

GLO(B)AL CITIZEN PROJECT

Name: Professor Awn Born: 1943 Lineage: Lebanese American



My father was born in Lebanon and immigrated in 1920 to a close-knit Arab community in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. At that time, the subway trains going in the direction of Manhattan actually said: “To the City.”

I went to a Jesuit Prep School—later transformed into Medgar Evers College—and afterwards, went to a seminary. The first four years were very monastic; I had no contact with the outside world and didn’t know any of the events of the Cold War.

When the U.S. warned Russia to remove its missiles from Cuba, someone just told us, “We could be at war,” and then two weeks later, “We’re not at war.” I had no idea what had happened!

After I was ordained in 1972 (I left the order in the ‘80’s as I grew out of its conservatism), I went to Harvard and received my Ph.D. in Islamic studies in ‘78. I thought Islam was fascinating, and I’ve taught it at Columbia University for 32 years. To be part of bright, young people’s lives is an extraordinary privilege—I haven’t had a boring day yet!

I still have family in Lebanon but most members live in France; I visit Paris regularly and feel comfortable there. Ironically, one of the first times I experienced discrimination was in Paris...a shocking, surreal moment. I’ve lived in Iran and Lebanon, spent time in Beirut, Marrakesh, and South Asia, but New York City is my home.