

# Religious Tolerance Matters for Everyone - Part 2

I traveled in early September 2016 to East Africa for a Christian mission conference.

The Kenya Airway flight from Liberia took me through Freetown, Sierra Leone, and Accra, Ghana, to my final destination, Nairobi, Kenya.

Upon our arrival to Freetown, several passengers on board deplaned while ongoing passengers stayed on board.

After the routine of cleaning the cabins and refueling, new passengers boarded, including seven Muslim clerics properly dressed in long white robes.

Most were seated on the same row as I was, with a few immediately behind me. One cleric kindly requested that we exchange seats since he wanted to sit together with his colleague.

I politely granted his request and moved. After a few minutes of conversation among them, I was again asked to kindly move to my original seat. I accepted.

The cleric was very apologetic. Repeatedly he said to me, "Brother, I am so sorry; brother, I am so sorry, for the embarrassment."

I replied, "Oh, no problem sir; that's fine."

Here seated, I was sandwiched by Pakistani Muslim clerics.

While preparing for takeoff, they all started to engage in what seemed to be prayer - looking into their palms and rubbing their foreheads while their lips moved.

After takeoff, the cleric across the aisle from me went into the overhead luggage bin to fetch some biscuits wrapped in a package.

After taking a piece from the package, he stretched out his hands to share a snack. "Brother, please take, eat with me."

I politely declined, but the cleric insisted. Out of courtesy and respect, I reached into the packet and took a slice of biscuits, expressed my thanks and began to eat.

The sharing and eating of biscuits offered a conducive space for a comfortable conversation while I keenly observed and learned from their interactions on flight.

Throughout the flight to Accra, the clerics were reading Arabic literature. For each reading, the cleric across the aisle kissed the book and placed it on his forehead before opening the text to read. It seemed to be an expression of reverence and respect of the text.

I seized a window of opportunity to ask the cleric next to me what he was reading.

He was reading the Quran, which led to a conversation about whether I spoke Arabic and owned a copy. I explained that I spoke English and that I owned an English translation purchased a few years before.

The cleric then asked, "Are you a Muslim?"

I replied, "No, I am a Christian," while mentioning that I had visited local mosques a few times and had taken 27 Ricks Institute students and staff in March 2016 to Friday prayers at the Central Mosque of Freetown.

His face lit up. He then mentioned that he and his colleagues have been teaching and sharing about Islam throughout Sierra Leone for several weeks and are now returning home to Pakistan.

I was able to slip in our conversation about the unique practice of religious tolerance and respect among Christians and Muslims in Sierra Leone.

Historically, in West Africa, it is widely noted that Sierra Leonean Muslims and Christians have been living and working together in peace and harmony for national development.

The dialogue was pleasant, respectful and cordial.

About 6:45 p.m., another cleric to my left asked me for the time. Since it was approaching their prayer time after sunset, they were concerned about space to pray since flight attendants were serving passengers at the time.

Right at 7 p.m., one of the clerics on my row began to recite the call to prayer

("Adhan") on the flight. It was not loud but was heard clearly by surrounding passengers. Interestingly, no one I noticed complained.

In my mind, religious tolerance was truly at work when these clerics were able to practice their faith without any interruption on our flight.

Mutual respect and the practice of religious tolerance aided me and the clerics I spoke with to engage in honest and respectful conversation.

Can you imagine how uncomfortable it could have been for an unexposed and naïve Christian on that 9-and-a-half-hour flight?

Global migration makes constructive religious conversation and coexistence essential.

In many instances, you will not have the opportunity to choose your seatmates or your neighbors, so we must learn to live together peaceably through mutual respect and learning.

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*Editor's note: This is the second of a two-part series. Part one is available [here](#).*