

MUSTAFA RONY ZENO

# The Path to Water

*Shari'a* revisioned

One Friday my Christian girlfriend joined me for prayers at the mosque and asked me why she found a watering can in her bathroom stall. The Prophet Muhammed instructed us to clean our anuses with water, I told her. To me, growing up around Muslim families in Southern California, a watering can evokes a bidet, not plants. The conversation led me to consider all those objects that I, and other Muslims in California, have repurposed for *shari'a*—which literally means “the path to water” (although is usually translated as “Islamic Law”).

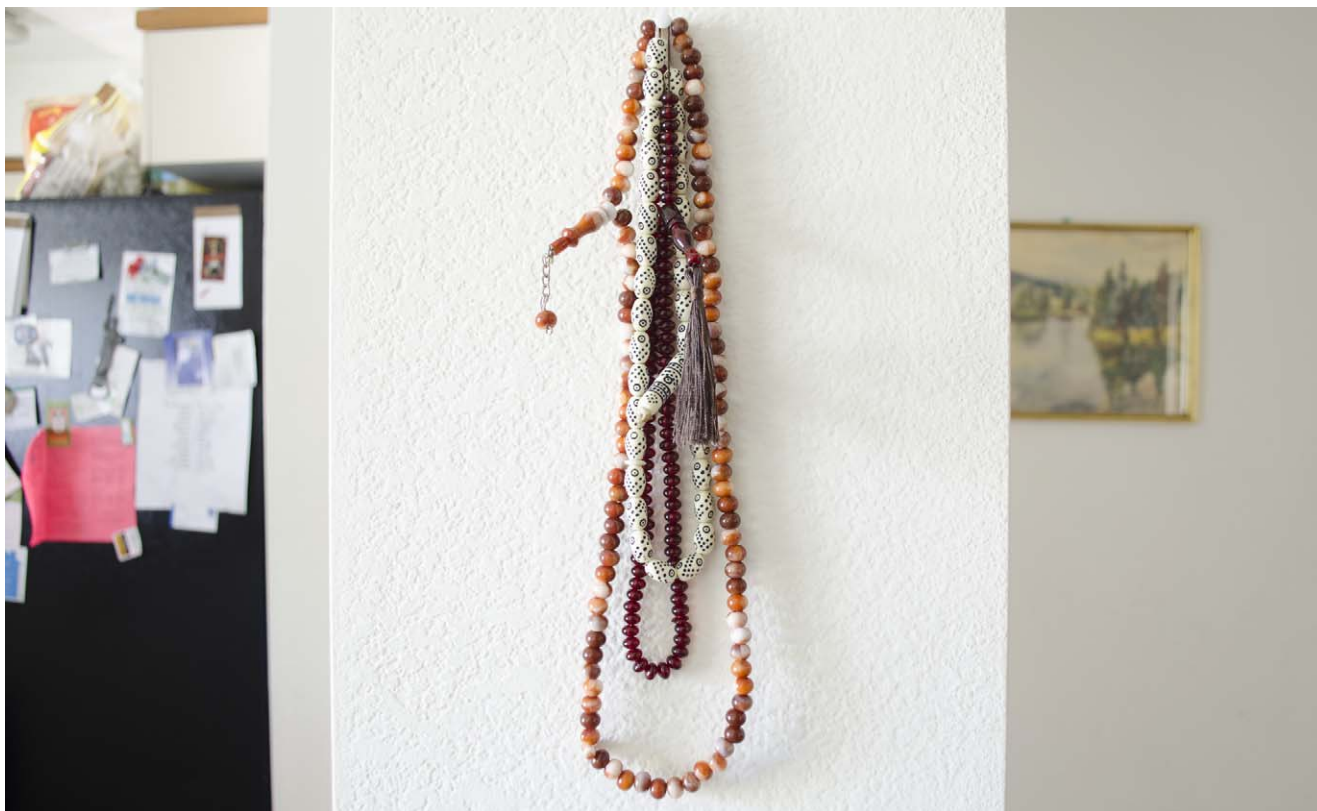
Gym towels can become prayer rugs in a pinch. Clippers keep my pubic hair trimmed as the Prophet Muhammad commanded me. Usually worn on trips to the beach, flip-flops take on a new meaning in my mosque bathroom where they are used for ritual cleanliness. While stuck in traffic I've seen drivers pull over, unfurl spare yoga mats kept in the trunk, and lay prostrate on the shoulder of the highway right before the distant sun sets into the Pacific. Each of these objects takes on different meanings through a Muslim lens.

Capturing *shari'a* in California was both challenging and illuminating. First came the realization of habit. Do I even know why I perform the rituals I do? Second was the difficulty of locating *masader*, religious sources, for those everyday practices. Finally, I worried how ancient religious texts or practices might look or sound—archaic, cryptic, crude<sup>2</sup>—to Western sensibilities, both Muslim and non-Muslim. This discomfort, however, underscored the need I felt to locate Quranic verses or hadith (teachings of the Prophet Muhammad) for each photograph, each practice in my life.

The objects depicted here, and by extension my faith, give me comfort. To represent their rawness and sanctity, the photographs are not adjusted for white balance or effect. These things symbolize the practices of my faith. The materials may be mundane, but they have come to inhabit sacred spaces. This photographic essay was produced for *Shari'a Revoiced*, a project of the University of California Humanities Research Institute, led by Mark Fathi Massoud and Kathleen M. Moore, with funding from the Henry Luce Foundation. **B**

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“O ye who believe! Celebrate the praises of Allah, and do this often.” (Quran 33:41)



“O ye who believe! When ye prepare for prayer, wash your faces, and your hands (and arms) to the elbows; rub your heads (with water); and (wash) your feet to the ankles. If ye are in a state of ceremonial impurity, bathe your whole body. But if ye are ill, or on a journey, or one of you cometh from offices of nature, or ye have been in contact with women, and ye find no water, then take for yourselves clean sand or earth, and rub therewith your faces and hands, Allah doth not wish to place you in a difficulty, but to make you clean, and to complete his favour to you, that ye may be grateful.” (Quran 5:6)





“Never stand thou forth therein. The mosque whose foundation was laid from the first day on piety is more worthy of the standing forth (for prayer) therein. In it are men who love to be purified; and Allah loveth those who make themselves pure.” (Quran 9:108)



“O you who believe! when the call is made for prayer on Friday, then hasten to the remembrance of Allah and leave off trading; that is better for you, if you know.” (Quran 62:9)



“And He hath made me blessed wheresoever I be, and hath enjoined on me Prayer and Charity as long as I live.” (Quran 19:31)



“Prophet Muhammad said: Cleanliness is half of faith.” (Narrated by Muslim 2:432)