

Silat Led Me to Islam

Abdul-Lateef Abdullah

My experience in Islam began as a graduate student in New York City in 1998. Up to that point in my life, for 25 years, I had been a Protestant Christian, but had not been practicing my religion for quite some time.

I was more interested in "spirituality" and looking for anything that didn't have to do with organised religion. To me, Christianity was out of touch and not relevant to the times. It was hard for me to find anything in it that I could apply to my everyday life.

I was hungry for a more straightforward and lucid approach to religion that could provide my life with true guidance, not just dogma that was void of knowledge based in reason.

While in graduate school, I had a Jewish roommate who was a student of the martial arts. While I was living with him, he was studying an art called *silat*, a traditional Malaysian martial art that is based on the teachings of Islam.

When my roommate would come home from his *silat* classes, he would tell me all about the uniqueness of *silat* and its rich spiritual dimension. As I was quite interested in learning martial arts at the time, I was intrigued by what I had heard, and decided to accompany my roommate to class one Saturday morning.

Although I did not realise it at the time, my experience in Islam was beginning that morning at my first *silat* class in New York City back on

February 28th, 1998. There, I met my teacher, *Cikgu* (which means teacher in Malay) Sulaiman, the man who would first orient me to the religion of Islam.

From the very beginning, I was intrigued by *silat* and Islam and began spending as much time as possible with my teacher. As my roommate and I were equally passionate about *silat*, we would go to my teacher's house and soak up as much knowledge as we could from him.

In fact, upon our completing graduate school in the spring of 1998, upon his invitation, we spent the entire summer living with him and his wife. As my learning in *silat* increased, so did my learning about Islam, a religion that I had hardly any knowledge of prior to my experience in *silat*.

What made my orientation to Islam so powerful was that as I was learning about it, I was also living it. Because I studied at the home of my teacher, being in the presence of devout Muslims allowed me to be constantly surrounded by the sounds, sights and practices of Islam. For as Islam is an entire lifestyle, when you are in an Islamic environment, you cannot separate it out from everyday life.

Unlike Christianity, which lends toward a separation between daily life and religion, Islam requires its followers to integrate worship of Allah into everything we do. Thus, in living with my teacher, I was immersed in the Islamic *Din* (lifestyle) and experiencing first-hand how it can shape one's entire way of life.



serat tjilwa

In the beginning, Islam was very different and powerful to me. It was also very foreign in many ways and the amount of discipline it requires was difficult to understand.

At the time, I was liberal in many ways, and was used to shunning anything dogmatic or imposed, regardless of where it came from! As time went on, however, and my understanding of Islam grew, I began to slowly see that what seemed to be religious dogma was really a lifestyle put forth to us by our Creator.

This lifestyle, I would later learn, is the straight path to true contentment, not just the sensual and superficial way of life that my society and culture promote. I realised that the question is quite simple actually. Who could possibly know better what the best way of life is for human beings than the all-wise Creator?

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In America, happiness is defined by what we have and consume, thus, the entire culture is geared toward the marketplace. Unless we are re-

moved from this type environment, it is difficult to see its drawbacks, which are based on worshipping and putting faith in everything but God, the only One that can provide us with real, lasting contentment in our lives.

Being a social scientist by trade, much of my professional time is spent trying to address the social ills of our society. As I learned more about Islam, I came to the conclusion that many societal ills are based on unhealthy social behaviour.

Since Islam is a lifestyle focused totally on the most healthy, positive way of conducting our lives in every setting, then it is, and will always be, the only real answer to any society's social dilemmas.

Islam shows us the proper way to live in and contribute to a community.

There still remain some minor aspects of Islam that have proven to be somewhat difficult adjustments for me. Nevertheless, I thank Allah everyday for the ease to which He has allowed me to make the necessary changes in my life so that I can continue to live in America and still be, *insya Allah*, a good Muslim.

I only hope and pray that others who have not found the path yet, can feel the same that I do, *Ya Arhamar Raahimiin walhamdulillahi Rabbil 'alamiin...* (O the Most Gracious and Most Merciful, all praise to You, the Lord of Universes).

*Abdul-Lateef Abdullah, obtained his Master's degree in Social Work from Columbia University, and recently completed his PhD from the Institute for Community and Peace Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in the field of Youth Studies.

Reading Islam

24/7 Prayers

Facing Difficulties

Allaahumma laa sahla illa ma ja'altahu sahlan wa anta taj'alul hazna izaa syi'ta sahlan.

OAllah, there is no ease except in that which You have made easy, and if You wish, You make the difficulty easy.

Fortification of Muslim



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