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Rating: 4.8

Description: A winner of the 2003 Wilbur Award for best book of the year on a religious theme, author and poet and appearing on Ted Koppel's "Nightline" documenting the Hajj, Michael Wolfe describes his motivations for accepting Islam.

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Published on: 16 Jan 2006

Last modified on: 12 Nov 2013

After twenty-five years as a writer in America, I wanted something to soften my cynicism. I was searching for new terms by which to see. The way one is raised establishes certain needs in this department. From a pluralist background, I naturally placed great stress on the matters of racism and freedom. Then, in my early twenties, I had gone to live in Africa for three years. During this time, which was formative for me, I rubbed shoulders with blacks of many different tribes, with Arabs, Berbers, and even Europeans, who were Muslims. By and large these people did not share the Western obsession with race as a social category. In our encounters, being oddly colored, rarely mattered. I was welcomed first and judged on merit later. By contrast, Europeans and Americans, including many who are free of racist notions, automatically class people racially. Muslims classified people by their faith and their actions. I found this transcendent and refreshing. Malcolm X saw his nation's salvation in it. "America needs to understand Islam," he wrote, "because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem."



I was looking for an escape route, too, from the isolating terms of a materialistic culture. I wanted access to a spiritual dimension, but the conventional paths I had known as a boy were closed. My father had been a Jew; my mother Christian. Because of my mongrel background, I had a foot in two religious camps. Both faiths were undoubtedly profound. Yet the one that emphasizes a chosen people I found insupportable; while the other, based in a mystery, repelled me. A century before, my maternal great-great-grandmother's name had been set in stained glass at the high street Church of Christ in Hamilton, Ohio. By the time I was twenty, this meant nothing to me.

These were the terms my early life provided. The more I thought about it now, the more I returned to my experiences in Muslim Africa. After two return trips to Morocco, in 1981 and 1985, I came to feel that Africa, the continent, had little to do with the balanced life I found there. It was not, that is, a continent I was after, nor an institution, either. I was looking for a framework I could live with, a vocabulary of spiritual concepts applicable to the life I was living now. I did not want to “trade in” my culture. I wanted access to new meanings.

After a mid-Atlantic dinner I went to wash up in the bathroom. During my absence a quorum of Hasidim lined up to pray outside the door. By the time I had finished, they were too immersed to notice me. Emerging from the bathroom, I could barely work the handle. Stepping into the aisle was out of the question.

I could only stand with my head thrust into the hallway, staring at the congregation’s backs. Holding palm-size prayer books, they cut an impressive figure, tapping the texts on their breastbones as they divined. Little by little the movements grew erratic, like a mild, bobbing form of rock and roll. I watched from the bathroom door until they were finished, then slipped back down the aisle to my seat.

We landed together later that night in Brussels. Reboarding, I found a discarded Yiddish newspaper on a food tray. When the plane took off for Morocco, they were gone.

I do not mean to imply here that my life during this period conformed to any grand design. In the beginning, around 1981, I was driven by curiosity and an appetite for travel. My favorite place to go, when I had the money, was Morocco. When I could not travel, there were books. This fascination brought me into contact with a handful of writers driven to the exotic, authors capable of sentences like this, by Freya Stark:

“The perpetual charm of Arabia is that the traveler finds his level there simply as a human being; the people’s directness, deadly to the sentimental or the pedantic, like the less complicated virtues; and the pleasantness of being liked for oneself might, I think, be added to the five reasons for travel given me by Sayyid Abdulla, the watchmaker; “to leave one’s troubles behind one; to earn a living; to acquire learning; to practice good manners; and to meet honorable men”.

I could not have drawn up a list of demands, but I had a fair idea of what I was after. The religion I wanted should be to metaphysics as metaphysics is to science. It would not be confined by a narrow rationalism or traffic in mystery to please its priests. There would be no priests, no separation between nature and things sacred. There would be no war with the flesh, if I could help it. Sex would be natural, not the seat of a curse upon the species. Finally, I did want a ritual component, daily routine to sharpen the senses and discipline my mind. Above all, I wanted clarity and freedom. I did not want to trade away reason simply to be saddled with a dogma.

The more I learned about Islam, the more it appeared to conform to what I was after.

Most of the educated Westerners I knew around this time regarded any strong religious climate with suspicion. They classified religion as political manipulation, or they dismissed it as a medieval concept, projecting upon it notions from their European past.

It was not hard to find a source for their opinions. A thousand years of Western history had left us plenty of fine reasons to regret a path that led through so much ignorance and slaughter. From the Children's Crusade and the Inquisition to the transmogrified faiths of nazism and communism during our century, whole countries have been exhausted by belief. Nietzsche's fear, that the modern nation-state would become a substitute religion, has proved tragically accurate. Our century, it seemed to me, was ending in an age beyond belief, which believers inhabited as much as agnostics.

Regardless of church affiliation, secular humanism is the air westerners breathe, the lens we gaze through. Like any world view, this outlook is pervasive and transparent. It forms the basis of our broad identification with democracy and with the pursuit of freedom in all its countless and beguiling forms. Immersed in our shared preoccupations, one may easily forget that other ways of life exist on the same planet.

At the time of my trip, for instance, 650 million Muslims with a majority representation in forty-four countries adhered to the formal teachings of Islam. In addition, about 400 million more were living as minorities in Europe, Asia and the Americas. Assisted by postcolonial economics, Islam has become in a matter of thirty years a major faith in Western Europe. Of the world's great religions, Islam alone was adding to its fold.

My politicized friends were dismayed by my new interest. They all but universally confused Islam with the machinations of half a dozen middle eastern tyrants. The books they read, the new broadcasts they viewed depicted the faith as a set of political functions. Almost nothing was said of its spiritual practice. I liked to quote Mae West to them: "Anytime you take religion for a joke, the laugh's on you."

Historically, a Muslim sees Islam as the final, matured expression of an original religion reaching back to Adam. It is as resolutely monotheistic as Judaism, whose major Prophets Islam reveres as links in a progressive chain, culminating in Jesus and Muhammad, peace be upon them. Essentially a message of renewal, Islam has done its part on the world stage to return the forgotten taste of life's lost sweetness to millions of people. Its book, the Quran, caused Goethe to remark, "You see, this teaching never fails; with all our systems, we cannot go, and generally speaking no man can go, further.

Traditional Islam is expressed through the practice of five pillars. Declaring one's faith, prayer, charity, and fasting are activities pursued repeatedly throughout one's life.

Conditions permitting, each Muslim is additionally charged with undertaking a pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime. The Arabic term for this fifth rite is Hajj.

Scholars relate the word to the concept of 'qasd', "aspiration," and to the notion of men and women as travelers on earth. In Western religions, pilgrimage is a vestigial tradition, a quaint, folkloric concept commonly reduced to metaphor. Among Muslims,

on the other hand, the Hajj embodies a vital experience for millions of new pilgrims every year. In spite of the modern content of their lives, it remains an act of obedience, a profession of belief, and the visible expression of a spiritual community. For a majority of Muslims the Hajj is an ultimate goal, the trip of a lifetime.

As a convert, I felt obliged to go to Makkah. As an addict to travel I could not imagine a more compelling goal.

The annual, month-long fast of Ramadan precedes the Hajj by about one hundred days. These two rites form a period of intensified awareness in Muslim society. I wanted to put this period to use. I had read about Islam; I [attended] a Mosque near my home in California; I had started a practice. Now I hoped to deepen what I was learning by submerging myself in a religion where Islam infuses every aspect of existence.

I planned to begin in Morocco, because I knew that country well and because it followed traditional Islam and was fairly stable. The last place I wanted to start was in a backwater full of uproarious sectarians. I wanted to paddle the mainstream, the broad, calm water.

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