

# GROWING Together

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## A YOUNG MUSLIM VOICE

Asma Gull Hasan is a 20-something Muslim born in Chicago, raised in Colorado and educated in the Roman Catholic school system. An American citizen, one of her favourite books is Alex Haley's Roots; one of her favourite musicians is the hip-hop rapper, Busta Rhymes. But Asma knows relations between Muslims and Christians in North America are not easy and she is speaking out. Can we hear her?

Asma recognizes that one of the challenges facing western Muslims lies in overcoming Christian images of Islam. Muslims in Canada are business consultants, physicians, cab drivers, politicians, travel agents, teachers, variety storeowners, CEO's and students. We non-Muslims are fearful they are also terrorists. September 11, 2001, the hostage crisis in Iran, women forced to wear full length burqua and banned from education, female circumcision and 'honour killings': doesn't that show Muslims are violent? So we tend to lump all Muslims together and believe all their women are hopelessly mistreated.

The historical relationship between Muslims and Christians is complex.

In the Christian 'dark ages' (9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries), Muslims saw Christians as "People of the Book", deserving special status in Muslim society. Meanwhile, Muslims safeguarded the rich culture of the ancient Greek and Roman civilization. Building on that tradition, they developed mathematics, astronomy, logic, architecture, irrigation and medicine that, in turn, became the base for western knowledge.



From 1090 – 1290, Christians responded with the Crusades, killing Muslims in the Holy Lands, Syria, and North Africa. From 1300 – 1700, Europe feared Islam – its invasion of Europe and the resulting conversion of Christians. Then, from 1700 to 1900, Europe expanded its power into all of Asia and Africa, and millions of Muslims came under the control of Europeans. Following World War 2, western nations withdrew their control of their colonies, abandoning Muslims to rebuild on their own. But military, educational, technological, industrial, financial and scientific progress continued in the west. And with that progress, western rights and freedoms grew. Over the years, many Muslims, like Asma's family, came to live in our midst.

Asma's personal values include self-respect, education, self-sufficiency, and an active personal contribution to the good of North American society. These are values her family lives by, good North American values well affirmed in Islam.

According to Asma, Islam was originally a feminist religion and Muhammad was a feminist. From history, we know his first wife was a very successful businesswoman. In the Quran, men and women are equal before God and female infanticide is forbidden. According to Islamic law, women have the right to divorce, to hold property and to inherit money; a Muslim woman can keep her personal income; the Muslim husband must provide for the family. Are these practices we non-Muslims see in Muslim communities and nations? Yet, Muslim feminists agree with Asma that Islam was feminist and can be feminist again – and faithfully so.

So Asma sees a renewed Islam emerging. It upholds faithful Muslim tradition and the freedom and personal rights she enjoys in western culture, freedoms and rights she believes are profoundly Islamic. Other Muslims may not agree with Asma and she knows that. But she hopes Christians can develop a more positive image of her faith. That may already be happening. Since September 11, the number of Qurans sold in English has increased. Muslim-Christian dialogues have grown across North America. Christians have been invited to visit the local mosque and found a welcome there. Asma hopes North American Muslims and non-Muslims can share these kinds of experiences with the whole world.

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<sup>1</sup>Asma Gull Hasan, American Muslims—a new generation. New York: Continuum, 2001