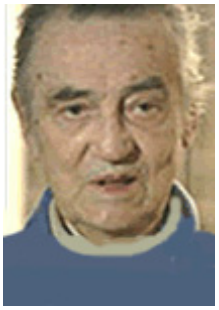
Charles Le Gai Eaton, Former British Diplomat

(part 1 of 6)



I was born in Switzerland of British parents, a child of war. At the time of my birth, the final peace treaty ending the first world war, the treaty with Turkey, was being signed close by in Lausanne. The greatest tempest which had changed the face of the world had temporarily exhausted itself, but its effects were everywhere apparent. Old certainties and the morality based upon them had been dealt a mortal blow. But my family background was stained with the blood of conflict. My father already 67 when I was born, had been born during the wars against Napoleon Bonaparte. Both had been soldiers....

Even so, I might at least have had a homeland. I had none. Although born in Switzerland, I was not Swiss. My mother had grown up in France and loved the French above all others, but I was not French. Was I English? I never felt so. My mother never tired of reminding me that the English were cold, stupid, and sexless without intellect and without culture. I did not want to be like them. So where-if anywhere-did I belong? It seems to me in retrospect, that this strange childhood was a good preparation for adherence to Islam. Wherever he may have been born and whatever his race, the Muslim's homeland is the Dar-ul-Islam, the House of Islam. His passport, here and in the Hereafter, is the simple confession of Faith, La ilaha ill-Allah. He does not expect - or should not expect - security or stability in this world and must always keep in mind the fact that death may take him tomorrow. He has no firm roots here in this fragile earth. His roots are above in that which alone endures.

But what of Christianity? If my father had any religious convictions he never expressed them, although - on his death bed, approaching 90 - he asked: 'Is there a happy place?' My upbringing was left entirely to my mother. By temperament, she was not, I think, irreligious, but she had grown up within a religious framework, and she was hostile to what is commonly called organized religion. Of one thing she was certain; her son must be left free to think for himself and never be forced to accept second-hand opinions. She was determined to protect me from having religion 'crammed down my throat'. She warned a succession of nursemaids who came and went in the

house and accompanied us to France during the holidays that, if they ever mentioned religion to me, they would at once be dismissed. When I was five or six, however, her orders flouted by a young woman whose ambition it was to become a missionary in Arabia, saving the souls of those benighted people who were - she told me - lost in a pagan creed called 'moslemism'. This was the first I had heard of Arabia, and she drew me a map of that mysterious land.

One day she took me for a walk past Wandsworth Prison (we were living in Wandsworth Common at the time). I must have misbehaved some way, for she gripped me roughly by the arm, pointed to the prison gates and said: 'There's a red haired man in the sky who will shut you in there if you're naughty!' This was the first I had heard of 'God', and I did not like what I heard. For some reason I was afraid of men with red hair (as she must have known), and this particular one living above the clouds and dedicated to punishing naughty boys sounded very frightening. I asked my mother about him as soon as we got home. I do not remember what she said to comfort me, but the girl was promptly dismissed.

Eventually, much later than most children, I was sent to school or rather to a series of schools in England and in Switzerland before arriving, aged 14, at Charterhouse. Surely, with services in the school chapel and classes in 'Scripture', Christianity should have made some impact upon me? It made no impact at all, either upon me or upon my school friends. This does not seem to me surprising. Religion cannot survive, whole and effective when it is confined to one single compartment of life and education. Religion is either all or it is nothing; either it dwarfs all profane studies or it is dwarfed by them. Once or twice a week we were taught about the Bible just as we were instructed in other subjects in other classes. Religion, it was assumed had nothing to do with the more important studies which formed the backbone of our education. God did not interfere in historical events, He did not determine the phenomena we studied in science classes, He played no part in current events, and the world, governed entirely by chance, and by material forces, was to be understood without reference to anything that might -or might not -exist beyond its horizons. God was surplus to requirements....

And yet I needed to know the meaning of my own existence. Only those who, at some time in their lives, have been possessed by such a need can guess at its intensity, comparable to that of physical hunger or sexual desire. I did not see how I could put one foot in front of the other unless I understood where I was going and why. I could do nothing unless I understood what part my action played in the scheme of things. All I knew I knew was that I knew nothing - nothing, that is to say, of the slightest importance - and I was paralyzed by my ignorance as though immobilized in a dense fog.

Where should I seek for knowledge? By the time I was 15, I had discovered that there was something called ‘philosophy’ and that the word meant ‘love of wisdom’. Wisdom was what I sought, so the satisfaction of my need must lie hidden in these heavy books written by wise men. With a feeling of intense excitement, like an explorer already in sight of the undiscovered land, I ploughed through Descartes, Kant, Hume, Spinoza, Schopenhauer and Bertrand Russell, or else read works which explained their teachings. It was not long before I realized that something was wrong. I might as well have been eating sand as seeking nourishment from this quarter. These men knew nothing. They were only speculating, spinning ideas out of their own poor heads, and anyone can speculate (including a school boy). How could a 15 or 16-year-old have had the impudence to dismiss the whole of Western secular philosophy as worthless? One does not have to be mature to distinguish between what the Quran calls dhann (‘opinion’) and true Knowledge. At the same time my mother’s constant insistence that I should take no notice of what others thought or said obliged me to trust my own judgment. Western culture treated these ‘philosophers’ as great men, and students in universities studied their works with respect. But what was that to me?

Some time later, when I was in the sixth-form, a master who took a particular interest in me made a strange remark which I did not at understand. ‘You are’, he said, ‘the only truly universal skeptic I have known’. He was not referring specifically to religion. He meant that I seemed to doubt everything that was taken for granted by everyone else. I wanted to know why it should be assumed that our rational powers, so well adapted to finding food, shelter and a mate, had an application beyond the mundane realm. I was puzzled by the notion that the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ was supposed to be binding on those who were neither Jews nor Christians, and I was no less baffled as to why in a world full of beautiful women, the rule of monogamy should be thought to have a universal application. I even doubted my own existence. Long afterwards I came across the story of the Chinese sage, Chuangtzu, who, having dreamed one night that he was a butterfly, awoke to question whether he was in fact the man Chuangtzu, who had dreamed that he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that it was Chuangtzu. I understood his dilemma.

Yet, when my teacher made this remark, I had already discovered a key to what might be a more certain knowledge. By chance - although there is no such thing as ‘chance’ – I had come across a book called ‘The Primordial Ocean’ by a certain Professor Perry, an Egyptologist. The professor had a fixed idea that the ancient Egyptians had traveled to part of the world in their papyrus boats spreading their religion, mythology, far and wide. To prove his case, he had spent many years researching ancient mythologies, and also the myths and symbols of ‘primitive’ peoples in our own time. What he revealed was an astonishing unanimity of belief, however different the images in which that belief was expressed. He had not proved his theory about the papyrus boats; he had, I thought, proved something quite different. It seemed that,

behind the tapestry of forms and images, there were certain universal truths regarding the nature of reality, the creation of the world and of mankind, and the meaning of the human experience; truths which were as much a part as our blood and our bones.

One of the principal causes of unbelief in the modern world is the plurality of religions which appear mutually contradictory. So long as the Europeans were convinced of their own racial superiority, they had no reason to doubt that Christianity was the only true Faith. The notion that they were the crown of the 'evolutionary process' made it easy to assume that all other religions were no more than naive attempts to answer perennial questions. It was when this racial self-confidence declined that doubts crept in. How was it possible for a good God to allow the majority of human beings to live and die in the service of false religions? Was it any longer possible for the Christian to believe that he alone was saved? Others made the same claim - Muslims, for example - so how could anyone be sure who was right and who was wrong? For many people, including myself until I came to Perry's book, the obvious conclusion was that, since everyone could not be right, everyone must be wrong. Religion was an illusion, the product of wishful thinking. Others might have found it possible to substitute 'scientific truth' for religious 'myths'. I could not, since science was founded upon assumptions regarding the infallibility of reason and the reality of sense-experience which could never be proved.

When I read Perry's book I knew nothing of the Quran. That came much later, and what little I had heard of Islam was distorted by prejudices accumulated during a thousand years of confrontation. And yet, had I but known it, I had already taken a step in the direction of Christianity's great rival. The Quran assures us that no people on earth was ever left without divine guidance and a doctrine of truth, conveyed through a messenger of God who always spoke to the people in their own 'language', therefore in terms of their particular circumstances and according to their needs. The fact that such messages become distorted in the course of time goes without saying, and no one should be surprised if truth is distorted as it passes from generation to generation, but it would be astonishing if no vestiges remained after the passage of the centuries. It now seems to me entirely in accordance with Islam to believe that these vestiges, clothed in myth and symbol (the 'language' of the people of earlier times), are directly descended from revealed Truth and confirm the final Message.

(part 3 of 6)

From Charterhouse I went on to Cambridge, where I neglected my official studies, which seemed trivial and boring, in favor of the only study that mattered. The year was 1939. War had broken out just before I had gone up to the University and, in two years time, I would be in the army. It seemed likely, after all, that the Germans would succeed in killing me as I had always thought they would. I had only a little time in which to find answers to the questions

which still obsessed me, but this did not draw me to any organized religion. Like most of my friends, I was contemptuous of the Churches and of all who paid lip-service to a God they did not know; but I was soon obliged to moderate this hostility. I remember the scene clearly after more than half-a-century. A few of us lingered on, drinking coffee, after the evening meal in the Hall of King's College. The conversation turned to religion. At the head of the table sat an undergraduate who was universally admired for his brilliance, his wit and his sophistication. Hoping to impress him and taking advantage of a brief silence, I said: 'No intelligent person nowadays believes in the God of religion!' He looked at me rather sadly before answering: 'On the contrary, nowadays intelligent people are the only ones who do believe in God,' I would willingly have sunk out of sight under the table.

I had, however, a wise friend, a man forty years my senior, whom I found totally convincing. This was the writer L. H. Myers, described at that time as 'the only philosophical novelist England has produced'. Not only did his major work, 'The Root and the Flower', answer many of these questions that gnawed at me, but they conveyed a marvelous sense of serenity united with compassion. It seemed to me that serenity was the greatest treasure that one could possess in this life and that compassion was the greatest virtue. Here, surely, was a man whom no tempest shake and who surveyed the turmoil of human existence with the eye of wisdom. I wrote to him, and he replied promptly. For the next three years we wrote to each other at least twice every month. I poured my heart out to him, while he, convinced that he had at last found in this young admirer someone who truly understood him, replied in the same vein. Eventually we met, and this cemented our friendship.

Yet everything was not as it seemed. I began to detect in his letters a note of inner torment, sadness and disillusionment. When 1 asked him if he put all his serenity into his books, leaving nothing for himself, he replied: 'I think your comment was shrewd and probably true'. He had given his whole life to the pursuit of pleasure and of 'experiences' (both sublime and sordid, so he said). Few women, in high society or low, had been able to resist his astonishing combination of wealth, charm and good look, He, for his part, had no reason to resist their seductions. Fascinated by spirituality and mysticism, he adhered to no religion and obeyed no conventional moral law. Now he felt that he was growing old, and he could not face the prospect. He had tried to change himself and even repent his past, but it was too late. Little more than three years after our correspondence had begun, he committed suicide.

My affection for him endured and, in due course, I named my eldest son after him, but Leo Myers' death taught me more than I could ever learned from his books, although it required some years for me to understand its full significance. His wisdom had been only in his head. It had never penetrated his human substance. A man might spend a life reading spiritual books and studying the writings of the great mystics. He might feel that he had penetrated the secrets of the heavens and the earth, but unless this knowledge was incorporated into his very nature and transformed him, it was sterile. I began to

suspect that a simple man of faith, praying to God with little understanding but with a full heart, might be worth more than the most learned student of the spiritual sciences.

Myers had been profoundly influenced by a study of Hindu Vedanta, the metaphysical doctrine at the core of Hinduism. My mother's interest Raja Yoga had already pointed me in this direction. Vedanta now became my principal interest and, ultimately, the path that led me to Islam. This would seem shocking to most Muslims and astonishing to anyone who is aware that the very basis of Islam is an uncompromising condemnation of idolatry, and yet my case is by no means unique. Whatever may be the beliefs of the Hindu masses, Vedanta is a doctrine of pure unity, of the unique Reality, and therefore of what, in Islam, is called Tawheed. Muslims more than others, should have little difficulty in understanding that a doctrine of Unity underlies all the religions which have nourished mankind since the beginning, whatever idolatrous illusions may have overlaid 'the jewel in the lotus' just as, in the individual, personal idolatry overlays the heart's core. How could it be otherwise, since Tawheed is Truth and, in the words of a great Christian mystic, 'Truth is native to man'?

All too soon my time at Cambridge was ended and I was sent to The Royal Military College, Sandhurst, emerging after five months as a young officer supposedly ready to kill or be killed. To learn more about the arts of war I was then dispatched on what was called 'attachment' to a regiment in the north of Scotland. Here I was left to my own devices and occupied my time either reading or walking on the granite cliffs above the raging northern sea. This was a stormy place, but I felt at peace as I had never done before. The more I read of Vedanta and also of the ancient Chinese doctrine of Taoism, the more certain I was that I at last had some understanding of the nature of things and had glimpsed, if only in thought and imagination, the ultimate Reality beside which all else was little more than a dream. As yet I was not prepared to call this Reality 'God', let alone Allah.

(part 4 of 6)

When I left the army I began to write, needing to express my thoughts as a way of putting them in order. I wrote about Vedanta, Taoism and Zen Buddhism, but also about certain Western writers (including Leo Myers) who had been influenced by these doctrines. Through a chance meeting with the poet T. S. Eliot, who was at that time head of a publishing firm, these essays were published under the title 'The Richest Vein', a quotation taken from Thoreau: 'My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snouts or forepaws, and with it I would burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabout…' But by now I had a new guide through the hills. I had discovered Rene Guenon, a Frenchman who had lived the greater part of his life in Cairo as the Sheikh Abdul Wahed.

Guenon undermined and then; with uncompromising intellectual rigor, demolished all the assumptions taken for granted by modern man, that is to say Western or westernized man. Many others had been critical of the direction taken by European civilization since the so-called 'Renaissance', but none had dared to be as radical as he was or to re-assert with such force the principles and values which Western culture had consigned to the rubbish tip of history. His theme was the 'primordial tradition' or Sofia perennis, expressed-so he maintained-both in ancient mythologies and in the metaphysical doctrine at the root of the great religions. The language of this Tradition was the language of symbolism, and he had no equal in his interpretation of this symbolism. Moreover he turned the idea of human progress upside down, replacing it with the belief almost universal before the modern age, that humanity declines in spiritual excellence with the passage of time and that we are now in the Dark Age which precedes the End, an age in which all the possibilities rejected by earlier cultures have been spewed out into the world, quantity replaces quality and decadence approaches its final limit. No one who read him and understood him could ever be quite the same again.

Like others whose outlook had been transformed by reading Guenon, I was now a stranger in the world of the twentieth century. He had been led by the logic of his convictions to accept Islam, the final Revelation and, as it were, the summing-up of all that came before. I was not yet ready for this, but I soon learned to conceal my opinions or at least to veil them. No one can live happily in constant disagreement with his fellow men and women, nor can he engage in argument with them since he does not share their basic, unspoken assumptions. Argument and discussion pre-supposes some common ground shared by those involved. When no common ground exists, confusion and misunderstanding are unavoidable, if not anger. The beliefs which are the very basis of contemporary culture are held no less passionately than unquestioning religious faith, as was illustrated during the conflict over Salman Rushdie's novel, 'The Satanic Verses'.

Occasionally I forgot my resolve not to become involved in fruitless argument. Some years ago I was a guest at a diplomatic dinner party in Trinidad. The young woman beside me was talking with a Christian Minister, an Englishman, seated opposite. I was only half attending to their conversation when I heard her say that she was not sure she believed in human progress. The Minister answered her so rudely and with such contempt that I could not resist the temptation to say: 'She's quite right - there's no such thing as progress!' He turned on me, his face contorted with fury, and said: 'If I thought that I would commit suicide this very night!' Since suicide is as great a sin for Christians as it is for Muslims, I understood for the first time the extent to which faith in progress, in a 'better future' and, by implication, in the possibility of a paradise on earth has replaced faith in God and in the hereafter. In the writings of the renegade priest Teilhard de Chardin, Christianity itself was reduced to a religion of progress. Deprive the modern Westerner of this faith and he is lost in a wilderness without signposts.

By the time ‘The Richest Vein’ was published, I had left England for Jamaica where I had a school friend who would, I knew, find me work of some kind. I had been described on the book’s cover as ‘a mature thinker’. The adjective ‘mature’ was singularly inappropriate: as a man, as a personality, I had barely emerged from adolescence, and Jamaica was an ideal place to work out adolescent fantasies. Only those with some experience of West Indian life in the immediate post-war years could understand the delights and temptations which it offered to those seeking ‘experience’ and sexual adventure. Like Myers, I had no moral print such as might have restrained me. I was embarrassed when I began to receive letters from people who had read my book and imagined that I was an old man –‘with a long white beard’, as one of them wrote - full of wisdom and compassion. I wished I could disillusion them as quickly as possible and be rid of the responsibility they were putting upon me. One day a Catholic priest arrived in the Island to stay with friends; he had, he told them, just been reading a ‘fascinating book’ by someone called Gai Eaton. He was astonished to hear that the author was actually in Jamaica and asked how he could meet me. His friends took him to a party at which they were told I might be found. He was introduced and, seeing before him such a foolish young man, gave me a long hard look. Then he shook his head in amazement and said quietly: ‘You couldn’t have written that book!’

(part 5 of 6)

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.

(part 6 of 6)

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.