

Why I Converted to Islam

By

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I was brought up in a secular, very skeptical family. We never talked about "god"; I had no idea that such an entity was known even though at school we sang hymns and talked about Jesus quite a lot (I often joke that it wasn't til I went to school that I found out 'Jesus' was a person and not just a swear word). Apart from that my religious education was practically zero.

As I grew up I imbibed and was conditioned by the dominant culture – that of secularism, post-modernism, relativism and skepticism. I never questioned it as I took it to be normal. In my darker moments I was a nihilist and this was compounded extensively by a sound degree in Philosophy and Sociology where the last vestiges of irrational morality and religiousity were explained neatly as psychological manifestations of greater social needs and based on nothing more than convenient social constructs. I bought it all. It all made sense. It didn't make me content, but I had no reason to doubt the explanations. I was at the time also a Communist, punk, feminist, anarchist, anti-Nazi league non-believer and had actual contempt for those who professed any belief in a higher power. It was obvious to me then that the majority of "believers" were in fact weak and in need of a "father figure" to solve their problems for them, be some succour for them when it all got too much, an edged bet in regards to death and what came after and an anthropomorphisation of everything they wanted a "saviour" to be. As far as I could see this term "god" was merely a convenient tool of expediency to fill in the gaps of their oh-so regular, secular life. Religion did not change them or make them better – it was simply a value added widget. God was merely a tool to get what they wanted. God was a weak entity who did their bidding and as such I could see no reason why I needed or in fact wanted "god" in my life. I found the whole belief thing a disgusting sell-out by people too weak, too immature, not man enough to stand up to their own problems, forge their own solutions, stare death in the eye and take responsibility for their own failures. God, if there was such a thing, was an irrelevance in my life. I didn't want to be saved, I didn't fear death, I couldn't care less what happened in any form of next life (if any) and I certainly didn't have any hang ups that I wasn't prepared to work through myself. What I wanted in my life was Truth, whether it be bitter or sweet. Fiat Justicia Ruant Coeli – let justice be done though the heavens might fall, would have been an apt badge to my lapel. I wanted to know everything, I was only interested in whether

something was true – accurate, the way it actually was; other things just didn't interest me.

Right, so imagine my horror when an intelligent friend of mine turned up to her next lecture wearing a headscarf on her head and a coat down to her ankles! She had 'converted' to Islam and all of a sudden became the antithesis of everything university and secular life stood for. She didn't drink, she gave up going out, she fasted Ramadan, prayed five times a day, didn't fornicate or flirt with men.... She might as well have been dead by student standards – yet here she was with something I hadn't seen in anybody else – dignity. I grilled her endlessly about Islam and Islam's position on everything – including women (yawn), and instead of buckling to my onslaught (which I was very good at after taking a philosophy degree!) she instead made me question every unquestioned assumption I ever held. The lightbulb moment came for me when she asked "Well what sustains the Universe then?", and of course it has to be admitted that the universe is created and sustained, but I replied, "Just a power"...to which I was treated with a casual, "Well, that's "god" by definition – a power that creates and sustains the universe *is* god". God by definition – in virtue of itself is a necessity; the logic is impeccable and indisputable, and for the first time in my life I allowed myself the idea that it is, if nothing else, at least a possibility that God existed. It was a possibility for anything to exist. By allowing that door in my head which had remained firmly shut since my birth to open just a fraction I can honestly say that that was my epiphany – I really had a "lightbulb" moment. The room lighted up, a veil was lifted and I am not talking metaphorically. By unlocking the door of belief it was like something came and booted it open entirely. I was still holding the phone when I realised that there would be no going back, and the question now wasn't "is there a god" but now that that was indisputable, as the Power behind the Universe, ergo the most important thing in the Universe, the question now was "what do I do now – what is the way to god and how can I truly know".

It wasn't enough for religion to be a mere accident of birth – being Christian if I was born in a Christian country and a Buddhist if born in a Buddhist country – religion is much too important for that. But I began my "religious" life as a Christian as it was natural for me to do so. And I took it all seriously – if something is worth doing then it is worth doing well, and if God existed He deserved – by being the most important thing in existence – the best devotion you could offer.

I really took Christianity very seriously and did it as it meant to be

done – I went to a service everyday, read the Bible everyday, but the thing is it's very hard to know what to do as a Christian since doing nothing and/or everything is fine in equal measures; there was no right or wrong action/worship, nothing I needed to be doing and even I wanted to base my life on the Bible (which I did) it wasn't abundantly clear just what I had to do and how I had to do it. It made the religion almost an irrelevance. I would read the words of Jesus and want to implement the deep spirituality which they contained.... But how? It seemed like just being "nice" was all you had to do... worship was seen as almost optional since god was so "nice" that He wouldn't mind an awful lot if you didn't bother.

Added to this I was having polemics about the truth and authenticity of the Bible and it's various "versions" and it was becoming apparent that Christianity might have been an alright path to somekind of connection to God (if that Jesus character could explain why he was god and who the holy ghost was), but as nothing is 100% accurate then nothing would ever be 100% certain ergo nothing was worth undertaking or believing in 100%. Still I was a Christian for a good two years and tried to work through all these issues, but began reading about other religions too.

But I found the same problems with other religions too – sacred texts were, at best, the best of a bad situation – cobbled together half-texts based on hear-say written after any significant event had occurred. It was obvious that at the kernel of each religion there was a Truth, the same Truth as expressed in all religions. Each religion had expressed it differently, but the trends and similarities were undeniable. But still not 100% enough to convince me to sign up.

Then one day I was in a second-hand bookshop and found a copy of the Qur'an – the only text I'd put off reading – I thought I knew before I bought it that no matter what was in there I had no intention of ever being a Muslim – I wasn't interested in that religion, but it seemed fair to read this text too, and I had wanted for a long time to knock my friend's obsession with Islam into order. So I bought it and left it on the floor for a long time. Then Ramadan came and for some reason I tried to fast – from dawn until sunset, and it was then things started to happen. Whatever polemic existed, whatever religious debate and propaganda was utilised the fact remained that practicing fasting had a deep impact on me. It was like being washed from the inside out; I became highly intuitive and would have dreams that would come true the next day, I started to have strange experiences, I became connected with Something that was undeniably Divine the more I resisted giving in to my appetites; I felt secure, peaceful, I felt I had

reached a place of safety. So I started to read the Qur'an; I began with the intention of faulting it and, like so many others before me, I couldn't. I couldn't find anything to fault, no error, no contradiction, no inane babble that sounded good but meant nothing. It was precise and had a precise understanding of humanity. There was no apology to it, the path to God was clearly laid out – what He expected and what we must do – a line was firmly drawn in the sand and the reader was left with the decision of which side he wanted to stand on – with or against Allah. Well, this was quite disturbing. The affect it had on me was undeniable. So I tried the ritual prayer at the set times – again it worked at a spiritual level no matter what the Islamaphobes said about the abhorrent state of Muslims themselves (all of which has basis in truth) it was undeniable that the religion itself worked.

I continued going to Church at this point and calling myself Christian, but there was a slow drift away, and further investigation of Islam ensued. I learned the Qur'an, unlike other sacred scripts, had never been altered since it was revealed and what we have now is exactly the same Qur'an as Muhammad gave to his followers. The Qur'an cannot be deconstructed the way the Bible has been, for example, and the very fact that the text has remained inerrant for 1,400 years is a mighty feat – if nothing else one has the ability to assess an accurate text whether or not one accepts or rejects it. It hasn't been altered or lost.

One question that had always carried through with me on this "religious" search was "why did God create us, and why did He allow so many religions if only one was right". It was here that I found a satisfactory answer in Islam; from the Islamic perspective God created us so that we could worship Him – and what is worship? To realise Reality. And what is Reality? Selflessness, which is why Islam is "submission to the will of God" – the ego is negated and is pushed to the periphery whilst the Greater Reality, the Absolute is placed at the centre of everything. There is a hadith Qudsi which states "I was a hidden treasure and I willed to be known, so I created the universe", the idea being that God is beautiful and contains the virtues as we know them, which can only find meaning in creation. What is the point of being Merciful if you have no one to show mercy to? What is the point of containing the aspect of Justice if there is nothing that needs your justice? You can only understand love by loving, for example. The Sufis, especially Rumi, used the analogy that we are God's mirror, and insofar as God needs no thing or has any want being His mirror it brings a completion to His wish that He wants to be known, loved and appreciated. And we are God's mirror insofar as we live the virtuous life in remembrance of our Creator.

Islam states that all other religions were the same – they espoused “islam” ie. “Submission to the will of God”, whatever form that took from the Prophet of the time. Qur’an states that there is no nation to whom a warner has not been sent, so effectively all nations have a religion. However, over time all religions have been altered or suffered loss or been intentionally (or unintentionally) corrupted by people wishing to gain some advantage by doing so. It was this that made ultimate sense to me after researching the religions that I did. The kernel was the same, but the outer manifestations that were different – culturally overloaded.

The reason I eventually stuck with Islam was that it has a guarantee of authenticity, it claims to be the kernel of all religion but the last (and perfect) abrogation of all other manifestations which lays a clear path and foundation to deep spirituality and communion with the Divine, and most importantly – it works! God does not serve me, but I change to serve the Greater Reality. My ego is tamed, Reality is given it’s rightful place, and truth, whatever it is and wherever it is found, becomes our guiding principle. For me, Islam has changed me from a little tyrant god and a fool into a true human being; I know the worth of dignified living, beautiful manners and the need for the heart to reign over the ego.