

Charles Le Gai Eaton, Former British Diplomat (part 6 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 6: A seed bears fruit.

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I needed a refuge. I had fallen in love with Jamaica, if it is possible to fall in love with a place, and I hated Egypt simply because it was not Jamaica. Where were my Blue Mountains, my tropical sea, my beautiful West Indian girls? How could I ever have left the only place that had ever felt like home to me? But that was not all, far from it; I had left not only a place also a person, a young woman without whom life now seemed empty and hardly worth living. I learned then what the word 'obsession' really means; a painful lesson but a useful one for those who try to understand themselves and others. Nothing in my previous life had any value; the reality was my need for the one person who occupied my thoughts morning to night and stepped into my dreams. When, in the course of my duties, I read love poetry aloud to my students, tears ran down my cheeks and they told each other: 'Here is an Englishman with a heart. We thought all Englishmen were cold as ice!'

These students, particularly a small senior group of five or six, were also a refuge. I might hate Egypt for being 8,000 miles from where I wanted to be, but I loved these young Egyptians. I rejoiced in their warmth, openness and the trust they placed in me to teach them what they needed to know; and soon I began to love their faith, for these young people were good Muslims. I had no more doubts. If I ever found it possible to commit myself to a religion - to imprison myself in a religion - this could only be Islam. But not yet! I thought of St. Augustine's prayer: 'Lord, make me chaste, but not yet', knowing that throughout the ages other young men, thinking that they had an ocean of time before them, had prayed for chastity or piety or a better way of life, but with the same reservation; and many had been taken by death in this same state.

All things being equal, I might never have overcome my hesitations. Intending eventually to accept Islam, I might have postponed the decisive act year after year and still been saying 'Not yet!' when age crept up me. But all things were not equal. The longing for Jamaica and for that person grew instead of diminishing as the months passed, as though feeding upon itself. I awoke one morning to the realization that only lack of money prevented me from returning to the Island. I made enquiries and found that, if I traveled on the deck of a steamer, I could make the journey for £70. I was sure I could save this sum by the end of the university term, and my life was at once transformed. Knowing that escape was close, I could even begin to enjoy Cairo. But one question now demanded a firm answer, and the answer could no longer be postponed. The opportunity to enter Islam might never come again. Before me was an open door. I thought that, if I did not walk through it, that door might close forever. Yet I knew what kind of life I

would be living in Jamaica and doubted whether I would have the strength of character to live as a Muslim in that environment.

I made a decision that must, with good reason, seem shocking to most people, and not only to my fellow Muslims. I decided-as I put it to myself -to 'sow a seed' in my heart, to accept Islam at once in the hope that the seed would one day germinate and grow into a healthy plant. I will offer no excuses for this, and I would blame no one for accusing me of insincerity and a false intention. But it is possible that they may be underestimating God's readiness to forgive human weakness and His power to bring forth plant and fruit from a seed sown in barren ground. In any case, I was under a kind of compulsion and knew what I had to do. I went to Martin Lings, poured out my story and asked him to give me the Shahadah, in other words to accept my Testimony of Faith. Although hesitant at first, he did so. Full of fear and yet joyful, I prayed for the first time in my life. Next day, for this was Ramadan, I fasted, something that I could never have imagined myself doing. Soon afterwards I told my senior students the news and their delight was like a warm embrace. I had thought previously that I was close to them, but now I understood that there had always been a barrier between us. Now the barrier was down, and I was accepted as their brother. In the six weeks that remained before my secret departure (I had not told my Head of Department that I was leaving) one of them came every day to teach me Quran. I looked at my reflection in the mirror. The face was the same, but it masked a different person. I was a Muslim! Still in a state of amazement I boarded ship in Alexandria and sailed away to an uncertain future.

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