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(part 1 of 2): Learning about Islam



My experience in Islam began as a graduate student in New York City in 1998. Up to that point in my life, for 25 years, I had been a Protestant Christian, but had not been practicing my religion for quite some time. I was more interested in “spirituality” and looking for anything that didn’t have to do with organized religion. To me, Christianity was out of touch and not relevant to the times. It was hard for me to find anything in it that I could apply to my everyday life. This dissolution with Christianity led me to shun everything that claimed to be organized religion, due to my assumption that they were all pretty much the same, or at least in terms of their lack of relevance and clarity.

Much of my frustration with Christianity stemmed from its lack of knowledge and guidance around the nature of God, and the individual’s relationship to Him. To me, the Christian philosophy depended on this rather bizarre intermediary relationship that we were supposed to have with Jesus, who on one hand was a man, but was also divine. For me, however, this difficult, and very vague relationship with our Creator left me searching for something that could provide me with a better understanding of God, and our relationship to Him. Why couldn’t I just pray directly to God? Why did I have to begin and end every prayer with “in the name of Jesus Christ?” How can an eternal, omnipotent Creator and Sustainer also take the form of a man? Why would He need to? These were just a few of the questions that I could not resolve and come to terms with. Thus, I was hungry for a more straightforward, direct and clear approach to religion that could provide my life with true guidance, not just dogma that was void of real knowledge based in fact.

While in graduate school, I had a Jewish roommate at the time who was a student of the martial arts. While I was living with him, he was studying an art

called silat, a traditional Malaysian martial art that is based on the teachings of Islam. When my roommate would come home from his silat classes, he would tell me all about the uniqueness of silat and its rich spiritual dimension. As I was quite interested in learning martial arts at the time, I was intrigued by what I had heard, and decided to accompany my roommate to a class one Saturday morning. Although I did not realize it at the time, my experience in Islam was beginning that morning at my first silat class in New York City back on February 28th, 1998. There, I met my teacher, Cikgu (which means teacher in Malay) S., the man who would provide with my basis and orientation to Islam. Although I thought I was beginning a career as a martial artist, that day back in 1998 really represented my first step toward becoming Muslim.

From the very beginning, I was intrigued by silat and Islam and began spending as much time as possible with my teacher. As my roommate and I were equally passionate about silat, we would go to my teacher's house and soak up as much knowledge as we could from him. In fact, upon our graduation from graduate school in the spring of 1998, upon his invitation, we spent the entire summer living with him and his wife. As my learning in silat increased, so did my learning about Islam, a religion that I had hardly any knowledge of prior to my experience in silat.

What made my orientation to Islam so powerful was that as I was learning about it, I was also living it. Because I studied at the home of my teacher, being in the presence of devout Muslims allowed me to be constantly surrounded by the sounds, sights and practices of Islam. For as Islam is an entire lifestyle, when you are in an Islamic environment, you cannot separate it from everyday life. Unlike Christianity, which lends toward a separation between daily life and religion, Islam requires its followers to integrate worship of God into everything we do. Thus, in living with my teacher, I was immersed in the Islamic deen and experiencing first-hand how it can shape one's entire way of life.

In the beginning, Islam was so new, different and powerful to me. It was also very foreign in many ways and the amount of discipline it requires was difficult to understand. At the time, I was so liberal in so many ways, and was used to shunning anything dogmatic or imposed, regardless of who authored it! As time went on, however, and my understanding of Islam grew, I began to slowly see that what seemed to be religious dogma was really the lifestyle put forth to us by our Creator – or the Arabic term, “deen” of God. This lifestyle, I would later learn, is the straight path to true contentment, not just the sensual and superficial way of life that my society and culture promote. I realized that the question is quite simple actually. Who could possibly know better than the all-wise Creator, what is the best way of life for human beings?

From the day of my first silat class in New York City to the day I took my shahadah, July 30, 1999, I underwent a thorough self-examination that was

comprised of two major experiences. One was the process of questioning the culture I was brought up in, and the second was struggling to understand the true nature of God and the role of religion in my everyday life. As for my culture, this one was not as difficult as most people would think. For me, growing up in America and knowing no better, it took a powerful experience, a gifted teacher, and the right knowledge to experience truth. American culture is very powerful because it constantly bombards us with sensual gratification. Unless we are removed from it, it is difficult to see its limitations, which are based on worshipping and putting faith in everything but God, the only One that can provide us with real, lasting support in our lives.

(part 2 of 2): How Islam has changed my life!

Being a social scientist by trade, much of my time is spent working on and pondering over the ills and dilemmas of our society. As I learned more about Islam, I came to the conclusion that societal ills are based primarily on unhealthy, dysfunctional social behaviors. Since Islam is a lifestyle focused totally on the most healthy, positive way of conducting our lives in every setting, then it is, and will always be, the only true answer to any society's social dilemmas. With this realization, not only did I decide that Islam was relevant to my everyday life, but I began to understand why it is so different from other religions. Only Islam provides knowledge and guidance for every aspect of life. Only Islam provides a way to achieve health and happiness in every dimension of life – physical, spiritual, mental, financial, etc. Only Islam provides us with a clear life goal and purpose. And only Islam shows us how to live in and contribute to a community, not just talk about it. Islam is what everyone needs, and what so many who have not found it yet, are searching for. It is the path to purpose, meaning, health and happiness. This is because it is the straight path to the source of all the power we could ever need – God.

It was only until I actually became Muslim that I realized just how encompassing our lifestyle truly is. Literally everything we are instructed to do has one underlying purpose – to remember God. It just shows the absolute and divine brilliance of the [religion], in that there is a lifestyle that can show you how to remember your Creator in as simple an act as greeting someone, or getting dressed in the morning, or waking up from sleep. Islam shows us that by constantly remembering God, everything we do becomes focused on Him, and thus becomes an act of worship. From this, our energy, our thoughts, and our actions all become redirected away from unhealthy and useless causes, and focused on the source of all goodness. Thus, we are continuously tapping into His divine strength, mercy and grace. So, by remembering God constantly, we become stronger, better, and healthier in every aspect of our lives.

There were, and still are, aspects of Islam that have proven at least somewhat difficult for me. Nevertheless, I thank God everyday for the ease to which he has allowed me to make the necessary changes in my life so that I can continue to live in America and still be, Insha-Allah [God-willing], a good Muslim. As a white, middle-class American, many of the cultural aspects of Islam are quite different from what I, and those close to me throughout my life, have been used to. In fact, when I finally broke the news to my family that I had taken my *shahada* [testimony of faith] and become Muslim, almost all of their questions and concerns were related to cultural differences – marriage, social life, family, etc. They were much less concerned about my general beliefs around God and religious practice. For my family, friends, and co-workers, becoming Muslim was not seen necessarily as a negative change, but it has required a great deal of education for them about Islam. In fact, as with my own education, this process of sharing the truth about Islam with them is never-ending because there is no limit to how much knowledge we can acquire, and it is the responsibility of every one of us to share whatever right knowledge we have.

Because acquiring right knowledge is such a critical component to a Muslim's development, having a teacher who has taught me how to apply Islam in everyday life that has made all the difference for me and helped me in managing whatever difficulties I have experienced from my reversion. Having someone knowledgeable you can turn to whenever you have questions is a wonderful support that every new [Muslim] should go out of their way to find. Islam is not a religion that can be rationalized, in the way that Christianity and Judaism have been over the ages. It is a clear path that must be followed exactly as God laid for us through the life of our beloved Prophet Muhammad his companions, and the scholars of Islam.

In this day and age, in this society, discerning the path can often be difficult, especially when we are constantly faced with questions and doubts from people who on the surface may not be hostile to Islam, but whose general lack of faith can have a harmful effect on someone who bases everything they do on their love for God. It is also not easy being in an environment where we are constantly bombarded with sensual temptations which are seen as ordinary, common aspects of everyday life. But when we have the support of a knowledgeable, experienced teacher, who is able to apply the universal teachings of Islam to his life, then the truth becomes clear from error, exactly how God describes in the Quran. From this, we are able to understand how to apply Islam correctly to our own lives, and thus receive God's many blessings. The ultimate test, however, of anyone who claims to have true and right knowledge, is to look at how they apply it in their own lives. If their actions support their teachings, then and only then should we look to them for guidance.

My journey to Islam, although short, has been a life-altering experience. It is one that with every passing day makes me more and more appreciative and thankful to Almighty God. The extent of His mercy can only fully be understood from the perspective of someone who prostrates themselves regularly and submits their will to that of the Creator. This is what I strive for through Islam, and part of what *jihad* is. It is the struggle that we must fight every moment of every day, but one that we love, because we know Who to turn to for support and Who is helping us along.

I look back at my life prior to Islam and reflect on the different ways I sought guidance. I think back to all the different ideas I once had of who God really is, and how we can become close to Him. I look back now and smile and perhaps even shed a tear because now I know the truth. Through Islam, I know why so many people who do not believe have so much fear inside them. Life can be very scary without God. I know, because I once harbored that same level of fear. Now, however, I have the ultimate “self-help” program. It’s the self-help program without the self. It’s the path that puts everything in its proper place. Now, life makes sense. Now, life is order. Now, I know why I am here, where I want to go, what I want my life to be, how I want to live, and what is most important not just to me, but to everyone. I only hope and pray that others who have not found the path yet, can feel the same that I do. Alhamdulillah rabbi alameen. [All praise and thanks are for Allah, the Lord and Cherisher of all creation].