

WILFRIED HOFMANN, GERMAN SOCIAL SCIENTIST AND DIPLOMAT (PART 1 OF 2)

Rating: 4.6

Description: The story of how a German diplomat and ambassador to Algeria accepted Islam. Part 1.

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Published on: 16 Jan 2006

Last modified on: 21 Dec 2008

Wilfried Hofmann, German Social Scientist and Diplomat (Part 1 of 2) 2001.jpg

Dr. Hofmann, who accepted Islam in 1980, was born as a Catholic in Germany in 1931. He graduated from Union College in New York and completed his legal studies at Munich University where he received a doctorate in jurisprudence in 1957.

He became a research assistant for the reform of federal civil procedure, and in 1960 received an LL.M. degree from Harvard Law School. He was Director of Information for NATO in Brussels from 1983 to 1987. He was posted as German ambassador to Algeria in 1987 and then to Morocco in 1990 where he served for four years. He performed umrah (Lesser Pilgrimage) in 1982 and Hajj (Pilgrimage) in 1992.

Several key experiences led Dr. Hofmann to Islam. The first of these began in 1961 when he was posted to Algeria as Attaché in the German Embassy and found himself in the middle of the bloody guerilla warfare between French troops and the Algerian National Front who had been fighting for Algerian independence for the past eight years. There he witnessed the cruelty and massacre that the Algerian population endured. Every day, nearly a dozen people were killed – “close range, execution style” – only for being an Arab or for speaking for the independence. “I witnessed the patience and resilience of the Algerian people in the face of extreme suffering, their overwhelming discipline during Ramadan, their confidence of victory, as well as their humanity amidst misery.” He felt it was their religion that made them so, and therefore, he started studying their religious book – the Quran. “I have never stopped reading it, to this very day.”

Islamic art was the second experience for Dr. Hofmann in his journey to Islam. From his early life he has been fond of art and beauty and ballet dancing. All of these were overshadowed when he came to know Islamic art, which made an intimate appeal to him. Referring to Islamic art, he says: “Its secret seems to lie in the intimate and universal presence of Islam as a religion in all of its artistic manifestations, calligraphy, space filling arabesque ornaments, carpet patterns, mosque and housing architecture,

as well as urban planning. I am thinking of the brightness of the mosques which banishes any mysticism, of the democratic spirit of their architectural layout.”

“I am also thinking of the introspective quality of the Muslim palaces, their anticipation of paradise in gardens full of shade, fountains, and rivulet; of the intricate socially functional structure of old Islamic urban centers (madinahs), which fosters community spirits and transparency of the market, tempers heat and wind, and assures the integration of the mosque and adjacent welfare center for the poor, schools and hostels into the market and living quarters. What I experienced is so blissfully Islamic in so many places ... is the tangible effect which Islamic harmony, the Islamic way of life, and the Islamic treatment of space leave on both heart and mind.”

Perhaps more than all of these, what made a significant impact on his quest for the truth, was his thorough knowledge of Christian history and doctrines. He realized that there was a significant difference between what a faithful Christian believes and what a professor of history teaches at the university. He was particularly troubled by the Church’s adoption of the doctrines established by St. Paul in preference to that of historical Jesus. “He, who never met Jesus, with his extreme Christology replaced the original and correct Judeo-Christian view of Jesus!”

He found it difficult to accept that mankind is burdened with the “original sin” and that God had to have his own son tortured and murdered on the cross in order to save his own creations. “I began to realize how monstrous, even blasphemous it is to imagine that God could have been fallen short in his creation; that he could have been unable to do anything about the disaster supposedly caused by Adam and Eve without begetting a son, only to have him sacrificed in such a bloody fashion; that God might suffer for mankind, His creation.”

He went back to the very basic question of the existence of God. After analyzing works of philosophers, such as Wittgenstein, Pascal, Swinburn, and Kant, he came to an intellectual conviction of the existence of God. The next logical question he faced was how God communicates to human beings so that they can be guided. This led him to acknowledge the need for revelations. But what contains the truth – Judeo-Christian scriptures or Islam?

He found the answer to this question in his third crucial experience when he came across the following verse of the Quran:is verse opened up his eyes and provided the answer to his dilemma. Clearly and unambiguously for him, it rejected the ideas of the burden of “original sin” and the expectation of “intercession” by the saints. “A Muslim lives in a world without clergy and without religious hierarchy; when he prays he does not pray via Jesus, Mary, or other interceding saints, but directly to God – as a fully emancipated believer – and this is a religion free of mysteries.” According to Hofmann, “A Muslim is the emancipated believer par excellence.”

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