

Interview with Shaykh Dr Umar Al-Qudri (full)

Introduction

Last year, I had the opportunity to attend a community Iftar (breaking of the Ramadan fast) after being invited by Shaykh Dr Umar Al-Qudri. I had contacted Shaykh Dr Umar earlier in the year about organising a visit to his place of worship, for a group of my students.

The experience of an Iftar was absolutely fantastic and people from many faith groups attended the event, including Jewish Holocaust survivor Tommy Reichental, Buddhists as well as members from the Christian denominations. Shaykh Dr Umar kindly agreed to be interviewed for RE: Link to help students in Ireland to learn about Islam for their Junior Certificate studies. Shaykh Dr Umar is the Ameer/Head-Imam of Al-Mustafa Islamic Educational & Cultural Centre Ireland, which is located in Blanchardstown, Dublin.

Interview with an Shaykh and Imam

FQ: *Can you tell me about yourself briefly?*

Dr Umar: I'm from Pakistan, my father was an emigrant to the Netherlands and he was one of the first Imams/Muslim leaders in Holland; at that time a very young Muslim community. I was born in Pakistan, and at the age of two I travelled with my mother to be with my father in the Netherlands and we lived there together. At the age of sixteen I returned to Pakistan to study Islamic Sciences for seven years and obtained a degree and masters in Islamic Studies. I then spent one year in the Netherlands, before moving to Ireland in 2004. When I came here the Muslim community was very young. At that time, I established the Al-Mustafa Islamic Centre in Blanchardstown, as well as studying law and completing that study here in Ireland. All of this time the Muslim community was growing and I was an Imam, a theologian. I started to run my own company. Last year, I founded the Irish Muslim Peace and Integration Council (IMPIC). My work is very diverse, one day I could be meeting politicians, the next day leading prayer in the mosque, another day giving a conference or teaching or visiting a school. Overall my work is very diverse.

FQ: *You definitely sound very busy.*

Dr Umar: Yes, and I also have three kids and a wife!

FQ: *What is your role in the Muslim community of Ireland?*

Dr Umar: The role of an Imam or a Shaykh is a spiritual or religious guide. I say a guide because Islam is not just a religion but a way of life, so people not only come with their religious or spiritual problems, but they may also come to me with their political, social or any other problems too. For example, if they experience racism, Islamophobia or other issues. I travel all over Ireland, from Belfast to Cork, meeting Muslims as well as travelling abroad with my job. I lecture in Islam, as well as recording TV programs on Islam which are aired world wide (recorded twice a year in Pakistan). One program is on the topic of the biography of the Prophet Muhammad and the other is on contemporary issues.

FQ: *What is the difference between a Shaykh and an Imam (if any)?*

Dr Umar: Anybody who is a Muslim can be an Imam, they lead the prayer. If there are five people in a room, they can appoint an Imam to lead the prayer. An Imam can be appointed based on his knowledge of one part of the Qu'ran or how he reads the Qu'ran. He does not have to be a scholar.

A Shaykh must be a scholar of Islamic scripture, have studied and completed his formal education and his studies of the Qu'ran.

FQ: *Am I correct in saying that you are both a Shaykh and an Imam?*

Dr Umar: Yes, that is correct. All Shaykh are Imam, but not all Imam are Shaykh.

The title Shaykh is also used in the Arab world to describe an older person and is a term of respect. It can also be used in the Arab world to describe a rich person who could be, for example, an oil shaykh, but this has nothing to do with the religion of Islam. When used in the context of an Islamic centre or mosque, it only means a learned scholar.

FQ: *How would you describe the Muslim faith to someone who was learning about it for the first time?*

Dr Umar: Islam is a religion that is very close to Judaism and Christianity in terms of its beliefs. It's a religion that 1.6 billion people worldwide have accepted, even though it is only 1,400 years old. Islam as a religion is growing and is divided into three branches. The first is **belief**: Muslims believe in one God Allah, the prophethood, the hereafter, paradise, the day of reckoning and revelation.

The second branch of Islam is the **practices**, which are known as the five Pillars.

1. Shahada – Belief, there is no God but Allah (Allah is the word for God in Arabic).
2. Salat – Prayer, five times a day.
3. Zakat - Charity, two-and-a-half percent of your income is donated to charity each year.
4. Sawm – Fasting, for Ramadan
5. Hajj – Pilgrimage to Mecca.

The third branch is the spiritual side – your behaviour, your attitude to people and to God, your compassion and how you behave towards the creation of God. The Prophet Muhammad was once asked ‘who is a Muslim?’ and he replied ‘A Muslim is the one who is a source of peace for others from his hands and his tongue’. All of those three things together are what makes Islam.

FQ: *Can you tell me about the Muslim community in Ireland?*

Dr Umar: The first recorded Muslim in Ireland used to teach in Trinity College in Dublin. At least he was the first prominent Muslim in the 1850s, who was a Professor of Eastern Studies. Then about 100 years later, groups of young, mainly South African Muslims came to Ireland to study medicine, as it was cheap to study here at that time.

In 2004, when I arrived to Ireland, there were approximately 23,000 Muslims here and in the previous census in 2012, there were 49,000. My estimate is that in the results of the 2016 census, we have at least about 100,000 Muslims in Ireland. The Muslims in Ireland come from many different countries spanning Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe and are based mainly in Dublin and Cork but are spread throughout other counties too. Most Muslims in Ireland are integrating very well as they already speak English before they arrive, are well educated and generally work in professions such as medicine and IT.

The Muslim community in Ireland is very diverse and there is no one voice, this community has many different voices but most Muslims, in terms of belief, have the same opinions. In Dublin we have fifteen Muslim places of worship and all over Ireland we have forty-five places of worship. These could be small places of worship, mosques or based in industrial estates. We have three major mosques in Ireland.

FQ: *What common misconceptions are there about Islam, in your experience?*

Dr Umar: The major misconception is to do with the link or affiliation to terrorism; that Muslims are all terrorists. The second is that all Muslims oppress women. Finally that Muslims don't agree with the Western way of life and want to kill people. Anybody who has met a Muslim person and gotten to

know them will know that these things are not true and that these do not represent the majority of Muslims in the world.

FQ: *What do Muslim's believe happens to us after we die?*

Dr Umar: Muslims believe that when a person dies, they are responsible for their actions in this world and will be held accountable for them. The concept of paradise and hell does exist in Islam. The idea is that, in the grave, questions will be asked regarding one's faith and actions in one's life and one will be accountable for them. Each person will be shown a movie of their own life and will be able to see everything that they did from birth to the moment of death and, according to the mercy of God, they will be judged.

FQ: *What is your favourite religious festival?*

Dr Umar: All Eids, Eid of the Prophet's birth or Eid after Ramadam is the most favourite.

FQ: *Have you been on a pilgrimage to Mecca and how was the experience?*

Dr Umar: I have been a number of times. The first time I was there – and every time I go there – it is still the journey of a lifetime. It is very emotional, very spiritual. It always recharges my spiritual batteries and my faith and is an amazing journey.

FQ: *Are there groups/denominations within Islam?*

Dr Umar: Mainly there are two: The Sunni and the Shia.

There is also a rising group known as Wahhabism, which is an ideology of extremist groups (such as Boko Haram and the Taliban), which account for three-to-four percent of Islam. It is a growing ideology of 'us versus them' which appeals to people who feel like they have been treated badly, marginalised or their country has been divided. The majority are Sunnis, then Shias, Wahhabis and some other smaller groups.

FQ: *Who was Muhammad?*

Dr Umar: Prophet Muhammad was the person who lived in a time when people were being oppressed, had no rights and were enslaved and looked

down upon because of their race or their language. He gave hope. He said to everyone that we are all different but we can all worship one God, who sees us all as equal. In a war-torn country, he introduced the concept of peace, of religious freedom, he gave women rights such as education, to acquire property, to vote and to be part of public life. He inspired people to stop slavery. He was known as the Prophet of mercy and compassion. He is the ideal person. The real Muhammad, not the one who Osama/the Taliban believed in, but the real Muhammad, peace be upon him, if everybody could be like him, the world would be a much better place.