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11 a.m., IAIS Lecture Theatre, Exeter University

From Mayfair to Mecca Lady Evelyn Cobbold's pilgrimage in 1933

My lecture is about purportedly the first British-born female Muslim convert to make the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Who was Lady Evelyn Cobbold? Not, as it turned out, an easy question, because, by the time we came to write about her, she had almost totally dropped out of sight. Of late there has been a great deal of academic and popular interest in intrepid British women travellers and their writings. Yet only in a single anthology does Lady Evelyn get even a passing mention. The story of her life and her contribution to the literature of the Hajj have been completely overlooked until now. Neither has she been studied from the point of view of what her life has to say about Islam among the British.

As it turns out, this unjustly neglected traveller was an extraordinary figure. Aristocrat, Mayfair socialite, owner of an estate in the Scottish Highlands, accomplished deerstalker and angler, not to mention mother and gardener too, she was surely unique in also being a Muslim and an Arabic-speaker. Better still, in 1933, at the age of 65, this highly eccentric Anglo-Scot set out to become the first British-born Muslim woman to perform the Hajj. Unusually for someone not born into a Muslim family, she claimed to have been a Muslim all her life, and that Islam was imbued in her by a childhood of winters spent in North Africa, during which she became, as she puts it, "unconsciously a little Moslem at heart". As she explains it in the first paragraph of her book, *Pilgrimage to Mecca*, published in 1934:

“This is not so strange when one remembers that Islam is the natural religion that a child left to itself would develop. Indeed, as a Western critic described it, Islam is the religion of common sense.”

In this way she disclaimed any moment of conversion. There is indeed no evidence of any Road-to-Damascus experience, nor of any formal adoption of Islam later in life. For her, it was almost an instinctive choice, something that had grown from within. This is illustrated by a chance meeting with the Pope, probably when she was a young woman: she took herself by surprise by declaring, in answer to His Holiness’s enquiry as to whether she was a Catholic, that she was a Muslim.

Sadly, the Pope’s reaction is not recorded.

EARLY LIFE AND FAMILY

To begin at the beginning, Lady Evelyn Murray, to use her maiden name, was born in Edinburgh in 1867, the eldest child of Charles Adolphus Murray, 7th Earl of Dunmore, and Lady Gertrude Coke, daughter of the 2nd Earl of Leicester, of Holkham Hall, in Norfolk.

Lord Dunmore was a larger-than-life traveller and explorer, whose roamings covered much of the globe. Permanently hard up, and with an incurable wanderlust, he found it both cheap and congenial to cart his family off to North Africa every winter. Evelyn and her younger siblings thus grew up in the company of Algerian and Egyptian nurses and household staff. The impact on young Evelyn was formative and profound. She was steeped in the culture and language of everyday life in the Arab world, and came to feel completely at ease and at home there. She seems to have been drawn naturally, by temperament, to the Arabs around her, in contrast to her siblings, none of whom showed any similar tendency.

As aristocrats have been all too aware over the centuries, noble birth is no substitute for financial security, and there was undoubtedly pressure on Evelyn to make an advantageous marriage. She left it fairly late for those days, but when she was 24 was introduced, in Cairo, to John Dupuis Cobbold, of the wealthy Suffolk brewing family. It was in Cairo too that their glittering society wedding took place, in April 1891. They then returned to Ipswich, in Suffolk, in Evelyn's case for a life of domesticity and children, punctuated by frequent travels at home and abroad.

Three children arrived between 1893 and 1900, but it is fairly clear that Evelyn found it hard to settle. There is evidence of restlessness, and these clues have to do with Islam and the Arab world.

A poem written in Cairo as early as 1889, when she was just 22, had already evinced a mystical yearning for meaning in life, a search for a One God, "the Essence of All", and an affinity with Islam. By 1900, she was travelling without her husband, on fishing trips to Norway, for example. Later, by the time her children were growing up, she was back in North Africa. 1911 found her, now 43, travelling in Egypt with a woman companion: we know this because she wrote a book about it – *Wayfarers in the Libyan Desert*, published in 1912.

This is a very revealing little book because, though she does not actually declare herself a Muslim, it contains numerous passages in which she extols the virtues of Islam and the Muslim way of life, while also being critical of the too-closeted lives of women in the villages.

From now on, it becomes increasingly evident that she regarded herself as a Muslim. She was making regular winter visits to Egypt, and a series of letters in Arabic survives from 1914–15, from Arab friends there and in Syria. Some address her as "Our sister in Islam, Lady Zainab" – Zainab being her adoptive Muslim name. Her friendship with the British Muslim Mamaduke Pickthall provides further testimony. In 1915 Pickthall, who would later produce one of

the most respected interpretations of the Qur'an in English, was urged by Lady Evelyn to declare his faith publicly – typically, for her, in front of a waiter over lunch in Claridge's! In fact he warily resisted the impulse, and would wait until 1917 before announcing his conversion publicly.

By the 1920s, family hearsay suggests that Evelyn's attachment to Islam had become a serious cause of estrangement from the Cobbolds, and, in 1922, she and her husband finally and formally separated. The Cobbolds arranged a generous financial settlement, including the highland deer forest of Glencarron, in Wester Ross, which made her a very wealthy woman in her own right. Much of the 1920s was occupied by a cavalcade of grandchildren, as well as by the field sports at which she excelled. During this time she became the first woman to down a 14-point stag and she excelled at salmon-fishing. But in 1929 her husband John Cobbold died, and it seems that it was from this point that she began seriously to contemplate performing the pilgrimage.

She announced her intention to the Saudi Arabian minister in London, Hafiz Wahba, who duly wrote to King 'Abd al-'Aziz in Riyadh requesting formal permission. But, typically for her, she did not wait for a reply, relying instead on a social contact in London to send a letter of introduction to Harry St John Philby in Jeddah. Philby had left British government service in the 1920s and set up in business in the Hijaz; and, in 1930, he had converted to Islam. He and his wife Dora duly received their unsolicited guest in their splendid old house in Jeddah. They were very good to her, introducing her to Jeddah's small expatriate social round, and even inviting the King's son, the Amir Faisal, to tea so that he could cast his eye over the prospective pilgrim. While awaiting official permission from the King for her to perform the Hajj, Philby arranged for Evelyn to travel by car to Madinah, fixing up her accommodation with a local family there.

Evelyn was by now 65, and the arduous conditions of life in the Hijaz would take their toll. But for her, as a travelling grandee, conditions were not nearly

so hard as they were for the ordinary run of pilgrims. For a start, the Saudis treated her with extreme courtesy, as was deemed to befit her status. And, once permission arrived, she would be allowed to go to Mecca with a guide and driver, once again provided by Philby.

Evelyn's encounter with Saudi Arabia took place at the very beginning of its modern development, when little had changed for centuries. Though it is hard to imagine now, the Hijaz and Najd were among the poorest regions on earth. It was before the discovery of oil, and the world economy was mired in the Great Depression. The infant kingdom had no source of income apart from pilgrimage receipts, and, in 1933, pilgrims from abroad would slump to an all-time low. Lady Evelyn's youngest daughter, Pamela, was by now married to Charles Hambro, who was on the board of the Bank of England, and it was waspishly suggested by Sir Andrew Ryan, the British minister in Jeddah, that this connection had been a not insignificant factor in the warm Saudi welcome for the British pilgrim. But salvation for the Kingdom was in the offing. Evelyn's visit to Jeddah coincided with the presence of American and British oil company negotiators, and King 'Abd al-'Aziz would sign the key concession agreement with the Americans in May 1933, so ushering in the transformation of the Saudi economy that would follow.

Evelyn's travels in the Hijaz do not concern us here. Suffice it say that, having visited Madinah and performed the Hajj that climaxed at the Standing at 'Arafat on 4 April 1933, she was uplifted but thoroughly drained by all that she had seen and experienced – so exhausted, in fact, that she sought special dispensation from the King at Mina to cut her pilgrimage short before the three-day Feast of Sacrifice there. Permission was duly granted, and, here, the special treatment accorded her as a grandee on pilgrimage becomes especially obvious. Though generally she extols the egalitarianism of Islam and the way in which the Hajj symbolically reduces all people to equals before God, she was at the same time an unreconstructed British snob, and was not averse to availing herself of the advantages afforded by her status. For example wherever she went she was accommodated in

spacious quarters where her privacy was respected. On arrival at each holy city she was assigned her own personal pilgrim guide. Her Saudi host at Mecca generously made available to her the entire roof of his rented house at Mina, where otherwise all his womenfolk would have slept for the sake of the cool night air. At 'Arafat, the same host invited her to share his tent with its view of Jabal al-Rahmah with his male guests, which she readily accepted, not least because it was cooler, the women being consigned to a hot bell-shaped tent behind, where they could neither see nor be seen. When challenged by a pious passer-by, suspicious of her strange reading matter in the car on the way to 'Arafat (it was Doughty's *Arabia Deserta*), her response was to silence him by declaring haughtily that "this is an English book, and I am an English Moslem and I am here on pilgrimage by permission of the King". A lesser mortal might not have got away with it so easily.

Despite this, there can be no doubt about her fundamental sincerity. While waiting to leave Mecca on her final return through the city on 7 April, she found that she could not after all stomach Doughty, because "he was too sturdy a Christian, or perhaps too bigoted, to perceive any truth in Islam ... I shut the volume, feeling it sacrilege to read it in my present surroundings." Instead, she took up the only other book she had brought with her, an Arabic Qur'an. Opening it at random, she was "soon immersed in the beautiful sura 'Light'". She had found that, after all, the suspicious passer-by might have had a point.

Evelyn's book, *Pilgrimage to Mecca*, gives a fascinating and sympathetic account of these Arabian travels. As much a record of an interior experience of faith as a conventional travelogue, it is remarkable for its sympathy and vividness. It takes the form of a diary, punctuated with lengthy digressions intended to promote Islam to her readers. Such digressions cover the Qur'an, the life of the Prophet, Islamic history and science, the position of women, King 'Abd al-'Aziz's achievements in bringing law and order to his newly united country, and the superiority of Islam over Christianity in matters of warfare and toleration.

WHAT SORT OF MUSLIM?

Well, what sort of a Muslim was Lady Evelyn? Though she would certainly have claimed to be Sunni it would be difficult to pin her down more precisely. And though clearly firm in her faith, there is no record of her performing the five daily prayers, or fasting during Ramadan, or of charity to the poor and needy, during her normal life at home. Indeed, so far from being charitable, she had acquired a reputation for stinginess, judging from Philby's letters home to his mother. No doubt she had uttered the *shahadah*, or declaration of faith, on various occasions; otherwise, going on the Hajj seems to have been the sole other Pillar of Islam that she subscribed to.

There is a long history of British converts to Islam before her time, going back at least to the Crusades and peaking during the 17th century when many Britons were enslaved, either to man the fleets of the Barbary corsairs, or otherwise to be absorbed into North African society. But Lady Evelyn belongs in a later category – that of educated converts in Britain itself in the late 19th century. She was contemporary with various other eminent Muslims of this type – Abdullah Quilliam, Lord Headley, Lord Hothfield, and Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall himself, to name but a handful.

For many British converts the attraction of Islam lay and still lies in its mystical dimension represented by Sufism. Many such converts follow the line that all religions share a transcendent unity behind the superficial doctrinal detail that divides them. Pickthall, for instance, maintained that the monotheisms preserve a universal truth behind the mass of dogma and superstition, that truth being the eternal unity of God. Many British Muslims of Lady Evelyn's day shared a similar universalist approach when they focused on the ethical similarities between the messages of Muhammad and Jesus rather than on the differences. Both Pickthall and Headley went so far as to imply that, solely by pursuing a moral life and right conduct, a person could almost be a Muslim without knowing it.

At the level of theology, the refreshing lack of doctrinal complexity in Islam also had an appeal for British converts. Not for them the perplexing mysteries of Christianity such as the Trinity, the divine nature of Christ, the Immaculate Conception and the Resurrection. Islam simply accepts the ultimate unity and ineffability of God, while respecting Jesus as a human being and forerunner of Muhammad as a prophet. For converts, a further refreshing feature of Islam was the lack of a remote, elaborate and gorgeously accoutred priestly hierarchy intervening between the worshipper and the Almighty – which is such a paradoxical feature of the older Christian denominations.

In the West, religious belief has increasingly come to be regarded as properly a matter of personal and private conviction. An individual may choose a religion according to personal taste, and the freedom to do so is protected in law. Personal freedom of religion is guaranteed by the secular state, which thus should, as ideally conceived, set out to be the even-handed protector of all minority faiths amongst its people. Religious groups are not expected to play any more prominent a part in public life than other special interest groups such as, to pick a few at random, trades unions, or professional associations, or football clubs. Matters of public ethics, law, justice and politics are deemed to be the proper sphere of secular public debate and judgement.

The line between public and private is not always an easy one to draw, for example in the fields of education, public health, diet, or family law. The issue of polygamy among Muslims in Britain, for example, is currently a live one in the media. Nonetheless, Western societies have evolved since the Middle Ages by progressively challenging the authority of religious establishments over public affairs. In the process they have had to develop systems of secular law and humanist values that all citizens can subscribe to. The trend, admittedly not yet fully realized, has been towards truly multicultural societies in which all minorities can flourish and enjoy freedom of expression and religion in a tolerant atmosphere, provided they observe the norms of

secular citizenship in public.

This Western attitude to faith as a matter of private choice and practice can work very well for Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and other religions. However, it is debatable whether Islam is analogous in this respect. For many Muslims, to be Muslim is a matter of more than mere private religious conviction, to be kept behind closed doors. Public space, as well as the private sphere, is considered to be the legitimate domain of Islam, and Muslims regard their religion as providing not just a personal faith, but a complete social system intimately tied up with a specific worldview and norms of identity.

Lady Evelyn, by contrast, showed little sign of being aware of any such public implications of her faith. So, it could be argued that in this sense she and others like her missed one of the essential aspects of being Muslim. In regarding Islam solely as a matter of private conviction and in subscribing to it entirely on her own terms, she followed a very European model of religious faith. She did not, and this seems to me very significant, even seek to influence her children into becoming Muslim – her son Ivan was sent to Eton, hardly a place that could be described as a *madrasah*.

But she has to be placed in the context of her time. She lived in an age in which many members of the intelligentsia and society's upper echelons sought enlightenment among a wide range of non-Christian belief systems on offer, some of them newly developed during the later 19th century. Her own parents, for example, had demonstrated a taste for experimenting with religion, and had ended their lives as Christian Scientists. Other prominent trends, such as the Theosophy of Madame Blavatsky, Bahá'ism, and the ideas of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, were reaching their peak of influence in the West during the early decades of the 20th century. British converts to Islam at this time have to be viewed in the context of this eclectic and personal European attitude to religious belief.

BURIAL AT GLENCARRON

Now for the end of her story. Lady Evelyn lived another thirty years. She died in January 1963, one of the coldest months of the century in Britain, and was buried, as she had stipulated, on a remote hillside on her Glencarron estate. Her splendidly Islamo-Caledonian interment symbolized her two worlds: a piper, so frozen that he was scarcely able to walk let alone perform, played MacCrimmon's Lament, and the Surah "Light" from the Qur'an was recited loudly in Arabic by the equally refrigerated Imam of the Woking Mosque. A verse from the same Surah adorns the flat slab over her grave, over which the deer now wander, according to her wishes.

Finally, as a result of the republication of *Pilgrimage to Mecca* and the turn-out today, I hope we may now declare Lady Evelyn Cobbold to have been comprehensively rescued from oblivion.

Pilgrimage to Mecca

By Lady Evelyn Cobbold

**Introduction "From Mayfair to Mecca" by William Facey and
Miranda Taylor**

Notes by Prof. Ahmad S. Turkistani

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