

A Few Questions For Simon Collis

by Hugh Fitzgerald

The Saudis, and many other Muslims, are ecstatic. Simon Collis, the British ambassador to Saudi Arabia, has just revealed to the world that he has converted to Islam (he did this a few years ago, but it was kept quiet until now). And he this week just completed the Hajj, the first British Ambassador to do so. What makes Muslims so ecstatic is that despite the outward show of believing that they, the Muslims, are “the best of peoples” (Qur’an 3:110), they are also aware of the fact that non-Muslims are none too impressed with Islam. A Western convert, one who comes from the highest levels of Infidel society, helps to validate Islam in Muslim eyes. Allahu Akbar, Our God Is Indeed Greater, when someone like Simon Collis converts.

And it’s especially pleasing when an upper class Westerner, as Simon Collis so obviously is (Christ Church, Cambridge, followed by the Foreign Office) converts not spur-of-the-momentish, but after a a long acquaintance with Muslim societies. On Twitter, Collis confirmed the story: “God bless you. In brief: I converted to Islam after 30 years of living in Muslim societies and before marrying Huda [his Syrian wife].” Add his name to the list of such celebrated Western converts as Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall (translator of the Qur’an), Muhammad Asad (née Leopold Weiss, a journalist, writer, and scholar of Islam), and St. John Philby (adviser to Ibn Saud, and one suspects that his conversion to Islam was not just a useful career move, but a kind of protest against the English establishment, in the same spirit as his son, Soviet spy Kim Philby, would later “convert” to Communism). The reason these converts’ names are known to so many Muslims is because there are so few of them. Now they can add Simon

Collis to their shortlist.

What was it Simon Collis saw in Islam that he found so attractive? During 30 years he lived in many Muslim countries, as part of the British embassy staff. He was ambassador to both Syria (2007-2012) and Iraq (2012-2014). What could he possibly have found winning about the Assad family's murderous regime, or about the even more barbaric Sunnis, including the Muslim Brotherhood, that was trying to overthrow the Assads' Alawite despotism? What did Collis make of the massacres of the Christians by Muslims in both Syria and Iraq? Of the atrocities visited upon the Yazidis, their men massacred, their women made into sex slaves for Muslim Arabs? In Iraq he surely learned of the Anfal Campaign, in which Muslim Arabs killed 182,000 Muslim Kurds. Might the general Arab indifference to that campaign have had something to do with the Arab supremacism that Islam promotes? Were the Sunni terrorists attacking Shia shrines and mosques and crowds of flagellants during Ashura, or the Shia who blew up Sunnis in retaliation, an edifying spectacle of intra-Muslim harmony for Simon Collis? Or did this observable behavior of Muslim murder and mayhem have nothing to do with Islam?

When he arrived in Saudi Arabia on February 3, 2015, what was it that so impressed Simon Collis with that society? Was it the school textbooks that teach hatred of Christians and Jews? Was it perhaps the swift meting out of Saudi justice, in the no-nonsense execution of Nimr al-Nimr, for the crime of being a Shia cleric and calling for free elections? What else might have impressed him? Was it the 147 public executions in 2015, a new record for the Saudis? Was it the ten years in jail and 2,000 lashes given to a Saudi who simply tweeted his atheistic beliefs? What does Simon Collis think of religious freedom in Muslim countries? Perhaps, now that he's a Muslim, and possessor of the One True Faith, he really doesn't care.

What does Simon Collis make of the ongoing bombing campaign by the Saudis in Yemen, where almost all of the victims appear to

have been civilians? Does he approve of the Saudi soldiers sent to help the King of Bahrain suppress his majority-Shia population? What does he make of the treatment of foreign workers, some not paid the wages they are due, others physically abused, or even raped, by their Arab masters?

What is it that most impressed Simon Collis about the Qur'an? Was it 2:256? 5:32? Does he know about 5:33? Did he ever bother to read 9:5 or 9:29 or other of the more than 100 "jihad" verses? Of course he did, so what we really want to know is, what did he make of those verses, how has he managed to accept a sanitized version of the Qur'an? And as for Muhammad, the Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*), the Model of Conduct (*uswa hasana*), what does Simon Collis make of the Prophet's approval of the killings of Asma bint Marwan and Abu 'Afak, merely because they mocked him? What does he think of the killing of the inoffensive Jewish farmers of the Khaybar Oasis by Muhammad and his men, in order to seize their property and women? What does Simon Collis think of the execution of the 600-900 bound prisoners of the Banu Qurayza, while Muhammad looked approvingly on? What does he think about Muhammad and little Aisha? Anything? Nothing?

What does Simon Collis think of what the Muslim invaders did in Hindu India, where they killed up to 80 million Hindus during 250 years of Mughal rule? What does he think of the destruction by Muslims of the Hindu and Buddhist statuary and temple complexes in India, and Pakistan and Bangladesh, over the centuries? What does he make of the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan, where Saudi and Pakistani engineers lent a hand to the Taliban? Or of the destruction of Hindu and Buddhist temple complexes in what is now Indonesia? Or of Sufi shrines and libraries of manuscripts in Timbuktu, by the fanatical Islamists of Ansar Dine?

For celebrity converts, there are financial incentives to become a Muslim, especially in Saudi Arabia. Even a humble Western nurse who worked in Saudi Arabia told me of how her

patients had offered her \$30,000 if she would convert to Islam (she turned them down). If a nurse is worth that, what would someone at the ambassadorial level be worth? An ambassador from *Great Britain*? Simon Collis surely was impressed – who is not? – with the fantastic riches of the Saudis, and just as surely knew that once he retired from the Foreign Service, as a celebrity convert he would be assured a well-paid sinecure at some Saudi research center or foundation or university. Wouldn't that be an inducement to say the Shehada, become a Muslim, and walk widdershins seven times round the Ka'aba which houses the magic wonderstone, as he did, swathed in white, just this week?

Imagine if someone in the Western press were to prepare A List of Questions For Simon Collis, more or less like those you have just been reading, and published it in The Telegraph or The Times or in the Washington Post or The New York Times. Collis wouldn't– because he couldn't – respond, but merely putting the questions to him publicly, knowing that his answer can only be an embarrassed silence, would be a salutary exercise, a way to smuggle in some home truths about Muslim societies. And the more that is done, the less likely it is that some other diplomat or public figure in the West will be quite so ready to throw in his dubious lot with Islam, as if it ever could be, morally or in any other way, superior to Western civilization.

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