

I did not even know that Islam existed

Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim

I was born in the south of England, near the sea, in a small town, and grew up knowing nothing about Islam. I did not even know that Islam existed. However, as a child I had always felt a sense of detachment from this world. I felt as if I had just arrived here from another place, and I could not get used to being here. I have always had a naturally strong attachment to the unseen; the sense of a hidden place from where I have come, and to where I will return. My family were Christian in name, but not really Christian in belief. My mother rejected the idea of God as a Father. She brought me up telling me that God is a 'force', or a 'power'. We never read the Bible, although we had a copy. Our Christian practice was very cultural. When I was a child we went to church on Sundays to socialise, rather than to think about the message of Nabi Isa (as).

My family never really thought about God, or the nature and meaning of our existence in this world, or of sacred knowledge. They are good, moral people, but they live mainly for this world. It is as if the realm of the unseen does not exist for them. I spent my teenage years looking for sacred knowledge. I read books on different ancient religions: the religion of the ancient Egyptians and the ancient Celts, but this did not satisfy me. When I was seventeen, my friends and I began to listen to the lectures given by a teacher who was originally from India. He talked about knowledge of the self; of the meaning of happiness and how important it was to put his teachings first in one's life. I became dissatisfied with this teacher, because I realised that he was not genuine. He used knowledge to control his followers. I stopped listening to him, and again began to buy books, as I continued to search for teachings about knowledge of the self and the Divine, but again I could not find anything to satisfy me. I wanted to find a proper path, a path that trains the soul.

When I was eighteen I moved to London to study Japanese, and when I was nineteen, I went to Japan as part of my degree. I found a society that had become very materialistic, and again, for me, there was a sense of something missing. On my way back from Japan I visited

Malaysia. This was the first Muslim country that I had ever been to. I journeyed to the northeast by train. When I got to the north, which is the most religious area of the country, I began to dress as the Muslim women do in that country, and told people I had just become Muslim – but I said this in order to protect myself. I stayed at a guest house where the owner asked me if I was learning about Islam. I said ‘no’, because I knew nothing about Islam at that time, so the owner taught me how to do wudhu and how to pray, and took me to the mosque at fajr time. I spent only a few days in Malaysia, but I had a feeling of being at home and of being at peace in a way that I had not done for a long time.

When I came back to England, I continued with my studies. I rented a room from a Moroccan woman who was just two years old than me. We became like sisters, and spent all our time together. She introduced me to her family. I felt that she had something that I had lost: a purity and innocence. British culture encourages people to corrupt and harm themselves in the name of being free, and I was already very dissatisfied with the ‘free’ way of life here: for me it was shallow and meaningless. In 1996 my Moroccan friend went to Egypt to study fus.ha Arabic and I followed. I stayed in Egypt for six months, and this changed my life. I immediately felt at home in Egypt in a way I had never done in England. Just before I had gone to Egypt I had a dream that I was wearing white, and that I was in a market looking for a hijab. In Egypt I wore clothes that covered, and I preferred to cover. I loved the adhan and the sense of community among people. Britain is very individualistic. People also still had a sense of noble and dignified behaviour, which in Britain we have also lost. I had my first Shahr al-Ramadhan in Egypt, and saw how, close to iftar time, the streets were completely empty, the trams had stopped, there were no cars or taxis around. Everybody was inside preparing to break their fast. When I thought about returning to England I wanted to cry. Eventually I had to return, but I was not the same person. I could not go back to the same life as before. I began to search for knowledge on Islam and to read the Qur’an. I visited different mosques in London. In 1999 I took my shahadatayn. After that, I had a dream about the Holy Prophet (s). He appeared to me in a dark space, on my right hand side, dressed in white. I didn’t see his face, just the edge of his beard. In front of him was a rolled up red and white musalla. He took a step towards the musalla and it unrolled by itself and laid out flat in front of him. I was

told that this dream was asking me to make complete submission. After that, I began to wear hijab.

At that time I knew nothing about the differences between path of the Ahl al-Sunna and the path of the Ahl al-Bayt (as). I followed Sunni Islam because I had never met any Shi'as, or even heard about the Imams (as). In 2001 I went to teach in an Islamic College in London which was set up by Iran. There were Shi'a teachers and students there, but still I did not really understand what the path of Ahl al-Bayt (as) was all about. I was confused and I decided to leave it Allah (swt).

In 2002 I was asked to edit and proofread a translation of Jihad al-Nafs by al-Hurr al-Amili, and in this way I discovered who the Imams (as) were. It seemed wrong to me that I had never heard of them, and that Sunnis never talked about them, or seemed to know about them. I then read Nahj al-Balagha and was shocked to encounter the personality of Imam Ali (as) so closely, because, as a Sunni, I had just seen him as 'one of the companions', and had never discovered his teachings, even though he is the Gate to the City of Knowledge. Imam Ali's (as) personality in Nahj al-Balagha is very strong, and his views on his situation are very clear. In Sunni books I had learned that Imam Ali (as) was weak, but here I found that he was very strong, a true leader. I began to read more and more, and realised that this shining path of knowledge had been hidden from the majority of the umma. Who had hidden it? I began to investigate the history and gradually discovered everything that had happened. When I realised that the path of Ahl al-Bayt (as) was the true path of knowledge, I had a dream in which a pious man told me 'We will show you the Shi'a path on condition that you use it for the purposes of peace.' I took these instructions seriously, and I still do. We should not use the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt (as) to argue, or cause bad feeling, but with the aim of bringing people to an understanding.

At first my family did not like it that I had converted to Islam. They were upset, and our relations became quite bad at one time, but now, more than ten years later, they show me respect and say that they are proud of me. I have to thank Allah (swt) from rescuing me from a false way of life and bringing me to the true way of life where I can gain the knowledge that I was always seeking. Salutations to the Messenger and His Purified Progeny (as)