

Abdul-Lateef Abdullah, Ex-Protestant, USA (part 1 of 2): Learning about Islam

Description: How he has learned Islam in his student life from his silat class teacher and its affect on his every day life.

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My experience in Islam began as a graduate student in New York City in 1998. Up to that point in my life, for 25 years, I had been a Protestant Christian, but had not been practicing my religion for quite some time. I was more interested in "spirituality" and looking for anything that didn't have to do with organized religion. To me, Christianity was out of touch and not relevant to the times. It was hard for me to find anything in it that I could apply to my everyday life. This dissolution with Christianity led me to shun everything that claimed to be organized religion, due to my assumption that they were all pretty much the same, or at least in terms of their lack of relevance and clarity.

Much of my frustration with Christianity stemmed from its lack of knowledge and guidance around the nature of God, and the individual's relationship to Him. To me, the Christian philosophy depended on this rather bizarre intermediary relationship that we were supposed to have with Jesus, who on one hand was a man, but was also divine. For me, however, this difficult, and very vague relationship with our Creator left me searching for something that could provide me with a better understanding of God, and our relationship to Him. Why couldn't I just pray directly to God? Why did I have to begin and end every prayer with "in the name of Jesus Christ?" How can an eternal, omnipotent Creator and Sustainer also take the form of a man? Why would He need to? These were just a few of the questions that I could not resolve and come to terms with. Thus, I was hungry for a more straightforward, direct and clear approach to religion that could provide my life with true guidance, not just dogma that was void of real knowledge based in fact.

While in graduate school, I had a Jewish roommate at the time who was a student of the martial arts. While I was living with him, he was studying an art called silat, a traditional Malaysian martial art that is based on the teachings of Islam. When my roommate would come home from his silat classes, he would tell me all about the uniqueness of silat and its rich spiritual dimension. As I was quite interested in learning martial arts at the time, I was intrigued by what I had heard, and decided to accompany my roommate to a class one Saturday morning. Although I did not realize it at the time, my experience in Islam was beginning that morning at my first silat class in New York City back on February 28th, 1998. There, I met my teacher, Cikgu (which means teacher in Malay) S., the man who would provide with my basis and orientation to Islam. Although I thought I was beginning a career as a martial artist, that day back in 1998

really represented my first step toward becoming Muslim.

From the very beginning, I was intrigued by silat and Islam and began spending as much time as possible with my teacher. As my roommate and I were equally passionate about silat, we would go to my teacher's house and soak up as much knowledge as we could from him. In fact, upon our graduation from graduate school in the spring of 1998, upon his invitation, we spent the entire summer living with him and his wife. As my learning in silat increased, so did my learning about Islam, a religion that I had hardly any knowledge of prior to my experience in silat.

What made my orientation to Islam so powerful was that as I was learning about it, I was also living it. Because I studied at the home of my teacher, being in the presence of devout Muslims allowed me to be constantly surrounded by the sounds, sights and practices of Islam. For as Islam is an entire lifestyle, when you are in an Islamic environment, you cannot separate it from everyday life. Unlike Christianity, which lends toward a separation between daily life and religion, Islam requires its followers to integrate worship of God into everything we do. Thus, in living with my teacher, I was immersed in the Islamic deen and experiencing first-hand how it can shape one's entire way of life.

In the beginning, Islam was so new, different and powerful to me. It was also very foreign in many ways and the amount of discipline it requires was difficult to understand. At the time, I was so liberal in so many ways, and was used to shunning anything dogmatic or imposed, regardless of who authored it! As time went on, however, and my understanding of Islam grew, I began to slowly see that what seemed to be religious dogma was really the lifestyle put forth to us by our Creator - or the Arabic term, "deen" of God. This lifestyle, I would later learn, is the straight path to true contentment, not just the sensual and superficial way of life that my society and culture promote. I realized that the question is quite simple actually. Who could possibly know better than the all-wise Creator, what is the best way of life for human beings?

From the day of my first silat class in New York City to the day I took my shahadah, July 30, 1999, I underwent a thorough self-examination that was comprised of two major experiences. One was the process of questioning the culture I was brought up in, and the second was struggling to understand the true nature of God and the role of religion in my everyday life. As for my culture, this one was not as difficult as most people would think. For me, growing up in America and knowing no better, it took a powerful experience, a gifted teacher, and the right knowledge to experience truth. American culture is very powerful because it constantly bombards us with sensual gratification. Unless we are removed from it, it is difficult to see its limitations, which are based on worshipping and putting faith in everything but God, the only One that can provide us with real, lasting support in our lives.

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