On Becoming a Muslim Anarchist

Ihsan

June 22, 2005

At my mosque — I say 'my' mosque, but to be honest I haven't seen the inside of the place for a year or so — there are a gaggle of Tablighi puritans who like to keep me company whenever I feel inclined to show my face there. I've sat in on several of their meetings, where there was much talk of hell from the reformed gangster turned guru who presides over this particular cult cell. Last time I was amongst them, I admit I was a hungry man desperate for spiritual food, and so gladly scoffed up their rude spiritual hash, despite its lack of essential nutrients and its at times bitter taste. Not surprisingly, it wasn't long before I was looking for something more nourishing and wholesome.

Then one Friday, I arrived early for Jummah and encountered a small, elderly Indian man on the mosque steps whom I had never met or indeed noticed before. He gently mocked the Tablighi bro' who was washing the steps, laughing as he explained how "these fundamentalists" were so ignorant. I could see the young Tablighi brother boiling with anger at this old man's comments, but both principle and no doubt social sanction prevented him from expressing his belligerence openly. Deciding he had cleansed the mosque entrance to Allah's satisfaction, he thus quickly departed and left me to the elder brother's more illuminating company.

My elderly friend turned out to me something of a scholar, or at least so he told me. He had studied under some of the great scholars back in India, he said, but today there were few to compete with these formidable spirits. There was something about his lightness of being, and the glint in his eye, that made me think he was a devotee of Tassawuf. Then he did something which scared me half to death. He wrapped his arm tightly around the back of my neck, pulled my ear right up to his mouth, and whispered insistently:

"Listen to me! Whatever path you take, you must believe it with all your heart. It is no good to simply follow others, do you hear? Do what *you* think is true!"

I have tried to follow the old man's words, but my worry has always been that I would fall into the vortex of self-worship, or devotion to *huwā* (whim), and thus commit the grave sin of *shirk*. Yet the more I tried to find something to follow that seemed true and right, the more transient and uncertain I found the belief system. Should I be Sunni or Shi'a? Should I be progressive or traditional? Should I be Salafi or Hanafi? I didn't understand where I was going wrong. Then a phrase I read, or perhaps a passing thought, reminded me that, when I became a Muslim, I had cut myself off from my previous beliefs. I now realise that was a mistake, and almost certainly the cause of my aimless wondering.

Prior to my conversion, I had always considered myself an Anarchist — although one that believed in a spiritual reality. My anarchism was founded on a mistrust of all forms of coerced authority, however tacit, and like Emma Goldman, I believed that through education people can learn to live in peace and co-operate freely and equitably. I have seen power and authority abused in so many contexts over the years– in schools, special education, psychiatry, by Landlords, and of course by governments. And religious leaders. I am now convinced more than ever that power, above all else, is the evil that corrupts otherwise good and well meaning people through forcing them to compromise with what they know is wrong.

Thanks be to God, I now realise Anarchism is the hermeneutic through which I must approach and realise the truth. In Islam, the only submission that I can live by is that which is embraced with the spirit of freedom and with my heart full of joy. And so in the Name of Allah, I testify that there is no god but God and Muhammad (aws) is God's prophet and messenger; and in seeking to establish a peaceful and loving relationship with The One through revelation, reason and God's signs, I hereby refuse to compromise with any form of institutional power, be it judicial, religious, social, corporate or political, insha Allah.

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