

Chapter One

As soon as we decided to marry, we found an alim to help Sarah become a Muslim. One afternoon, we went to his house and on the way, I imagined that he was an old man with white hair and a wrinkled face. We both thought that we wouldn't understand his sermons. Sarah told me, "You must understand what he tells us!"

"Why?" I asked.

"Because you are a Muslim, too", she replied.

I answered dryly, "Oh yes, I am a Muslim".

When we reached his home, Sarah confided in me, "I'm scared!"

I myself was a bit afraid of the important step that we were about to take. It was the first time I had ever spoken with a religious man. I feared that he would label me as a deviated young man. My friends had often warned me about these religious men who oppose everything—youth, beauty, education and wealth.

Because they do not enjoy such privileges, my friends told me that they behave oddly. My head was filled with these pessimistic ideas, yet I told Sarah, "Why be afraid? This is a very routine affair; within a few minutes you will become a Muslim, the same as I am".

"How did you become Muslim?" Sarah asked.

"I didn't become one—I am Muslim due to inheritance."

I smiled, saying, "What I mean, is that I was born in a Muslim family, hence I am a Muslim."

Sarah said thoughtfully, "It seems that you do not really know why you are a Muslim."

I knocked at the door, which was opened by a young child who led us to a room where the alim was. I was very surprised to see that he was young and healthy looking. He welcomed us politely and I began to feel at ease. I looked at Sarah and could see that she was no longer nervous or afraid.

I told him the aim of our visit and that I wanted him to teach Sarah the Shahada {testimony of God's Oneness and of the Prophethood of Muhammad (SAW)}.

He quietly told me, "But that is not sufficient, my son". I was surprised to hear him address me thus, since he was only a few years older than me.

"What else do we need to do?" I asked.

He remained silent for a moment. I appreciated the silence, because I dislike those who attempt to fill every space with words, yet I was anxious for us to achieve our aim, so I said, " Well?"

He smiled and said, "I want to help you, but as a religious man, I cannot offer Islam in the form of mere words. I have an obligation towards my religion."

I told him that it was a private matter and that he didn't have any responsibility towards us. He sighed and said, "I am not responsible for people, but I have a great responsibility towards Almighty Allah and towards Islam. Do you think religious men are free to act as they wish? As a matter of fact, an alim has a serious duty. It is not easy to carry such a burden."

His words affected me and I asked, "What do you expect of us?"

"I do not expect anything of you. You want me to witness the repetition of a few words, but I will not agree to this unless Sarah becomes acquainted with Islam and understands its precepts."

At this point, I realized how serious he was and how tolerant. Still, I thought that it was best to do it my way, because I thought Sarah would not be able to comprehend Islamic concepts, since I myself did not. Sarah understood my intentions and told me, "Do not insist any longer. I appreciate his devotion to his duties, and I think we should listen to him. If I can understand my philosophy courses, why can't I understand Islam?"

I turned to the alim and, feeling a bit embarrassed, said, "We want you to do what is right, and we will pay you for your time."

He shook his head and stated, "We do not barter our religion. A religious person only expects reward from Allah. We should offer our services without expecting any compensation."

I regretted my words, and Sarah admonished me, "You have made another mistake."

"I apologize, but one hears many rumours."

Our religious instructor answered, "One should be sure of the truth and not believe everything that is said." He continued, "Man is in dire need of religion. He cannot live without it."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Human nature is such that man seeks ease and comfort, which cannot be obtained except through happiness. And happiness cannot be found unless it encompasses all aspects of life. Religion is the only system which offers happiness and satisfaction, and abounds with ideals and educational values."

I said, "Are you saying that nothing can be substituted for religion? But don't you believe that scientific progress can take the place of religion and provide man with a comfortable life?"

"No, my son. Even if man replaces religion with science and seeks happiness in it, he will not be able to appreciate the true meaning of happiness. Scientific progress and technology may provide man with material comfort. Man can travel far distances in a matter of hours, listen to foreign broadcasts, view the surface of the moon on television while sitting in his living room. Yet man cannot truly experience happiness, since he cannot put an end to injustice and oppression, which human nature opposes.

"He cannot uproot his inner instincts of hating hypocrisy, aggression and the exploitation of the weak by the strong. He is powerless to end the world's insane race for wealth and power. Everything science offers man is controlled by two factors: good and evil. Man can direct scientific progress according to his desires—a plane, for example, is a device for a comfortable journey, yet it can also be the means of great destruction. Television is a useful means of information, yet it also spreads indecency and corruption in society.

"Explosives are used to build roads, but they also maim and kill innocent people. Thus, man is constantly struggling between what he likes and dislikes. There is no happiness in such a life."

I objected, "Can't an ideal morality replace religion? I mean to say, if morality is highly developed and all-encompassing, then justice can be achieved in society."

He replied, "Such idealism is not sufficient for a person's happiness. It is the result of an emergency situation, not a sound foundation. Compassion, for instance, is a feature of such idealism and a natural inclination in humans. Yet it must be stimulated. A kindhearted man cannot but help a poor man he meets.

Only such an incident can stir compassion in his heart. If he does not come across this poor man, his compassion will be useless and society won't benefit from it. Compassion here is just an example of idealism and social sympathy. It is not the outcome of a solid foundation. Hence, it cannot cause a man to feel at ease and happy; its range is limited." While I was listening approvingly, another question came to my mind.

"What do you think of mutual interests? Can this replace religion and create happiness for man?" I asked. He said, "No, serving mutual interests alone cannot bring happiness."

I asked, "Why not?"

He answered, "Because there are serious gaps due to the different interests of individuals. Often a person's interest conflicts with another's. One may benefit by the loss of another. How often palaces are constructed on the ruins of others! How often towns emerge on the remnants of others! How often someone feels happy at the misfortune of others. Unhappiness won't be uprooted through any law of mutual interests. Happiness won't be fulfilled by such means. Man will still face what he does not like and will pursue his own comfort by all means."

I asked, "Well, can't good breeding and enlightenment achieve that for man?"

He answered, "This good breeding that you visualize, in turn, needs good teachers to supervise the learning process. They, in turn, need be watched and so on, along an endless chain. Breeding does not start at point zero. Zero cannot produce numbers. Hence, an individual remains with an insistent need for religion; a need which can provide all aspects of happiness and an easiness on a firm foundation that never changes."

The alim stopped speaking and we remained silent, thinking about what he was saying. After awhile I asked, "Why have you stopped master?! Have we caused you trouble or taken too much of your time?" He replied, "No, but I wanted you to have a rest and also to ponder over what you have heard today."

I looked at Sarah, who whispered, "Oh, please ask him to continue. I am quite satisfied and have no objection."

I told him, "Please continue."

He said, "Now you agree that a man is in need of religion, which means he is in need of Prophets and Messengers. But we should know the nature of this religion and that kind of message which brings man true peace."

I told him, "Yes, tell us the message of Islam."

He said, "First, it must be in total harmony with human instincts but not contrary to it. Second, it must be reasonable and within the scope of a human mind's comprehension.

"Third, it must present righteous values and morals with which the life of a good individual can be constructed. It must use good examples and illustrations that will acquaint us with its very essence and aim so that we can follow its teachings. Islam can do this,"

I asked, "How do we know that Islam can do this?"

He said, "This is what I intend to explain, but it will take a long time. Can you be patient?"

Though I was in the habit of glancing often at my watch, for some time, I had forgotten to look. It was nearly ten p.m. We should have left an hour earlier in order for Sarah to enter the boarding house where she lived before the doors were locked. We stood up to leave and expressed the hope that we would meet again soon. Our earlier thought had completely changed, and we were anxious to come again.

As we left his house we noticed someone following us but we could not see who he was in the darkness. Sarah was afraid that it was her cousin, who loved her and was jealous, as she had chosen to marry me. I tried to calm her as we walked hand in hand along the streets to the boarding house, where we found the doors already closed.

Sarah and I were at a loss as to what to do. Finally I said, "We must decide now. We can't stand here all the night. I wish we had left earlier."

She answered, "We have not been wasting our time! We need to listen to the lecture. I feel that it was worth staying for. What I fear is that my cousin was the one following us. I am sure he will put obstacles in our way."

I agreed and had the same fear. At last, I suggested that she spend the night in my small home and that I would sleep on the sofa in the living room. She agreed, and when we reached my door, I had a feeling that someone was watching us.

The next morning, while I was on my way to the lecture hall, a first-year student handed me a sealed letter. I opened it and read:

'Do you think I'll let you enjoy life while I am brokenhearted? I will do anything to make you leave my cousin. I shall tell her family about your plans and how she spends her evenings in the homes of strangers and visit Muslim soothsayers.'

The letter upset me greatly. I found an empty corner and sat down to think. "I cannot give up my fiancée. She has become part of my life," I told myself, "Yet I may be risking her life, which I care very much about. I must find a way to keep her out of trouble. This cannot be achieved but by marriage."

I decided that I would not tell Sarah about the letter and that I would ask the alim to perform his job sooner. I reasoned that when we become husband and wife, her family would not try to interfere. So I never told Sarah about the letter but I found her a bit disturbed that day. I tried to cheer her and told her of my plan to finish the matter quickly.

She said doubtly, "I don't think the matter will end soon."

I said, "I'll do everything to make him finish it."

She said, "No, please. Don't forget he has a responsibility for his religion and will fulfill his duties completely."

"You are right Sarah. Anyway, we will see to it. At 5 o'clock I will be ready to accompany you to his house."

At five, I found her waiting at the door of the boarding house. She looked pale and worried. I asked her what the matter was but she smiled and said,

"Nothing." Although I tried to find out why she was so worried, she wouldn't tell me, but insisted on hurrying to the alim's house. I was afraid that she had received a similar threatening letter. I tried to talk about different matters to distract her attention.

We reached the house and were soon in the alim's presence. I begged him to start and finish quickly so that we could avoid the previous day's trouble. He felt sorry and apologized but I said,

"Oh, you need not apologize, we were really interested in your lecture, but we forgot to note the time."

He said, "Without hardship, rest can't be appreciated. You do not agree?"

I replied, "Perhaps."

"You are not sure. But haven't you ever drunk water after hours of thirst and did the same at ordinary time? Haven't you noticed the difference? Sometimes you walk for long hours in the sunlight and you look for shade to escape the heat. Can that shade be the same as that in your home?"

"When one falls ill, deprived of movement and unable to enjoy life, and finally he becomes well again, does he not feel more grateful for the health he had previously? In times of sickness, he appreciates the great treasure of health."

We listened to him attentively and I said, "It is exactly as you say."

He said, "That is why sometimes hardships or troubles can actually be to our benefit. Thank God for His bounties. Without experiencing pain and suffering, one cannot experience true happiness."

I repeated, "Thank God."

He continued, "We agree that man is in need of a religion which will suit all aspects of life and must be in harmony with human instincts and wisdom. A religion that can set examples and illustrations. Islam can do so. Islamic theory is handed down to man through prophethood. It contains all that a human being needs. The Qur'an says:

Those who believe in the unseen and keep prayer and spend out of what We have given them and who believe in that which has been revealed to you and that which was revealed before you, they are sure of the hereafter (Al-Baqara, 2: 3-5)

"That belief in the unseen is in harmony with human nature. Despite having different attitudes and opinions, man generally feels that there is a great might outside his limited senses. He takes refuge in it in times of hardship. He is similar to a man flying in a plane, when the pilot suddenly announces some damage that may cause the plane to crash.

He warns the passengers to get ready and to use life belts or emergency doors. Everyone tries his best to save himself. A crippled person cannot move, even though he finds himself near death, he does not give up hope. He thinks there is a merciful power somewhere that may help him. He believes in the unseen power that exceeds the power of technology or science. Until the last moment, this man hopes for mercy."

"Another example is a mother whose child is seriously ill. Doctors give up the hope of curing him, yet the mother still hopes he will recover. She feels there is some mighty power that can do this. This is what is meant by the belief in the Unseen, a belief that is in harmony with mankind. Another example is a captain of a ship lost in the middle of the ocean. How does he feel at such a time?

He appeals to the unseen, highest power that is beyond his materialistic potentials. This is a real factor that man is in need of believing in the unseen. Religion is an instinct that exists among all human races, even the most primitive. Metaphysics and paranormal study, is an inner human inclination. Such an instinct is found even among children who continue to ask about such matters. A child's questions unintentionally express the feeling of this unseen power that he wants to understand."

"This belief in the unseen is essential in religion, as it naturally leads to belief in Allah. Such belief is sometimes clear and sometimes vague, depending on explanations. Another aspect of harmony in

religion with the human instinct is the unification of our great universe and the accurate coordination in it."

I looked at my watch. Seeing that we still had some time, I said, "What do you mean by the coordination of the universe?"

He said, "This is a lengthy discussion. I see you are in a hurry, so we can discuss the matter in another lecture." I looked at Sarah, who agreed, saying, "We'd better avoid yesterday's trouble, especially since..."

"Especially since what?" I asked.

"Oh nothing", she told me, "Please schedule our next meeting after Wednesday because I have an exam on that day."

I asked the alim to fix the date of our next meeting and he said he could not see us until the next Saturday afternoon. I thought about the many long days that would pass without achieving our goal. I begged him saying,

"Please can't you spare one or two hours before Saturday?"

He said, "I am quite busy with teaching, studying and working on various questions raised by others."

I said, "Can't you postpone some of your lessons?"

He smiled saying, "You are convinced that exam cause the delay of other matters. Don't you think my lessons need my thorough attention?"

I was ashamed and remained silent for a moment, then said, "In fact, I did not think that you were busy with studies."

"Knowledge is an ocean. One cannot reach its bottom except after long, continuous efforts. It may take all of a man's life. When one gets some knowledge one tries other doors for more."

I asked, "Oh, do you also do that?"

He smiled and said, "Are we a special group, different from others? We are the same as any other researcher. We study religious sciences and related things that may influence religion. One keeps on studying looking for constructive opinions or better ideas as long as one lives."

I said, "Then you are not confined to the study of *Halal* and *Haram* (the allowed and the forbidden) matters?"

He said, "This is the core of our study, but this knowledge has certain dimensions that require the study of other matters."

"What are these dimensions?"

He told me, "It is necessary for one to know about logic, linguistics, the narrations, the origins and the reasons behind Islamic precepts. One who guides others must first of all know that Allah, the Almighty, is the source of all guidance. It needs great efforts and serious research and investigation."

"I never thought of that," I admitted. "I used to think that a religious man has less trouble, less responsibility and an easier life than most."

"It is a pity. Such feelings are enough to create a gap between religious men and intellectuals. Yet each one needs the other to understand and spread the message of life completely. Perhaps you will understand in the future what you have been ignorant of until now."

I said, "Surely, I will."

He said, "Until we meet again, I want you to read these two books about religion."

I accepted the books, and we left with the promise to meet again the following week.

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