

I chose to become a Shia Muslim and accept the religion of Islam from the age of 16 or 17

I have been a Shia Muslim for over 4 years now and have found true happiness in my life without a doubt. I chose to become a Shia Muslim and accept the religion of Islam from the age of 16 or 17, which is considered by many to be quite a young age for an English born westerner living in London. I will admit as a youngster before the age of 16 I never would have believed that I would accept or even consider Islam as something which would interest spiritually but here I am.

My family are all English going back generations, my parents came from church of England background but were never very religious and never used religion in day to day life at home. I was baptised as a baby and I went to Sunday school as a very young boy and took part in some local church sports days and seasonal plays Christmas etc but apart from this there wasn't much more religion in my life. I always believed in God and a creator but Christianity was dull and uninspiring to me and I found it hard to find the closeness to God that I sought.

Overall, growing up in north London I lived in a very predominantly English area but made very close friends with Muslims at school. Secondary school was when I really started to realise in more detail who Muslims were and what their beliefs are. As is usually the case with many Muslims once you start asking a few questions about Islam, there answers come flowing out and I loved everything I was hearing. I was very touched by the 5 times a day prayers, protecting the modesty of women and men, and the fasting during Ramadan, all of it was to achieve a closeness to God and to satisfy him through good behavior and deeds on this earth.

It was my Lebanese friends who really began taking me to the next level; I was invited to prayers, offered English translations of the Quran and given plenty of knowledge about the life of Prophet Muhammad pbuh and the message he brought to liberate mankind from ignorance and sin.

When learning and reading the Holy Quran and absorbing its message and then living in a non-Muslim environment I could start to see how the life around me is so fake and materialistic that it's a real put off for me. I started to see how going out and drinking alcohol, partying, chasing women and money and not care what you eat what you say or how you behave is just wrong and leads to bad behaviour, bad memories and bad moral society. Reading the Quran and studying the life of Muslims and how they behave really made me realise how Islam was a religion that came to us over 1400 years ago but is still needed urgently today as we as humans still struggle with the same moral issues and weaknesses that we faced back then in time of Prophets. I wanted to be close to God but also wanted to live a life free of material wants and selfish needs and to live a life that would not only benefit me spiritually but also practically and personally too. After realizing I didn't want to be part of modern day western lifestyle I decided the Quran had led me to the truth and I knew I was a Muslim!

After becoming Muslim and learning the basics, next was the arrival to Shia Islam. Naturally once you learn about Muhammad pbuh you can't help but move on to Imam Ali a.s his son in law and his daughter Fatimah s.a and his family Ahlulbayt a.s. I did have a mix of friends both Shia and Sunni and of course both would tell me their sides of history and beliefs. There was a time I could have very easily become a Sunni, but personally I love history and when studying Islamic history, all the truth about what happened is there and the conclusion was Muhammad pbuh DID appoint Imam Ali a.s as his successor, Prophet Muhammad pbuh DID love his Ahlulbayt over everyone else and Imam Ali a.s was without a doubt the most loyal, honest and closest company and family member to the Prophet ever!

Imam Ali a.s followed the Prophet better than anyone and that's why the Shia follow him so closely because through Imam Ali a.s and the twelve Imams can a modern day Muslim truly achieve as near perfection to Prophets teaching. It was Lebanese Muslim who brought me to Islam truly and they of course follow Imam Ali a.s in Lebanon very sinisterly as well and its for the simple fact that in Islamic history no one was a better servant to Allah swt & Muhammad pbuh then Prophet adopted Son Imam Ali a.s! He protected and sacrificed for the prophet in Allah's name on many occasions and achieved his aim of

ensuring Muhammad's message was heard and protected. This is why Imam Ali a.s is my greatest role model after Rasulullah pbuh.

At first I didn't have great access to the Shia community in Britain because my area is a Sunni dominated area in north London, but once I began to travel and meet new people and Shia venues, truly what I began to see was a true sense of oneness, brotherhood and spirituality that I have never seen among any other community like I have with the Shia community in my life. Wherever you are from nationality wise the Shia community always looks at you as a human being and as a fellow brother in humanity. Whether you are Muslim or non Muslim the Shia of Ahlulbayt a.s are taught that we are all brothers in humanity and everyone should be respected and treated with the best of manners. I have always been welcomed wherever I go and have made many friends with random people simply because they know my intentions are good and we all seek closeness to Allah swt.

In Muharram, I take time off work and travel to as many lectures and gatherings as possible. It's a time of great sadness and after learning in great details what happened to Prophets Family and grandchildren on the day of Ashura even a reverted western that I am, still feels the great sadness and depression over these great personality who sacrificed so much for the religion and for all humanity. Although it is a sad time I do enjoy travelling to experience the closeness the community has in coming together to remember the great personalities of Karbala and to try to soak up there personality and teachings threw there sacrifices and life stories.

My opinion regarding Azadari/morning during Muharram is something I didn't know much about before I came to Islam especially Shia Islam but once learning about the lives of the Imams and Ahlulbayt and the suffering they went through it was easy for me to understand why the community mourns in such a way. I have been gently and thoroughly educated about Islam and Shia beliefs by a truly religious & practicing Lebanese family and they have shown me all the truths about the history and beliefs and cultural acts of Muslims and I have come to the conclusion that crying for the Ahlulbayt and even beating your chest in

memory of these great personalities is an act which truly allows us to remember them and become 1 with their message and beat the legacy of these great personalities into our hearts and help raise us to their level of self sacrifice and honour that they had. Attempting to memorize and embrace these great personality and their suffering for peace freedom and truth should always be remember and emphasized upon.