



Sister Salima: Coming Back to Islam (Story of a Revert)

I do believe that everyone is born a Muslim in the sense that at birth we are aware of a covenant with Allah. There is no ego in an infant; he hardly knows he is separate from anyone else or the environment in which he finds himself. But so soon that is lost, once the senses are overloaded with impressions from the world around us. A developing child is then influenced first by the creed, or lack of any, that is passed down to him by his parents, and afterwards by beliefs of his peers and sometimes going on further by people of other cultures or nations and even other times. This is the story of how I stumbled along lost on various paths for half a century and then, through the Grace and Mercy of Allah, was able to return to the true way.

My parents were Roman Catholic. My father never went to church in the time that I knew him, and refused to discuss religion at all in any way with anyone. My mother was a 'practicing' Catholic, very firm in her belief that hers was the one true religion. I was extremely devout as a child and when I was eleven years old I asked for a Bible for my birthday. Fast becoming disillusioned, I am sure I never managed to read the entire book, but certainly made it through the new testament and a good portion of the old testament. Even at the age of eleven I was able to see so many discrepancies and contradictions; what I was reading did not seem as though it could have come from beyond the realm of the human mind. I was so disappointed that I turned away from faith altogether and for years refused to believe in any reality other than what I saw in front of me. I thought of myself as an atheist.

As time went on I knew I was missing something in life and took time to study many other religions. I was turned away from Islam by the misconceptions held by the society in which I lived, those being that Islam is steeped in violence, Islam is rigid, dogmatic, archaic and outdated, etc etc. I did not find any faith that seemed to relate to me, so went on through my life for years looking for some guide that would help me to find direction and fulfillment in a life that seemed empty. Eventually I discovered, during my life experience and through the Beneficence of Allah, so many of the Signs that He has given us. I became aware of the Power and the Glory of Allah. Slowly I was being brought back full circle but couldn't see what was happening and continued to deny and resist it at every step of the way.

I began to look into philosophy, psychology and other self help subjects since I felt I was not advancing towards living according to my ideal. I felt especially drawn to sufism, but there was no structure there, no real help for living in this world among other people, some of whom will have like moral values, some who differ, and others who will oppose all morals. My primary or core belief gave me the same moral standards as a Muslim who follows his faith. My life in the community would be acceptable according to Muslim standards, but in my heart I was unable to meet my own expectations. I can see so many errors that need to be corrected in my personality, my lifestyle, my outlook...and so much room for improvement in powers or faculties such as intuition, concentration.....and I had been trying to make those changes for a long, long time using various methods. Experience helps as a teacher of course, and doubtless any benefits come always with the grace and mercy of Allah. But I wasn't making progress fast enough for my liking.

Whatever practices or rituals I tried from time to time always fell by the wayside sooner or later, even those that seemed to be having good effects. I had never felt the need of an outward form of religion. I was able to conceive of a formless god, but unable to form the notion of a personal god. It didn't seem necessary... I did read the Qur-an, but a version without commentary, and I think that the time was not yet right that I should be able to see, because it did not make any impression on me.

Since I felt I never had been among people of like kind in America, I decided to leave when I retired. I came to India, and at once felt that I could relate to the disposition and emotional makeup of the people who live here. But as time went on, I realized my thinking and lifestyle still did not fit in with the people around me. The first people who invited me into their lives in India were Hindu, and in two years I eventually met Jain and Christian people, but they too were not 'like me'.

After I moved to Ratlam I began to meet Muslim people. I felt that they shared my values and decided I wanted to live in a Muslim neighbourhood. Everyone was aware of my interest in Islam which had already been going on for ten years, and would ask me 'then why don't you embrace Islam? What is stopping you?' and the only excuse I had was that I was afraid I wouldn't be able to follow all that was expected of a Muslim. It is one thing for someone who is born a Muslim to backslide, but for someone who has studied the faith and chosen it, to follow it imperfectly seemed unforgivable. I did not want to make a commitment I was unable to keep. But I could recognize a different community existing within society that must have been created by following the teachings of Islam. Could I also be transformed?

I was very comfortable in my new home from the beginning. Because of my interest in it, a nephew of the family I rented from gave me a Quran, and this time when I read it I believe Allah opened my heart to Islam. It was a very good translation with extensive commentary and I read every word. The longer I read the more I realized there were no discrepancies-nothing seemed like a mistake, no lies. All the things that I found in the Bible to object to were not in the Quran. Many of the same stories that I couldn't believe in the Bible were different and in the Quran they made sense.

From that time when I first was able to appreciate and understand the Quran I have never stopped reading it. As soon as I finish I begin again. It gives me a sense of being close to Allah, and is like a personal conversation with Him; it is a great source of comfort. But beyond that, it is truly a miracle. Once I thought a book written so long ago could not possibly have any relevance to living in our time, and of course a book written by any human hand could not do so. But the Quran is an effective guide showing how to live in this world no matter to what country or what period of history you might transport it. The fact that it has existed for so long without being changed or corrupted is another evidence of its miraculous nature. I also know that if Allah so wills, people will read it and not see the truth, because that happened to me the first time.

It was very easy to become a part of the new household where I lived. When Ramazan came I fasted along with everyone else, but I was really unprepared for the profoundness of the experience. How easy it sounds, but how difficult it is in practice. It is plain to see the value in this pillar of Islam, and how it serves as a way of renewing the faith and sharpening the spirit of brotherhood. I could see how it added strength to the will and softens the ego. It prevents a sense of complacency from setting in and adds a new dimension to the routine practice of namaz.

So now that my eyes were at least half open, I told myself that I could live as a Muslim and believe the things they believe without actually being a 'by the book' orthodox Muslim. But little by little the family that took me in began to teach me more about what is expected, the simple things they have incorporated into their everyday life without any difficulty since childhood. I was now 60 years old and I remembered when I taught myself Hindi almost five years earlier how difficult it was. How could I now memorize and learn to recite something in Arabic? How could I keep to the discipline involved in praying five times a day when I had not formally prayed at all in half a century?

But I tried-and found as long as I was sincere and persistent, I was able to remember, that too seeming to be a miracle. Within about two weeks I had succeeded in memorizing all the prayers and began doing proper namaz five times a day. This has become a foundation to my life and made my weak will and unruly ego behave as I had always wanted but not been able to manage. Namaz is self-perpetuating; it was a very easy habit to form and I am determined never to let it be lost to me.

There is a growing percentage of people in America today who realize that their single ideal of freedom of the individual has left their lives spiritually and morally bankrupt. They are looking for something new, far removed from any kind of religion that will satisfy unrealistic expectations. Muslims share many ideals, values.....with Americans. I am speaking of those whom I have met, and from reading the Quran and other literature I can see that these things are consciously taught and reinforced in their lives since childhood and a part of their scripture. Americans seem to have come to their current state of evolution unintentionally...and there are notable differences as well. I find that Americans and Muslims are both honest, independent, fearless, respectful of others, conscientious of property rights and tolerant. However, Muslims also have the admirable qualities of dignity, humility, consideration, co-operation and accountability.

How to bring the truth of Islam to those people who really need it yet resist it most vehemently? Dr. Israr Ahmed recognized the problem and knew the answer, and I quote from his article, Islamic Renaissance-The Real Task Ahead:

"The very mental constitution of these people compels them not to appropriate passionately anything that does not satisfy the test of reason and critical inquiry. They cannot attain the deeper levels of religious life without first untying the intellectual knots of their minds. These are the people who constitute the intellectual minority of a society and who command leadership over its ideology and policy. A change and indeed a total revolution in their viewpoint and way of thought is therefore of paramount importance."

The Qur-an most certainly will satisfy anyone's sense of logic, and it is arguments based on that which will pique the interest of even the most resistant culture. However, having intellectual understanding and even true conviction is not enough; Allah Himself has told us what we need to do and without it we cannot follow our true nature. Now that I have embraced Islam, I feel that I belong to a community of like minded people. All across the world I am aware that there are Muslims in other countries and cultures, but we share among us one common thread that ties us together forever. I do now know that the Qur-an is a guide for living in this world and can be used in any country within any government and law system. I also know that the qualities of self discipline, integrity, humility, patience, a sense of self worth and dignity as well as a high regard for all life, among many other concepts that become part of the nature of a Muslim who follows his deen correctly, are the greatest hope, perhaps the only hope for a lasting world peace.

Written by Sister Salima