Pilgrim’s Progress

November 1, 2001 By Mubarak Dahir

From his Islamic roots and Midwestern boyhood, through Middle East travels, crack addiction and AIDS, to September 11 and beyond, he has always looked for Allah. Meet Terry Mohammed Tahir, a Muslim for all seasons.

It boggles my mind, particularly as a Muslim,“ says Washington, D.C., HIVer Terry Muhammad Tahir of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. ”My understanding of Islam is that we are created with the sole objective to worship God by our work, how we treat others, how we improve the world. How can men who call themselves Muslims but terrorize and kill be so far away from Allah’s vision?"

Tahir, 60, has been getting closer to Allah all of his life. Growing up in Missouri in the 1950s, the grandson of a devout Muslim from what is now Bosnia, Tahir pored over the Koran in his high school library and fasted during the holy month of Ramadan. “The other kids would tease me -- they thought my ideas very strange.” After graduation, Tahir joined the Army and, once discharged, finally traveled to the Mideast to see the great mosques.

In Kuwait, under the tutelage of a local imam who renamed him (he later added *Terry* for confused Americans), he studied Arabic and Islam for a year before coming home and settling down in D.C. as a taxi driver.

During the ’70s and ’80s, he’d faithfully take off three weeks every year for a pilgrimage back to the Muslim world, but he wrestled with his identity. “I was always split in my emotions about being from America,” he says. “Muslims admire America and want to emulate it, because it is so successful. But there is a widespread feeling that political oppression in the Muslim world is a direct result of America’s politics.” He sighs. “Unfortunately, many believe the only way to get America’s attention is to bomb them.”

By 1990, Tahir had become the owner of a small limousine and car service. Some of his best customers were prostitutes. One was also a crack addict, and Tahir got hooked. “I know I was not following my religion,” he says. In March 1991, his home and business lost, he celebrated his 50th birthday sitting on a trash can outside his regular watering hole, desperate for a fix and begging for bucks. Bottoming out, Tahir checked into a VA hospital and began his long night’s journey into day. But getting clean and sober was only the beginning.

In August 1995, after he collapsed from fatigue, doctors at the VA delivered devastating news: full-blown AIDS. Tahir was transferred to a nursing home where he waited to die. Instead *Nightline* --

and Allah -- saved him.

Watching an episode on PWAs, he heard a Georgia woman, a former drug addict like himself, testify that of all the gifts God gave her, AIDS was the greatest. “Her simple words had a profound impact on me,” he says. “I’d been treating AIDS as a curse, not a gift. Now, Islam is a practical, day-to-day religion. I realized I could use Islam to cope with my everyday situations with AIDS.” For inspiration, Tahir turned to a verse in the Koran, one he still has framed and hanging in his home. It reads, in part, “My living and my dying are for Allah.” Ironically, the verse is the one that terrorists use to justify their attacks, he says.

Though Tahir credits his faith with repeatedly saving his life, he admits to “mixed feelings” about the reception he has received as an HIVer in the Muslim-American community. “Many are skeptical,” he says, crafting a careful response. “They think if I had been a good Muslim, I wouldn’t have AIDS in the first place.” As a volunteer at the Council for Islamic-American Relations and with the Muslim activists of the Minaret of Freedom Institute, Tahir sometimes suspects that others even shy away from working near him. “But I will not let my HIV status hold me back from participating fully as a Muslim.”

Though secretive, other HIV-positive Muslims, particularly from Millati Islami, a national drug-recovery group, have been open to his overtures. There’s even a local imam with HIV who calls Tahir on the phone for advice. AIDS acceptance and awareness are slow because Islam -- like some Christian and Jewish strains, Tahir points out -- remains closed to many of the issues raised by HIV. “Sex and sexuality are a big hurdle,” Tahir says. “Entire governments and cultures are in denial.”

The events of September 11 may make tackling HIV in the Muslim world even more onerous, he fears. If the attacks turn into a war of cultures -- the West vs. Islam -- many Muslims may retreat to the view that HIV is part of Western cultural corruption, and further ignore the problem.

Painfully aware of the current backlash of American rage against Muslims, Tahir says that his own experience has been positive, with non-Muslims offering much support. At a D.C. mosque, worshippers arrived for Friday prayers to find people of other faiths handing out good-will roses. And if he is often disappointed as a Muslim with HIV, he reminds himself, “It’s not Islam that lets me down -- it’s people. My faith is what keeps me alive.” *Amin*.

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