

# A Microcosm of the Muslim World

## INTERVIEW WITH DR YASIR QADHI

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**Yasir Qadhi was born in Houston, Texas and graduated with a BSc in Chemical Engineering from the University of Houston, after which he changed course and studied classical Islamic sciences at the University of Madinah in Saudi Arabia. There, he completed his second Bachelor's in Hadith Studies, and an MA in Islamic Theology. Subsequently, he completed an MA and an MPhil from the**

**Department of Religious Studies at Yale University, and completed his PhD from the same department in 2013. He is one of the world's most popular English-language public speakers on Islam.**

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*Growing up in and around the Two Holy Cities, what were your initial impressions of Makkah?*

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I'm very fortunate to have spent 20 years of my life in Saudi Arabia, ten years as a child when my father was a professor at the University in Jeddah and then ten years as a student myself at the University of Madinah. When we were in Jeddah we had a habit of going to Makkah at least once every two or three weeks. So I have performed more umrahs than I can remember, and Alhamdulillah more than a dozen Hajjs.

I'll never forget just the feeling of awe when I first entered the Holy City as a five year old child. It was the minarets that fascinated me most. Makkah was of course very different then – much smaller and with smaller crowds. And I remember the carriers of the holy water (Zamzam), dressed in traditional Hijazi attire, pouring it from their leather canisters for thirsty pilgrims. Also, there used to be thousands of pigeons, and the custom was that pilgrims would buy some birdfeed and feed them in the spirit of compassion. The Haram brings back memories of my childhood, including peaceful times with my family and of course the mesmerising voices of the imams of the haram such as Ali Jabar and Sudais.

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*Which aspects of the Prophet's ﷺ early life in Makkah demonstrate the City's significance as a Holy place?*

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One of the main things that we learn from Muhammad's pre-prophetic life is how he viewed himself as a responsible citizen of Makkah. If you look at his entire forty years before the beginning of the Revelation, it's

essentially a resumé of social work for the people of Makkah. He was helping the poor and taking care of orphans – everybody loved and trusted him. He was a humanitarian, a social worker, a community figure. He established himself as *al-Amin* (the honest, the trustworthy). In fact when the Revelation came down to him, he ran back frightfully to his wife Khadija, who reassured him that Allah ﷻ would never misguide him simply because he was a good man. And of course the incident of rebuilding the Kaaba – when he was entrusted to settle the dispute of who would move the Black Stone – demonstrated this. The lesson to take here is that one needs to be a productive, useful citizen of the place you're living in. Our Prophet clearly demonstrated that in Makkah, a city he loved dearly. When he was forced to leave the city, he turned around, crying, *'Oh Makkah, you are the most beloved of all cities to me. and were it not for the fact that my people are expelling me I would never have left you.'* This love existed regardless of the level of wrongdoing that was clearly happening in Makkah at the time.

And then, of course, the pinnacle of the Prophetic, or if you like, the political part of Muhammad's life, was the taking over of the Kaaba. It wouldn't be the final victory, nor the culmination of his victories, (that would come afterwards), but it was undoubtedly the symbolic culmination because with the conquest of Makkah it was essentially as if the whole of Arabia has been conquered. Once Makkah came under the religion of Islam, all the other tribes had to acquiesce. In this way, Makkah became the symbolic capital of the Islamic world from the onset.

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*Do you believe the state of Makkah, the birthplace of Islam, has a physical or metaphysical impact on the rest of the Muslim world?*

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There is no question that Makkah is a microcosm of the Muslim world. Indeed the changes in Makkah are demonstrative of the changes taking place in the Muslim world. The diversity of Makkah is incredible. When one goes for Hajj or Umrah, one sees the different ethnicities and languages, the different professions, different socio-economic levels. Everything is represented, the good and the bad. Everybody who goes for

Umrah and Hajj also knows that there are some negatives too. Somebody used to tell me that if we can solve the problems of Hajj, we'll solve the problems of the Ummah. There's an element of truth there, because everything in the Muslim world is represented in Makkah – diversity of people, politics, theological positions and so on.

Moreover, the excessive consumerism and materialism that we're seeing worldwide is unsurprisingly reflected in Makkah itself, which is now a hub for shopping malls, luxury hotels and restaurants. There are people who criticise Makkah for these things, but as far as I see it, it's simply a supply and demand system, reflective of the wider world and the paradigm in which we live. If we don't want to see these things in Makkah, let's not demand and consume them!

*With Makkah changing so rapidly, how can the 21st century pilgrim connect with the cultural history of their religion to ensure the fullest spiritual experience?*

The question arises: when did this 'history' actually exist? Every time a new construction happened I'm sure people lamented the previous construction. It's architecturally impossible to keep old structures completely. The Abassids had to reconstruct the Haram, then the Mamluks, then the Ottomans and so on. They each did, however, retain certain motifs – they left a thing or two and then eventually added to it.

So, on the one hand I understand people want to keep relics of the past, and I don't have a problem with that. But on the other hand there has to be a pragmatism. I think one will have to move beyond the physical and get to the metaphysical. And that is to understand this very location is where Abraham and Ishmael built the Kaaba. This is the very location that Muhammad, ﷺ stated that over 70 of the prophets have visited and performed the pilgrimage. According to our tradition even Musa (Moses) came to Makkah.

So we will just have to accept the sanctity of the place – I've never had a problem feeling that. For me, the awe one feels when sitting in front of the Kaaba overcomes everything else. You have to discover your spirituality wherever you are. Indeed we all pray in modern life, despite having cell phones, computers, business meetings etc. Do you really think that if you simply lived in the Mamluk era there wouldn't be the distractions of those times and places? I'm sure when they first introduced lamps people would have said it destroys the sanctity because we like the darkness. So people like to romanticise the past but the fact of the matter is that each era felt this and just got over it.

*Why is it that non-Muslims have traditionally been prohibited from entering Makkah?*

Theologically there are explicit traditions from our Prophet's time. In fact the Quran is very clear in Surah Tauba, which was revealed immediately after the conquest of Makkah. Allah in the Quran said to give the idol worshippers to the end of the sacred months after which they must

convert to Islam or leave Makkah – it was very clear that idolatry cannot remain in the Haram. And of course the Prophet destroyed and banned all idols immediately after entering Makkah. So this is symbolic of the fact that Makkah is to remain a sacred sanctuary. Legally, according to Islamic law, there is a difference of opinion about whether or not non-Muslims can enter for a specific time and purpose. The correct position is that they can enter temporarily and for a specific reason. What is not allowed is for them to remain permanently. So if there is a need – a technical skill for example which needs to be brought in, that is permissible. So for example, when the Prophet's Mosque was being constructed, a specific type of engineering was needed – you needed people that had expertise in certain things that Muslims did not necessarily have.

But if we were to open the door unconditionally then I believe that the sanctity of Makkah would be undermined. When in Makkah, it is important for everybody to worship the same God, do the same rituals and undergo the same experience. That's what defines the Holy City. To allow tourists to come in would be to disrupt a very particular experience sought and needed by the pilgrim.

*An illuminated page from manuscript of Sahih Al Bukhari, composed in Makkah in 1588*



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