

Charles Le Gai Eaton, Former British Diplomat (part 5 of 6)

Description: The search for the truth of a philosopher and writer, faced with a constant internal struggle of harmonizing belief and action. Part 5: A job in Cairo.

By Gai Eaton

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Category: [Articles](#) > [Stories of New Muslims](#) > [Personalities](#)

He was right, and I faced, as I had done in Leo Myers' case and have done on many occasions since then, the extraordinary contradictions in human nature and, above all, the gulf that often separates the writer setting down his ideas on paper from the same man in his personal life. Whereas the aim in Islam is to achieve a perfect balance between different elements in the personality so that they work harmoniously together, point in the same direction and follow the same straight path, it is common enough in the West to find people who are completely unbalanced, having developed one side of themselves at the expense of all the others. I have sometimes wondered whether writing or speaking about wisdom may not be a substitute for achieving it. This is not exactly a case of hypocrisy (although the saying, 'Physician, heal thyself!' applies) since such people are entirely sincere in what they write or say, indeed this may express what is best in them; but they cannot live up to it.

After two-and-a-half years I returned to England for family reasons. Among those who had written to me after reading my book were two men deeply versed in Guenon's writings who had followed him into Islam... I met them. They told me that I might find what I was obviously seeking, not in India or China but closer to home and within the Abrahamic tradition... They asked when I intended to start practicing what I preached and seek a 'spiritual path'. It was time, they suggested gently but firmly, for me to think about incorporating into my own life what I already knew theoretically. I answered politely but evasively, having no intention of following their advice until I was much older and had exhausted the possibilities of worldly adventure. I did however begin to read about Islam with growing interest.

This interest aroused the disapproval of my closest friend who had been working in the Middle East and had developed a strong prejudice against Islam. The notion that this harsh religion had a spiritual dimension seemed to him absurd. It was, he assured me, nothing more than outward formalism, blind obedience to irrational prohibitions, repetitive prayers, narrow bigotry and hypocrisy. He told me stories of Muslim practices which, he thought, would convince me. I remember in particular the case he mentioned of a young woman dying painfully in hospital who had summoned the strength to get to her feet and move her iron bedstead so that she could die facing Mecca. My friend was sickened by the thought that she had added to her own suffering for the sake of a 'stupid superstition'. To me, on the contrary, this seemed a wonderful story. I marveled at this young woman's faith, distant as it was from any state of mind that I could imagine.

Meanwhile, I could not find work and was living in poverty. I applied for almost every job that I saw advertised, including the post of Assistant Lecturer in English Literature at Cairo University. This was foolish or so I thought. I had taken my degree at Cambridge in History and knew nothing of literature before the nineteenth century. How could they consider employing someone so unqualified? But they did consider it and then employed me. In October of 1950, at the age of 29, I set off for Cairo the very moment when my interest in Islam was taking root.

Among my colleagues was an English Muslim, Martin Lings, who made his home in Egypt. He was a friend of Guenon, a friend also of the two men with whom I had talked in London, and he was unlike any I had ever met before. He was the living embodiment of what, until then, had been no more than theories in my mind, and I knew that I had finally met someone who was all of a piece, whole and consistent. He lived in a traditional home just outside the city and to visit him and his wife, as I did almost every week, was to step out of the noisy bustle of modern Cairo and enter a timeless refuge in which the inward and the outward were undivided and in which the supposed realities of the world to which I was accustomed had but a shadowy existence.

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