The Secret World of God: Aesthetics, Relationships, and the Conversion of 'Frances' from Shi'a Islam to Christianity

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Abstract

On a relatively sunny, summer morning (for Scotland) I met with Frances at a coffee shop in what I will call Castle City. We had met through a mutual acquaintance at a university and the local Episcopal parish. She is a slight woman possessing a strong if introspective personality and at ease with words that made conversation enjoyable. She looks completely at home in the UK (and this would also have been the case 100 years ago) reminding us that the nation's name Iran is related to the English word Aryan. I do not claim that this is a complete picture of her conversion, which as with many conversions out of Islam—whether to Christianity, atheism, or humanism—took place over many years and I try to give due weight to the various phases in this complex process. Moreover, it must be noted that this is the account of a diaspora conversion, because many of the key events took place outside of Iran.

The Shi’a community at its origin launched a political program to seek redress here on earth. A sense of glory in ‘Ali’s worldly failure and spiritual triumph did not accompany the thoughts of the community at the time of its inception. The Qur’an is not wanting in reminders of God’s earthly retribution. The Shi’a literature, most of which originated after the deaths of ‘Ali and his two sons, did not turn to this aspect of divine justice. This reflects that with the weakening of the political aspirations of the Shi’a they cautiously stressed a remote rather than an immanent justice of God. And when the prophet told as a secret to one of his wives a recent event, and when she gave information thereof and exposed it, he acquainted her with some of it and avoided part of it. Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, is monotheistic. Allah is the only God, the all-powerful Creator. • As "the Messenger of God," Muhammad presented himself in the tradition of earlier prophets like Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. • Like the Jewish prophets and Jesus, Muhammad demanded social justice and laid out a prescription for its implementation. Regions of the Islamic world were tied more closely together through trade and the exchange of technologies, crops, and ideas. • Older religious and political traditions were at times swept away or at least altered. • The Islamic world and the understanding of Islam itself was shaped by contact with intellectual and cultural traditions like Greek philosophy.

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