

Jeremy Ben Royston Boulter, Ex-Christian, UK

(part 1 of 7)



My disbelief before Islam

When I married my Portuguese wife, Anabela, I had a philosophy which, though I believed in God as the Creator and Power that drove the universe, did not acknowledge that I was obliged to worship Him (I conceived the Power as It – that is, sexless).

I had been born a Roman Catholic, and brought up believing in Jesus as my God and Mary as my God's mother – but this did not sit well with me. Rather, I saw Jesus and Mary as a **means** *through* which to reach God, who was the God of the Old Testament.

As I grew older, I began to despair at understanding vast tracts of the Old Testament. The material was dense, and so called 'prophetic' passages appeared to be in the present tense – addressed to those people thousands of years ago, as happening to them or in their lifetimes. More confusion arose because personal addresses or actions sometimes seemed to be assigned or directed not to people, but to cities and nations. God, for example, seemed to regard Jerusalem as his wife, and the actions of her people congruent with her actions. God called her a whore, and appealed frequently for her to repent and turn back, and become His queen again. The same was true of people, such as Jacob, who assumed the name of a nation, so passages addressed to Israel sometimes meant Jacob. Jacob often symbolized his descendents, which were split into two camps: the camp of Ephraim and the camp of Judah. Again, the names of these descendents of Jacob reflected the split in the children of Israel, between the city state of Zion and Samaria.

Other passages seemed to refer to supernatural events, and supernatural encounters. The raising up of Elijah and the appearance of God before Israel

seemed to describe events that could be explained as meetings between races of advanced technologies and simple, non technological, men. Given that many other religions described the same kind of encounters with their 'gods', I began to suspect these stories of the Bible were but legends, gathered together, and made to seem coherent for the sake of a constructed hierarchy, the Church.

On top of this suspicious view I had begun to hold, I also learned of the historical persecutions that took place during and since mediaeval times, particularly the events of the crusades and the inquisition, which followed them. In fact, the ethos of the inquisition was exported to the New World by Spanish and Portuguese '*Conquistadores*', and the Roman Popes manoeuvred to establish riches and power in Europe by a reign of Machiavellian terror. *The Family of Borgia*^[1] were particularly exemplary figures in this respect.

Finally, I learned of the attempt of the Church to stifle and deny scientific advancement well into the reformation, and that change only manage to establish itself through the renaissance at a later date.

All these factors led me to believe that the God of the Bible and the descriptions of Heaven and Hell taught by the Church were forgeries, designed to subjugate and pacify the vast majority of the population under the rule of a minority elite.

Tortuous Confusion

There is a primal urge in men to worship that which created them, and turn to Him when in need and nothing but Him can be appealed to sort out ones peril or confusion. I have heard people exclaim *in extremis*, "For the Love of God," "Oh, God!", "For God's sake," and the like, appealing for succour. Yet when aid comes, and they feel secure again, they thank the living agents who helped them in this world, or their favourite deities in the world of the unseen. In my own sense trackless waste, my lack of orientation, I took refuge in the concept of the Force, or Power I described earlier – the **single** and **non-material Creator**, whom men (**individually**) interacted with at a personal level, **with** neither **mediation** from **unseen agencies**, nor **help** from other **human beings**.

The route took in coming to this conclusion was long and tortuous, concepts building on one another from my reading of science fiction and primitive conspiracy theories. I read, for example, Erich Von Däniken's "*Chariots of the Gods?*"^[2] and "*The Philadelphia Experiment*"^[3] by Charles Berlitz and William Moore, the first of which gave credence to religion being 'made up', and the second of which opened my eyes to what can be covered up by the elite society and their governments in the world. However, not every nation and government can be in on the grand conspiracy, if such a thing exists, so the natural place to

look for confirmation or contradiction was other religions. To me, the ‘other religions’ were Hinduism and its offshoots, in particular Buddhism, so I sought to find out more about them from the inside.

The most visible of the branches of Hinduism in London, where I lived, was the orange coloured monks from *the temple of Krishna*^[4], so I duly found myself recruited into their sect. Although the ritual meditation felt good, its wide use definitely provided a calming effect on the devotees – confirming that it preached a kind of placation of the people. Its creation story was also rather repulsive; who wants to acknowledge the origin of the world being a vast, but dead, cosmic cow, or that we evolved from her excretions? I soon left the sect as abruptly as I entered it, and read up on Buddhism. I knew the latter was an offshoot of the mother of the other, so I wasn’t tempted to try and practice Buddhism. Instead I tried to discover its key concept of life and life after death. I soon discovered that, like Hinduism, the hereafter was conceived to be a series of reincarnations, and that we were bound to our lives on the wheel of fate. However, instead of seeking unity with the cosmic mind of God, the perfection of Nirvana, the Buddhist seeks to attain enlightenment and freedom from the cycle of birth and death. This enlightenment negates the ego because it must surrender its jurisdiction over time to achieve it and let the infinite and unknowable take over. Strictly speaking, Buddhism is a religious philosophy, taking the human ego as the only god that dominates life, whose way is to a Godlessness goal in the afterlife.

Again, in seeking to eliminate ego orientation, Buddhism can be seen as the Marxist concept of “*opium for the people*”^[5]. It makes them tractable and controllable by the elite in society; but what about ways of ‘bucking the system’? What about, pre-historical religions, or religions that had died out? One of the earliest forms of religion I learnt about is *totemism*^[6]. Totemism postulates the existence of a spirit equivalent to a sign in the real world, usually an animal. A whole tribe can have a collective spirit totem, such as the cave bear, whilst individuals may possess an individual totem, such as the grey wolf. Furthermore, if one is seeking help in a particular endeavor, such as hunting, the totem of the hunted animal can be consulted for signs of where the quarry might be.

There is a clear connection to magical oracles in the use of totemistic rituals, pointing to the existence of unseen forces existing in the world. There are also other avenues to these forces, such as astrology and nature worship. One of the latter means of worship envisages the earth as *Gaia*^[7], the mother of everything in nature, and the patterns of interaction between creatures of the ecological system. I rather liked this idea that earth was a viable individual who must be respected, and was capable of guiding us and protecting the guided, while punishing those who work against her and will not take guidance. Not long ago, a man named James Lovelock was able to express how I felt then in a book called “*The Revenge of Gaia*”^[8], which he published in 2006.

However, the earth is too narrow a canvass for a universal creator, so the second avenue was even more attractive to me. It pertains to the heavens, and the heavens are much wider. *Astrology*^[9] assigns meanings and influences to celestial bodies and their position in the skies at the time of birth to determine the fate of an individual being. They also rely upon the position of the celestial sphere at any given point of time and space on the earth's surface to venture predictions of what might occur on the path of fate, and therefore give advice on decisions of the people within the sphere of influence from those predicted events. For a while, I became an amateur astrologer, because I felt I was in touch with a universal, rather than local, force.

Then I met a man who turned me back towards my religion of birth in order to seek universal answers. I can't remember his name, unfortunately, but his origin was Ireland, and his religion Roman Catholic, as I had been. His outlook, however, was not as hidebound as some staunch Roman Catholics I would meet later. He happened to meet me while I was reading a book called *Omega* by *Stewart Farrar*^[10], which gave me an insight into witchcraft and the religion of Wicca. We had a huge discussion that lasted nearly a day, while sitting on a beach in the Algarve, Portugal. He was trying to describe the concept of God, and readily agreed with me that Jesus was not God. God was something immaterial and invisible power and Lordship over everything. With the input I had from Stewart Farrar, I described what I felt was the essence of Divinity and my relation, or the worlds relation, to it. I felt that "God" was the Devine initiator, whose "way" was the Laws of the natural world. I said I believed that every world was different and behaved after its own proper laws, but that there was a general guiding Law of the Universe, which was God and His Guidance: working "with the flow" signified "good" while working across the flow signified evil. Examples of working "with the flow" is using nature's medicines for healing, whilst "across the flow" is manufacturing chemical agents that mimic the effect of nature's medicine; working with the flow would be environmentally friendly whilst across the flow would cause pollution; etc.

This was my state when I married my Portuguese wife. She was Roman Catholic, but largely non-practicing. Before long, she was pregnant, and my first child came into the world.

Footnotes:

[1](<http://www.reformation.org/in-the-pillory.html>)

[2] (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chariots_of_the_Gods%3F)

[3] (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0449214710/stevejacksongame>)

[4] (<http://www.iskcon-london.org/temple.html>)

[5] (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opium_of_the_people)

[6] (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/totemism>)

[7] (<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/g/gaia.html>)

[8] (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Revenge_of_Gaia)

[9] (<http://www.scribd.com/doc/2578598/Encyclopedia-of-Astrology-Nicholas-deVore>)

[10] (<http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/f/stewart-farrar/omega.htm>)

(part 2 of 7)



Returning to God

During my early years of marriage, I was friends with a man who loved hiking in the mountains and going nude in seclusion. He was both *naturalist*[1] and *naturist*[2] in outlook, and he took me and my wife in that direction. Naturally, when Andrei Micael was born, I advocated a more natural baptism than one with ‘holy water’ from a cold stone basin being poured onto his head by a Roman Catholic priest. Instead, I wanted to trek into the mountains and dip him in a stream, just as *John the Baptist*[3] baptized the repentant Jews in the River Jordan. Of course I did not realize that baptism was something one should do when an adult, rather than a child, for how can children repent? They have done nothing to repent from. My true baptism I would make on myself, when I bathed away my past state in ritual purification on becoming Muslim.

My wife’s mother started to visit us in the summer, the first time just to see Andrei, I think. Like my wife, she was a Roman Catholic. Unlike her, however, she was an avid believer in the mediation of Mary, the mother of ‘God’, the saints in their graves, and the boy Jesus. To this end, she wore a crucifix around her neck and assiduously visited the shrines of Mary (including the *Sanctuary of Fatima*[4] and *Our Lady of Lourdes*[5]) at least once a year, and made pilgrimage to the *Sanctuary de Saint Benedict*[6] every time she came to Braga, where my wife and I lived. She had a small statue of Mary with child that she used to set up on its own special table (like an altar) in the corner of her bedroom, and she kept a

battered old photograph of a fresco of Mary (the mother of Jesus), holding a cup with a bleeding heart, in her wallet. The former she used to kneel to before going to bed every night, and the latter she would keep while travelling, taking it out to kiss when she wanted to pray.

To me, all these actions were abhorrent, totally against both my primitive concept of the Universal Force or Power, a Unique Creator and Sustainer that permeated the Universe, and also to God as He is described in the Bible. I became determined to persuade my mother-in-law to stop her idolizing worship of (dead) human beings as mediators to the One Who Hears. But how?

Back to the Bible

I first tried by using logic. How can dead men hear? How do we know their piety? Was it not men who made them 'saints'? And by whose authority were they made saints? Were they not men, like us? But all to no avail. So finally I decided I would use the weapon of her own scripture because I knew that the First Commandment^[7] in the Bible was,

"I am the Lord your God, Who took you out of Egypt and from bondage. And you shall not take any gods besides Me. You will not make graven images or likenesses of any creature that lives in the heavens above or the earth below, or in the water under the earth, nor will you bow down to them, or serve them."
(Exodus 20:2-5^[8])

If that were the case, then there would be more evidence that God is only One, and immaterial, and only He could hear us.

Over the years that I sustained my regular (summer) persuasion with her, I began to appreciate that the Bible actually contradicted what the Church taught about the 'god-ship' of Jesus, and affirmed clearly that God was One. It completely denied the license^[9] we have taken to worship idols^[10] or use them as a focus of our prayer. So my belief in the God of Abraham slowly increased until my only fear was that I might be wrong. What if, despite my strong belief that it was not true, it was Jesus who sat on the Throne of Judgment on the Last Day? Then I would be in a pickle. The evidence in the Bible was ambiguous on this point, since '*The Revelation of St John*^[11]' seemed to indicate that it would be him.

Debts

This was my state when I found the need to look for a job that would help me escape my heavy debts at home. During this period, I decided to give up my job at the British Council in Portugal and venture a language school of my own in Braga. I wanted to be near at hand for the raising of my son. At the same time, I

decided to buy a home, which would be like renting a flat, except that I would own the place at the end of the process. My school, however, did not work out, and I ended up not only owing a lot of money to the bank for my house, but also for the starting capital I had borrowed. When I closed my school two years after I opened it, I foolishly did not declare bankruptcy, instead using my 'business card' to become a freelance English teacher. Although this helped me keep my feet I might just be able to survive, the capital I owed did not diminish appreciably. I needed some get out plan. My wife then suggested that I look for a well paid job abroad to deal with the problem, pointing out that many acquaintances had husbands abroad, and had amassed enough money to build homes for their families in the home country.

The day I decided I needed to find such a lucrative job abroad was a black day indeed. I was in deep gloom because things were coming to a head. I was unable to keep up with the interest repayments on loans from domestic appliances, the mortgage, our cars and the debts I had accumulated running a language school for three years at a loss, I saw blackness ahead of me – and no local means to climb out of the debt hole I was in. I felt almost suicidal, thinking death would allow me to escape from debt. I didn't know, at the time, that debt was one of the things a person could be barred from paradise for, and that death did not mean you escaped your obligations.

One night I knelt by my bedside, facing the east, and poured out my trouble to God. I told him I was in despair, at my tether's end, and could not see myself able to support my wife and children, let alone myself. I begged him to give me a way out, a way to a good life for us all. Somehow, I knew he was listening, and my heart eased as I prayed. Eventually, I felt comfortable enough to lay my head down again, and fall back to sleep.

The next few events proved He had answered my prayer. The very next day, I was looking through the EFL Gazette and found several advertisements for British Council placements abroad. When I pointed them out to her, my wife advised me to look for work in the Middle East or Far East where salaries were relatively high. There and then, I applied to institutions in Oman, Saudi Arabia, Brunei, Taiwan, Japan and Korea. The British Council gave me an interview, but I was not chosen for any of their places. An employer in Taiwan chose me and offered me a job, but when I accepted, the process was never followed up by them. Just as I was beginning to feel all the doors were closing in my face, one of my last choices, a university in Saudi Arabia, offered me a position as a lecturer of English, and I took it. Praise be to God! I thought He had answered me financially, but his real gift was to come from an unexpected direction.

Footnotes:

[1] (<http://religiousnaturalism.info/>)

[2] (<http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturism>)

[3] (<http://www.abu.nb.ca/courses/ntintro/lifej/johnbaptist.htm>)

[4] (<http://www.santuاريو-fatima.pt/>)

[5] (<http://www.our-lady-of-lourdes.com/sanctuary>)

[6] (<http://www.sbento.pt/index.html>)

[7] (<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy%205:6-9&version=NIV>)

[8] (<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%2020:2-5&version=NIV>)

[9] (<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%20115:3-8&version=NIV>)

[10] (<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jeremiah%2010:1-16&version=NIV>)

[11] (<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation%2022:3&version=NIV>)

(part 3 of 7)



A New Beginning

When my friends learnt that I would be going to the Gulf, I was deluged with advice. I was told that I would find nothing to do in Saudi Arabia, and would feel hedged in. I was warned that I would be cheated and treated like a slave. The culture would not be conducive, and I would be bored to tears. However, I knew this was my way out, so, like I always do when I go to a

new place, a culture different from my own, I tried to offload my cultural prejudices and intended to test the society I would be part of on its merits.

I was pleasantly surprised on arrival to note the general friendliness I met with from Saudis. Instead of the proud aloofness, shady ethics and touchy honour I expected, I was greeted with warmth, curiosity and open doors. My hosts went out of their way to please me, a stranger in their land. Not that I didn't meet with a fair share of hypocrisy. The foreigners from Pakistan, Bangladesh and other Far Eastern countries were seriously exploited, and unfairly treated, in my eyes, by the Arab majority. But I saw none of that condescension when they applied their society to me. However, it was not their culture or society that attracted me to

Islam. In fact, if I were to judge Islam by the culture, I would have stepped in the opposite direction, I think. It was another thing.

The Motivation

The impetus or catalyst that changed me from vaguely religious to fully submissive to God started with a seemingly innocuous event. Stepping out onto Saudi Arabian soil early in the morning for just the second time (in 24 hours) at Ha'il Airport, a small, hick aerodrome rather than fully fledged passenger terminus, I was confronted by a big green sign with the words "The Ha'il Islamic Propagation and Guidance Office", followed by the office phone number, in English. I remember being surprised the sign was in English, but I didn't take much more conscious notice of it than that.

The University pick-up arrived and took me to the College, where I had to check in my passport and fill in an arrival form. Then I was sent to the head of the English Department. When I entered his office, I was confronted with a man in Saudi dress. But he did not look like an Arab, to my untrained eye. He must have felt a bit uncomfortable having me stare at him, trying to figure out his origins, but he handled it well. Later, I was to find out he was Welsh and had converted in Brunei before he came to Saudi Arabia. He told me that I had the rest of the week to settle in, which meant I had five days before I officially started teaching. I was sent back to the man in charge of personnel reception and housing, who took me in the pick-up to choose my digs. I soon settled in, and found I had nothing to do and four days to do it in. Then, with the memory of the strange looking 'non-Arab Saudi' still in my mind's eye, I remembered the sign in English and began to think of the religion of the country.

Now, I knew of the *Bible*[1] and that the *Torah*[2] was part of it. I had read some of the Book of the Hindus, the *Bhagwad Gita*[3], and also read not scriptures, but practical books for other religions and non-religious theories about religion. However, I had never read the *Talmud*[4], nor had I read any of the Book of the Muslims, which I knew was called the *Quran*[5]. Somehow I had always had the impression that these two books were 'off limits' to non-Jews and non-Muslims. And I had thought they were exclusively in the Semitic languages, which I didn't know. However, the sign in English pushed the thought into my mind that perhaps I could find an English translation of the Arabic Quran at the institute it advertised. Perhaps this would be the opportunity to read it and judge the source of the religion for myself.

I immediately set off for the centre of town to look for the place. The centre of Ha'il had a six storey office block which they called *Al-Bourj*, which means "the tower", the only 'high rise' building in town. The road I walked down went straight past it, leaving it on the left, ending in the down town shopping souk. On

the right side of the road opposite the *bourj*, was the vegetable market, which I later learned doubled as an execution ground. Where my road and the high-street crossed at the *bourj*, I found the same sign I had seen at the airport. It was conveniently written in a direction sign with the pointed end pointing diagonally across the street, but as hard as I looked at the shop fronts, all in Arabic lettering which I was unable to read, I was unable to locate my goal. The shops were all shut, it being the afternoon, so I couldn't even make enquiries. I had no idea when the shops would open again, so I decided to go to my new home, buy some supplies in, rest up and try again the in the morning.

The next day was Tuesday, and I went into town again as soon as I had breakfast. On the way, I passed several bookstores, and mindful how difficult it had been to find the propagation office, I stopped in every one. None of them had any books in English, let alone the Quran, and, as far as I could make out, they directed me onward towards the *bourj*. This time I took station directly under the sign and waited until a policeman came by on a motorbike. As he passed by, on the other side of the road, I waved at him madly. He swept into the crossroads and made a left, stopping his bike at the start of the vegetable market. I called him over, and by dint of gesticulation and pointing at the sign, managed to convey I wanted to know where it was. He pointed across the road and, when I still couldn't spot it, to the roof of a house where a copy of the sign I had seen at the airport was placed. How stupid I felt. I had strained my eyes at the signs above the shop fronts, and the place had been staring me in the face! At last I had my target, and I went over to the shops below it, finding a bookshop full of people from all over south-east Asia and Oceania. I took it to be the bookshop belonging to the centre.

The Encounter

As I said before, the bookshop was full of people, and books in many different languages, but I was too shy to ask anything lest I be misunderstood; I couldn't speak any of their languages. Glancing through the shelves, I could see no thick tomes, and all the titles in English seemed to be about Jesus or explanations of particular religious areas. I noticed that there were some stairs at the back next to the shop counter, leading up to the next floor. The Policeman had indicated the offices of the Guidance Centre were upstairs, so, on the vague hope I may come across a reading room, or something, I climbed the stairs at the back of the bookshop, smiling hard at the people behind the counter in lieu of speaking because of being so self-consciously tongue-tied.

At the top of the stairs was a huge empty room that looked like a meeting hall. Adjoining it, I found a room that had a huge table in its centre and shelves all around, but only a very, very few, battered books – perhaps that reading room I had hoped for. Unfortunately, the books were all in a foreign language, or

languages – foreign lettering I could not make head or tail of. I began to despair of locating what I wanted on my own, or getting what I wanted in a land that could speak my language. Luckily, one of the office staff found me and asked me what I wanted, or what I was doing there, or something of that nature (he was speaking in his language, which I could not understand). I replied in English, telling him I was looking for a copy of the Quran to read. He indicated that I should wait, because he was going to fetch someone. So I waited; perhaps a solution was about to come my way.

A tall, handsome bearded man came into the room I was waiting in. I was to know him later on as Brother Abu Abdurrahman, my teacher and mentor, but at the time, he was just another ‘*Saudi*’ who might be able to help me get what I wanted. He asked me in English what I wanted, and I told him I wanted to read the Quran.

“Why do you want to do that?” he asked me.

“I want to compare it to the Bible.” I replied.

“What for?”

“You know, to see if it is like it.”

“Do you want to know about Islam?”

“Well, yes, I suppose.”

“Why don’t you read this pamphlet?” He said, showing me a pamphlet that said ‘Who is God?’ I didn’t really want to know the Muslim view of theology or religion. That wasn’t what I was after. I wanted to look at their scripture, to see if it compared to what was in the Bible.

“No. I don’t really want to read about Islam. I want their book,” I said.

“Really? It is better if you learn more about the religion before,” he wheedled.

“I’m not interested in the religion, per say,” I said, trying not to offend, “I just want to read their book.”

“The book isn’t a game,” he said.

“I’m not playing,” I said. “I am seriously interested in what it says.”

“OK. I will see what I can do,” he said, giving way. I thanked him and he walked out of the room.

Footnotes:

[1] <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/r/rsv/about.html>

[2] <http://bible.ort.org/intro1.asp?lang=1>

[3] <http://www.bhagavad-gita.us/>

[4] <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/talmud.htm>

[5] <http://quran.com/>

(part 4 of 7)

The Book



When he came back, he was carrying a thick book in a shiny jacket. He held it gently, cradled in his hand. He told me this was not a translation, but an explanation of the meaning of *the Noble Quran*^[1] in English. That confused me, and I re-iterated that I wanted a translation. He said that it was a translation, but no translation was the same as the original, which is why it was

called *'an explanation of the meaning'*.

Not really following his train of thought, I accepted. It crossed my mind that it was better than nothing. He seemed to know what was going on in my head. So, being the good psychologist he was, he started to hand it to me, and then withdrew it as I reached out to take it.

“There are three – no, four – conditions I want you to agree to before I give it to you,” he said.

“What conditions?” I asked, nervously.

“First, please don’t put it down on the floor or even on a chair. You might accidentally step or sit on it, which is disrespectful to the holy book.” Well I could understand that condition.

“Secondly, I know it is the habit of some people to read while they are doing their business sitting on the toilet.” He was right. I sometimes did it myself.

“Why?” I asked.

“Don’t do it with the Quran. The place where you eject your waste is not the place to read it. You shouldn’t even take it into the toilet with you.” Well, I could see what he was getting at, though I thought it a bit picky. But I was willing to follow that condition too; anything to get hold of it, I thought.

“Thirdly, whenever you stop reading it, place it in a shelf, rather than leave it out. It demonstrates more care.” No problem, I thought. It shows that the Muslims cared for and respected the Quran a great deal.

“Fourthly, try not to put the Quran open and face down in order to keep your place.” That was very picky, I thought.

“Why?” I asked. The question was getting to be repetitive.

“The word of Allah should not be facing down; it should be facing up. If you need to keep your place, there is a place keeping ribbon attached you can use.” Well, of course! I thought. That must be the reason the Bible has one, too!

“I accept those conditions,” I said, aloud.

He asked me to come and tell him how I got on, which I took lightly at the time, and I hurried off with my prize. I couldn’t wait to get home and really get my head stuck into it that very day, especially since the next day was going to be Wednesday, my last free working day before the Saudi weekend, which was Thursday and Friday.

The Catalyst

During the next week, I went through the Quran. I started at the beginning, and read steadily through the second chapter. Somehow, I had expected the book to be an account of the Muslim prophet’s life, something like the Gospels or the books of Moses in the Bible. But that is not what I was reading.

Right from the start, it captivated me by apparently speaking directly to me. There was no, ‘*God said “such and such”*,’ or ‘*The prophet said “such and such”*,’ as if it were reported by others concerning *what* a prophet had said about God or *what* a prophet had reported of God’s very words. Indeed, I rather felt like I was receiving revelation direct from God Himself. He was talking to me direct, and His words impinged directly upon my heart.

Soon I found myself crying, as I recognized myself, and members of my family, in the descriptions of the people of the book and their (mistaken) beliefs and obdurate stances. Even some of the attitudes and beliefs of the disbelievers, hypocrites and polytheists echoed some of my attitudes and the attitudes of people I knew in the West. My heart ached with concern over the possible destiny of my relatives, and quaked with fear over my, by now undoubted, destiny if I remained on the way I had been treading.

After reading the first big chapters, *Al-Baqarah*[2], *Ali-'Imran*[3], *An-Nisa*[4], *Al-Ma'idah*[5] and *Al-An'am*[6], I skipped through the book, looking for shorter chapters. But even the shorter chapters of around 60 verses echoed the big five. However, when I arrived at the final part, the 30th *Ju'z*, the chapters were suddenly no more than two or three pages, some only a page and a half. And the topics were now more restricted.

Then the chapters fitted one page, or less than a page, until there were more than one chapter on each page. At that point, one of those tiny chapters suddenly illuminated.

[‘Say He is Allah, the One,](#)

Allah the Self-Sufficient.

He begets not, nor was He begotten.

And there is none comparable unto Him.’

This was the heart of the Quran; what I understood as *its True message*[7]. It sounded so right to me. It was just the way I felt about God in my own, made up, religion despite what the churches of my religion taught about the divinity of Jesus and the concept of Trinity.

The Last Straw

Could it be that Muslims really believe in a single Creator, Unique, the Foundation and Mover of the Universe? Is it really true that this God repudiates any possibility of procreation, either from Himself or being procreated from another? Does this religion truly confirm what I think is true anyway? And, if it does, doesn't that mean I have a duty I have neglected all this time?

These thoughts and questions stumbled through my mind. I had to check against the only Muslims I had more than a passing acquaintance with; two colleagues at the University College.

I stopped them on the stairs leading up to the main gate of the main building. They had been aware I was reading the Quran, and they readily stopped, happy to be able to answer a question I might have. I apologised for taking their time and got right down to this amazing discovery I had made.

“I’ve been reading your Book,” I said, “and I’ve come across a verse which seems to sum it all up.”

“Which verse is that?” It was Isma’il Rostron, the white convert who asked.

“Here. Right at the end. It says,

‘Say He is Allah, the One,

Allah the Self-Sufficient.

He begets not, nor was He begotten.

And there is none comparable unto Him.'

It's what the whole book is driving at!"

"Yes, that's right," said Isma'il.

"Funny you should say that," said Jamal. He was British from Pakistani origins, and a born Muslim.

"There is a story about one of the Prophet's companions^[8], handed down to us through the traditions of the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him."

"What story?" I encouraged.

"There was a man, a commander of Jihad, who used to lead his companions in prayer with a recitation. Upon finishing the portion of the Quran after reciting The Opening, he would complete it with the recitation of 'Say, He is Allah the One'. So, when they returned, they mentioned this to the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, and he said, 'Ask him why he does it!' he told me. "So the people went and asked him, and the commander said, 'Because it is the description of Allah, and I love to recite it.' So, when the people came and reported that to him, the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said, 'Inform him that Allah the Most High, loves him'."

"Really?" I asked, feeling a little dazed by this confirmation.

"Yes," said Jamal. "And there is another which tells you exactly how much of the message this chapter of the Quran is."^[9]

I was on tenterhooks.

"A man heard another man reciting 'Say, He is Allah the One' over and over again through the early morning hours of the night. So, when morning came, the man went to the Prophet, and mentioned it to him, and it was as though he was belittling it. The Prophet said, 'By He Whose Hand is my very soul, verily the chapter and its message is equivalent to a third of the Quran'."

"So, you see, you are right. It is what most of the Quran is driving at," he continued.

I was convinced. The Muslims really believed in this principle, no ifs or buts, and no shading into trinity or mediators allowed. This was The God I could really relate to.

"What about the other thirds?" I asked.

“One third consists of the stories of the Prophets and the lessons we learn by their example.”

“What do you mean?”

“What the prophets did and said, how they proclaimed the message to their people and how they interacted with their families and communities.”

“I see; and the last part?”

“That’s the ordinances of Allah concerning how we live individually and as a community,” he said. “Things like the legal statutes concerning marriage, divorce, parenting and child rearing; purification, prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage; the lawful and the prohibited in alimentation and social interaction; law and punishment.”

I decided I had to go away and think about the implications.

Footnotes:

[1] (<http://www.quraan.com/index.aspx?tabindex=1&tabid=27>)

[2] (<http://www.quraan.com/index.aspx?tabindex=1&tabid=27&bid=2>)

[3] (<http://www.quraan.com/index.aspx?tabindex=1&tabid=27&bid=3>)

[4] (<http://www.quraan.com/index.aspx?tabindex=1&tabid=27&bid=4>)

[5] (<http://www.quraan.com/index.aspx?tabindex=1&tabid=27&bid=5>)

[6] (<http://www.quraan.com/index.aspx?tabindex=1&tabid=27&bid=6>)

[7] (<http://www.tafsir.com/default.asp?sid=112&tid=59484>)

[8] (<http://www.tafsir.com/default.asp?sid=112&tid=59492>)

[9] (<http://www.tafsir.com/default.asp?sid=112&tid=59502>)

(part 5 of 7)

Three Conditions

I ended up thinking about the heartache I felt for my family, so I decided to wait until three things were clear before I would embrace Islam.

1. My wife accepted the religion as I had done.
2. She agreed to leave her job and come and live with me in Saudi Arabia.
3. A (personal) problem she and I had between us was overcome.

In other words, I vowed I would wait until all conditions were optimum and would not become officially Muslim until they were.

I began talking to my wife about what I had found out. Although I was trying not to sound overboard, my amazement at what I had found and my endorsement of it must have been overwhelming. I wrote e-mail after e-mail, and chatted lengthily on msn. I read constantly and widely anything about Islam I found on the net, especially arguments Muslims made through Biblical support for the religion. My enthusiasm for the discovery that Islam was just an extension of our religion purified, you might say, from its errors, must have impinged sharply on her to the extent that she became dismayed, and she was finally driven to comment, "it sounds like you have converted."

This made me pause because I realised that I had already made the step in my heart, if not by my mouth, and my response reflected that.

"Actually, I have."

From that moment on, my wife kept on criticising me for not consulting her before I made such a big decision. My constant defence was that I hadn't officially converted yet, though I had in my heart. This argument derailed my efforts to convert her, and led to very tense and painful cohabitation during the next few holidays I took that Christmas and the following three summers. But that is another story.

The Mosque and the Orphans

In the meanwhile, I had my first experience of praying with Muslims. One weekend, I was walking back from the centre of town in the evening after an afternoon of shopping. I had bought some 'native' clothing, and wanted to try them out. In fact, I was wearing one of the dress-like '*thobes*' I had just bought, and carrying the other with my 'western' clothes in a carrier bag. The sun was westering as I started for home, and set when I was about half-way there. The call for prayer blared from a small mosque I was approaching, and was echoed by the hundreds of mosques near and far through the city. Shutters were rattling down, and goods in the street were being covered with plastic and sail cloth. Men started streaming from the shops and houses to the mosques. It was impressive! A call from the minaret responded to in an instant. I decided I wanted to see what Muslim prayer was all about.

I tentatively followed the stragglers in as the prayer began and watched them line up behind the two lines already formed. They raised their hands as they joined the line and then folded them over their chests. It looked easy enough, and I tagged on to the end of the line. Several children joined the line after me, forming a kind of restless addendum. As the men alongside me bowed and prostrated, I copied their movements as best as I could, looking sideways out of

the corner of my eye. They were oblivious to me, each one concentrating on some point directly before them, eyes lowered. Their communion with God was palpable, and I tried to share in the channel they had tapped, despite not having the same words to do so.

“Oh God! Help me to fulfil my vow, and persuade my wife. Guide me to You, and guide my family. I believe in You, the only God, and not in human beings as gods.”

I repeated the prayer, over and over, like a mantra. I don't think I reached the same level of communion as my companions, but my heart felt better when the prayer was over. As I pulled on my shoes and socks, two of the children who had lined up beside me came over.

“Anta Muslim? Limada tusalli? ‘adam wa’ dha al yedduka al yameen ala shimal.”

The kids had spotted that I was a total greenhorn, and had serious doubts whether I actually belonged. They showed me how I should have positioned my hands, how I should have prostrated and bowed, how I should have placed my feet and so on. Of course, I didn't have a word of Arabic, so I was just aware that they thought I needed a lot of coaching if I was to pass off being a bone fide member of the congregation. They signalled that I should follow them so they could take me to their home and hand me over to their elder brother.

I was a bit wary of going into the door, in case they meant for me to wait outside, but one of the children came back when I didn't follow them in. He made the 'come on' motion again, and then signalled that I should go right as I entered, and through a hanging bead screen. Inside was a sitting room with typical Arab floor cushions. A young teenager, maybe 15 or 16, stood up from his comfortable lounging position to greet me.

The older brother was very hospitable, but couldn't help me understand the children and what they were getting at. He served me Arabic coffee in tiny cups and invited me to share some dates. I was curious why children were entertaining me, the older boy being just a teenager. Where were their parents?

“Where's your mama and papa?” I asked.

But he either didn't understand or could not explain in sign language. He gestured that I should wait, so I guessed they would be home, soon. However, instead of a grown man, it was another youngster, barely out of his teens, who rolled in just before the evening prayer. He looked surprised at seeing me in the sitting room with his brother, and a few words were exchanged.

“Ameriki?”

I shook my head. “No, British.”

“Welcome. Welcome. Coffee?”

Again I shook my head; I had had enough.

He stood up and indicated I should follow. “*Tawadha*,” he said, meaning “let’s make ablution!” He rubbed his hands together. “Wash; go *masjid*.”

He wanted me to get ready to go to the mosque for the evening prayer.

“Put hand,” he said, lifting my right hand, “on this!” he said, placing it over my left hand and then lifted them both so they rested on my chest. We were walking across the road, and we stopped right in the middle of it for the lesson as if cars did not exist. He indicated the prayer by lifting his two hands to his ears. “Do like me!”

I lined up beside him, and this time made a better job of the movements.

When we got back home, dinner was served on a kind of tablecloth on the floor. I asked him, “Your mama?”

‘Mama’ seems to be an international or universal means of indicating a mother. He shook his head, and made a sleeping gesture and then a downward movement of the open palm towards the ground. “*Baba wa mama fiy mout,yarhamhumullah*. Sister make.”

So they were orphans, and this young man and his sister had shouldered the responsibility of the family. His English was not the best, so the conversation was desultory. He asked, “You like Islam?”

I said I did.

“Why you not Muslim?”

I needed time.

He offered me a lift home. “You need help, any time visit,” he said as he dropped me off.

I thanked him.

Then the words I was to hear a thousand times over emerged from his mouth. “Any Service?”

The kindness of that orphan family has never left me. I was really touched at the care they had shown, and appreciated their sincere attempts at guiding me. But the person who had the greatest effect in my initiation was a man yet to arrive on the scene. He was a green card Iranian looking for American nationality, and he was about to blow into my life.



Ali Family

Ali Family was the fourth ‘western’ Muslim colleague, just out from the United States. He had driven up from Jeddah because his first action on arriving in Saudi Arabia was to pay a visit to God’s house and walk around it (the lesser pilgrimage called ‘*Umrah*’). This was one of the characteristics of Ali that I would get to know well: his obsession with visiting the House of God as often as he could. He was wearing shades, and looked ‘cool’. A second thing I would learn for him was his admiration of American social and legal norms, which he compared favourably to his experience of these norms in Saudi Arabia. Yet under that ‘western’ exterior was the heart of one who loved God passionately. Soon after he met me, he asked me if I knew about Islam, and I told him I had been reading his Holy Book. Of course his next step was to ask me if I was going to embrace Islam, and I told him about my three conditions.

“Are you mad?” he said. “You can’t make conditions with God.” He used the name for God I had begun to become familiar with in the Quran. “Prostrate right now and beg His forgiveness! If you know this is the Truth, make your declaration of faith now.”

“Why shouldn’t I make conditions?” I asked. “I want my family to be Muslim, too. Is that too much to ask?”

“Guidance is for whomsoever God wills. Are you refusing his guidance because of family concerns? Even the Prophet, peace be upon him, could not guide all his family, and his uncle died a disbeliever despite him being at his death-bed begging him to bear witness that there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad was His messenger,” he informed me.

“But I want to talk it over with my family first!” I argued, knowing that they should know my frame of mind before I took such a gigantic step as to formally embrace another religion seriously.

“What if you die before you get the chance to submit?” he asked me. “If you die having known the religion and refused it, your destination will definitely be the Fire! Have you any idea how lucky you are? Not everyone is touched like you

have been. You cannot refuse the chance He is giving you,” he argued persuasively.

At the time, I was taken aback by his attitude. On reflection, however, I knew he was right. I would be a fool if I let the chance slip.

My Avowal^[1] of Islam

My next step was to go back to the Islamic Propagation Office and ask them how to formally embrace Islam. When I stepped in the office for the second time, there was a look of surprised bafflement. I don't suppose they had many white Europeans invading their office, so they were trying to make out why I had come.

An Indian man, *Shaykh Farooq*, spoke first.

“What do you want?”

His English was good, I could tell. However, I was just as surprised they didn't understand why I had come to their office as they were that I had. When I told him the reason, he told me that I had to receive full disclosure of what the religion of Islam was and the conditions of avowal.

It sounded a bit ominous. I had expected to be welcomed, and sworn in straight away, but they insisted I needed some coaching.

There were two other people interested in being Muslims in the office before me, both from the Philippines. David was a born again Christian who had become convinced of Islam during his Arabic language classes which the centre ran. Coincidentally, he was the electrician who serviced the apartment/hotel that I was staying at. John, however, had been persuaded to become a Muslim because his wife was Muslim. He had been dragged to the office by David, who was his friend.

Arrangements were made for all three of us to make the double declaration together in the presence of two Muslim witnesses. After that, we would be officially Muslim. They arranged for a religious propagator to explain that very weekend coming up, after the noon prayer on Thursday.

Since David and I lived in the same apartment/hotel, John came by us, and we went to the centre together. They showed us into the main rest area, which now had low floor cushions set around the walls with armrests to lean on for the occasion. *Shaykh Ehab*, or *Abu Abdurrahman*, as I now knew him, a man who I had given me the Quran in the first place, and *Shaykh Farooq*, who I had met when I came to the office to ask how to become a Muslim, were both there, waiting for us. Then *Shaykh Ibrahim*, the manager of Ha'il Propagation Centre, brought in two men I did not know. Apparently, they were volunteers. *Shaykh*

Sa'ud worked for the Saudi Electric Company, and *Shaykh AbdulAziz* for the Saudi Telecom Company. It was *Shaykh Sa'ud* who did the disclosure.

He explained carefully that Islam was a monotheist religion, and taking the step of formally embracing Islam was a big step. Once I had done so, there was no turning back, and if I did turn back, I would be subject to the death penalty for apostasy.

I said I knew the seriousness of the step.

Then he told me the six points concerning the creed. "First, you must know and believe in your heart and in your prayer that Allah is your God, and there is no God but Him."

"This is the basic reason I am here," I thought.

He held up his hand. "This means that you should not look to any object or image as a focus for your worship of God, for they are idols. Also your worship should be direct to Him, not through any human being or spirit: prophet, priest, angel or elemental. Do you understand what I mean?"

We each agreed that we did.

Then he went on. "You must believe also in His angels, who are the messengers and errand doers of God. They carry His word to the Prophets and do whatever He commands them on the earth and in the heaven."

I nodded along with David and John. It was the angels that destroyed Sodom and Gomorra on God's command, and the angels who communicated with Mary about Jesus.

"And you must believe in God's message, which you can find in the Quran, and in that which was sent to different Prophets in the Torah, the Psalms and the Gospel, before it. We believe all of these Books were revealed to the Prophets by God."

'Very fair,' I thought.

"Do you believe that these are all revealed by God through His angels to His Prophets?"

We affirmed it.

"Muslims have to believe in all the Prophets, naturally, and they are the ones who have given us the Message of God from the time of Adam. Muhammad is the last of the Prophets because the Quran is the final message to mankind, and it tells us he is the end of the Prophets. And you must believe that Jesus, Peace be upon him, is not God or the son of God. He is a man, like us, created by the command

of God in the womb of Mary, and a Messenger of God, just like Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. What do you say.”

“Jesus was a Prophet, like Muhammad,” said David. I nodded. ‘Of course,’ I was thinking.

“You must also believe that we will be resurrected and judged on the Final Day, and that in the Hereafter there is one of two destinies awaiting us: the Garden or the Fire. This is the basis of our free will. We choose where we go by our deeds in this mundane world.”

This is an integral part of Christian belief, too, so there was no trouble to assimilate it. We agreed we understood.

Footnotes:

[1] (<http://www.sahihalbukhari.com/sps/sbk/sahihalbukhari.cfm?scn=dsphadeeth&HadeethID=3202&txt=a%20spirit>)

(part 7 of 7)

“Finally, you must believe in predestination, which means ‘*fate*’. That is, all that befalls you in the mundane world is by Allah’s Will. If you like it, then say ‘*Praise be to Allah*’. And if you dislike it, it is a test or punishment from Him. Again you should say ‘*Praise be to Allah*’, and repent and correct what you are doing wrong. Above all, you should have patience, and hope for what is better, just round the corner.”

This last was a bit beyond my understanding, and is quite difficult to grasp. Even the companions asked the Prophet, “Why should we bother to work, if we cannot avoid our fate? Should we stop doing works and trust in Allah?”

His response was that we should not give up working. He said that the man or woman destined for hell, even if his works were good up to a certain point in his life, would start doing the deeds that would land him in the fire as he approached his death. And the man or woman destined for Paradise, even if he had no good deeds to his name until a certain point in his life, would start doing the deeds that would land him in Paradise as he approached his death. What that meant to the individual is that he should do the good deeds now, for no one knows when he will die. We do not know what we are destined for, so we exercise our own will in what we do. And if we want to be among the ones favoured, we should endeavour to be doing good deeds in the present, in case death comes upon us unforeseen.

Even though I was not clear on the last point, I was on the first five points of the creed, and both David and John also did not demur. Each one of us I told him “I am ready.”

He took each of our avowals separately. When it came to my turn, he said, “repeat after me.”

“Ash-shaddu an laa ilaha illa Allah, wa ash-shaddu ana Muhammadan nabiyyan wa rasulu Llah.”

The Purifying Bath and a New Life

He explained that anyone who avowed the testimonies not only became a Muslim, but Allah promised them Paradise, even if their deeds were few. Then he said, “Now you should bathe yourself and make your first Formal Prayer, which will be the noon prayer followed by the mid-afternoon prayer. Yusuf will show you how.”

Even before we learnt how to make ablution, the brothers came up and hugged us, grins and congratulations being poured on each one of us. Then I heard a question I would hear often, so often I thought it was a necessary part of embracing Islam. “What name are you going to take, now you are Muslim?”

“Why should we take another name?”

“You are starting life anew, like a new born baby. You are only one minute old!”

Well, I hadn’t decided, because I hadn’t thought about it. However, when it came to the certificate, I did choose – and action that I regretted later. David and John kept their names, simply translated them into Arabic for their Muslim nicknames, *Dawoud* and *Yahyah*. I just delayed my decision.

It was still daylight, but nearly half past three in the afternoon. Yusuf was a Chinese propagator, one of the acolytes of the centre. He showed us how to make ablution in the public ablution trench explaining each part. It was both clearer and more regulation bound than how the orphans had shown me.

He made sure I was doing it right, and then told me to go to the toilet. “When you pray, you should be free of distractions such as hunger or thirst, or the need to go to the toilet. You should also be wary of flatulence, since it breaks purity and forces you to make ablution again.”

After I finished relieving myself, I should take a bath. The bath would be my purification, which would purify me and signal my entry into Islam, and prepare me for my combined afternoon prayers. I suppose that it is much like the baptism that John the Baptist insisted his followers should take if they were to follow him

and the religion he preached. No formal brushing of the head with ‘holy water’ as a sign of being born into Christianity, this, but full immersion in flowing water submitted to voluntarily by adult people who had chosen their religion. I, too, would have to wet all my body, but not by immersion in a stream or river; there aren’t any in Saudi Arabia. What I was required to do consisted of four basic stages. I would have to wash my private parts thoroughly and then make ablution again, wash my body with a basin of water starting on the right, and finally pour a jug full of water over my head, making sure every crevice of my body received a douche of water. I did what he told me to do and came out for my first experience of being a practicing Muslim.

Yusuf called us over and told us he would show us what we should do. Then he said he would lead us in the Prayer as it was our first time.

The direction of prayer for the Formal Prayer is facing Mecca, where the Kaaba is, and consists of standing with hands folded on the chest, bowing (once within one unit of prayer), prostrating (which is done twice) and sitting on one’s feet (done between pairs of prayer units and between prostrations and at the end of the Prayer). The outline of the Formal Prayer I learned and the recitals, invocations and supplications needed in the Prayer are reproduced in a separate article on Purification and Prayer.

The story of my adopting Islam as my religion finished with this first formal prayer. However, many trials and tribulations followed, but these are another story. If you also feel you must embrace Islam, remember – Islam is the spiritual refuge, the surety of Allah’s support. It is also the beginning of many tests, for Allah makes life a constant test for believers. Your problems in this world will not go away automatically, but they will melt away one by one with Allah’s help. So submit, and be patient, and Allah will make you one who He rewards twice. My favourite verses in the Quran are from The Stories (*Al Qasas*), in the 28th Chapter, verses 51-55.

“Indeed now We have conveyed the Word to them, so they may remember. Those who to whom we gave the Scripture before it, believe in it, and when it is recited to them say, “We believe in it. Verily, it is the Truth from our Lord. Indeed, even before it we were Muslims.” These will be given their reward twice over because they are patient and repel evil with good; and they spend (in charity) out of what we provided them. And when they hear vain foul language, they withdraw from it and say, “To us our deeds, and to you your deeds; Peace be unto you! We seek not (the way or company of) the ignorant.”