

Praying to Newark

New York bureaucracy pauses for *salat*.

By Paul Moreland

AS MY LAWYER LIFE often requires, I recently whiled away an afternoon in a waiting room within New York City's Citizenship and Immigration Services office.

For the uninitiated, CIS is the former Immigration and Naturalization Service—or at least one broken-off piece of it. Like the other parts of the shattered INS, CIS falls under the auspices of the Department of Homeland Security. Perhaps that's why I find the replacement and reordering of naturalization—the process by which an alien becomes a citizen—and citizenship—bestowed upon those of us born here—a tad curious.

On this particular afternoon, two events interrupted the tedium of passing three hours in the frozen concentrate of diversity. The first, and far less interesting, was the sight of two Chinese lesbians fondling and kissing each other a few rows ahead of me.

The second unfolded a little more discretely. It began when two Muslim men, one elderly, the other of middling age, stood up in unison and surveyed the bus-station-like set-up. At 3:30 on a Christmas week afternoon, the room was unusually sparse. (The clerks, however, had adjusted their productivity downward to ensure that the wait was commensurate with any normal day, when the place resembles a bustling terminus on the Silk Road.)

Both men wore the skullcaps known as kufis and gown-like galabiyas and sported the bushy beards and disproportionately thin sideburns that are *au*

courant in Karachi this season. My instinctual reaction was, I'm certain, not dissimilar to that furtively harbored by many denizens of downtown Manhattan: could they have concealed weapons under there? But then I remembered the healing words of President Bush—"Islam is a religion of peace"—and chastised myself for having such an intolerant impulse.

After a moment of consultation, the pair proceeded to a rear corner, evidently the corner of the windowless, disorienting room determined to be facing Mecca. There they stood, shoulder to shoulder, in silent meditation. I turned back to the Camus paperback I was reading and his bleak picture of the interior of French Algeria as the younger man began to utter a guttural strophe that to my uninitiated Catholic ear sounded like "Haaa Faaa."

We were presumably in the room for the same purpose—to attend an appointment in a federal office building, where it wasn't Christmas but a holiday season. Here religion is *noli me tangere*. This particular office caters to those inquiring into the status of mismanaged green-card applications, which in the New York district if piled up would compete for skyline with the best of Trump's skyscrapers. My inquiry involved an Italian filmmaker, theirs the elder Musselman.

The lack of reaction among my fellow travelers was stunning. A Dominican woman sitting nearby uttered a lilting "*Dios mio*." But there was no official reaction. The clerks didn't bat an eye.

The security guard continued to make his rounds. Had my cell phone's lowly ring reverberated through the room, I would have been ordered to leave and efforts to confiscate my phone would have ensued.

The two votaries transitioned from their standing posture to a kind of rhythmic bowing and finally into a repetitive genuflecting motion. As often happens these days, I found myself a stranger in a strange land—the strange land doubling as home.

In the past, in this same room, I've seen kindly Catholic priests escorting humble parishioners from hotter climates up to the counter to inquire as to why their green-card applications are older than any of their five children. I wonder what reaction an impromptu *angelus* in the other corner would evoke? And what of Felix Mota, another priest, of the Santeria order, who in 2003 got tangled up with Passaic police and the ASPCA over his ritualistic slaughter of two roosters and a lamb at a makeshift altar behind his religious supply store? "This is a great moment for me," the Cuban émigré triumphantly declared after completing the two-hour ritual. "For the first time, I feel I can openly practice my religion without interference."

The *salat*, or contact prayers, are the obligatory prayers that Muslims perform five times daily. They represent a direct link between the worshipper and God, with no earthly intermediaries such as the Department of Homeland Security.

Sadly, such prayers invariably conflict with appointments in federal office buildings. But one suspects that the day is fast approaching when the courts ensure that the appointments accommodate the prayers. After all, had the office been in its normal standing-room-only state, a dozen others might have followed these two to the corner.

Modern Western experience demonstrates that, as in France, as the Muslim population grows so too do demands for accommodation. American experience in particular tells that as long as a group earns the multicultural seal of approval, courts will meet its demands. One only need survey the number of kufis bobbing in the line coiling around the CIS office to conclude that the panels of prattling heads and their satellite-linked guests will soon be abuzz with talk of whether the federal government should break for *salat*.

The Founders were annoyingly vague in setting forth the precise parameters of the separation between church and state—much less a commensurate stricture between mosque and state. One overarching fact is crystalline though: the burner under the melting pot petered out long ago, but the cook continues to heap in the ingredients.

Evidently the call to prayer was in fierce competition with the desire to secure an immigration benefit, for the pair's ticket number flashed on the red LCD counter midway through. Rather than interrupting the prayer, a third, more secular companion dashed to the window, bantering in halting English to the clerk and motioning to the corner. As we all sat waiting for our numbers to flash—mine was still 20 away—the clerk, speaking a different dialect of broken English, agreed to wait for prayers to finish. We all waited.

Such are the subtle machinations of immigration policy that transfigure our culture like the perpetual trickle of

water against stone. Those with power to alter it—which apparently does not include the American people—are unwilling to do so. But as Americans as far away as the outer suburbs are beginning to see, the phenomenon will not long remain confined to our metropolises.

Back in my office, I continued research in connection with an asylum case for a gay man from an Islamic country, where the only parade sexual orientation gets is the one filing past as you get flogged. For the muddleheaded Left, which fails to notice that religious diversity in the Muslim world went out the door with Tariq Aziz, there is a gaping disconnect between this and the “expression of religious freedom” I witnessed earlier. Culture is portable.

On a personal level, Muslims *per se* do not bother me. To a certain degree they are cultural conservatives, and since it's doubtful one will ever be able safely to

visit them in their native environments, the opportunity to observe *salat* was not without benefit. But the ramifications of absorbing millions more of their coreligionists from across their vast realm, importing with them every variant of Islam—some inimical in varying shades to the West—are rarely discussed with ease. Hence, there are more American boots on the ground preventing Muslims from entering Iraq than there are doing likewise on the Rio Grande.

As a long day drew to a close, a different aspect of the afternoon's event began to nag at me. Just how did they know that particular corner of the windowless room faced the twin minarets of Mecca? Evidently they didn't, for a review of a map of Manhattan revealed the two were actually praying to Newark. ■

Paul Moreland is the pen name of an immigration lawyer in New York City.

Songs of the Doomed

Hunter S. Thompson (1939-2005)

By Anthony Gancarski

“PERHAPS HE FOUND what he came here for, but the odds are huge that he didn't. He was an old, sick, and very troubled man, and the illusion of peace and contentment was not enough for him—not even when his friends came up from Cuba and played bullfight with him in the Tram. So finally, and for what he must have thought the best of reasons, he ended it with a shotgun.”

In 1964, Hunter S. Thompson wrote these words about the recent suicide of Ernest Hemingway, a writer whose work spoke to billions because it was

plain, clear, hard, and unsentimental. Thompson's burden in 1964 was to pay homage to a genius. He understood, *vis-à-vis* Hemingway and other matters, that “when the going gets weird the weird turn pro.” But his words in eulogy to Hemingway spoke an existential truth: no matter how deeply professional a craftsman is, the dark patches in his soul often can't be faced by even the most courageous writer.

Hunter Thompson, the self-proclaimed original “political junkie,” saw politics itself as addictive in the sense of the best