

N.K., EX-CATHOLIC, USA (PART 5 OF 5)

Rating: 4.4

Description: A Catholic who rejects his faith and takes to Philosophy, and then later accepts Islam due to many unanswered questions. Part 5: A trip to Egypt and accepting Islam.

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I read other books on Islam, and came across some passages translated by W. Montgomery Watt from "That Which Delivers from Error" by the theologian and mystic Ghazali, who, after a mid-life crises of questioning and doubt, realized that beyond the light of prophetic revelation there is no other light on the face of the earth from which illumination may be received, the very point to which my philosophical inquiries had led. Here was, in Hegel's terms, the Wise Man, in the person of a divinely inspired messenger who alone had the authority to answer questions of good and evil.

I also read A.J. Arberry's translation "The Quran Interpreted," and I recalled my early wish for a sacred book. Even in translation, the superiority of the Muslim scripture over the Bible was evident in every line, as if the reality of divine revelation, dimly heard of all my life, had now been placed before my eyes. In its exalted style, its power, its inexorable finality, its uncanny way of anticipating the arguments of the atheistic heart in advance and answering them; it was a clear exposition of God as God and man as man, the revelation of the awe-inspiring Divine Unity being the identical revelation of social and economic justice among men.

I began to learn Arabic at Chicago, and after studying the grammar for a year with a fair degree of success, decided to take a leave of absence to try to advance in the language in a year of private study in Cairo. Too, a desire for new horizons drew me, and after a third season of fishing, I went to the Middle East

In Egypt, I found something I believe brings many to Islam, namely, the mark of pure monotheism upon its followers, which struck me as more profound than anything I had previously encountered. I met many Muslims in Egypt, good and bad, but all influenced by the teachings of their Book to a greater extent than I had ever seen elsewhere. It has been some fifteen years since then, and I cannot remember them all, or even most of them, but perhaps the ones I can recall will serve to illustrate the impressions made.

One was a man on the side of the Nile near the Miqyas Gardens, where I used to walk. I came upon him praying on a piece of cardboard, facing across the water. I started to pass in front of him, but suddenly checked myself and walked around behind, not

wanting to disturb him. As I watched a moment before going my way, I beheld a man absorbed in his relation to God, oblivious to my presence, much less my opinions about him or his religion. To my mind, there was something magnificently detached about this, altogether strange for someone coming from the West, where praying in public was virtually the only thing that remained obscene.

Another was a young boy from secondary school who greeted me near Khan al-Khalili, and because I spoke some Arabic and he spoke some English and wanted to tell me about Islam, he walked with me several miles across town to Giza, explaining as much as he could. When we parted, I think he said a prayer that I might become Muslim.

Another was a Yemeni friend living in Cairo who brought me a copy of the Quran at my request to help me learn Arabic. I did not have a table beside the chair where I used to sit and read in my hotel room, and it was my custom to stack the books on the floor. When I set the Quran by the others there, he silently stooped and picked it up, out of respect for it. This impressed me because I knew he was not religious, but here was the effect of Islam upon him.

Another was a woman I met while walking beside a bicycle on an unpaved road on the opposite side of the Nile from Luxor. I was dusty, and somewhat shabbily clothed, and she was an old woman dressed in black from head to toe who walked up, and without a word or glance at me, pressed a coin into my hand so suddenly that in my surprise I dropped it. By the time I picked it up, she had hurried away. Because she thought I was poor, even if obviously non-Muslim, she gave me some money without any expectation for it except what was between her and her God. This act made me think a lot about Islam, because nothing seemed to have motivated her but that.

Many other things passed through my mind during the months I stayed in Egypt to learn Arabic. I found myself thinking that a man must have some sort of religion, and I was more impressed by the effect of Islam on the lives of Muslims, a certain nobility of purpose and largesse of soul, than I had ever been by any other religions or even atheism's effect on its followers. The Muslims seemed to have more than we did.

Christianity had its good points to be sure, but they seemed mixed with confusions, and I found myself more and more inclined to look to Islam for their fullest and most perfect expression. The first question we had memorized from our early catechism had been, "Why were you created?" To which the correct answer was, "To know, love, and serve God." When I reflected on those around me, I realized that Islam seemed to furnish the most comprehensive and understandable way to practice this on a daily basis.

As for the inglorious political fortunes of the Muslims today, I did not feel these to be a reproach against Islam, or to relegate it to an inferior position in a natural order of world ideologies, but rather saw them as a low phase in a larger cycle of history. Foreign hegemony over Muslim lands had been witnessed before in the thoroughgoing destruction of Islamic civilization in the thirteenth century by the Mongol horde, who razed cities and built pyramids of human heads from the steppes of Central Asia to the

Muslim heartlands, after which the fullness of destiny brought forth the Ottoman Empire to raise the Word of God and make it a vibrant political reality that endured for centuries. It was now, I reflected, merely the turn of contemporary Muslims to strive for a new historic crystallization of Islam, something one might well aspire to share in.

When a friend in Cairo one day asked me, Why don't you become a Muslim, I found that God had created within me a desire to belong to this religion, which so enriches its followers, from the simplest hearts to the most magisterial intellects. It is not through an act of the mind or will that anyone becomes a Muslim, but rather through the mercy of God, and this, in the final analysis, was what brought me to Islam in Cairo in 1977.

“Is it not time that the hearts of those who believe should be humbled to the Remembrance of God and the Truth which has been revealed, and that they should not be as those to whom the Book was given aforetime, but long ages passed over them and their hearts grew hard, and many of them are ungodly? Know that God revives the earth after it was dead. We have indeed made clear for you the signs, that haply you will understand.” (Quran 57:16-17)

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