

Abdal Hakim Murad's road into Islam

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I once read that it was a peach dripping from the chin of girl that brought you to Islam. Is that really so?

When I was sixteen, my parents send me on an exchange with a French Jewish family in Paris. They had a house in Corsica as well where they went for their holidays. But they were nudists, so for two full weeks they would wear no clothes at all. It was, to say the least, very... euhm... instructive for me. *(smiles)*

But then, when I was with them on their holidays, there was a moment where I saw a sort of 'luminosity' in the beauty of some of those people. The whole environment and the sea, it all felt very paradise like. And at that moment, when I saw the juice of the peach dripping from that girl's cheek, I realized that it was not 'nothing'. I understood this wasn't just some matter of 'brain function' but that there was a real presence there. I knew nothing about religion at that time, but I somehow grasped that all of the things that surrounded me were just part of a sort of interface that was being used to bring about this beauty.

What you describe is more a general religious experience. How did you eventually come to choose Islam specifically?

That was a rather undramatic process.

I went to one of the most liberal schools in London when I was young so the chaplain was constantly urging us to pay attention to human rights and all sorts of right-on issues. But when pressed, to give an explanation of any of the key doctrines which we were proclaiming at the liturgy every day in Westminster Abbey, he couldn't really do so. He also didn't think it was very important. The trinity, the incarnation, the dual nature of Christ, the atonement, and so on, in his eyes all of those things were more of a poetic, inspirational and aesthetic value than of real factual relevance.

At that time, of course, in the seventies, many were looking for alternatives in India. Yet, although I believe that Europeans in particular find it easy to be spiritually mobile, I don't think most people can do that because it requires a cultural rerouting that most aren't capable of. You can't reinvent yourself as swami in an ashram if deep down within you lie the stories of Abraham, the concepts of monotheism, the desire to pray, etc. There's a kind of dissonance there that I think obstructs spiritual growth and gets in the way of having an integrated personality. So I had no desire to do anything exotic.

I did have some interest in Unitarian Churches and various alternatives. However, Islam eventually crept up on me. I suppose through something called 'the festival of Islam' which happened in London in 1976, showcasing exhibitions in the National Gallery and having concerts of Islamic artists. This was of course before anybody knew much about Islam, before Khomeini had come to power and

before all the other events that put Islam at the forefront of the debates in today's society. So, being from an artistic family, my interest was first triggered by the aesthetics of it.

In particular architecture attracted me. In fact, the space defined by Islam architecturally is compelling to everybody. The most popular building for tourists in Asia is the Taj Mahal and the place in Europe that gets the most visitors – even more than Versailles or the Vatican – is the Al Hambra in Spain apparently. So there's universalism there that speaks to many, perhaps because we, Europeans, are now beyond the iconic phase in the evolution of our arts. The geometrical, limpid, contemplative introspection of the Islamic space is intelligible even for the younger generation. You see this when you take young people to churches and mosques. They often feel more at ease in mosques. It seems difficult for them to feel connected to the elaborate concretized sensibilities of a different age.

Eventually I started hitch-hiking around Europe, visited Muslim Spain and then decided that instead of going to Cambridge to study economics as I had planned, I was going to study Arabic. The initial intention was that I could get a job in a bank in the Gulf and make a lot of money. But providence had some other ideas, so I'm still poor. *(laughs)*

So, in the end, the two came together: on the one hand there were the aesthetics of the arts and on the other hand the fact that the Christian concepts like trinity blocked my own life of prayer. The trinitarian God – that three-in-one mystery of which the chaplain at my school said not to think about it too much – never formed part of my youthful devotions. A God that is the God of Abraham and all the prophets made more sense to me.

I therefore didn't have a real conversion, I gradually grew into Islam. I also didn't meet any Muslims before I decided to convert. It was all libraries and art. Only after I learned the theory, I wanted to learn the practice by meeting certain individuals and seeing what the religion can actually do to produce a higher state of being.

That's why I went to study abroad in Al-Azhar as well as at the feet of certain shaykhs.

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