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A Convert from Islam

In this National Catholic Register interview, Ilyas Khan expresses gratitude to Netherhall House in London for giving him the strong prayer life and intellectual grounding that helped him to convert.

05/30/2012

Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar was instrumental in helping Ilyas Khan, a British philanthropist and former Muslim, to become Catholic. But so too were

many other distinctly Catholic influences, all amounting to a “pull” towards the faith rather than a “push” away from Islam.

Khan, a merchant banker by training and the owner of the Accrington Stanley soccer team, is also chairman of the prominent British charity Leonard Cheshire Disability — the largest organization in the world helping people with disabilities. In a revealing interview with Register Rome correspondent Edward Pentin, Khan explains in more detail what drew him to the Catholic Church in 2009.

What brought you to the faith? Was there anything in Islam, perhaps Muslims’ devotion to Our Lady, which helped you to convert?

Yes and no. Devotion to Our Lady on a personal basis is a big part of my faith, but at the same time, I know it wasn’t anything to do with my

upbringing as a Muslim. My first tentative steps towards Catholicism were taken in my very early infancy. My mother was very ill at that time, and I was raised till about the age of 3 or 4 by a grandmother who was determinedly Catholic and Irish. I went to a Church school, and I think that when I started classes I didn't think of myself as anything other than being Christian.

I also benefited from being brought up in Lancashire, up on the Pennines and close to the Ribble Valley. If there was ever a Catholic heartland in England, that was it — the great stronghold that never really acknowledged the Reformation.

Later on, when I was entering university, divine Providence intervened for a second time, and I stayed at Netherhall House, which is an Opus Dei student hall of residence in London. But, in between, say from

the ages of about 4 to 17, I had been raised as a Muslim in a Muslim household. I had gone to mosque, learned the Quran. So, yes, I was raised a Muslim, but I don't think there was any aspect of Islam that might have nudged me towards becoming a Catholic.

Was that time in Netherhall very influential, in terms of bringing you into the faith?

Very much so, yes. However, at that point in time, I don't think I had the guts to convert or be received into the Church, or even take formal instruction. Apostasy is something Islam takes very seriously. In the eyes of a great many, Muslims' apostasy is actually (as opposed to merely theoretically) punishable by death. So Netherhall was absolutely instrumental. I remember very clearly my devotion to prayer was really formed there, surrounded as I

was by living examples of a wonderfully spiritual faith.

Would you say you came to the faith almost subconsciously?

Not really. I think I came to my faith wholly consciously. By the age of 18 and 19, I was a reasoning and questioning young adult. And by then I had discovered there was a brilliant person called Hans Urs von Balthasar. There was a library in Netherhall where I started reading theology. That's where I came across Origen, and, to a very large extent, that's also where I was able to study and appreciate the work of St. Augustine. So I was very conscious but somewhat apprehensive. Both my parents were still alive at the time, and part of my reticence was my unwillingness to cause them hurt. I don't know quite how I would have described myself by the time I graduated from university, but

probably “a closet Catholic” comes close.

What gave you the courage in the end?

Apart from the Holy Spirit? A culmination of two things: a greater degree of certainty in my own moral compass; and if there was a push away from Islam or a pull, it was much more the pull of Christ. It wasn't ever in my mind a negative thing [to convert]. The other important factor was my very regular attendance, over a decade prior to my formally being received, at a church — St. Joseph's in Hong Kong. I went to live in Asia and Hong Kong in my mid-20s, and that's where I discovered my affinity for traditional Catholicism. The simple acts of faith — ritual, the liturgy and congregational prayer — were the stepping stones.

Did you have a sense, in those years leading up to being received, of a growing sense that the Catholic faith is the truth?

Yes, though that's perhaps slightly melodramatic. At this stage of my life, when my religion is at the core of what I do, it's very difficult to differentiate between any actions that might or might not be motivated by faith. I would hope that everything I do in my life is motivated and guided by faith. To answer your question in a slightly different way: I never doubted, from about my mid-20s onwards, that I was a Christian, and my path towards Catholicism, as opposed to Christianity per se, was really quite a quick one. In retrospect, the heart of that journey actually took four or five years and was more academically or intellectually based. I have to say it was Von Balthasar who guided me.

Were Blessed John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI also influential? Both have been described as so-called Balthasarians.

That's a really good question. I've never been asked that question before. Yes, well, Cardinal Ratzinger, the current Pope, definitely qualifies as being "Balthasarian," and Blessed John Paul II raised Balthasar to becoming a cardinal. Obviously, John Paul II was an influence beyond his regard for Von Balthasar — how could one not be influenced by such a great man? Like a great many people, Balthasar himself was not just a gigantic intellect, but also articulated how the mystery of faith is central to our lives as Christians. And, in that regard, the single most moving moment for me happened when I was in my mid-30s. I was walking past the Pieta in St. Peter's, and I remember being literally arrested in my tracks by a

combination of four or five things all at once. You asked me about my relationship with the Blessed Mother of God — well, that moment in time was really important. That can be described as being the turning point.

Was it the beauty of the Pietà that struck you?

Yes — and the context. This is God, I thought. This really is God. You must remember that one of the big things when we look at traditional Islam is the heresy — in their opinion — of equating the mortal Jesus with God. And if there is ever an obstacle that a Muslim convert has to contend with, intellectually and emotionally, more than anything else, that is it. At that moment, in front of the Pietà, I realized, through sheer emotion, that the truth of our religion is so simple and so direct.

You mean the fact that Jesus is not just a prophet, but God Himself?

Yes, absolutely, and I think at that moment — I remember it distinctly; it still moves me to tears — there was no doubt in my mind. It was so clear. I'm afraid it would be impossible for me to articulate that feeling in mere words. If there was a “before” and an “after,” then that was my point of arrival, so to speak.

In terms of being concerned about the “apostasy” charge from Muslims — is it something that keeps you up at night?

No, not at all. It doesn't keep me up at night. However, I can tell you where it becomes relevant: In various different forums — in articles, magazines and on radio and once or twice on TV — I have tended to get a fair degree of coverage in Britain, where I'm also well known as the owner of one of our best-known football teams. I get described with a standard tagline saying

something like: “The most prominent recent Catholic convert.” Whilst there have been many times when I have been on the receiving end of threats from individual Muslims or Islamic organizations who might read and react to these articles and interviews, I have to say that those occasions have absolutely never kept me up at night. I have received my fair share of hate mail and threats of violence, but I conduct myself with what I hope is a simple dignity and refuse to be drawn into a life governed by fear or undue caution.

Conversely, what I am interested in is where Islam and Catholicism meet; here, there is a degree of commonality. And my attitude is to exhibit for those who are not Catholics the beauty, purity, wonder and the privilege of being a Catholic. I’m just very straightforward and calm about this issue, and that’s a reflection of my faith.

Some prominent converts from Islam can be very negative towards their former religion, but you don't seem to have that view.

My views have the benefit of being blessedly simple. I don't think there's any complexity in my faith, and, as I said earlier, I was pulled towards my Christian faith, not pushed away from Islam.

However, I must admit that I do have a great deal of sadness in my heart when I contemplate people who use Islam to justify their actions. These actions aren't just un-Islamic — they are inhuman and have nothing to do with my view of Islam as a religion. Sadly, there appear to be a very large number of Muslims for whom anger and violence seem intuitive first responses to anything they don't agree with. Beyond that, I feel that the two religions, Islam and Christianity, might be described as

“distant cousins.” Remember, I was raised a Muslim, and I have been to Medina and Mecca, and I can see some of the inherent qualities. But we must also admit that the point of departure, the difference between the two religions, is vast. So while there are similarities, and I can see them, they don’t count really for very much. ... I celebrate the fact that Jesus Christ is love. It’s a simple statement. It is the defining difference.

And it is very simple in its totality.

Yes, it is; but then the thing we call “love,” that we as Christians concern ourselves (with) at the heart of our faith, is a living, real and tangible quality. Jesus is actually with us; we don’t need metaphors or vague conceptual examples of what love “might” be in order to inspire or inform us. We are blessed by the Holy Sacrament and nourished by

the direct intercession of Our Lord through his sacrifice. In that regard, Von Balthasar has helped to change the basis of conversation about the relationship between the Church, Christ and the Holy Spirit. He created a new understanding around the semantics of “love” in a religious context. I, therefore, can’t really say much about the contrasts between Catholicism and other religions, be they Islam or Hinduism, for example, but simply affirm the unerring simplicity of my own faith.

Edward Pentin // National Catholic Register