

BOOKS

[*The Islamist: Why I Joined Radical Islam in Britain, What I Saw Inside, and Why I Left*, Ed Husain, Penguin, 304 pages]

How I Found Allah and Quit the Jihad

By Piers Paul Read

ED HUSAIN—the Ed is short for Mohammed, not Edward—was born in Britain to Muslim parents from the Indian subcontinent and raised in the East End of London. This is the poorest part of the city, for centuries home to the cockney working class and successive waves of penniless immigrants. The mosque where Ed Husain prayed with his parents had been built as a Calvinist “temple” for Huguenot refugees from Louis XIV’s France. Later it served as a synagogue for Jews escaping the pogroms in Russia.

What became of these minorities is pertinent to the theme of this book. As they prospered, the Huguenots and the Jews moved out of London’s East End. The Huguenots were assimilated into British society and are no longer identifiable as a distinct minority; the Jews, on the other hand, though they are fully integrated into the social and political life of the nation, retain a distinct identity, as they do in the United States. Like other identifiable minorities, they are mostly to be found in cities such as London and Leeds. Urban Britain in the 21st century is as much a melting pot as New York and, by and large, Britain has been successful in absorbing immigrants from all over the world. The sons and daughters of Irish labourers, Indian shopkeepers, and Cypriot barbers are now surgeons, bankers, and corporate lawyers. Their religious beliefs as

Catholics, Orthodox Christians, or Hindus have no relevance to their status as citizens of the United Kingdom.

Is the same true for Muslims? As a child Ed Husain was told by his father “that Islam was spiritual, internal and about drawing closer to God and not about radical politics...” His father’s heroes were Mahatma Ghandi and Winston Churchill, and his spiritual guide a mystic guru from Sylhet on the India-Bangladesh border, Shaika Abd al-Latif. The secular education Husain received at his local comprehensive school was compatible with this spiritual understanding of Islam.

There were tensions. Husain was the butt of racial abuse, and there was a conflict between the values of Islam and “cool Britannia”:

My generation of young British Muslims was torn between two cultures. The mainstream British lifestyle of dating, pre-marital sex, living together, and dissolution of partnerships with comparatively little fuss was not something that appealed to us. Simultaneously, the customs of our parents’ generation—arranged marriages with cousins—were equally abhorred.

Ironically, it was the teacher of religious education at his school, a Mrs. Rainey, who set young Husain on the path toward Islamic extremism: she gave him the school’s set book on Husain’s own religion, *Islam: Beliefs and Teachings* by Gulam Sarwar. “Religion and politics are one and the same in Islam,” Sarwar wrote. “They are intertwined.” Sarwar lamented the absence of any truly Islamic state in the world today and recommended movements that sought to bring one about—the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East and Jamat-e-Islami on the Indian subcontinent.

With his friend Falik, Husain began to pray at the East London mosque that “housed the infrastructures of activist organizations” such as the Young Muslim Organization, the YMO. The early chapters of *The Islamist* require

concentration: it is difficult to comprehend the complexities of Islamic activism both on a practical and theoretical level. Husain cites the different ideologies such as Abul Ala Maududi and Syed Qutb and the different factions such as JIMAS (Movement for the Revival of the Prophet’s Way), Salafism, Wahhabism or the Hizb ut-Tahrir. The ideological infighting reminds one of similar bickering on the Left—Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Leninists, Trotskyists, Stakhanovites, and so on. There are further parallels. Islamists like Communists are universalists with loyalties that transcend the nation state:

The Muslim nation was a global nation, and we all had a religious obligation to establish a global state that would rival the United States and Europe. This was not a fantasy. Not all that long ago the Ottoman Empire had roared at the gates of Europe: we would not only repeat history, we would make it.

This was the ideology of Hizb ut-Tahrir, the most extreme of the Islamist organizations, which Husain joined while studying for his exams at a college of further education. Almost all of his fellow students were the sons and daughters of immigrants. He writes:

Yes, we attended a British educational institution in London but there was nothing particularly British about us. It might as well have been Cairo or Karachi. Cut off from Britain, isolated from the Eastern culture of our parents, Islamism provided us with a purpose and a place in life. More importantly, we felt as though we were the pioneers, at the cutting edge of this new global development of confronting the West in its own back yard.

Husain and his friends in Hizb ut-Tahrir organized meetings and distributed pamphlets among the students. They pointed to the “decadence” of British society—pornography, prostitution, the highest rates in Europe for

abortion, divorce, and single-parent-hood—and to the humiliation of Islam in the Middle East thanks to Western military intervention, alliances with the corrupt despots in Arabia and the Gulf, double-talk about democracy, and above all support for Israel. There was also, at that time, the civil war in the Balkans. A potent aid to recruitment into Hizb ut-Tahrir was the spectacle of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. Christian Serbs were killing Muslim Bosnians and the West was doing nothing to prevent it.

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This agitprop met with considerable success. Muslim girls started to wear the *hijab* and “in common rooms Muslims played games of pool in Muslim-only groups. In canteens Muslims socialized only among themselves. Being a Muslim was a badge of pride.” Yet Husain became alarmed when this self-segregation by Muslim students degenerated into a gang culture. Some carried knives; there was a confrontation and a non-Muslim was killed.

Other factors drew Husain away from Islamism. Many of his comrades-in-arms did not practice what they preached: they were “in relationships with the ‘sisters.’” Political activism had detracted from Husain’s inner consciousness of God and caused him to neglect his studies; “If you want to change the world,” one of his teachers told him, “then you must get an education first.” And Husain fell in love.

Disillusion with Hizb ut-Tahrir did not lead Husain to lose his faith in Islam. He says he gave “much thought to Christianity,” but rejected it because “In my mind, if there was a God out there, God did not have children. And certainly a man did not, could not, become God.” Instead Husain returned to Islam as an

interior, spiritual religion and joined the Labour Party—“an act of defiance.”

Ed Husain is clearly an intelligent young man who has taken his teacher’s advice about education, but gaps remain in his understanding. Christians do not believe that a man became God but that God became a man. Husain also retains some illusions about Islam. Although Mohammed allowed a man to have four wives, any number of concubines, and divorce his wives at will, he was, Husain tells us, “a founding father

of female emancipation.” Husain thinks the Prophet would have shrugged off the Danish cartoons, but after his victory in the Battle of Badr in 625, Mohammed ordered the execution of two poets who had criticized his writing. Husain praises Sufism and the magnanimity of Saladin, but it was Sufi mystics who on Saladin’s orders executed the 230 Templar knights captured at the Battle of Hattin.

After marrying, Husain taught English for the British Council first in Syria, then Saudi Arabia. He praises the religious tolerance he found in Syria, but fails to give credit to Syria’s Ba’ath Socialist regime. He excoriates the Saudis, contrasting the way in which “millions of people have been naturalized as British citizens, more in the United States and Canada” while the Wahhabi Saudis deny citizenship to the fellow Muslims who lived and worked in their country for decades. “It was only in the comfort of Britain that Islamists could come out with such radical, utopian slogans as ... one Muslim nation. The racist reality of the Arab psyche would *never* accept black and white people as equal...”

The shortcomings of the West’s allies in the Middle East—Saudi Arabia and

the Gulf—are well documented. What is of value in *The Islamist* is the insight it provides into what is going on in Muslim communities in Britain. Much of what Husain describes takes place before 9/11 or the terrorist attacks on the London underground on July 7, 2005. Does it help us to understand the mindset of the perpetrators? “A primary reason,” Husain tells us, “for Western failure in the War on Terror is ... an innate inability to understand the Islamist psyche.” But is there a single psyche to understand? Islamists in Britain, he tells us, “are a diverse and complicated phenomenon. They are divided by age, ethnicity, class, geography and their allegiances to Islamists in Southeast Asia or the Arab World.”

The Islamist is stylistically pedestrian, but it provokes thought. What are the limits of free speech? Should our first loyalty always be to a nation state? If Britain rejected the legitimacy of the state of Israel and worked against it, where would the loyalties of the Jewish community in Britain lie? Is it beyond dispute, as the French Dominican Jacques Jomier wrote in *The Bible and the Koran*, that “the Koran texts are not conducive to peace”? And should moderate Muslims be blamed for failing to disown them? Are the young Britons who go to fight for a cause they support in Bosnia or Iraq different in kind from those who went to fight for the Left in the Spanish Civil War? Is the political activism of Islamists in our universities any worse than that of Marxists? Think of the Baader-Meinhof gang in Germany and the Red Brigades in Italy. Indeed how different are they from the young terrorists portrayed by Dostoyevsky in *The Devils*? Perhaps we should resign ourselves to the fact that rebels will always find a cause. ■

Piers Paul Read is a British author whose works include Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors, a history of the crusading order, The Templars, and most recently a collection of essays, Hell and Other Destinations.

[*Chasing the Flame: Sergio Vieira De Mello and the Fight to Save the World, Samantha Power, Allen Lane, 640 pages*]

The Man from UNHCR

By Wayne Merry

BOOKS NOW OFTEN come with both title and subtitle to tweak the customer's attention. The subtitle of Samantha Power's new book certainly raised my eyebrows. "The Fight to Save the World"? Good Lord. Immediately, I recalled a volume from the opposite end of the political spectrum entitled *An End To Evil*. Surely these are tasks for a messiah, not mere mortals? No, our authors see them as legitimate ambitions for the American Republic.

In the case of Samantha Power, the issue is relevant given her close association with Barack Obama. Power worked in the senator's office and was an adviser to his campaign until her recent public gaffe describing Hillary Clinton as a "monster." Despite this misstep, she could reasonably anticipate a position in an Obama administration. Does she see the subject of her new book, the Brazilian-born United Nations humanitarian affairs official Sergio Vieira de Mello, as an inspiration for that putative role? Evidently. In the acknowledgments at the end of the volume she describes Obama as "the person whose rigor and compassion bear the closest resemblance to Sergio's that I have ever seen." What does the comparison imply for the counsel she might give a future president?

Sergio Vieira de Mello is a good subject for a biography, certainly more worthy than much of the political pulp that plagues an election year. He came to the world's attention as the earliest VIP victim of a terrorist bombing in Baghdad in August 2003, when the United Nations headquarters in Iraq was destroyed. By that time, Vieira de Mello had become something of a legend

within the UN system and among humanitarian organizations, although he was often a subject of controversy. Power's description of his painful and pointless death at the hands of al-Qaeda—which blamed him, among other things, for separating predominantly Catholic East Timor from largely Muslim Indonesia—is genuinely moving. There are hundreds of thousands of families around the globe today who owe their livelihoods, if not their very lives, to his efforts. That is a towering legacy for almost any individual, let alone one who operated within the limits of multilateral bureaucracy.

Vieira de Mello's career illustrates the dichotomy of a world that is flat in the distribution of individual talent but jagged in opportunities for that talent to flourish. A person born in Belgium or Botswana is just as likely to be gifted as one born in America or China, but far less likely to develop those gifts, especially in international public affairs.

Today, however, the multilateral sector provides outlets for the abilities and ambitions of people born outside the great powers. It is noteworthy that Vieira de Mello never served his native country in any capacity, and Brazil took official notice of him only after his death. He joined the UN almost by accident as a very young man—he needed some kind of job—but gave the institution a loyalty, dedication, and even passion often associated with patriotism. In an organization that was notorious for its time-servers and cynics, he believed that the UN spelled legitimacy. In an earlier century, he might have devoted his talents to a religious order, a corporation, or—given his early Marxist convictions—the Revolution.

Only 55 at the time of his death, Vieira de Mello had encountered a kind of inversion of the Peter Principle: he had not reached the limit of his own competence, but had exceeded that of the United Nations. His Baghdad mission was doomed by decisions already made in Washington, while in New York the UN leadership wanted to play a role in Iraq simply to demonstrate its continu-

ing relevance. As one UN official recalled, "That was the whole plan: Sergio will fix it." He died trying.

Power is balanced about her subject's virtues and contradictions, yet she does not recognize that a powerful motive for Vieira de Mello was the pursuit of adventure. This is nothing unusual: adventure is for young men what romance is for young women. And Vieira de Mello never lost the impulse, as he showed with his passion for "the field" and loathing for office work, his fitness and dress obsessions, his daring and risk-taking in very hazardous circumstances, his fondness for James Bond movies, his repeated romantic attachments, and sadly his neglect for his duties as a husband and father. In a different age, he might have been a conquistador. His charisma was powerful, but he used it to help the world's victims. He became, in essence, a humanitarian soldier of fortune. He certainly could have made a real fortune elsewhere.

Vieira de Mello repeatedly encountered the conflict between, as one colleague described it, "the UN that meets and the UN that does." Most of us see the UN through its deliberative and rhetorical bodies, but the system contains a number of semi-autonomous entities, some providing services that almost nobody else will. One of the most important is the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which was Vieira de Mello's institutional home for most of his career. Often criticized by those with immaculate hands, UNHCR does much of the humanitarian dirty work the world prefers to ignore.

Vieira de Mello brought great intelligence, stamina, a sense of humor, and massive charm to the role. He was a genuinely considerate person, whether toward secretaries or refugees, but he hated making enemies. He was a highly manipulative and successful diplomat, even if he compulsively avoided giving offense, which effective diplomacy sometimes requires. Vieira de Mello courted controversy for pursuing the interests of refugees to the point of dealing without prejudice with the Khmer