

Are you still a Moslem? Memories of a happy Islam

A few years ago, I received an unexpected call from my nephew then living with his parents in Cairo; I had been living outside Egypt for many years already. Last time I had seen him, he was a playful little boy. Receiving a call from him surprised me because he had never called before; but the real surprise came when he proceeded directly to ask me: "Uncle, are you still a Moslem!?"

In the pause that ensued, my intricate relationship with my folks in Egypt sped with lightning speed through my mind. I smiled at the thought that my early-teen nephew dared at last to ask me the question everyone back home wanted to know: "Why, at the age of sixty-six, had I left my birth-country, where I had been living in relative ease, to move for good to an ashram dedicated to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother?" My family and friends had known for some time that I was translating the works of these great spiritual masters into Arabic, but translating was one thing and migrating to live in an ashram was quite another.

My spontaneous reply to my nephew ran something like: "Yes, I am still Moslem, but I am also Christian, Hindu and Buddhist and everything else that has in it a kernel of truth, goodness and beauty." He kept silent, then hastily mumbled good-bye, and hung up. We have not talked with each other since.

Now that my nephew is slowly edging into manhood, and the falling autumn leaves are reminding me of the shortness of human life, I feel a growing urgency to share my Islam experiences with whomever cares to know them. What I want to say is not meant for everyone though; it is meant only for those young and open in mind and heart.

The reason I am sharing my experiences with Islam is that they represent a life story I can truthfully narrate and because I believe that, with some good will, we can always learn from true life stories, even when we do not agree with the message conveyed. But the strongest motivation for me to share is to express my concern for young Moslems who are currently living, in many countries, under extremely difficult circumstances and who have to witness how things are steadily worsening around them. It is no secret that lately Islam has lost much of the sympathy and esteem it once enjoyed worldwide, and that the opportunities for Islamic countries to reintegrate into the rest of the world seem to dwindle from year to year.

The happy Islam I have experienced

I grew up in Egypt around the middle of the last century. The Islam I found was remarkably tolerant and appealing. Though personally I did not have a happy childhood, my difficulties had nothing to do with Islam (but rather with the particular mode of life in my parents' home). In fact, Islam was one of the sunniest aspects of my childhood, a fact I did not become aware of until much later.

Original Islam was marked by striking tolerance; it is enough to contemplate the following famous verses from the Quran:

“Verily! Those who believe and those who are Jews and Christians and Mandaeans*, whoever believes in God and the Last Day and performs righteous deeds shall have their reward from their Lord. They shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve.”

* The Mandaeans follow a Gnostic religion the Prophet must have come across during his travels. There is no doubt in my mind that had the Prophet known the highly developed religions of the Far East [such as Taoism, Shintoism, Buddhism, Hinduism...] he would have included them in the verses above.

My folks (and by “folks” I do not mean just first-degree relatives but the extended family with its large network of interrelated friends and acquaintances) practiced Islam in a remarkably uncomplicated way. Simply put, they were Moslems and happy about it; it would not have occurred to them they could be otherwise.

They did not care much for the juristic and theological divisions which have afflicted Islam over long stretches of its history. Strangely enough, the same divisions have come to the forefront in the consciousness of many Moslems today. My folks performed the prescribed religious duties freely: some prayed, others fasted, still others completed the pilgrimage, and a few completed all their religious obligations; they did not condemn or extoll others because of that. Youngsters in my family were free to practice on their own without censorship or pressure. The remarkable thing is that I saw no one misusing this freedom. My folks were, on the whole, decent, honest and hard-working, they loved their families and cared for the wellbeing of the people who worked for them.

Tensions between Moslems, Christians and Jews living in Egypt were almost unknown at that time. The presence of the British as the de facto rulers of the country welded Egyptians into a common national identity. A great majority of Egyptians hated the presence of the British; some actively resisted and fought against it and were detained in prisons or deported out of the country. National feelings did not make them averse to everything Western though. Many professionals sent their children to Western schools to make them multi-lingual. In these schools, Moslem and Christian children went to separate religion classes.

My parents did not talk religion with their children, and precisely their silent and unpretentious Islam had a lasting effect on me. I was deeply touched to see my father silently reading the Quran whenever he allowed himself some relaxed time at home, and I was similarly touched when I saw my mother, who suffered from chronic depression, cling to her Quran when she was in a crisis and pray fervently for relief.

Around my eighth year I developed a voracious appetite for reading, and I was specially fascinated by the popular booklets describing the glories and heroic deeds of the great figures of Islam. In the religion class at school, I got my first glimpses of the

Quran. I could already then feel the power and beauty of its rhymed prose and appreciate the impact it must have had on the Arabs who heard it for the first time. In my early teens I developed the habit of visiting a nearby mosque where I enjoyed listening to recitations of the Quran. I was particularly attracted to those parts which describe the glory of God and the wonders and beauty of His creation and which call for compassion, brotherhood and equality of all people, and I was less interested in the later parts detailing the laws, prohibitions and punishments.

The members of my larger family dressed in a conservative European fashion; women were not veiled, elderly women and widows chose sometimes to cover their hair with a scarf. In large family gatherings, women and men were not strictly separated; if there was any separation, it came quite naturally because men liked to talk about their work and discuss politics, while women preferred to talk about children and domestic affairs. Men and women maintained a natural reserve; they often addressed each other using titles that varied according to rank, age, and degree of relationship. They naturally avoided showing too much familiarity or asking each other personal questions. Married and engaged couples avoided displaying their mutual tender affections towards each other in front of the rest of the family.

Talented young Egyptians were broadly educated, either in Egypt itself or in Europe; no wonder that some of them became the best thinkers and writers Egypt has produced in modern times. They interpreted Islamic civilization in biographies and novels which, in my view, have not been equaled to this day.

Having said all this, I would like to emphasize that it is by no means my intention to glorify the people among whom I grew up. I believe that the exceptional tolerance and openness they have evidenced resulted mainly from the fortunate circumstances they lived in. They, like most people, were mainly occupied with worldly matters and simply lived their Islam without thinking much about it. And yet, their example furnishes me with the point I want to make here, namely that the excessive and often violent religious zeal of the extremely conservative Moslems of today does not necessarily produce a better Islam, rather the opposite. Often these zealous people justify their extreme conservatism by the fear of losing their faith if they would relax in even the tiniest detail of the law. According to my experience and understanding, the people I have described in the previous paragraphs lived their Islam without coercion or fear and managed well in leading a happy and appealing version of Islamic life. Islam, rightly understood and practiced, offers a healthy and resilient way of life that stands on the strength of its own truth. There is no compelling need for conservative Moslems to fear "contamination" by other traditions. Believers who are firm in their own religion should be able to live anywhere and everywhere without losing it. The truly important thing today is to have enough fairness to grant other people the right to cherish their religions as well; otherwise only two alternatives remain: either to live in alienation and isolation or to be in constant conflict with everyone else. In the multicultural world of today, people do not really care about the

religions of other people. Religion, or the lack of it, has become rather a private affair. On the other hand, people are welcome and sought everywhere as long as they are qualified, dependable, honest and socially agreeable.

Aspirations for the future of Islam

1) I wish and hope that young Moslems would acquire the habit of learning from every occasion and thus go far beyond the school education they have received. In Egypt of the second half of the 20th Century, the quality of education, particularly in languages, has dropped far below what it was in the first half of the century. The neglect of foreign languages led to a narrowing of the horizon of many young people, and they consequently became dependent on the local media and happenings to form their views about life. Unfortunately, the media and the clergy have often bombarded young people with Islamic ideological and juristic issues that had been discussed, almost in the same manner, a thousand years ago. These young people were seldom taught that Islam is infinitely more than cut-and-dry legalistic doctrines. The result was that they know and care little about the glorious achievements of Islam in Bagdad, Isfahan and Cordoba and about the great Moslem philosophers, physicians, astronomers, architects and mathematicians whose works were studied in European universities all through the Middle Ages. Lacking adequate background in philosophy, these young people find it difficult to grasp that the holy texts of Islam (or of any religion, for that matter) can be interpreted in a symbolic and psychological way that often reveals more of the truth contained in them than a strictly literal interpretation could ever reveal.

Most damaging, in my opinion, was the fact that young Moslems were seldom taught that their Prophet was, first and foremost, a messenger of peace and compassion who did all he could to avoid direct confrontation with his own people until he was forced, in the last years of his life, to defend his people and himself against their fierce and unrelenting assaults. One just needs to remember that as soon as the Prophet finally entered victoriously into Mecca, he declared general amnesty and forgave all those who had been inflicting untold injury, humiliation and torture on his followers. One needs only to remember that the only mention of war in the Prophet's *Last Sermon of Farewell*, was an exhortation to his people to respect the traditional prohibition of war during the four holy months of every year. In the rest of the Sermon the Prophet urged his people to regard life and property as a sacred trust, to consider their wives a trust from Allah, to refrain from hurting others, to be honest and to fulfill their worldly and religious obligations.

Young Moslems were seldom taught that civil courage can be much greater than dying on the battlefield. The Prophet demonstrated his greatest courage when he dared, single-handedly at first, to confront his people with a new religion that went against all their cherished pre-Islamic notions and values. When he asked proud tribal Arabs, for whom making war was the normal way of life, to be humble in front of

Allah, the God of mercy and compassion in whose eyes they and their slaves were equal — his new religion must have appeared to them sheer madness and an unacceptable provocation.

Young Moslems today often ignore the fact that the Prophet, before developing into the phenomenal man of action he became in his last years, was for a long time a deeply spiritual and peaceful traveling merchant who carefully studied the world around him. In his free time, he spent many solitary nights contemplating on the top of a nearby mountain — thus preparing himself for the revelations he would receive and the great actions he would later perform. Today we witness some young Moslems, who have hardly any experience or knowledge, assume for themselves the right to change the world according to their own understanding and in violent ways that are totally un-Islamic.

2) I also wish and hope that Moslems would understand the simple equation that to live peacefully in the world, they need to begin by establishing peace in and among themselves, not a superficial peace that collapses by the first provocation, but a solid and lasting peace. Once this solid peace is established, the extreme violence committed in the name of Islam in the last decades — would become unthinkable and would appear in its true light: an irrational folly that has caused an incalculable damage to Islam.

Establishing such solid peace is not easy though, and it requires a sustained spiritual endeavor. The topic of spirituality is too wide and sensitive to be discussed here. The one particular thing I would like to say in this article is to mention the great contributions of the Sufis to world spirituality. Today Sufism is the most warmly accepted aspect of Islam worldwide. It is time for Moslems to re-evaluate their relationship to Sufism and to try to learn from it how to awaken in their hearts the Love of God and His creation which is a much more effective guide to keep humans on the right track than the fear of God's punishment.

This article is my answer to the question put to me by my nephew that I mention in the beginning of this article. May I end by adding one more detail which would complete my answer to his question: The reason I have left Egypt to spend my remaining years in an ashram dedicated to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is that I find this ashram to be, for me, the most suitable place, to deepen, in and around myself that solid peace I mentioned in the previous paragraph, the peace on which, in the long run, a divine life can be established on earth.

Zackaria M Moursi, February 21st, 2017

“If mankind only caught a glimpse of what infinite enjoyments, what perfect force, what luminous reaches of spontaneous knowledge, what wide calms of our being lie waiting for us in the tracts which our animal evolution has not conquered, they would leave all and never rest till they had gained these treasures.” Sri Aurobindo