

I worry about my religion

Ahsan Pervez Daredia

It's a chilly night in Beijing as I'm weaving my way in and out a very packed aisle to board my flight to Karachi. I get to my seat after some effort. Every time I get my seat assignment, I secretly hope that it's someone nice and intelligent sitting next to me; you know, someone I can make conversation with. Ah, 23L, here it is.

I look up to see a middle-aged man in a *shalwar kameez*, vest and hat. No problem; I point to the window seat saying "*idhar*". The man, instead of being courteous by getting up to give me space, puts his feet up on the seat while I squeeze my way in, my buttocks scraping against his knees.

Unfortunately and predictably, my arrogance takes over. I assume this man is boarding an airplane for the first time and/or has nothing to offer me through conversation. I put my headphones on, with "*chammak chalo*" blasting through them, drowning out everything around me. To my surprise, he strikes up a question by tapping on my shoulder.

"What work do you do?" he asked me in Urdu with his thick accent.

I respond in my best and formal Urdu, "I teach English."

While our aircraft taxis to the runway, we exchange words for a few minutes, just small talk, nothing important.

Finally, I'm headed home, I think as the runway is aligned perfectly with our aircraft. The twin Boeing engines start to rev up and a thunderous roar is let out as we begin to gain speed on our way to the skies.

Suddenly and abruptly, the man next to me starts praying and the next 30 seconds of my life are spent with my heart beating faster than the airplane.

"*Shukran Allah, Allah O Akbar, Subhan Allah,*" he chants multiple times.

My Western side immediately emerges, screaming:

"Oh my God, these are the last few moments of my young life."

We all know the stereotype; a Muslim on an airplane follows an explosion. I know, I know, it's over-exaggerated, but that's what we've come to know and think in the post 9/11 era. I've been on numerous flights in, out, and within Pakistan, but I cannot explain the genuine terror that took complete control of my body and mind. I felt the blood in my veins begin to ice over as a cold trail of sweat made it's way down my spine. I wanted to cry; I've never felt such magnitude of fear before. I thought of the hot explosion that was going to follow, blowing the entire aircraft to smithereens.

I'm ashamed, embarrassed and utterly disgusted at myself for even thinking such thoughts. I'm not feeling this remorse because nothing happened, because I knew nothing could happen, right?

We live in a time where airport security is tighter than its ever been. How could I let myself think such terrible thoughts? There hasn't been a major hijacking since 9/11; what were the odds that this would be the next big one? The man was simply praying for a safe journey and arrival. I wanted to kick myself for my preceding thoughts. I had never let my paranoia take over me like that, but this was a first time. There had to be a trigger to my feelings. Could it have been the media? Perhaps it's the hundreds of jokes I crack between my friends about this subject. Maybe it's the numerous episodes of Family Guy or South Park that I've watched in the past, joking about just this situation that invoked such feelings.

I'm a Muslim and apparently I am prejudiced against my own religion.

It makes me laugh just to think what would have happened if there was an American or a European sitting in my place, given that I, a Pakistani reacted as so. I can now see what living in the West for the past decade has done to my thought process about the average Muslim. Why have I, too, turned in to the person who stereotypes anyone who recites the Quran? The poor man sitting next to me wasn't a terrorist; he was just a Muslim.

Even though my flight wasn't pleasant – it included a lot of pillow-stealing, kicking while sleeping, and awkward staring at each other – if you're reading this, I'm sorry I stereotyped you I hope we can let this night go for both of our sake.

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