

Description: Islam evolving in the heart. Part 5.

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Three Conditions

I ended up thinking about the heartache I felt for my family, so I decided to wait until three things were clear before I would embrace Islam.

1. My wife accepted the religion as I had done.
2. She agreed to leave her job and come and live with me in Saudi Arabia.
3. A (personal) problem she and I had between us was overcome.

In other words, I vowed I would wait until all conditions were optimum and would not become officially Muslim until they were.

I began talking to my wife about what I had found out. Although I was trying not to sound overboard, my amazement at what I had found and my endorsement of it must have been overwhelming. I wrote e-mail after e-mail, and chatted lengthily on msn. I read constantly and widely anything about Islam I found on the net, especially arguments Muslims made through Biblical support for the religion. My enthusiasm for the discovery that Islam was just an extension of our religion purified, you might say, from its errors, must have impinged sharply on her to the extent that she became dismayed, and she was finally driven to comment, "it sounds like you have converted."

This made me pause because I realised that I had already made the step in my heart, if not by my mouth, and my response reflected that.

"Actually, I have."

From that moment on, my wife kept on criticising me for not consulting her before I made such a big decision. My constant defence was that I hadn't officially converted yet, though I had in my heart. This argument derailed my efforts to convert her, and led to very tense and painful cohabitation during the next few holidays I took that Christmas and the following three summers. But that is another story.

The Mosque and the Orphans

In the meanwhile, I had my first experience of praying with Muslims. One weekend, I was walking back from the centre of town in the evening after an afternoon of shopping. I had bought some 'native' clothing, and wanted to try them out. In fact, I was wearing

one of the dress-like 'thobes' I had just bought, and carrying the other with my 'western' clothes in a carrier bag. The sun was westering as I started for home, and set when I was about half-way there. The call for prayer blared from a small mosque I was approaching, and was echoed by the hundreds of mosques near and far through the city. Shutters were rattling down, and goods in the street were being covered with plastic and sail cloth. Men started streaming from the shops and houses to the mosques. It was impressive! A call from the minaret responded to in an instant. I decided I wanted to see what Muslim prayer was all about.

I tentatively followed the stragglers in as the prayer began and watched them line up behind the two lines already formed. They raised their hands as they joined the line and then folded them over their chests. It looked easy enough, and I tagged on to the end of the line. Several children joined the line after me, forming a kind of restless addendum. As the men alongside me bowed and prostrated, I copied their movements as best as I could, looking sideways out of the corner of my eye. They were oblivious to me, each one concentrating on some point directly before them, eyes lowered. Their communion with God was palpable, and I tried to share in the channel they had tapped, despite not having the same words to do so.

"Oh God! Help me to fulfil my vow, and persuade my wife. Guide me to You, and guide my family. I believe in You, the only God, and not in human beings as gods."

I repeated the prayer, over and over, like a mantra. I don't think I reached the same level of communion as my companions, but my heart felt better when the prayer was over. As I pulled on my shoes and socks, two of the children who had lined up beside me came over.

"Anta Muslim? Limada tusalli? 'adam wa'dha al yedduka al yameen ala shimal."

The kids had spotted that I was a total greenhorn, and had serious doubts whether I actually belonged. They showed me how I should have positioned my hands, how I should have prostrated and bowed, how I should have placed my feet and so on. Of course, I didn't have a word of Arabic, so I was just aware that they thought I needed a lot of coaching if I was to pass off being a bone fide member of the congregation. They signalled that I should follow them so they could take me to their home and hand me over to their elder brother.

I was a bit wary of going into the door, in case they meant for me to wait outside, but one of the children came back when I didn't follow them in. He made the 'come on' motion again, and then signalled that I should go right as I entered, and through a hanging bead screen. Inside was a sitting room with typical Arab floor cushions. A young teenager, maybe 15 or 16, stood up from his comfortable lounging position to greet me.

The older brother was very hospitable, but couldn't help me understand the children and what they were getting at. He served me Arabic coffee in tiny cups and invited me to share some dates. I was curious why children were entertaining me, the older boy being just a teenager. Where were their parents?

"Where's your mama and papa?" I asked.

But he either didn't understand or could not explain in sign language. He gestured that I should wait, so I guessed they would be home, soon. However, instead of a grown man, it was another youngster, barely out of his teens, who rolled in just before the evening prayer. He looked surprised at seeing me in the sitting room with his brother, and a few words were exchanged.

"Ameriki?"

I shook my head. "No, British."

"Welcome. Welcome. Coffee?"

Again I shook my head; I had had enough.

He stood up and indicated I should follow. "*Tawadha*," he said, meaning "let's make ablution!" He rubbed his hands together. "Wash; go *masjid*."

He wanted me to get ready to go to the mosque for the evening prayer.

"Put hand," he said, lifting my right hand, "on this!" he said, placing it over my left hand and then lifted them both so they rested on my chest. We were walking across the road, and we stopped right in the middle of it for the lesson as if cars did not exist. He indicated the prayer by lifting his two hands to his ears. "Do like me!"

I lined up beside him, and this time made a better job of the movements.

When we got back home, dinner was served on a kind of tablecloth on the floor. I asked him, "Your mama?"

'Mama' seems to be an international or universal means of indicating a mother. He shook his head, and made a sleeping gesture and then a downward movement of the open palm towards the ground. "*Baba wa mama fiy mout,yarhamhummullah*. Sister make."

So they were orphans, and this young man and his sister had shouldered the responsibility of the family. His English was not the best, so the conversation was desultory. He asked, "You like Islam?"

I said I did.

"Why you not Muslim?"

I needed time.

He offered me a lift home. "You need help, any time visit," he said as he dropped me off.

I thanked him.

Then the words I was to hear a thousand times over emerged from his mouth. "Any Service?"

The kindness of that orphan family has never left me. I was really touched at the care

they had shown, and appreciated their sincere attempts at guiding me. But the person who had the greatest effect in my initiation was a man yet to arrive on the scene. He was a green card Iranian looking for American nationality, and he was about to blow into my life.

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