

DR. MOUSTAFA MOULD, EX-JEW, USA (PART 2 OF 5)

Rating: 5.0

Description: After a spiritual journey of almost 40 years, a Boston Jewish linguist finds Islam in Africa. Part 2.

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Published on: 29 Nov 2010

Last modified on: 14 Feb 2011

I also attended an advanced “*Madrasah*”, studying Jewish history, Hebrew, Torah, and added Aramaic and Talmud (Jewish fiqh); though the languages were still my chief interest. Also around that time, age fifteen, I lost my faith, my belief in God. Earlier, I’d concluded that if God commands us to do certain things, how can I not do them; so I tried to be more orthodox. Then, one day I found myself saying, if God says to do all this I must; but what if there is no God? Do I believe in God? I really don’t know, maybe not, I guess not. And if God doesn’t exist, I don’t need to be doing all this stuff. And I stopped. You can well imagine how upset my father was.

Many people, particularly Roman Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants who grow up in a harsh religious environment, full of the threat of Hellfire and damnation, beaten by the nuns at school and made to feel guilty about things that are merely a part of *fitrah* (nature) – like their bodies - are happy to get out of religion and in fact become very anti-religious, and feel freed as if from a prison! My feeling was not like that; I felt sad, more like I’d suffered a loss, but there was nothing I could do; I knew it would be comforting to believe, but I couldn’t. Throughout the 60’s and 70’s I occasionally got these gnawing feelings and yearnings.

As Jeffrey Lang said in his book about his conversion to Islam, there is an emptiness and a loneliness that an atheist feels, which people of faith cannot understand. The world is absurd, an accident. Science has, or will have, all the answers, but life has no real meaning or significance. Death is final. You can have influence and an impact on the world through your children; you can do well, be remembered in the history books for hundreds, even thousands of years; when the sun dies mankind may colonize other star systems, maybe even other galaxies. But ultimately, even if it takes 15 Billion years, the universe itself will die, or collapse into a black hole or whatever, and the end is absolute nothingness, the only thing that is infinite is a void. Life, then, is meaningless and death frightening. Truth and morality can become relative, which may lead to moral confusion, hedonism, and worse. But instead of the contempt for religious people that many atheists claim to feel, I respected them, and often envied them for the security, the certainty, the comfort they experienced.

I went overnight from almost orthodox to an atheist, though I still loved Jewish languages, culture, music, food and history. I was an “ethnic “ Jew, and still a Zionist. Zionism was still largely a political philosophy, not so much a religious one. In fact, at that time there was still significant opposition to Zionism among many of the orthodox. The current religious, messianic type Zionism really didn't develop until 1967 – 1973 when Israel seized Jerusalem. I also decided I wanted to be a historical linguist specializing in Semitic languages; but then the universities I chose didn't accept me, and the one that did didn't offer Arabic, or even linguistics.

At my university in the early 60's, I came into contact with a wider variety of people. For the first time I knew a large numbers of Protestants, Afro-Americans, and foreign students who were Muslims. I was no longer encountering anti-Semitism, and I was beginning to enjoy and appreciate the diversity of America and my exposure to the international students. By the end of my sophomore year I was eating bacon and pork chops; at the same time I helped organize and was the president of the campus chapter of the Student Zionist Organization. I was the New England vice president in my senior year.

Many of us were politically left-wing, coming from working class families whose spectrum ranged from liberal democrat to communist. We were pro-labor and the American Civil Liberties Union, anti-McCarty, Nixon, the House Un-American Activities Committee. We revered Franklin D. Roosevelt, Hubert Humphrey and Adlai Stevenson. We were into labor Zionism and the kibbutzim. One thing I want to emphasize, because of the profound effect it had on me years later: at that time most Jews were still socialists or liberal democrats, many were still working class, not as successful as they are now. I clearly remember right-wing Herut party, their expansionist ideology and the terrorist activities in the 40's. We considered them fanatics and lunatics.

I took a seminar on the Middle East. At nineteen I thought I knew everything. My professor was Syrian, and I think he was a Muslim. I was going to teach him a few things. He was remarkably patient and tolerant with me, considering his obvious anti-Zionist, anti-Israel position. His criticisms of my papers were objective and mild, mainly that they were too one sided. I began to pay more attention to the other side, and I realized how much propaganda I'd absorbed and how much information I had ignored. I didn't get a very good grade, but I learned a great deal. It was Professor Haddad who made it seem sensible to me that one could be secular and religious at the same time.

At the same time, I was becoming more and more involved in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements. I joined the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the NAACP, and participated in sit-ins at lunch counters. I helped found our campus chapter of the then mildly radical Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). I majored in government, taking several courses in constitutional law and international relations. I went to Washington, D.C. in August, 1963 to take part in the “March on Washington” and was standing about 60 feet from Dr. King when he made that wonderful speech.

I'd lost my faith at 15 and by 22 I'd lost Zionism. I still had my ethnic heritage, though I'd begun to feel uncomfortable with the clannishness of many Jews. I felt like a normal American fighting for American causes. I prepared to be a social studies teacher, but the job market was not good. After two years of substituting, and a temporary position at my old high school, I joined the Peace Corps, for the adventure and idealism improved my job prospects later – and to avoid being drafted and sent to Vietnam. I was selected to go to Uganda, East Africa.

I was extremely happy in that beautiful country, living where the Nile flows out of Lake Victoria, teaching students who wanted to learn in a society where teachers were respected. I was learning new languages and cultures. I developed a taste for African and Indian-Pakistani cuisine. Since there wasn't much else to do in a small, up-country town, I began going to Indian movies. I particularly liked Mohammed Rafi, the famous playback singers, especially his qawalis; he reminded me of my father's cantorial music. I also enjoyed the Islamic, Omani Arab ambience I found on the coast: Mombasa, Dar es-Salam, Zanzibar. It was the first time not in a Hollywood (or Bombay) movie that I heard the *Adhan* (the call to prayer in Islam). Even in the movies its plaintive melodies always sent a thrill through my body. I was learning two African languages, Swahili and Luganda. Swahili was a very easy one for me; over half its vocabulary is from Arabic and practically the same as Hebrew. But Swahili is a Bantu language, and I was fascinated by the similarities and differences between Swahili and Luganda. I made up my mind: here was my last chance to do what I'd always wanted – linguistics – but now with Bantu instead of Semitic languages. I applied to graduate school.

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