attended a program that included a discussion led by Dr. Elora Shehabuddin on women and Islam, a call to prayer inside the Church followed by the breaking of the fast, and a multi-cultural dinner at tables led by local Muslim women. The program sold out at 200 participants and as a result the organizers and I decided to expand programming and rename our dinner program the "Pink Iftar." The "Pink" part being a tribute to my penchant for the color.



Co-founder Kahfah Bachari Manna and her mother, Nahid Bachari.



Guests break bread with Muslim women conversationalists.

For Women's History Month the Ladies of the Pink Iftar presented a series of special dinners in the homes of Muslim women for women of other faith backgrounds to attend. This was based on the idea that once you bring someone into your home to break bread together you create the opportunity for women to gain a genuine understanding of one another, an understanding based on more than tolerance and acceptance, but grounded in compassion. That is to say, we might find that our views are different, just as our faiths are different, but that these differences do not limit our capacity to appreciate and celebrate each other's humanity.

Both Muslim and non-Muslim women who have participated in the Iftar dinner or the small dinner series have expressed surprise and delight at having created new friendships that inform and enhance their view of the world. For the Muslim women who participate as our conversationalists and hosts, myself included, the experience has empowered us and has offered a much-needed space for us to create our own narrative about our lives, whatever that may be. This August we will be presenting another Pink Iftar, as we hope to do every year. We also have plans to expand programming to showcase the art and music of Muslim women as well as create programming aimed at developing dialogue

between young Muslim women and non-Muslim women.

I am fairly certain that we are on to something and that these kinds of programs and relationships will give us the tools we need to overcome the xenophobia and extremism we see in mainstream culture both here, in America, and elsewhere. I am also fairly certain that those of us who have taken on these challenges, who believe in the power of dialogue and discovery and who labor over the eradication of discrimination and intolerance, are the product of an entire network of supportive, progressive, women and men, fathers, mothers, grandparents, and many others, who have offered their shoulders for us to stand upon. We continue our struggle as part of their legacy and in order for the future to be brighter for all of our children, whatever their faiths may be and where ever their lives may take them.

For more information or to purchase tickets to the next Pink Iftar at Christ Church Cathedral on August 18th please contact womensiftar@gmail.com.

Kafah Bachari Manna is the co-founder of the Pink Iftar and a writer. She is currently working on a collection of short stories and a novel about the experience of Iranian Americans in Iran and America.