

The attraction of Islam: Finding the inner Muslim prince

Written by Eric Walberg

In the third of his Ramadan articles, Eric Walberg looks at the increasing attraction to Islam on the part of Westerners^{27/9/7} -- In part I we saw how the Crusades and their modern equivalents -- imperialism and neo- imperialism -- brought the West's agenda forcibly to the Muslim world, first via missionaries and armies, then businessmen and armies. In the past two centuries the West did much to undermine the *raison d'être* of the Muslim world, but the increased contacts also opened the doors for Western intellectuals to study its rich cultural heritage and, with the help of sincere translations of the *Quran* and other religious books, to discover Islam from the inside, not only with an attitude of superiority and hostility.

Edward Said argues in *Orientalism* (1978) that Islam and Muslims are ingrained in the Western mind as "the other", oriental, opposite to the Christian and European Jewish experience, though in fact Muslims are much closer in their beliefs to Christians than Jews are. In 17-18th cc Europe, Western critics still vied to discredit Islam as a religion and set it in opposition to the "true religion" of Christianity, with the anathema and insult of the first Islamic millennium replaced by arguments of a historical, geographical, sociological or political nature. For example, a burning hot climate supposedly makes Arabs intellectually lazy and overly sensuous, encouraging them to accept the doctrine of predestination and a belief in a purely carnal paradise, to the point where they wished to die for their religion in order to reach it all the more quickly.

Voltaire plays a fascinating role as an early critic of all organised religions, a deist positing a God of reason, much like Islamic monism. His early tragedy *Mahomet or Fanaticism* portrays the Prophet as a Machiavellian manipulator but was really more a critique of the Catholic church and the use of religion to justify war. He later read Sale's newly translated *Koran*

and came to an appreciation of Islam as "benign and tolerant", "a wise, severe, chaste and humane religion", "less impure and more reasonable" than Christianity and Judaism, having the eponymous Candide retire to an island near Constantinople to cultivate his garden and live in contemplation, much like a Muslim Sufi. Voltaire was even accused of being a "patriarch in the breast of Constantinople" for noting that the Ottoman empire "peacefully governs twenty peoples of different religions". His British contemporary Edward Gibbon, also a deist, viewed Islam as a rational, priest-free religion, with Muhammad as a wise and tolerant lawgiver.

Since then, the "Christian" viewpoint has continued to lose its credibility as the melting pot of secularism dulled the distinction between Jew and Christian in the 20th c, letting pundits blandly refer to a "Judeo-Christian" civilisation, and turning the age-old Christian assault on Islam into a triple-barrel Judeo- Christian-secular one. The fact that the Muslim world remains economically and culturally "backward" -- in contrast to the spiritual backwardness of its nemesis -- has accentuated the gap between the two cultures. So Westerners who try to bridge this gap have

The attraction of Islam: Finding the inner Muslim prince

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played and continue to play an important role in promoting better understanding.

A 16th c sailor, John Nelson, inadvertently or otherwise left behind in Morocco, was the first recorded Englishman to become a Muslim. He eventually returned to England safely. No doubt he converted less out of conviction than to endear himself to his captors/hosts, though Islam has never practiced forced conversions and active proselytising in the way that Christian invaders have throughout the world in the past four centuries.

With Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1799 interaction between the West and the Muslim world accelerated. The 19th c Western invasion, however, was not only by armies, but by adventurers and intellectuals, forerunners of the archaeologists, anthropologists, and economists of today. Four legendary adventurers of the 19th-early 20th cc -- Pickthall, Lawrence, Philby and Burton -- embody particularly well the range of responses by Westerners fascinated by Muslim society and provide models for the experience of individuals since then. All travellers and writers, more or less unattached to the West, they were able, to varying extents, to shed their stuffy British natures. Parsifals in the quest of the holy grail, embracing their inner Muslim prince, their subconscious, their soul. But they came with very different mindsets and left very different legacies.

Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall travelled to Cairo at age 18 in 1894 and, as he later recalled in his delightful *Oriental Encounters: Palestine and Syria*, "ran completely wild for months, in a manner unbecoming to an Englishman; and when at length, upon a pressing invitation, I turned up in Jerusalem and used my introductions, it was in semi-native garb and with a love for Arabs which, I was made to understand, was hardly decent. My native friends were objects of suspicion. I was told that they were undesirable, and, when I stood up for them, was soon put down by the retort that I was very young. I could not obviously claim as much experience as my mature advisers, whose frequent warnings to me to distrust the people of the country thus acquired the force of moral precepts, which it is the secret joy of youth to disobey."

The Orient came as a revelation. Later in life he wrote, "When I read *The Arabian Nights* I see the daily life of Damascus, Jerusalem, Aleppo, Cairo, and the other cities as I found it in the early nineties of last century. What struck me, even in its decay and poverty, was the joyousness of that life compared with anything that I had seen in Europe. The people seemed quite independent of our cares of life, our anxious clutching after wealth, our fear of death."

He had found a world of freedom unimaginable to a public schoolboy raised on an almost

The attraction of Islam: Finding the inner Muslim prince

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idolatrous passion for The State. Most Palestinians never set eyes on a policeman, and lived for decades without engaging with government in any way. Islamic law was administered in its time-honoured fashion, by *qadis* (local judges). Villages chose their own headmen, or inherited them, and the same was true for the bedouin tribes. The population revered the Sultan-Caliph in faraway Istanbul, but understood that it was not his place to interfere with their lives.

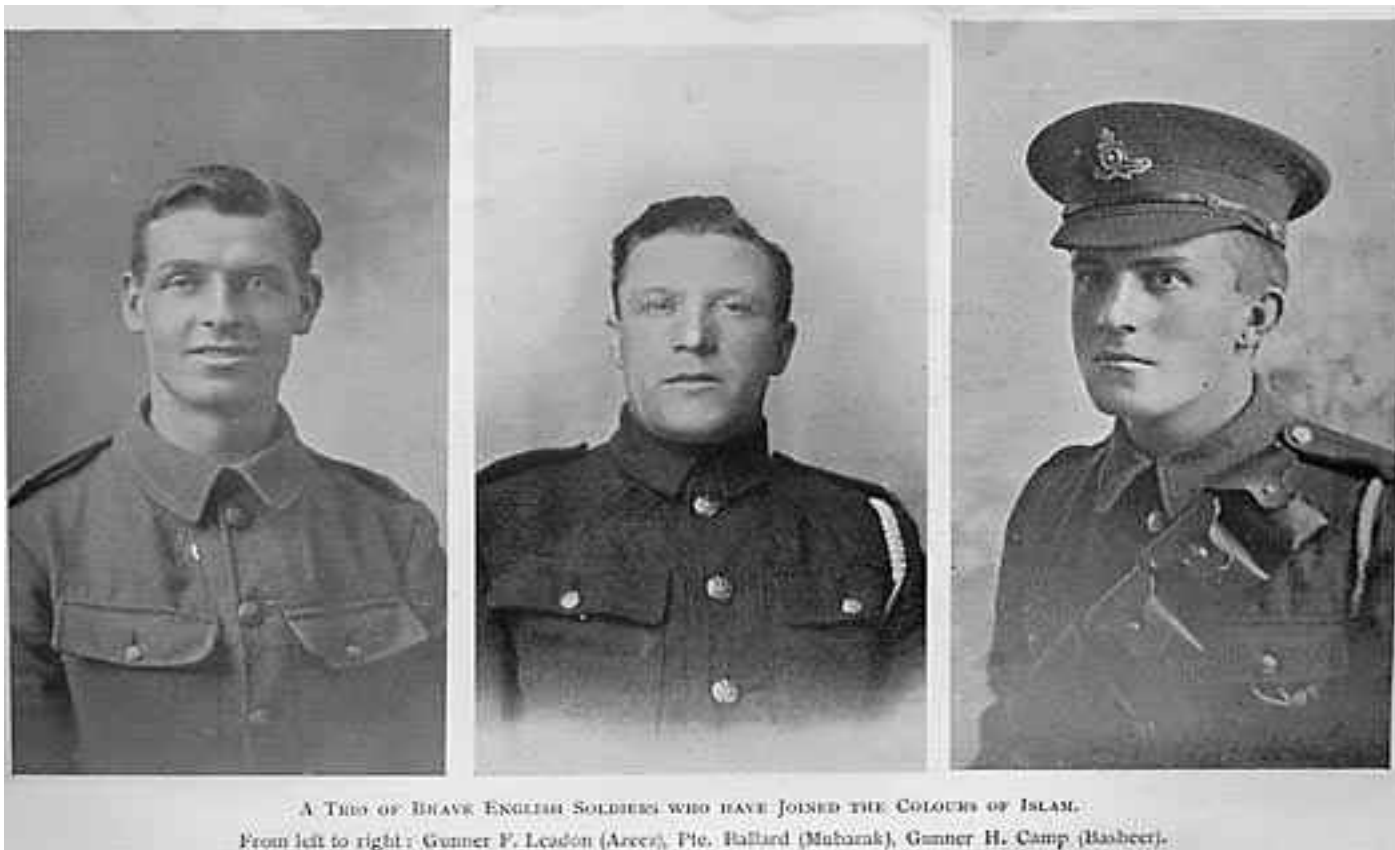
It was this freedom, as much as intellectual assent, which set Marmaduke on the long pilgrimage which was to lead him to Islam. He saw the Muslim world before Westernisation had contaminated the lives of the masses, and long before it had infected Muslim political thought and produced the modern vision of the Islamic State, with its centralised bureaucracy and its secret police. He would have converted to Islam immediately but was discouraged by an imam who was concerned about the shock this would be for the lad's mother, telling him to delay his decision till the moment was right.

Throughout his life Pickthall saw Islam as radical freedom, a freedom from the encroachments of the State as much as from the claws of the ego. It also offered freedom from the narrow fanaticism and sectarian bigotry which characterised and still characterises the myriad sects of Christianity. Superstition and priestcraft were abhorred. The Reason-God was immanent in creation, a blessed sign of God's nearness. The brotherhood of Muslims which he observed in Syria, the respect between Sunni and Shia, and their indifference to class distinctions in their places of worship, seemed to be the living realisation of the dreams of the Diggers, English radicals at the time of Cromwell's Commonwealth.

In 1917, in London, as the "Christian" nations committed mass murder in the war-to-end-all-wars, during a lecture on "Islam and Progress", he took the plunge. As the *New Statesman* put it in 1930, reviewing his Quranic translation, "Mr Marmaduke Pickthall was always a great lover of Islam. When he became a Muslim it was regarded less as conversion than as self-discovery."

The attraction of Islam: Finding the inner Muslim prince

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WWI was a turning point in relations between East and West. The slaughter among Christian nations disillusioned many, including these three British soldiers who "joined the colours of Islam". From left to right, Gunner F Leadon (Azeez), Private Ballard (Mubarak) and Gunner H Camp (Basheer). From Islamic Review, September 1916

The war ground on, and Pickthall watched as the Turks trounced the British and colonial troops at Gallipoli, only to be betrayed by the Arab uprising under TE Lawrence. Pickthall despised Lawrence as a shallow romantic, given to unnatural passions and wild misjudgements. As he later wrote, reviewing *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, "He really believed that the British Government would fulfill punctually all the promises made on its behalf. He really thought that it was love of freedom and his personal effort and example rather than the huge sums paid by the British authorities and the idea of looting Damascus, which made the Arabs zealous in rebellion."

Once a friend of Winston Churchill's, Pickthall broke with his elite friends, moved to India to teach and write, and became a close associate of Gandhi, supported the *ulama's* rejection of violent resistance to British rule. Nonviolence and noncooperation seemed the most promising means by which India would emerge as a strong and free nation. When the Muslim League made its appearance under the very secular figure of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pickthall joined the great bulk of India's

ulama

in rejecting the idea of partition. India's great Muslim millions were one family, and must never be divided. He also continued his Friday sermons, begun in the working class mosque in Woking, preaching at the great mosque of Bijapur and elsewhere, now in Urdu.

The attraction of Islam: Finding the inner Muslim prince

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In 1935 Pickthall returned to England. His school and journal Islamic Culture were flourishing. Henceforth he had forever to deny that he was the Fielding of his friend EM Forster's novel *A Passage to India*.

The last lines he wrote were from the
Quran

: "Whosoever surrendereth his purpose to Allah, while doing good, his reward is with his Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them, neither shall they grieve." (5:69) A Don Quixote, peripheral to the great forces of imperialism, with its agenda of war and subjugation, but a template for the post-imperial man, citizen of the world, a modern saint.

His early love affair with life under the Ottomans meant he witnessed the dismemberment of the Caliphate, not as TE Lawrence and Philby's "liberation", but as a tragedy, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths, the ethnic cleansing of millions, the planting of ethnic hatred among peoples who had lived in harmony for centuries, and a fatal blow to Islam. However, while rejecting bitterness and calls for violent revenge, he was convinced that Islam's victory would come through changing an unjust world from within.

Pickthall's contemporary and *bête noire*, TE Lawrence was a horse of a different colour. Second of five illegitimate sons of an Irish baronet and his governess, Lawrence lived out his troubled youth on a world scale. He ran away from home in 1905 and served as a boy soldier in Cornwall. Fascinated by the Crusades, his first journey to the Middle East was a solo three-month walking tour of crusader castles in Syria, during which he travelled thousands of miles on foot and learned Arabic. His Oxford graduation thesis was *The influence of the Crusades on European Military Architecture -- to the end of the 12th century*. He subsequently worked on archeological digs in northern Syria.

In 1914, Lawrence spied for the British military posing as an archaeologist for a military survey of the Negev Desert, of strategic importance as it would have to be crossed by any Turkish army attacking Egypt in the event of war. He was next posted to the Arab Bureau of Britain's Foreign Office which supported Arab tribes opposed to Turkish centralised rule. With the capture of Damascus he was promoted to lieutenant-colonel, made a Companion in the Order of the Bath and awarded the *Legion d'Honneur* in 1918, though he curiously refused a knighthood in October of that fateful year, possibly because he realised by then how he had (inadvertently?) betrayed his many Arab friends in the cause of empire. Nonetheless he served as an advisor to Winston Churchill at the Colonial Office and in the military in India throughout the 1920s. Churchill attended his funeral in 1935. Lawrence's major work is

The Seven Pillars of Wisdom

, an account of his war experiences, military strategy, Arabic culture and geography.

The attraction of Islam: Finding the inner Muslim prince

Written by Eric Walberg



TE Lawrence with his Muslim prince, Sherif Ali, and Majid, as played by Peter O'Toole, Omar Sharif and Gamil Ratib in David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* □□

Jack Philby (Sheikh Abdullah), father of the legendary double agent Kim Philby, was an explorer, writer and spy. At Trinity College, Cambridge, he was a friend and classmate of Jawaharlal Nehru, later Prime Minister of India. Like Lawrence, he was deeply involved in fomenting the Arab revolt against the Ottomans, and like Lawrence, he felt betrayed by the British government for its reneging on all the promises of post-WWI independence for the Arabs. He worked with TE Lawrence for a while, but did not share Lawrence's enthusiasm for the Hashemites, being a proponent of the Saudis. Philby settled in Jeddah and became a partner in a trading company and Ibn Saud's chief adviser, negotiating a 60-year contract for the kingdom with Standard Oil, paving the way for US domination of the Middle East. In 1960, on a visit to Kim in Beirut, while in bed with his son Kim at his side, he said, "God, I'm bored" and died. Though he considered himself a socialist and Muslim, he seems to have served neither cause, a fitting father to his master spy son, and, along with Lawrence, an example for the steady stream of Westerners who come to the Muslim world with a smile and a briefcase.

Much the senior of Pickthall and Lawrence/Philby, Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890), like Lawrence and Philby, was a spy in addition to his calling as adventurer and writer. Burton's best-known achievements include travelling in disguise to Mecca (he was rumoured to have killed a native to avoid exposure), making an unexpurgated translation of *The Book of One Thousand Nights and A Night* and the

Kama Sutra

. He was a captain in the army of the East India Company, and later served as British consul in Damascus, where he wrote

The Jew, the Gipsy and el Islam

, a scathing critique of Judaism and Christianity and a defense of Islam. He did not formally convert to Islam, though he composed on his return journey from Mecca

The Kasidah

The attraction of Islam: Finding the inner Muslim prince

Written by Eric Walberg

which contains layers of Sufi meaning. "Do what thy manhood bids thee do/ from none but self expect applause;/ He noblest lives and noblest dies/ who makes and keeps his self-made laws" is

The Kasidah

's most oft-quoted passage.

Burton stands midway between Pickthall and Lawrence/ Philby, an ethnographer who delighted in exotic foreign customs, a brilliant intellectual and linguist who remained in British mainstream society without working too actively to promote the British imperial cause, but cold and elitist.

While these early adventurers had no clear agenda, the Burtons and Philbys of today -- the eager young Western archaeologists, anthropologists, economists, advisers -- do: to document the dying cultures in the case of the former, and dig the knife in to accelerate their demise in the case of the latter. However, the message of Islam continues to penetrate the Western mind, appealing to the spiritual hunger which is at the basis of the human experience. Just as Americans embraced Buddhism from defeated Japan after WWII, they are increasingly embracing the spirituality of the supposedly conquered Muslim world today.

Over the past 20 years, an estimated 20,000 people in England have converted and, as in many other countries, the movement toward Islam has accelerated. One Dutch Islamic centre claims a tenfold increase in converts since 9/11, while the New Muslims Project, based in Leicester and run by a former Irish Catholic housewife, reports a steady stream. A 1999 United Nations survey showed that between 1989 and 1998, Europe's Muslim population more than doubled. Today, about 13 million Muslims live in Western Europe: 3.9 million in Germany, 3.3 million in Britain, 7.5 million in France. Surprisingly, there has been a surge in conversions to Islam since September 11, especially among affluent young white Britons.

So the tradition that Pickthall embodied continues. Austrian correspondent for the *Franfurter Zeitung*

Leopold Weiss (Muhammad Asad) left Europe in 1922 for what was supposed to be a short visit to an uncle in Jerusalem. Weiss counted himself an agnostic, having drifted away from his Jewish moorings despite his religious studies. There, instead of becoming a Zionist, he was struck by how Islam infused everyday lives with existential meaning, spiritual strength and inner peace, though he was disappointed in the corruption of Muslim society. In the mountains of

The attraction of Islam: Finding the inner Muslim prince

Written by Eric Walberg

Afghanistan a young provincial governor finally told him, "But you are a Muslim, only you don't know it yourself." When he returned to Europe, he saw that "the only logical consequence of my attitude was to embrace Islam.

"Islam appears to me like a perfect work of architecture. All its parts are harmoniously conceived to complement and support each other: nothing is superfluous and nothing lacking, with the result of an absolute balance and solid composure. As a spiritual and social phenomenon, it is still in spite of all the drawbacks caused by the deficiencies of the Muslims, by far the greatest driving force mankind has ever experienced; and all my interest became, since then, centred around the problem of its regeneration."

After the establishment of Pakistan, he was appointed the Director of the Department of Islamic Reconstruction, West Punjab and later became Pakistan's alternate representative at the United Nations. He authored *Islam at the Crossroads* and *Road to Mecca*, published a monthly journal *Arafat* and, like Pickthall, an English translation of the *Quran*.

Charles Le Gai Eaton, a former British diplomat and author of *Islam and the Destiny of Man*, relates how he overheard a young woman telling a Christian minister she was not sure she believed in human progress. "The Minister answered her so rudely and with such contempt that I could not resist the temptation to say: 'She's quite right - there's no such thing as progress!' He turned on me, his face contorted with fury, and said: 'If I thought that, I would commit suicide this very night!' Since suicide is as great a sin for Christians as it is for Muslims, I understood for the first time the extent to which faith in progress, in a 'better future' and, by implication, in the possibility of a paradise on earth has replaced faith in God and in the hereafter. Deprive the modern Westerner of this faith and he is lost in a wilderness without signposts."

Abdul-Karim Germanus, professor of history and civilisation at the University of Budapest for 40 years, worked to revive classical Arabic, dreaming of a time when all Arab countries would speak the same form of Arabic that would tie them to their rich heritage and history.

Dr Murad Wilfried Hofmann, Catholic German diplomat, first became interested in Islam in 1961 when posted to Algeria. He witnessed the cruel persecution of the natives who maintained their humanity despite torture and hardship, and felt it must be their religion that inspired them. He

The attraction of Islam: Finding the inner Muslim prince

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started to read the *Quran* and found it much more appealing than the qualified deism of the Jewish tribal God or the artificial, complicated Trinity of Christianity. It was the most straightforward and least anthropomorphic, i.e., the most advanced monotheism. He was enthralled by Islamic art and architecture -- so imbued with spirituality, where the mosque is integral to social life.

Yahya Birt, son of former BBC Director General Lord John Birt, says of Islam: "It has a clear moral system and an intact tradition of religious scholarship. No scripture expresses its message of the oneness of God as clearly as the *Quran*. It also has a remarkably rich mysticism, which may be what appeals to middle-class white Brits like me." Singer/composer Cat Stevens cut his singing career short to become Yusuf Islam in 1977 and a high-profile spokesman for the British Muslim community.

These well-heeled defectors prompted Cold War author and journalist Philip Knightley to brand them "the new Philbys". They were running from privilege, he suggested, driven as much by a sense of guilt at what they had as wonder at the mysteries of Islam. The fact that Kim Philby's father happens to have converted to Islam was taken to support the accusation. But take Joe Ahmed-Dobson, the son of the former Health Secretary -- a child of New Labour and the opposite of a rebel. He works on inner city regeneration, finds spiritual satisfaction in Islam's "constant impetus to do the right thing", and credits his first-class degree to the structure his faith has brought to his life.

Surprisingly, almost as many Western women are converting as men. In America, one in four converts is a woman; in England, the figure is one in two. British journalist Yvonne Ridley converted to Islam after being held captive by the Taliban during the US invasion of Afghanistan. Working as a reporter for the Sunday Express in September 2001, Ridley was smuggled from Pakistan across the Afghan border. But her cover was blown when she fell off her donkey in front of a Taliban soldier near Jalalabad. The formerly hard-drinking Sunday school teacher became a Muslim after reading the *Quran* on her release.

She represents a trend of conversion in the West precisely among educated women, who like their male aspirants are in search of spiritual fulfillment, their own "feminist" holy grail. What do her Church of England parents in County Durham make of her new family? "Initially the reaction of my family and friends was one of horror, but now they can all see how much happier, healthier and fulfilled I am. And my mother is delighted I've stopped drinking." What does Ridley feel about the place of women in Islam? "There are oppressed women in Muslim countries, but I can take you up the side streets of Tyneside and show you oppressed women there. Oppression is cultural, it is not Islamic. The *Quran* makes it crystal clear that women are equal."

The attraction of Islam: Finding the inner Muslim prince

Written by Eric Walberg

Karen Armstrong, a former nun and best-selling author who writes on Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism, now calls herself a "freelance monotheist". She has advanced the theory that fundamentalist religion is a response to and product of modern culture, and has been influential in conveying the meaning of Islam to a wide readership in Europe and North America. Her writings include *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* and her biography *Muhammad: A Prophet For Our Time*.

Elizabeth L, a graduate in political science and the daughter of affluent white British parents says very movingly: "I know it sounds clichéd, but Allah came knocking at my heart. That's really how it feels. In many ways it is beyond articulating, rather like falling in love." As she read the *Quran* and prepared for her conversion, the September attacks came and went and failed to derail her spiritual journey: "I can see why people get fed up with the West. Capitalism is enormously oppressive."

The individuals who will stand out as heroes of our times, who will lead us out of our current social and economic crisis, will most likely be Muslims, at least in their way of life. Both the born Muslims and the men and women who have found their inner Muslim prince.

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2007/864/cu6.htm>