

MARGARET MARCUS, EX-JEW, USA (PART 1 OF 5)

Rating: 4.3

Description: Margaret discusses her early childhood of Sunday school, leaving and scorning all organized religion, and a class she took about Judaism and Islam in university.

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Q: Would you kindly tell us how your interest in Islam began?

A: I was Margaret (Peggy) Marcus. As a small child, I possessed a keen interest in music and was particularly fond of the classical operas and symphonies considered high culture in the West. Music was my favorite subject in school in which I always earned the highest grades. By sheer chance, I happened to hear Arabic music over the radio which so much pleased me that I was determined to hear more. I would not leave my parents in peace until my father finally took me to the Syrian section in New York City where I bought a stack of Arabic recordings. My parents, relatives and neighbors thought Arabic and its music dreadfully weird and so distressing to their ears that whenever I put on my recordings, they demanded that I close all the doors and windows in my room lest they be disturbed! After I embraced Islam in 1961, I used to sit enthralled by the hour at the mosque in New York, listening to tape-recordings of Tilawat [Quran recitation] ... by the celebrated Egyptian Qari, Abdul Basit. But on Juma Salat (Friday Prayers), the Imam did not play the tapes. We had a special guest that day. A short, very thin and poorly-dressed black youth, who introduced himself to us as a student from Zanzibar, recited Surah ar-Rahman [A chapter of the Quran]. I never heard such glorious Tilawat even from Abdul Basit! He possessed such a voice of gold; surely ... Bilal [a companion of the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, who was charged with announcing the call to prayer 5 times a day] must have sounded much like him!

I traced the beginning of my interest in Islam to the age of ten. While attending a reformed Jewish Sunday school, I became fascinated with the historical relationship between the Jews and the Arabs. From my Jewish textbooks, I learned that Abraham was the father of the Arabs as well as the Jews. I read how centuries later when, in medieval Europe, Christian persecution made their lives intolerable, the Jews were welcomed in Muslim Spain, and that it was the magnanimity of this same Arabic Islamic civilization which stimulated Hebrew culture to reach its highest peak of achievement.

Totally unaware of the true nature of Zionism, I naively thought that the Jews were returning to Palestine to strengthen their close ties of kinship in religion and culture with their Semitic cousins. Together, I believed that the Jews and the Arabs would cooperate to attain another Golden Age of culture in the Middle East.

Despite my fascination with the study of Jewish history, I was extremely unhappy at the Sunday school. At this time I identified myself strongly with the Jewish people in Europe, then suffering a horrible fate under the Nazis, and I was shocked that none of my fellow classmates nor their parents took their religion seriously. During the services at the synagogue, the children used to read comic strips hidden in their prayer books and laugh to scorn at the rituals. The children were so noisy and disorderly that the teachers could not discipline them and found it very difficult to conduct the classes.

At home, the atmosphere for religious observance was scarcely more congenial. My elder sister detested the Sunday school so much that my mother literally had to drag her out of bed in the mornings, and it never went without the struggle of tears and hot words. Finally, my parents were exhausted and let her quit. On the Jewish High Holy Days, instead of attending synagogue and fasting on Yom Kippur, my sister and I were taken out of school to attend family picnics and parties in fine restaurants. When my sister and I convinced our parents how miserable we both were at the Sunday school, they joined an agnostic, humanist organization known as the Ethical Culture Movement.

The Ethical Culture Movement was founded late in the 19th century by Felix Alder. While studying for rabbinic, Felix Alder grew convinced that devotion to ethical values as relative and man-made, regarding any supernaturalism or theology as irrelevant, constituted the only religion fit for the modern world. I attended the Ethical Culture Sunday School each week from the age of eleven until I graduated at fifteen. Here I grew into complete accord with the ideas of the movement and regarded all traditional, organized religions with scorn.

When I was eighteen years old, I became a member of the local Zionist youth movement known as the Mizrahi Hatzair. But when I found out what the nature of Zionism was, which made the hostility between Jews and Arabs irreconcilable, I left several months later in disgust. When I was twenty and a student at New York University, one of my elective courses was entitled Judaism in Islam. My professor, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Katsh, the head of the department of Hebrew Studies there, spared no efforts to convince his students-- all Jews, many of whom aspired to become rabbis - that Islam was derived from Judaism. Our textbook, written by him, took each verse from the Quran, painstakingly tracing it to its allegedly Jewish source. Although his real aim was to prove to his students the superiority of Judaism over Islam, he convinced me diametrically of the opposite.

I soon discovered that Zionism was merely a combination of the racist, tribalistic aspects of Judaism. Modern secular nationalistic Zionism was further discredited in my eyes when I learned that few, if any, of the leaders of Zionism were observant Jews, and that perhaps nowhere is Orthodox, traditional Judaism regarded with such intense

contempt as in Israel. When I found nearly all important Jewish leaders in America supporters for Zionism, who felt not the slightest twinge of conscience because of the terrible injustice inflicted upon the Palestinian Arabs, I could no longer consider myself a Jew at heart.

One morning in November 1954, Professor Katsh, during his lecture, argued with irrefutable logic that the monotheism taught by Moses (may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him) and the Divine Laws revealed to him were indispensable as the basis for all higher ethical values. If morals were purely man-made, as the Ethical Culture and other agnostic and atheistic philosophies taught, then they could be changed at will, according to mere whim, convenience or circumstance. The result would be utter chaos leading to individual and collective ruin. Belief in the Hereafter, as the Rabbis in the Talmud taught, argued Professor Katsh, was not mere wishful thinking but a moral necessity. Only those, he said, who firmly believed that each of us will be summoned by God on Judgment Day to render a complete account of our life on earth and rewarded or punished accordingly, will possess the self-discipline to sacrifice transitory pleasure and endure hardships and sacrifice to attain lasting good.

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