

YOUNG RUSSIAN MUSLIMS DISCOVER RELIGION

On Islam & Newspapers

CAIRO – Frustrated by spiritual poverty and lack of purpose, a growing number of young Russian Muslims are embracing their faith to seek answers for questions, guidance in life and an alternate way of thinking.

"I had a choice," Rustam Sarachev, a 21-year-old from the city of Almetyevsk, told The Washington Post on Wednesday, December 22, recalling his decision to set a foot in a mosque for the first time four years ago.

"Either the street – alcohol and cigarettes and all that stuff – or a very pleasant atmosphere and pleasant people," he added.

A self-described hooligan, a troublemaker, Sarachev was living every day to the fullest with no worries or purpose. He was even planning a raucous party on the eve of the holy fasting month of Ramadan as a fare-well send-off on his way to the house of the prayer.

Mocked by his company for thinking about the journey, Sarachev was left on his own with 500 rubles unspent on vodka in his pocket and one idea in mind; exploring a way back to Islam.

Not sure why he is heading to the mosque or what to expect there, he went through the great door of the edifice that dominates one end of the minor city of Almetyevsk.

"I was shocked," Sarachev remembers.

"I couldn't understand where I was. There were only young people, all around. They treated me so well. I'd never been welcomed like that before," he said.

There, he saw familiar faces, youths like him who were used to be big partiers and suddenly dropped out of sight. One was Almas Tikhonov, a long-time roughneck, who Sarachev was surprised to see him praying in compelling serenity.

In the days that followed, the image of new Tikhonov haunted Sarachev's mind. He decided to make another visit to the mosque, which turned to be the second of an endless series of visits to the prayer house.

Now, instead of partying he plays on an all-Muslim rugby team. He replaced vodka with coffee and spent his spare time at the banya – the Russian sauna.

But this transformation did not go without trouble. He had to endure the jibes of his old friends, which maybe strengthened his resolve.

Yet, the ex-friends were not Sarachev's main problem.

In Tatarstan, to where Sarachev belongs, the people were left with only a perfunctory sense of their own Muslim inheritance. Religion here meant grandparents and holidays.

So, there was no wonder when Sarachev was faced with the unhappiness of his parents who disfavored his religious awakening.

"They didn't understand," he said.

"There were fights and quarrels. But of course they had been very mad at me when I was getting home late and drunk."

Now, seeing a more sober son, his parents started, slowly, to get along with the situation. For example, If his mother sees him praying at home, she'll close the door and won't interfere.

This year, for the first time, they gave him the money to buy a sheep for sacrifice in Eid Al-Adha, where financially-able Muslims sacrifice a single sheep or goat as an act of worship.

Now, he is surrounded with friends who have married and have jobs, kids and cars, the embodiment of Sarachev's view of good, respectable life. To achieve this life, he believes, Islam is the key.

Islam is Russia's second-largest religion representing roughly 15 percent of its 145 million population.

Exploring

Now as he digs deeper and deeper into the faith, Sarachev is finding answers for difficult questions that have always plagued his mind.

"Everyone eventually asks, 'Why am I here? Why will I die? What will happen after I die?'" he said.

Now, Islam is helping him find the answers.

"You gradually start to understand who you are and why you were created," he said.

For Sarachev, the reason is to lead a pure Muslim's life.

"The prophet showed people everything – from how to go to the toilet to how to run a state."

But not every young worshipper is driven by the same motives.

Guzel Sharipova, 23, found in Islam what was missing in her life; rules.

"Everyone has a time to come to Islam," she said.

Thanks to an Arab boyfriend, she was introduced to deeper Islam. At that time, she was living with her great-aunt and began asking her about the prayers she recited. Eventually, she put on a veil.

"She was a girl who loved life, and suddenly she became so religious," said Enzhe Anisimov, daughter of Sharipova's aunt.

"Something in it really attracts Guzel. But what is it? If she has found answers to the questions she was trying to find answers to, maybe that solved something for her."

Sharipova is now in harmony with her life after she gave most of her attention to her sour and discarded life's vanities.

"I'm trying to spend time on only necessary things," she said.

But, still there's so much for the new devout youths to know and fully apprehend.

As Sarachev is still struggling to understand even now what's expected of him by his religion, his mind is still probing thorny issues like the real meaning of the term "jihad", which he believes means "a struggle" against non-believers.

"It's very complicated. I don't want to be wrong," he said.

Jihad has been wrongly used in the West as merely meaning holy war.

Muslim scholars have affirmed that the word, which is mentioned in the Qur'an means "struggle" to do good and to remove injustice, oppression and evil from society.

Last year, Sarachev got to know some young men who wanted to pick up guns and go fight abroad. They weren't from the mosque.

Still uncertain about what jihad really means, he sought the advice of the mosque's imams.

They explained to him, he said, that these young men were mistaken.

"Those people who say they want to fight, they're like foam on water. There's a lot of foam, but it's useless."

Source: <http://www.onislam.net/english/news/asia-pacific/450252-young-russian-muslims-embrace-religion.html>