



7.574
DUF

CONVERSION JOURNEYS

On Becoming Muslim in the West

SULAIMAN DUFFORD

PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA



Cover photo brought back from author's visit to Istanbul where he taught in the 1990's. The ferry is arriving from the Asian side of Istanbul, to the European side which is dominated by the Sulaimaniyyah Mosque and compound (including clinic, library, school, restaurants, guest hostel, etc.). This is the only mosque in the world with its four minarets surrounding the forecourt rather than the mosque itself, one of the masterpieces of Sinan, court architect to Sultan Sulaiman the Magnificent. The boat symbolizes the re-arrival of Asian Islam to Europe, where there had already been a significant Muslim presence for more than five hundred years.

Published By:

Yayasan Ismail
6 - 4 Jalan 14/48A
Off Jalan Sentul
Sentul Raya, 51100
Kuala Lumpur

Printed By:

Syarikat Teja
58 G, 12/34A
Kepong Entrepreneur Park,
Batu 7, Jalan Kepong,
Kuala Lumpur.

ISBN 983-42868-0-5

©Fotocopy Rights Unrestricted



CONVERSION JOURNEYS

PUSTAKA PERDANA



1010092

by

SULAIMAN DUFFORD



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA

CONTENTS

Preface	1
Introduction	3
Conversion Category I Reading Books and Meeting People	7
Conversion Category II Travel	55
Conversion Category III Al-Qur'an	93
Conversion Category IV Da'wah Models	121
Afterword	135
Appendix I An Introduction to Islam and Muslims	137
Appendix II A Cognitive Analysis of Islamic Practices	144
Appendix III Islam and the Brain - A Qur'anic Interpretation	147



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA

PREFACE

I am so happy that Almighty God, Allah s.w.t., arranged for me to read all these varied experiences of people HE guided to HIS chosen religion of ISLAM. This anthology vividly reminds me that I am witness to the Grand Parade on the Day of Resurrection, when these people will testify in the Highest Court - the Almighty Lord's Court - as to how they came towards the Godly light of Islam.

I am especially attracted to Brother Sulaiman Dufford's paradigm for accepting Islam - where he grows into Islam - slowly & steadily learning to mature & evolve Islamic values - especially the spiritual ones! And also as solemnly elucidated by Ms Joanne McEwan - "Sense & Sensitivity - How to Accommodate New Converts" - for some people to change, it may take a day, while for others, it may take months or even years! Born-Muslims need to take heed of this vital paradigm, something very precious that new Muslim converts can teach & espouse to born-Muslims - this self-awareness of into Islamic ideals & values.

This spiritual sensitivity which born-Muslims have inherited as a way of life & a culture (more than just a spiritual religion) has been somewhat lost after so many generations! Nowadays, we may take the Islamization of values for granted & may even have become heedless of this slow evolution/Islamization of the human psyche!

Brother Sulaiman also has a very simple yet clearly useful Appendix I, a "Short Introduction to Islam", significantly relevant to new Muslim converts. His Appendix II is a fascinating and innovative approach to Islam - a unique cognitive-neurological-based analysis of Islamic practices, expanded in his "Islam & The Brain". This is a new paradigm - to approach the Islamic Shari'at (Revealed Law) and balance it with the Tarekat (the aesthetic/spiritual aspects of Sufism) as a balance between the left & right brain hemispheres!

Another vital and significant aspect of the Islamic Outreach (dak'wah) that he has highlighted is the need for a slow-yet-steady 'growing-cum-evolution' of the Muslim psyche - so that the Muslim absorbs and accommodates Islamic idealistic values as "an Internal Personal Hijrah", a rising above his previous cultural identity. Although he credits Ali Shariati for this idea, we can be grateful he has brought it to our attention. I had not thought in these terms previously. Secular anthropology, for which religion is only another aspect of culture, will be stood on its head with this concept of placing cultural derivatives beneath Revealed Religion. And it is about time someone thought of this.

Associate Professor Syed Kadir Al Sagoff
Department of Economics
Universiti Putra Malaysia
December 2004



INTRODUCTION

The two most frequent questions we converts face when we meet born-Muslims are: “Why did you become Muslim?” and, “How did you become Muslim?” These questions are not casual courtesies. The Ummah (Unified Group/ Nation/ Community) seems to have a vestigial memory of the old days, when the Ansar/Muhajir (“Resident Helper/ Emigre Newcomer”) equation was still in place in the new city-state of Madinah Munawwarah (in the present Saudi Arabia). Perhaps these born-Muslim brothers and sisters dimly recall that their relationship and responsibility to us as converts, is that of Ansar to Muhajir. And yet, who can place this vital equation within the context of the modern system of secular nation-states, such as first appeared on the stage of world history less than three hundred years ago? Even our Holy Land was forcibly inducted into the nation-state system, when the British so cunningly engineered the downfall of our last Caliph in Istanbul, and subsidized Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud to conquer his tribal neighbors and form one of the most recent nation-states, now known as Saudi Arabia.

So when we converts wish to emigrate from our countries of origin, where can we go? Where is our “Madinah”? Full of hope and faith in our decision to join the Muslim Ummah, we arrive in one so-called Muslim country or another, and find immigration laws written by those same British, or Dutch, or other European powers, excluding us from ever settling there. Oh, one CAN settle down. Some have done it, usually with pension money from the West. But many others literally “wilt on the vine” waiting, waiting, waiting, for governmental sanction of their presence in their chosen adopted country.

Meanwhile, our friends and families back home (usually in the West) gradually forget us and cannot follow our continuing development as Muslims among Muslims, instead of being the Muslim minority members in the Jahiliyah that we once were. Suppose we go back there, to our former homes — what do we find? We find that our Muslim brothers and sisters, having established their businesses and families there, are often having difficulties in maintaining their dignity as Muslims. And yet they may also be unable to return to THEIR homes because of economic or legal dangers. And they are often unable (as in post-9/11 America) to welcome us and protect us as the Musafirun (travellers) that we now are, when we go home.

Some born-Muslims may feel they are missing something in their habitual (even if erratic!) mosque attendance, that there is still something yet very vital in Islam that is carried more by the converts than by the natives of Muslim areas. It is primarily to bearers of these remnants of longing for the glory of pristine Islam that we address our collection of conversion stories in this book.

These stories resolved themselves rather neatly into several categories, answering the “why” of individual conversions. These categories are not mutually exclusive, yet there seems to be one sine qua non (pivotal precondition) for each conversion. Without this particular experience, they would not have made it across. We will discuss each category in a little detail at the beginning of each grouping of stories.

Two important categories must await further exploration, those of conversion due to excessive oppression (usually, imprisonment), and conversion due to marriage. For those seeking the beauty of innocence and virtue in a marriage partner, the beauty of the well-dressed Muslimah is surely legendary. One is reminded of the final words of Goethe’s “Faust” - “Die Ewige Weiblichkeit zieht uns hinan” (“The Eternal Feminine leads us ever onward”).

Additionally, we have included some converts’ analyses of the da’wah or Islamic outreach techniques that helped them to convert. Such techniques have yet to be effectively organized into a global missionary effort, as effective, say, as that of the Christians. Surely, Muslim converts themselves know best which techniques fail and which succeed. Da’wah experts may be able to learn something from those who have made the transition from their Jahiliyah upbringing, especially the obstacles along the way that arose unintentionally from the born-Muslims themselves, or from systemic difficulties encountered in bucking the modern secular nation-state system.

A word about our use of the term “Jahiliyah”. As converts look back, they often report an increasing comprehension of certain terms that had absolutely no meaning for them previously, and that continue to have no meaning for non-Muslims in secular cultures. “Jahiliyah” is one such term. It translates literally as “days of ignorance”. In general, however, it refers nowadays to all those cultural systems that ignore or even denigrate the Wahyu (Revelation) from Allah s.w.t. (Subhana wa Ta’ala, i.e., the Glorified & Sublime), in any of its forms. That there exists such a way of knowing about reality and truth, which is wholly other than the scientific or logically analytical method never occurs to them. They often cannot even entertain this possibility of perceiving reality, and so their expert opinions about Islam and Muslims are often essentially flawed.

Some Muslims are inclined to look back, at first anyway, to those left behind. Perhaps it’s a form of homesickness. Occasionally in these stories, we may even find a convert blessed with the ability to influence other members of his or her family to also follow and convert. Unfortunately, however, the majority of our stories seem to report increasing difficulties with intransigently non-Muslim family members, sometimes even including spouses and children, or with parents who had accumulated property and wealth from which their Muslim offspring are totally disinherited. And yet they go on.

And in going on regardless of consequences, such converts prove their status as true Muhajirun, those who have left everything and everyone solely for the sake of Allah s.w.t. But where are their Ansarun? Most report finding true helpers along the way. But because modern legal systems do not recognize the needs of spiritual refugees, it usually takes more than one helper to “cross the bridge”. A complete analysis of the transition between secular and Ummatic Islam at the individual level has not yet been written. Perhaps the stories within this humble collection will contribute to such a study in the future.

Finally, let us try to appreciate the vital function the Muslim Caliph had performed from his post in Ottoman Turkey for more than five hundred years, until about 81 years ago. We have not really had an Ummah since the destruction of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1923, so we may not remember much about it. What we face now, born and converted Muslims alike, is the severe proscription of our Islam in the public life. Other than a few fascist Muslim leaders, nobody presumes to dictate our observances as Muslims within our own homes and private lives. For the most part, we are free to choose whose advice we wish to follow, whenever contradictions occur in personal worship or social conduct. This is also a secular right, and secular states are cordial with Muslims who agree to abide by it.

Yet who speaks for the Muslims as a whole? Who decides what is truly a jihad (God-sanctified holy struggle) and what is not? Who guides the public community of Muslims as to their proper behavior and comportment outside their homes? No one! Those who presume to do so form a hodge-podge of conflicting and often belligerent voices. Muslims everywhere mistake their individual cultures for Islamic truth, and attempt to impose it on the rest of us.

Whatever the personal qualifications of our former Caliphs in Istanbul, there was always the possibility of wise understanding of these matters. There was always the possibility of a united front against the forces of colonialism, “divide-and-conquer” tactics against the Muslim unity, and political emasculation in the administration of our Holy Cities: Mecca, Madinah, Jerusalem.

So now our lonely converts must all decide these matters for themselves, with whatever sympathetic guidance they may find in the areas to which they emigrate, or in the areas in which they choose to remain as Muslims. The difficulties facing all Muslims seem to be escalating in the modern world. Yet they may all be faced with the same type of courage with which the writers of these stories have recognized and enthroned the Revelation at the forefront of their lives.

Much work needs to be done. We have to re-evolve our Ummah. We have to re-define our roles in the lands of Jahiliyah that all-too-often still offer

the best economic and political freedoms and opportunities to individual Muslim families. We have to practice Islamic outreach that grows all the more difficult due to the behavior of other Muslims. We have to regain the, as yet only theoretical, equality of all Muslims before Allah s.w.t., instead of this constant bickering and disunity between various Sunnis and Shi'ites, races and tribes, and, yes, often between born and converted Muslims as well. We have to follow the example of our Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w., i.e., sallallahu 'alaihi wassallam - Allah's peace and blessings be upon him) by entering into agreements with those largely sympathetic non-Muslim peoples, instead of so quickly demonizing them. Every small effort counts. May Allah s.w.t. be pleased with this present effort, and bestow His Blessing upon our intention that it may contribute to meeting the overwhelming needs we face, both as individual Muslims and as an Ummah or Muslim community worldwide (AMIN! Ya Rabbil 'alamin).



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA

CONVERSION CATEGORY I :

READING BOOKS AND MEETING PEOPLE

The most common road to conversion appears to be “chance” meetings with Muslims combined with judicious reading of books about Islam. One might hope that this very book might serve the purpose for some future converts. Those whose conversion arose PRIMARILY from reading and studying Al Qur’an will tell their stories in a separate section. It may surprise some to learn that Al Qur’an is not, in itself, the most frequent stimulus to conversion. We will speculate on some reasons for this in introducing that later section.

Of course, there is much overlapping of conversion categories. The division followed in this book is based on the consideration of which form of introduction to Islam is the sine qua non for each individual. For each story, we have asked, which factor was the primary means of Islam entering the spirit of the non-Muslim, without which an ultimate commitment might never have been made?

In our “Reading and Meeting” category, the major factor is presumed to be high-impact reading materials, which one is in fact lucky to find considering the ineffectiveness of many Islamic outreach publications. Or the major factor may arise from personal influence, usually emanating from meetings with born-Muslims during visits to Muslim countries, or else meeting Muslim foreign students or emigres residing in the home country of the non-Muslim. Or, one’s destiny may be dramatically altered as a result of meeting especially effective religious teachers (whom one may find addressed as “Sheikh”, “Ustad”, “Ustaz”, “Kyai”, “Bapak”, etc., depending on the culture-of-origin).

To discuss reading materials first, scholarly works by non-Muslim “orientalists” may be more helpful to the native English speaker, than devotional materials translated from or written by non-native speakers of English. The reason is simply that English verbal logic is not primarily suited for expressing spiritual states or cognitions, so that translation of attempts to communicate difficult religious topics may lapse even further from any form of comprehensible truth.

Converts often read Islamic materials not written by Muslims because it is important to approach any new experience by satisfying the left-brain need for information. Yet, how can such writers know anything about the (right-brain) inner subtleties of Islamic devotion? In the search for really satisfactory Islamic DEVOTIONAL writings, one must perhaps go to recent translations of classics from the Golden Age of Islam, by such writers as Al

Ghazali, Ibn Arabi, Jalaluddin Rumi, and the like. What a pity so few born-Muslims know how to guide the aspiring non-Muslim seekers to such reading materials! Herein lies an explanation for one of the real strengths of the Muslim convert. He or she must be CONSCIOUS of becoming and evolving (changing) into a Muslim, in a way that born-Muslims may never achieve. The convert must really struggle to establish Islam in his or her life, often surrounded by misunderstanding and hostility. There may be hostility of friends and family, lack of expert guidance (such as adequate reading materials), lack of facilities for Islamic worship, lack of proper Islamic nutrition, dress, and personal hygiene, lack of really penetrating training in the Islamic prayers and other observances, etc. Of late, the social environment in the western world has become so paranoid, confused, and sometimes even "terrified" (due to "Islamophobia"), that maintaining a sane and stress-free Islamic lifestyle has become virtually impossible, even for Muslim citizens of these countries.

Reading materials therefore have an increasingly difficult role to play in bringing aspiring new Muslims across to Islam's "safe haven". Even though fewer and fewer of such books may succeed in doing so, the conversion stories in this section attest to the importance of these materials in the hearts of those yearning souls who do not have the chance to leave their countries or study with foreign-based religious teachers. The first Revelation vouchsafed to the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) was "Read! Read, in the name of your Lord who created... Who taught with the Pen, Who taught man that which he knew not..."

The majority of converts represented here, who came to Islam primarily by reading and studying, must restore our confidence on the civilizing influence of learned books. It is only to be regretted that more such books do not bear Islamic authorship. Here the converts themselves may contribute much to our outreach needs, as those such as Muhammad Asad ("The Road to Mecca") have in the past.

As for personal influence from other Muslims, virtually all converts report the importance of such contacts. If Muslims can take pride in any particular aspect of Islamic outreach, it would be in setting such good examples of personal behavior (the Islamic domain known as Akhlaq) and firm religious observance of especially the FIVE Pillars of Islam that non-Muslims may wish to emulate them. Even some American military personnel abroad have responded to the edifying influence of local Muslims.

Sociologically speaking, even a slight glimpse into the holistic social integrity of Muslim families and groups can have an enormous impact on non-Muslim outsiders, whether or not they eventually convert. Western social life nearly having achieved a condition of nihilistic anarchy, a return to some sort of structure and value system for these people seems inevitable. This is

where mainstream Muslims have much to contribute in reforming non-Muslim westerners into a noble and caring community.

But the most dramatic examples of personal influence undoubtedly come from the missionary activities of certain Muslim preachers, such as in Indonesia, where the profession of “roving preacher” has very high status and very powerful influence on local life and even politics. A certain Zainuddin M. Z. was one of the first of these “Muslim revivalists” in Indonesia, attracting audiences numbered in the thousands with mixtures of native wit and spiritual wisdom. Even some child prodigy preachers are attracting big audiences these days, drawing their highly precocious wisdom from the surrounding religious culture. A. A. Gymnastiar of West Java has refused numerous pleas to run for the presidency, preferring to continue to educate his people in modern business methods fully integrated with Islamic values and priorities. And Central Java's Bapak Muhammad Subuh Sumohadiwidjo circled the globe over twenty times before he died, resulting in thousands of conversions in the West.

Perhaps only a few of our storytellers were able to meet such celebrities of Islamic outreach. Nonetheless, many do report highly significant interaction with admired Muslim helpers in the conversion process. A single pious Muslim evidently has the power to counteract a deluge of negative media propaganda, and the images of such exemplary Muslims that emerge from these stories is quietly impressive. May Allah reward them all.



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEBUDHARAPAN
PERDANA



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA

1. A CANADIAN'S JOURNEY TO ISLAM

by Kurt

It's funny - I'm actually a Muslim! This term used to conjure up images of backward Bedouin Arabs living far away. Well, living in North America likely had something to do with my ignorance. I got all my views from television - that box that people watch for hours a day and assume it has factual information because it's officially titled the "news." Ironically, there are tons of libraries out there, but on average we use them only for specific purposes - cramming for term papers or for other schoolwork. We should use it to grow on a constant basis!

I have to admit, now that I'm a Muslim I can see that the average North American is very ignorant of Islam. It's not totally our fault, the society that we have created sucks you in by making you a constant consumer - whether it is to get you to spend money or simply buy into some idea. We just eat too much, talk too much arrogance, and overall live like royalty while complaining that the rest of the planet hates us. Ah, if people only realized that the problems of the world are in our own backyard.

I guess it all started nine months ago. I simply could not ignore that this universe must have a God. I mean seriously, just look out your front door: the beautiful sky, the amazing stars, the gentle breeze on your face, and so many other incredible things. We all take these phenomena for granted. We fail to realize how absolutely amazing and in balance this universe is. The human body itself is a marvel! I could go on forever. The point is, I could no longer be an ignorant ape, so I decided to read some books about God.

I started to read about Christianity. The Bible has some wonderful aspects to it, but where did they get the idea of the "trinity," and who actually could accept the doctrine without experiencing doubts? It's a mystery, the Christians say. It sure is. It was time to read about Judaism. That too has some valuable and interesting aspects. One problem I saw, and it actually was a huge problem, was that they only have about 15 million followers. I mean, God is for everyone and a good religion should spread to the masses.

Thus, it was Islam's turn. I wasn't keen on the idea but I realized I had to take a look. Sure, the television already "educated" me on the issue. To my surprise I found out a lot of things that I never knew. The Qur'an had no chapter on terrorism. It was shocking! I was blown away to learn that Islam actually was for all of mankind and was in fact a peaceful religion. It's an addicting read because it makes total sense and puts you directly in touch with God. The more I read the more I became disgusted with our media because they were either lying or reflecting uneducated views. I wanted to learn more. Sure, I read many books that I could recommend.

However, the most important thing that I did was to actually speak with Muslims - to meet them at a personal level. Seriously, all I can say is wow! I have never met nicer people in my entire life. They embraced me with generosity and tolerance. No, they didn't try to force conversion on me as that is against Islam's beliefs. Instead, they laughed and talked like any other group of people. Okay, so I had to check more Muslims out. I went to the mosque. I was a little nervous and maybe afraid. However, I had the same experience as my first encounter. Honestly, I swear, Muslims in general are very nice people. Sure, you have a couple of idiots or bad apples, but you get that anywhere. I was beginning to think that Islam might be the true path to life.

It was right before Ramadan this year that I declared my *Shahadah* (declaration of faith) in front of the brothers at the local mosque. I felt good! Well, everything went well for the first week - I prayed and fasted. However, this last week was a mess. I have made mistakes and have discovered another lesson thanks to Islam: nobody is perfect and just because you take your *Shahadah*, you can't expect life to get magically easier. Rather, you are tested and conditioned to become a better person everyday.

The point is, Islam has changed my life for the better and the fascinating thing about it is that it constantly teaches me to grow. My wife says that my behavior has improved, that I think things through a lot more, and that overall I just seem a lot happier as a person. I have my good days and bad days, but having Allah with me makes all the difference. There is a purpose to this life and it feels good to care about all of humanity and not just my country. Peace be upon all of you. Ameen!



2. CONVERSION FROM NOWHERE

by Sa'ad Laws

I have often been asked how I came to Islam. I mean, it isn't too often you see a white guy from "cow country" turn to Islam. I guess the most amazing thing about the whole thing is where I started. Now, I am not one of those stories of brothers who you hear were in gangs, addicted to crack, or worshipped devils at stone altars. I come from quite a typical background. I have two sisters, a brother, and both my parents are still married. My father is an engineer, while my mother is a housewife (or domestic engineer, as she likes to say), and we are as middle-class as you can get. My family lives in a small country hamlet, just to the south of nowhere. To give you a glimpse of how rural it is, there is a general store about a mile from my house, where the lady who runs it say, "You all come back now, ya hear," whenever you leave the store.

In the eleventh grade, I began to read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, the ultimate anti-white leader, or so I was told. I read his book, and the more I read it, the more I couldn't put it down. His story was amazing to me. He came from nothing and then... there he was. It was the chapter entitled 'Mecca' that had the most profound effect on me. In it, he told his story of how he was affected by the generosity and compassion of, not only the Muslims he met while making the Hajj, but also by Islam itself.

I read that and thought to myself, "Who are these guys?" So, I went to the school library and started to check out every book that I could about Islam. I was amazed at what I read. They believed in the same principles I have found so innate within myself. They said that there was only One God, that Jesus was not his son, but a rightly guided Messenger and Prophet. I was taken aback.

I knew that whatever this "Islam thing" was, I needed to be a part of it. I searched the phone book and came across a mosque in Washington D.C. But, that was unfortunately several hours away, which might as well have been two thousand miles. When I first called them I was so nervous. Here I was about to talk to a Muslim! They were very pleased by my enthusiasm towards Islam and my eagerness at becoming a Muslim. But, they wanted me to come to the mosque. This would of course be a problem. At the time I was still in high school and under the reign of my parents, who also controlled my extended whereabouts, especially since it was the family vehicle that I was driving. My chances of getting that car for a trip to D.C. were slim at best. What was I going to do?

I couldn't get to the Muslims, so how was I going to be a Muslim? I asked them if they could come down here, but that was to no avail. I needed to do

this now; I couldn't just sit around for another year or two with this. It was after much prodding that I finally convinced the brother to let me take my *Shahadah* right then and there, on the phone. I guess that might have been a first... conversion by phone.

So, that is how I came to Islam. I can truly say now, looking back on the whole story, that I was overwhelmingly blessed by the way Allah guided me to Islam. I look back now and see my old friends from high school and how lost they are. Then I look at myself. I mean I know that I have more than a few rough edges and that I have much improving to do, not only as a Muslim, but also as a person in general. But, I can't help but feel a bit awed that I was guided and that Allah picked me to be guided and out of where? Out of Nowhere. I realize that what happened to me was from Allah and that He alone has guided me. I feel kind of awestruck when I think of it. I mean, I don't know why, but Allah picked me for this religion of guidance. I feel like I have been saved from the Hell fire and plucked from the ashes. It is this, my being guided to Islam by Allah and Allah alone, that is the greatest blessing that I have ever received.



3. THE TEXAN WHO FOUND ALLAH

by Chris Irwin

My reversion to Islam wasn't so unique after all. Islam reaches the hearts of people even if they live in a desolate cave in the wilderness, or in the polar ice caps, or the middle of the densest jungles. Everywhere there is Allah's majesty. When I was a youth being raised in San Antonio, Texas, I could not imagine a person like me embracing a foreign religion, even if it be the absolute Truth that all our philosophers and ascetics spend their lives in search of. My parents taught me nothing of religion. My mother felt that her religious upbringing brought her nothing but harm. I was a child who did not like sports or most of the other games that kids generally like.

I would ponder a lot of things in life, like why I am here on earth, what will happen when I die, etc. These things were terrifying for a child as young as 7- 8 years old. I remember kids picking on me, saying that I was going to burn in hell for certain little mistakes and I would cry to my mother, "I don't want to burn in hell mommy!" When I reached high school, I met a nice girl who convinced me to consider Christianity. I did not take the advice that I found in the introduction to my Bible that suggested reading both the New and Old Testament together.

Instead, I started reading the Old Testament first and tried to follow all the laws in it. I read about things that I knew could never happen, like the world being so young and that the entire earth flooded. Nevertheless, I always held to a blind faith of believing that all of the Bible was true no matter how unrealistic it was. Soon this became frustrating. I became very depressed and hated myself, thinking that this was the way to get rid of arrogance.

Then one day, after coming back from San Francisco, I picked up some books that my grandfather had given me. One was a history book called 'Early Islam'. I started to read it, though I immediately hated it because I thought the Muslims hated Jews and Christians. I thought it was the Devil's religion. I continued reading, however, and I learned that Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) received a vision from the Angel Gabriel, just like the prophets of the Old Testament. I learned this at the same time that I was almost finished reading the Old Testament, when I was about 16 years old. The way in which the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) received the Revelation seemed so sincere, realistic, and modest, that it at the same time opened my heart a little. I then read a biased version of his life story, but it still showed his great accomplishments. After receiving a revelation from Gabriel and spreading the message of One God while still confirming the message of the prophets of old, this man seemed to have accomplished more than both Jesus and King David (upon them both be peace) together.

I was hooked. I tried to find books on Islam from every source available to me. I started reading a book on the history of Saudi Arabia . Eventually I started to use the Internet which led me to a gateway of information. I would spend hours everyday researching Islam. I found a very important thing on the Internet: the Qur'an is compatible with science and modern knowledge.

After this, I knew I had to become Muslim. That year, I tried to fast Ramadan and learn how to pray through Internet programs and by reading booklets about Islam. I was even trying to convince some of my friends to embrace Islam, though I wasn't even fully Muslim and I had yet to meet one. Then one day the following year, I met a nice woman by searching for Muslim organizations in San Antonio. When my parents left for the weekend, she drove from the other side of town to take me to the mosque. I took my *Shahadah* (declaration of faith) that day.

When I was in college, I met several other Muslims, but I never really made any close friends. Soon I met some Turkish friends, and they taught me a lot about Islam. Before I left college, I met a really good brother who had also accepted Islam. He was a great influence on me. He taught me the traditional Islamic sciences and I studied Hanafi jurisprudence with him.

I decided to join the Army so I could be more independent and learn to live on my own. The Army was really rough. It was a new and frightening experience especially after the attacks of September 11th, which occurred while I was still serving. A small group of thugs around me gave me a radical choice: "Either you're with us or against us." I was then in basic training stationed in Georgia. I believe those guys have since been disciplined by the Army for their bigotry.

Eventually, I went to Kuwait and then to Iraq. During this time, I saw things and learned things that will change my life forever. I met Muslims from many different backgrounds and countries who all testify to Islam as the Truth I lived in hostile environments, surrounded by religious bigotry where no one understood me.

Then I went into a city of anarchy, death, and chaos (Baghdad, Iraq). The echoes of its destruction I believe were a harbinger of the downfall of our civilization. But also the song of love amongst the believers is a new song of hope and revival. This love and sincerity I did not find in the richest and most powerful empire in the world. I had people greeting me with "as-salamu `alaykum" because of the love between us as brothers in Islam, even though we were from the opposite sides of a political and cultural chess game. While the people around us rallied around flags and ethnic similarities, the brotherhood of Islam drew us together in spite of them. It didn't matter what I was wearing or what bad situation we were in, it was the fact that I was a brother under the same God. This is something outstanding, and truly from Allah, Exalted is He.

4. DEDICATING A LIFE TO GOD

by Ifwine Acelas Mischler

The Prophet's Companion that I identify most with is Salman Al-Farisi. He grew up as the son of a wealthy man in Persia and was a devotee of fire until he overheard some Christians worshipping. When he wanted to join their religion, his father imprisoned him, but he managed to escape and travel to Syria to become Christian. He worked as the servant of various bishops and holy men in order to learn the religion. Finally, one of them told him to seek the final prophet in the city of palm trees (Madinah). Salman sold all he had to join a caravan headed to Madinah, but the caravan betrayed him and sold him as a slave. He did eventually reach Madinah. There he heard of a new prophet arriving. His last mentor had told him of the signs to seek in the prophet, and when Salman saw those signs in Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), he immediately joined Islam.

I grew up in a large Roman Catholic family and attended Catholic schools for twelve years. As a child I wanted to be close to God, though I could never talk about this or other personal matters with my family. For many years, even through my first year of college, I wanted to dedicate my life to God as a nun, either as a teacher or missionary to foreign countries. Doubts first started when I was about 11, and when I was 12, I didn't want to be confirmed because of them. I said that I didn't believe in God, but I didn't confirmed doubt His existence - I never had - but I was beginning to doubt what the Church was telling me about Him. But at that time I couldn't express all that, and for many years I don't think I had a clear idea of just what I disliked or doubted. I think a lot of it was instinctual, "at the gut level", rather than rational. In high school, I continued to have doubts on and off. At that time I was particularly concerned with Right and Wrong and found it confusing that I could get such different answers from two priests who represented the same Church. One would tell us that there was an objective law that had to be followed while another would take a humanistic approach and say that moral issues were relative.

It was during my first semester of college that I recall having my first clear idea of what I disliked about Christianity. I briefly joined an evangelical organization. I didn't know what "evangelical" meant, but I wanted to join a Christian group. This organization takes the Bible very literally and they believe that you have to accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior or you will be damned to hell. I went with them as an observer on one "mission" to talk with students in their dormitory. But when I asked these evangelical Christians what would happen if a person never heard the message but was a morally good person, their answer was that they were damned. I couldn't accept that God could be so unjust, and so I left them at the end of only one semester.

Two years later I took an introduction to cultural anthropology course. It made me see whites (my own race) in a different light. I saw what a lot of damage they had done to the world in spreading their religion and culture and I even felt ashamed of being white (but never expressed it to anyone). During the seven years I took to complete my bachelor's degree, I tried attending Catholic Masses at different places where the services were geared towards young adults with different music or gimmicks. The last time I attended Mass was New Year's Day 1978, and I walked out in the middle.

The confusion and doubts I felt were giving me abdominal pains. I knew there was only one God, but I didn't know Him. Every now and then I would pray for guidance. Not often, but I wanted to know Him if possible. I didn't look into Islam at that time because the only books I might have found would have been written by non-Muslims and full of lies and distortions. So I drifted for four years.

I began teaching English composition to undergraduate international students. Most of them were Muslim, most from Malaysia. Two young Malaysian men in my class were very outgoing and started talking to me about their country and a bit about Islam. I have always enjoyed learning about other cultures and religions, so I found it very interesting.

On November 14, 1981, I started reading a translation of the Qur'an. The first time I read the translation of Al-Fatihah, I heard a voice in me say, "Believe in Me." "Who is this?" I asked. "Is it Jesus, or the Christian concept of God, or the Muslim concept of God, or the devil?" The more I read, the more disturbed I became, wondering if this was true. Yet I couldn't stop reading for several days until finally I had to call one of those Malaysian guys and ask him about it. "But I don't believe in Revelation!" I said. "But maybe this is a sign that it's real," he replied. So I called one of the two Saudi doctoral students who were serving as Imams in that town. He had me to his house (with his wife there, of course) and answered my questions. I even asked about how to pray, and he lent me books.

One of my first questions was about what happens to someone who never hears the message of Islam. His answer was that we are all born with an innate knowledge of God and if we are honest with ourselves and look at creation, we will acknowledge the Creator, so even if someone never hears of Islam, he has the chance to be saved. That seemed fair.

The books I read, and also what these two friends told me, showed me that Islam was not just a belief and a few prayers, but that it was a whole system, social, political, economic, etc. That, I think, was the main attraction of Islam for me. All the pieces fit together and made sense. So I kept reading. Within a short time I knew that I would become a Muslim, but I wasn't ready to commit myself yet. I had to know a lot about it, to know what

I was getting myself into. Within a month, there were only a few questions remaining in my mind.

One morning, when I started reading before going to the university, I found the book I had opened had two chapters on the very questions that were remaining: jihad and slavery. I read from 6:30 to 8:00 and when I closed the book at 8:00 I just said, "Yeah." I knew that I was a Muslim. So on December 14, 1981, I went to the mosque at noontime and talked to a Malaysian student who was a sort of secretary there and was told to come back at Maghrib (sunset) to testify in public. "What! I have to say it in public?!" I was so excited and nervous. During that month, my Malaysian friends told me not to judge Islam by what Muslims do because they are not perfect, but to judge it by the Book. That advice has served me well over the years. And I've always remembered the words that a Malaysian sister said to me on the night that I reverted to Islam (by reciting the *Shahadah*). She told me, "The words you have just said are, 'I bear witness that there is no god but Allah (God)'... not just 'There is no god but Allah (God)'...' And you bear witness by everything you say and do: how you dress, how you walk, how you talk, how you eat, what you eat, et cetera."

I've tried to live by that advice. Salman Al-Farisi's last Christian teacher had told him signs by which he would recognize the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). And once he saw those signs, he accepted Islam immediately. I wasn't given any such signs, and I had to do a lot of reading to know what it was I was accepting. But once I had all the answers, I accepted Islam right away. I can't say that I'm anywhere near as good as Salman was, but like him (and many others), I found the Truth after a long search.



5. AMERICAN PERFORMING ARTIST DISCOVERS ISLAM

An Interview with Everlast
by Adisa Banjoko

American rap music has seen more than its share of influence from the religion of Islam. With groups such as Public Enemy rapping about their respect for the Nation of Islam, to people such as Q-Tip of A Tribe Called Quest embracing mainstream Islam, the religion seems to be a recurrent theme in the genre, both impacting lyrics and lives. One artist more recently touched by Islam is Eric Schrody, better known in music circles as Everlast.

What follows is an interview with journalist Adisa Banjoko in which Everlast discusses his journey to Islam and the challenges he faces as a new Muslim.

Adisa: Tell me about the first time you learned about Islam.

Everlast: It was probably around the late 80's. I was hanging out with Divine Styler (a popular Los Angeles rap artist). He was basically at the end of his 5% period (a reference to an American religious sect); he was starting to come into Islam. He lived with the Bashir family. Abdullah Bashir was sort of his teacher - and mine it wound up later. As he was making the transition from 5% into Islam, I would just be around and hear things.

I'm trying to think of the first time I recognized it as Islam. I think it was when one of Divine's friends took (the Muslim profession of faith) and I was there. I heard him say, "I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His servant and messenger." And I remember me being like, "What is this? I'm white. Can I be here?" It was out of ignorance, you know? Because here in America, Islam is considered a "black thing." And that's when someone pointed out to me, "You have no idea how many white Muslims there are in the world." I said, "That's crazy. I had no clue."

Adisa: Do you feel any extra pressure being a white Muslim in America?

Everlast: I don't think of it on the grand scale. To me, Islam is min Allah is the God of all mankind and all the 'Aalameen (worlds). Islam is my personal relationship with God. So, nobody can put any more pressure on me than I put on myself. But as far as the mosque where I pray, I have never felt more at home or more welcome. And it's not just mine. The few mosques that I've gone to around the country, I've never ever been made to feel uncomfortable. Like in New York, the mosque is big and there's so many people that nobody is looking to notice you. There were Chinese, Korean, Spanish

[peoples] - everything, which was a good thing for me because at my mosque, I'm the only white male [although] there are some white females.

Adisa: How did your family take your turning to Islam? Because you were raised Catholic, right?

Everlast: Well, you know my mom is very open minded, very progressive. My mother lives with me. And I've been raised all my life without a belief in God, but a knowledge that He exists. I was taught, if anything in the world, know [that] there's a God. And my mom, even though she was Catholic, she was the first person to point out the hypocrisy in the church. My mom really hasn't attended church in a long time. But as far as me, my mom is just happy that I have God in my life.

She sees me making prayers. And Divine is one of her favorite people in the world. She knows how much different we are than when she first knew us as kids. When me and Divine first hooked up, we were wild. We were out partying, fighting, doing whatever we had to do. We thought, "Yeah, that's what being a man is about. We're going to go out here and be thuggish."

She has seen how much it's changed me and him, and how much peace it's brought me since I've started to really accomplish something with it. I actually had a long talk with my mother the other day and we were on the topic of religion. We were actually talking about life and death, and the future, and when she might go - that won't be for a long time, Insha' Allah (God willing).

But I asked her to do me one favor. I said, "Mom, when you die, there might be some angels who ask you a question, and I want you to answer it; and I'm not sure exactly how it goes, 'cause I ain't died yet. Remember that there's only one God, and He's never been a man."

She said, "I know what you are trying to tell me." I said, "Jesus wasn't God, Ma".

Some of what I know has definitely shown up in my mother. She's no Muslim, but she knows there's only one God. And that makes me very happy. I know guys that have turned towards Islam and their families have turned them out.

Adisa: Talk to me about the first and second time you took your *Shahadah* (profession of faith).

Everlast: Well the first time, it was right after I had heard a tape from Warith Deen Muhammad (son of Nation of Islam founder, Elijah Muhammad, who took most of the Nation of Islam into mainstream Islam). That just kind of

broke down the whole Jesus thing. He explained that we (Muslims) do Christians a great favor by bringing Jesus down to the level of a man. Why would God create a man who is half a God and compare us to him? And it just sent off a bomb in my head. So I converted . And then the initial high wore off.

I didn't really claim to be Muslim though at that time. I picked and chose what I wanted to believe. Allah gave me leeway for a time. But eventually it was time to fish or cut the line. I was coming to a point where I was unsatisfied emotionally and spiritually. I had money in the bank and a \$100,000 car, women left and right: everything that you think you want. And then just sitting there being like, "Why am I unhappy?" Finally that voice that talks to you - not the whisper [of Satan] - the voice said, "Well, basically you're unhappy because you're living foul and you're not trying to do anything about it."

My stubbornness at that time wouldn't allow me to talk about it. You get in that state of mind where you're like, "I can figure this out all by myself." I finally got humble enough to talk to Divine and Abdullah about it. They asked me, "How do you feel? What do you think it is?" So finally, I'm sitting there taking again. From that point on, I've made a commitment where I'm going to try my best. I'm going to do my best to make my prayers, let's start there. Let's make our prayers and pray for the strength to stop doing one thing at a time. That's what I'm still dealing with.

You know, once you get over the big things, it becomes very subtle. It can be as subtle as looking at a man, not speaking bad about him, but backbiting him in your mind. The easy ones to beat - well I shouldn't say easy - the big ones are easy to notice. It's the subtle psychological stuff that helps you get into who really you are. You got to be able to face the truth of who you are. If you are not able to face that truth of who you are, you're going to crumble, man. People question me and go, "You're Muslim?" And I'm like, "Yeah I'm Muslim, but I'm also a professional sinner. I'm trying to get over it, trying to retire. I won't front and say I'm better than you. I just believe that I've been shown the truth and hopefully that will save me."



6. EXPERIENCING ALLAH'S MERCY

by Khadijah Jandhli

I was born in Oklahoma, USA, and raised in a Christian family where religion was very important. My mother was very careful to keep me from making bad friends and our family went to church at least three times a week. Allah protected me by putting me in a family that stressed high moral living: no smoking, no drinking, no drugs, no swearing (cursing), no premarital sex, etc. I memorized almost the entire Bible. One of my grandfathers and one of my grandmothers was a preacher. Allah blessed me with a good singing voice, and from the time I was 14 years old, I was paid by the church to sing, play the organ, direct children's choirs, etc.

I was 49 years old and still employed by a church when I met a university student who was Muslim. One day I asked this Malaysian student, Amina, who covered herself from head to toe in the best Islamic manner, if she would tell me something about her religion. She said that she would rather get a more knowledgeable person because she did not want to give me any wrong information. So, she referred Mahmoud (from Oman) to me. He came to me, saying he needed some help in writing class, and answered some of my questions. The next day, he brought Saif (from Yemen) and they both answered my questions and became my students. Soon after that, Tariq and Khalid (from Oman) and Yousif (from UAE) also became my students, as did many others.

They came every day for help with their English and with their writing classes. I was surprised to find that these young men had exactly the same good manners as the Malaysian sisters. In addition, I noticed the same love in their eyes when they spoke with each other that I had seen in the eyes of the Malaysian sisters. I thought that maybe it was something about their religion that made them love each other; I wanted to have that kind of love for people and to be loved by people like that. I was hungry for this love that they shared with each other. I was attracted to the light in their eyes, although at that time I did not know what it was. In reality, it was Allah loving me through them and showing me how beautiful Islam really is. Subhan Allah! (Allah is Sublime).

Always wanting to learn new things, I asked Saif for something to read about Islam. Wisely, he brought me Jamal Badawi's book, "The Status of Women in Islam" and some copies of Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet) such as, "Heaven is at the feet of mothers", and "The best companion for you is your mother (three times) and then your father." Thus, the first thing I knew about Islam was that it affected the way people acted toward each other and that it taught that women had a respected, high, and special place in this world. Saif was very careful not to push me to renounce Christianity and

become Muslim. Rather, he answered my questions and made good explanations of any misunderstandings I had about Islam.

One day, I asked him if the Holy Qur'an had been translated into English. He explained that the Word of Allah could not be translated into English, but that the meanings of the Words of Allah had been translated. I asked if he would bring me a Qur'an, and he agreed. What he brought was a beautiful, hardback, Arabic-English Qur'an with translation of the meanings and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali. However, he gave me strict instructions about it. He informed me that this was a Holy Book and, although I was not a Muslim, he still wanted me to treat the Book with respect. He asked me to wash my hands before I touched it; to keep it on a high shelf; to not put anything on top of it, to never carry it into the bathroom or any other dirty place, and, to say before I started reading it, "I begin in the Name of God."

Thus, the first thing I learned about the Holy Qur'an was that it was the true Word of God (Allah) and it had remained the same forever; that it was to be respected in every way. I was very excited to think that this Book had not been tampered with. It had always frustrated me that when I read the Bible, I was reading something that had been written down long after the events had happened, that it was written by many different authors, and that I could never see the original message of God in the language in which it had been spoken.

Therefore, when I began to read the Qur'an, I did so with a holy fear and awe of God. For a strong Christian, reading the Qur'an for the first time is shocking. For example, the Qur'an repeatedly says that Jesus ('Isa) was only a man and that those who say he was the Son of God are in terrible error. On the fifth day of reading the Qur'an, I found Surah Al-Noor. "...Light upon Light..." Although I was reading only the English translation of the meanings, the beauty of the Truth and of the Arabic language became clear to me. I could not wait until Saif came, so I could ask him to read that Surah to me in Arabic. He was happy to read it, and as I expected, it was even more beautiful in Arabic than in English. From that time on, I finished my reading each day with that Surah.

From August 10 to November 8, I read about Islam and prayed as best I knew how, and I tried to get enough courage to ask Saif what I needed to do to "really" become a Muslim...but I was afraid. During this time, I became increasingly shy about the way I was dressing. So, I began to wear long skirts or long pants, long-sleeved blouses (even when it was hot and I had no air conditioning), and so on. Sometimes, when no one was with me, I would put a scarf on my head and I loved the way I felt in it, so safe and pure.

Finally, I decided that on the night of November 8, after I finished tutoring Saif, I would ask him what I needed to do to become a Muslim.

Although I did not know it, Saif had decided to invite me to Islam on that same night after he finished his tutoring session and had made his intention to Allah to do that. After the lesson was completed, I turned to Saif and said, "OK, Saif. What do I have to do to become a Muslim?" At exactly the same time, he turned to me and said, "OK, sister, tonight I have to invite you to Islam." Our words passed each other in the air between us. There was a moment of silence, then we both began to cry. Allahu Akbar. Subhan Allah. (Allah is Great. Allah is Sublime.) Do you see how Allah had written everything, even to the exact moment when I would be ready to ask the question and Saif would be ready to invite me to become a Muslim?

I asked Saif to give me one night to prepare myself to make *Shahadah* (declaration of faith), as he explained to me that making *Shahadah* was all I had to do to be a Muslim. On November 9, 1994, Saif brought Abdel Wahed with him as a witness, and I made *Shahadah*. Then they went to the mosque to announce my conversion. Upon hearing that I had become Muslim, all the students came to see me, brought food to fill my empty cupboards and refrigerator, and sat with me every evening for a time to answer questions. The sisters from the university and community brought me some clothes, including an Islamic dress. When I finally put on my Islamic clothes, I felt I had finally come to my real home, my real faith, my real identity, my real language, my real family.



7. AN AMERICAN MORMON'S JOURNEY TO ISLAM

by Anthony

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH, THE MOST COMPASSIONATE, MOST MERCIFUL

One night, not so long ago, I began to question my belief in the purity of the Bible. Because of this, I felt depressed. I knew that God was there, and I knew that He had sent down His religion to man, but I could not find it. Why was it so hard to find? Why would God allow it to be so hard?

Then I remembered what an old Muslim friend told me. He said that Muslims believe in the Qur'an, in only one God, and in all the messengers of God, which includes all of the Christian and Jewish prophets. At that time, I had a book that explained Islam at a very basic level. It was a great source for me. My interest in Islam was soaring. I borrowed my neighbor's Qur'an and read it in a few weeks.

I loved it - I believed every word it said. However, I could not believe that the crucifixion was a false story. I was so brainwashed by the Bible that I could not accept the truth at the time. So, when the night came in which I finally lost my trust in the Bible's purity and incorruptibility, I decided to look into Islam again.

That night I went online to begin my new spiritual search. I went to many online sites, and I ordered information from many of them. Then I went to Why-Islam.org <<http://www.whyislam.org/877/>>, and I read a beautiful article entitled, "The Fall of Atheism<http://www.whyislam.org/877/Modern_Science/Fall_of_Atheism.asp>." I read some interesting facts about the Qur'an, and I said to myself, this might be the way that God has led me. Just before I logged off, I ordered more information about Islam.

A few days later, a representative of Why-Islam.org sent me an email. He thanked me for my interest in Islam, and told me that I could write to him at anytime if I had any questions concerning Islam. Thus, we began a dialogue online. I asked him a deep question: How do Muslims actually prove to Christians that the crucifixion did not happen? He wanted to meet up with me to discuss it, and I agreed. We met up in a neighborhood pizza parlor. Our discussion left me in awe. He showed me verses of the Bible that I had always overlooked. He left me with a Qur'an and a lecture on CD.

As soon as I went home, I knew that this was God's religion, but I did not want to rush into it. Instead, I studied it more. All my studies led me to the

same conclusion: Islam was the path of God. Still, I was afraid to convert. Converting is a life decision, and I was not willing to take that decision lightly. One day, the brother from Why-Islam.org wanted to take me to the Friday prayer (the Juma'ah prayer).

The night before, Satan struck with all his force. All night, he whispered things in my heart, trying to show me that Islam was not the way to go. In fact, so intense were his promptings that I slept for no more than an hour that night. I kept on praying to God, reading the Qur'an, and praying some more. Satan put so many thoughts in my head that I began to believe that I was not going to convert.

In the car on our way to the mosque, I told the brother that I was thinking about changing my mind about taking *Shahadah*. He told me that the choice was mine, but to beware of the doubts that Satan puts into one's head. For a while, we talked in the car about Satan whispering into people's hearts, and how Satan tries to drag someone from the Light. He explained to me that Muslims as well as non-Muslims who are on their way to becoming Muslim are heavily affected by Satan.

He said that non-Muslims are generally left alone, because Satan does not need to distract them from God, since they are already far from Him. He explained that last night, all the thoughts that flooded my head were from Satan. Satan put so much doubt in my head in that one night in order to pull me from the Light. This was how desperate Satan was - he knew that I was going to take *Shahadah* the next day and was trying anything to prevent this. We went into the mosque, and the brother taught me how to make ablution (wudhu - cleaning one's self before prayer). After the ablution, I felt brand new, and my nausea had left my body. I was not even thinking about the sickness anymore, I just felt good to be in a place where God is worshipped. We approached the director and told him that I wanted to take the *Shahadah* that day after the service. He smiled and congratulated me with a warm hug. Another brother who overheard us did the same. He said, "God bless you, and congratulations." These were beautiful people, people of God. These were the kind of people I wanted to be like.

During the service, the Imam amazingly gave his speech about Satan's whisperings into the hearts of men in the attempt to lead them away from the Light. It left me in utter shock. The brother was talking to me about this in the car, and by an amazing coincidence, the Imam thought it was best that day to talk about Satan's whispers. This, I believe, was God getting His Message across to me, telling me to ignore Satan.

I could not wait to declare the *Shahadah*, and when the time came after the service, I rushed up to the front. After publicly declaring my Islam, I think that every Muslim brother present that day came and hugged me. There were

at least a few hundred brothers present, so you can imagine how many hugs I received. They congratulated me and said, “God bless you, you made the right choice.”

I pray that my story helps those who go through the same mental struggle that I had with Satan. My experience is so amazing to me that I cannot truly describe it in words. I pray that those who read this will be able to overcome Satan as I was able to that day. Right now I’m learning Arabic and studying Tafseer (Qur’anic exegesis). Since I took *Shahadah*, my life has gone in a different direction, a positive direction, and I can only thank God for it. As-salaam ‘alaikum. May God guide you as he guided me.



8. FROM HOLY ROLLERS TO HOLY QUR'AN AND AMERICAN'S JOURNEY TO ISLAM

by Dellie Spencer Jr.

My name is Dellie Spencer Jr.; my Islamic name is Abdul Wadoud. I have been a Muslim for nine years. I am soft spoken and try my best to be kind to all those I come in contact with. When people discover that I am Muslim, especially after September 11th, they invariably ask, "Why are you a Moose-lum? You seem like a rational person?" My reply is always, "I am a rational person, and that is why (I became a Muslim)." I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and brought up in the church. I along with my two sisters attended East Mt. Zion Church Sunday school every Sunday, and at least twice per month we were told to stay for the church service. I think this was to give my parents some time to be alone together, although I could never prove it.

One day I told my mother that I was old enough not to be forced to go to church if I didn't want to go, especially since neither she nor my dad went. Strangely enough, she didn't object. For the next few years, I never thought about religion. I still considered myself to be a Christian, although I saw no need to attend church. I read the Bible and liked a lot of what I read, but I saw no need for group practice of religion.

During my last years of high school and my four years of college, spirituality became of more interest to me. I read books by people like Carlos Castaneda and others, took various mind-altering drugs, and began to look at nature and the world around me differently. I could see the unity behind all things and how it all tied together. Everything you did affects something or someone else, like throwing a rock into a still pond. I began to see and understand my self and my place in nature. I understood why Native Americans see life and nature as a big circle, such that each sphere of nature performs a job within this circle. I saw that when left to it's own devices, nature was always in balance. Only when man tried to interfere or control nature contrary to its natural course, did things go wrong. This was also a time of heightened racial awareness and understanding of the different ways in which the races looked at nature. People of color typically saw nature as something to live with, while those without color saw nature as something to be conquered.

It was during this period that I began to consider myself as something other than a Christian. For a while I was an atheist, then I was a Buddhist. I read about the Tao. I attended some services in a Catholic church and got involved with the Holy Rollers. [Ed.: "Holy Rollers" were the first black churches to become what we now know as "charismatic".]



From two extremely different directions, a light began to shine on me. I was preparing to take my black belt test in New Orleans. My instructor, while not a member of the Nation of Islam, was a believer in its concepts and precepts. After the exam, he mentioned something about Jesus. I asked him why he said that, and he replied that Muslims believed in Jesus too. Up until then, I had not heard anything of any logic from this group, but I liked my instructor's comment.

I decided to learn more about the Nation of Islam and the Muslims. I bought some books by Elijah Muhammad and was very disappointed. The one good thing, however, was his repeated reference to "The Glorious Qu'ran." I had heard of this book and in fact had picked it up to read on more than one occasion, but initially it had made no sense to me. At the same time I was living with a lady who tried to fast a few days during Ramadan, and who had in her possession a book that taught the Muslim prayer. At the time, I had met someone of almost every belief, but I had never to my knowledge met a Muslim. This would later prove to be a very good thing. I was still wary. I had heard nice words before but where were the people to back them up? Nevertheless, I began to teach myself to pray and began to make my prayers on a regular basis. I bought more and more books on Islam and began to study in earnest. I bought the books of Hadith (prophetic Traditions) of Bukhari and Muslim and read the works of the great scholars of Islam. I wrote a letter to the local mosque requesting information. I took *Shahadah* (declaration of faith) in my home, took the ritual shower, and began to live at least my private life as a Muslim.

One day, I was driving down the alley behind the mosque when I passed an old man wearing a long Islamic shirt, a waistcloth, and a kufi (skullcap). I too was wearing a kufi and when I passed, he looked up and gave me a smile that I felt in my toes and said "As-Salaam `aleikum!" (peace be on you). I didn't stop but made up my mind to go in the next time. As fate would have it, the next time I passed the mosque and finally went in, the only person there was the same old man. His name was Abdul Hameed. He recognized me from the alley and listened intently to my story of coming to Islam. When I had finished he said, "Welcome to the Truth." He told me that he would always be pleased to stand next to me during the prayer. He was the first Muslim I ever met, and to this date, he is one of the few I can say who practices Islam to the best of his ability every day. He is not perfect - far from it, but he makes effort each day to be better than the day before. He is not harsh, and he does not judge or condemn. He leaves that to the One who will judge us all.

He told me two things that he said I must always remember: the first is that Islam's biggest threat comes not from the non-believers but from the Muslims themselves. He said that I would see and hear of Muslims doing and saying things that had nothing to do with Islam. Thus, it is my duty to learn as much of the religion as I could. Second, I must try, to the best of my abilities,

to be the best Muslim possible each and every day. Some days would be better than others, but I must always try to be the best possible everyday that I wake up. I would be lying if I didn't say that I have found few Muslims who truly practice Islam. Most simply go through the motions. I have even encountered some racist attitudes that rival those of the deep south in 1960's America. I realized that while the faith is perfect, the faithful are not. There have been times when I was very discouraged by the actions of some of the Muslims, but in the end, I always remember the words of Abdul Hameed.

There is another factor that keeps me centered. That is the Hajj I made in 1994 and the experience of being a part of something bigger than anything in the world. To see millions of Muslims sharing food and sleeping quarters, together with the sacrifices that are a part of this experience, changes a person internally forever. It is the experience of seeing the religion practiced as it is supposed to be that lets you know it can be done if we want to do it. One comes back different than when he left and he'll always desire to return. These are the reasons on the rational plane for why I choose Islam. But as a wise man once told me, no one chooses Islam - Allah chooses whomever He wants for His Way.



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
PERDANA

9. PEACE TO THE UMMAH... FROM BRAZIL!

by Sarah de Andrade Siqueira

I have always kept interest in the Muslim world; it passed to me a sense of peace. On the Brazilian Educational TV I watched a documentary about life in some Muslim country. Those mystery women dressed in those beautiful long clothes and veils raised my curiosity. When a Muslim woman mentioned that it is not a matter of culture only but that her religion was a complete way of life (Deen), I wanted to know more. The idea of a religion ruling all aspects of life is not common where I live, not to mention having anything to do with economy, politics and social issues.

I decided to look into Islam. My first question was: How could I do this? No books were available at my University or in the bookshops. In 1999 I earned my BA degree in Languages. It was a moment that brought tears to my eyes, because my beloved family always made a lot of effort to provide me with the best education they could, despite our humble life. The present my parents chose to give me upon that occasion was a computer. They saved long months to be able to pay for the gift they thought would enable me to pursue a career. When I saw those big boxes in my room I felt such gratitude to them.

Now I could access the Internet and be able know more about Islam. I was surfing on the web looking for information when I came across Yusuf Islam's website. I read about his journey to Islam and how a famous pop star could give up the great world of music and find his certainty on the straight path. He chose Islam as a way of life based on pure love, charity, humbleness and the submission to the one and only God. When I listened to Yusuf's lecture "One God, One Community", my appreciation for Islam became greater than before.

Since that day I have been studying Islam with an eager will to learn about the pillars of Islamic faith and way of life as well. When I had a blessed opportunity to read the Holy Qur'an, which narrates with scientific accuracy the development of the baby in mother's womb until his first moments of life, I decided to embrace Islam. During my "web Islamic research", I met in an Arab chat room some Muslim friends who helped me a lot in my journey to Islam, Alhamdulillah. The one I met first was a Sudanese Muslim student, who taught me my first words in the Arabic language and was always by my side, despite our distance, to solve my doubts in respect of Muslim women's issues. The other was a brother from Egypt, who was amazed with my path to Islam and shipped me the Holy Qur'an (a bilingual version in English and Arabic), a prayer carpet, books about Islam, and even Hijabs to allow me to practice the beautiful and honored concept of Islamic modesty.

My parents are Christian, however they never opposed my religious choice - God bless them. I thought there were no Islamic Centers in my Brazilian city. All websites about Islam I had visited were not Brazilian either, and the few of those I've found in Portuguese refer to Islamic Societies far away from my home. Hence, Allah and my Sudanese sister were my witness that I had embraced Islam. After sometime, however, I found an Islamic website developed by a Brazilian sister, who gave me information that there was a small but serious Muslim Society in my hometown. She introduced me to the Imam and sisters there. It was a beautiful moment of my life, to get know a part of our Ummah in the city I was born in and live in. My mum is now considering converting to Islam. May Allah show her the right path.



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA

10. GUIDANCE IN A BOARDING SCHOOL

by Matthew C. Ingalls

Allah guided me to Islam when I was 14 years old. My initial readiness to accept Islam and my reversion to Din al-Fitrah (the religion that conforms to human nature) at such an age seems to imply that I was all-but-Muslim already. But if we were to examine it as a cause- and-effect relationship, we must first start with the conversion of my friend Nabil in the summer of 1992.

Nabil was born in Africa to Isma'ili Shiite parents of Indian descent, but he spent his childhood in Canada. The only contact he had with anything even remotely Islamic was his infrequent visits to the Isma'ili Jamaat Khana with his parents. Essentially, he knew nothing about Islam. In the summer before he was to attend a Protestant boarding school in Massachusetts, Nabil visited India as a tourist with his cousins. The majority of the trip was spent in idle pursuits; however three days before he was scheduled to return to Canada, Nabil went to the market of Delhi to buy gifts for his family.

While shopping, members of a da'wah (Islamic missionary) group from South Africa, who were in Delhi for a four-month stint, approached him and asked him his name. When he replied, "Nabil," an apparently Muslim name, one of the brothers replied with the Islamic greeting of Assalamu Alaikum (peace be upon you). Nabil, though ignorant of even the correct response to such a greeting, was nonetheless intrigued by the genial group of men, and accepted an invitation to join them the next day at the Islamic da'wah center in Nizamuddin, a small city just outside Delhi. They told him to be there at 5:00. He learned from his cousins later that evening that this meant 5:00 a.m.

Nabil made the hour-long journey to the center long before sunrise. He witnessed thousands of worshippers perform the dawn prayer in perfect unison - an astounding spectacle to him. Afterward, he listened to a motivational talk by the renowned Indian Sheikh, Maulana 'Umar Balampourri, which was translated by a member of the South African group that he had met the previous day. Based on a paradigm that was completely foreign to Nabil, the essence of the speech lay slightly beyond his grasp, but the boy listened patiently and attentively. Afterwards, he was invited downstairs to partake in breakfast with the foreign da'wah groups. By the Will of Allah, Nabil sat next to a group from Egypt.

The head of the group, an elderly soft-spoken gentleman, glanced compassionately at the boy who was eating what he could of the simple food. He asked the boy his name, reflected for a moment, and then asked, "Nabil, why are you here?" "Well, I was invited by the group from South Africa to come this morning." "No, no, this is not what I mean," replied the old man with a remarkably fluent command of the English language. "Why are you here, on

this earth, breathing, living, waking up every morning? For what purpose is all this?"

Nabil was silent. In the fourteen years of his existence on earth, he had never once even thought of such a question. Taking the boy's reticence as ignorance, the man continued, "You are here to perform a great job — the greatest and noblest job there is. You are here to know the One Who gave you everything — everything you have, have had, and ever will have. And then you are to tell others about this One. If you do this correctly, you are successful; if you don't do this, then you have failed to fulfill the purpose for which you were created." The man's words were simple, but Allah had opened Nabil's heart to their weightiness.

He remained in the center for the next two days, and before he left for home on the third day, he announced his conversion to those present with the *Shahadah*, the testimony of faith. The rest of the summer he spent in Canada learning as much as he could about his new religion. That fall, Nabil's parents sent him to St. Mark's boarding school in Massachusetts, where he would struggle to fulfill the purpose for which he was created.

I was in the height of my awkward stage that freshman year at St. Mark's. I met Nabil in passing during the first week of school, and my first impression of him was that he was Indian and wore a fuzzy beard. A month later, we sat next to each other on a long bus ride to the school of a rival sports team. We spoke the entire ride. Nabil struck me as jovial, polite, and intelligent. In a short time, he became one of my closest friends. I was particularly attracted to his generosity. While all the other prep-school students would get food from their parents and hoard it, eating it secretly when alone or cruelly in front of other students, Nabil would buy food specifically with the intention of sharing with others, be they friends or not.

As I was completely ignorant of Islam at that point, the only thing that struck me about his religious identity was that he did not eat pork and that he would explode in rage when anybody touched the strange sacred book that he kept in a mother-of-pearl jewelry box on top of his bureau. One day Nabil, in a moment of spiritual zeal, burst into my room, where I was sitting with another student, and without establishing the customary rapport, blurted out, "I'm going to tell you guys something that if you say it, one day you will be happier than you can imagine, and you will wish that you had said it more than you did." Intrigued, we pressed Nabil to tell us, to which he replied, "La ilaha illa Allah; Muhammadu rasulu Allah." We repeated the words after him and he corrected our pronunciation, promising to tell us the meaning later. Though the strange language meant nothing to me, I took it upon myself to write down the transliteration of the words. I read the sentence to myself repeatedly that week, and within a few days, I had memorized it. Allah was meanwhile opening my heart to its meaning without my knowledge.

Dave from Texas was a notoriously racist student. Every black student at St. Mark's hated him. He had been beaten bloody earlier that year by the token Native American student because of his particularly skewed racial outlook on society, which had already landed him in the dean's office three times within the first six months of school. When he first learned that Nabil was Muslim, Dave remarked in his affected southern twang, "Yea, well I saw that movie 'Not With My Daughter', and ya'll worship the devil as far as I see it." Perhaps it was not a deep-rooted hatred in Dave that produced such comments, but rather his love of confrontation as a product of his own insecurities. Nabil sensed this, and bore Dave's bigotry with patience and sympathy for the troubled boy. Eventually he managed to explain the true message of Islam to the Texan, and he accepted it at once. By the second half of freshman year, Dave was waking Nabil up daily to perform the dawn prayer.

In the meantime, Nabil was conducting intensive late-night Islamic talks with another young student named Hammer, who had recently become disenchanted with Christianity. On an average Saturday night, Nabil would answer Hammer's questions and field his objections until 2 am, after which he would come talk to me, either continuing with the religious discourse or delving into the worldly. He explained the meaning of the foreign words that I had previously memorized and used this as a launching point to explain the greater purpose to human existence, namely the knowledge and worship of One God, as had been generally explained to him by the Egyptian Sheikh that previous summer.

One late evening, after a particularly exhausting religious discourse, I abruptly interrupted my companion's thought and said, "Nabil, I'm ready." "Ready for what?" "I'm ready." I looked at him in the eyes with the recalcitrant stoicism of a man who knows, with certainty, of the thunder that he is calling down upon himself with the choice he is about to make. Nabil narrowed his eyes, reading my resolution. He smiled and slapped my palm. Nabil took Hammer and me to the mosque for the first time on a Thursday night in May of 1993. Referring to a visit to St. Mark's earlier that year by a Muslim man named Issa from Providence, Hammer confided in me on the way to Boston that night, "The moment it clicked for me was when Issa was speaking to us. He was saying, 'A car's purpose is to take its owner from place to place, and if it breaks down and isn't able to fulfill its purpose, the owner has no use for it. Likewise, if we don't fulfill the purpose for which the Creator and Owner of all created us, then He has no use for us.' I figured we owe it to Allah to find out what our purpose is, and then to do it, or else we're useless and ungrateful."

After the evening prayers and an informal talk to a medium-sized audience at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology mosque that night, the Sheikh of the mosque, Abdul Badia', explained to Hammer and me the basic

pillars of Islamic belief, the pillars of worship, and a few the things we must not do. He spoke with a certainty and wisdom that I had never encountered in a religious figure before him, as if the unseen Truths were as manifest as those of the seen world. He asked us if we accepted these principles, to which we replied in the affirmative. We recited the *Shahadah* before the Muslim audience, made do'a (supplication) in a group, and then braced for the deluge of congratulatory hugs and handshakes from our new brothers in Islam. I later learned that Allah had guided over five thousand people to Islam at the hands of Sheikh Abdul Badia'.

Hammer and I returned to St. Mark's the next day as new people. There were only few weeks left in the school year before summer vacation, but we managed to establish the five daily prayers among the Muslim students. Another student, Marshall, began to join the prayers by his own impetus, and he would come back the next school year as an official Muslim. Nabil would take time daily to teach us verses of the Qur'an and the method of prayer, ritual ablution, and Islamic purification. The school year soon ended, and each student went home for the summer.

My parents at first dismissed my conversion as merely a passing phase, but with time they realized that I was committed to my new beliefs. They never opposed my decision once, and through the years they have taken great pains to help me fulfill the obligations of my religion - buying me halal (Islamically slaughtered) meat, delaying dinner for prayer times, paying for my trips around the world to study Islam, even helping me to wake up for the pre-dawn meal during Ramadan. Marshall experienced a similar reaction from his parents, while Hammer bore several years of hostility from his.

The next year, our small band of Muslims braved a series of trials. Reverend H. W., the school's official (female) minister, warned our parents of the evils of our conversion, and even lobbied the school's administration to have Nabil expelled from school. The next year she was fired for her Bible-thumping fundamentalism. Another Armenian Christian teacher derided our religious beliefs at every opportunity and openly voiced his animosity towards Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). Allah, Who has promised the believers an egress from where they could never have imagined, disgraced him by exposing his molestation of a female student, for which he was fired that spring. Our group has been through several ups and downs throughout the ten years in Islam. Nevertheless, we have held together and, by the Mercy and Guidance of Allah, have maintained our religious observance. As I have experienced firsthand, Allah increases the faith of those who are steadfast and patient in the face of hardship. I pray that Allah uses my story to increase the faith of those who read it.

11. SWEDISH WOMAN SUBMITS TO ALLAH

by Haneefah binti Stefan

The first time I ever thought about having Islam as my religion was at the age of 15. Reading a story in my high school religion book about a Swedish woman who converted made me think: How would it be if I became a Muslim? How would it change my life? This woman was wearing a scarf on her head, and she was working as a secretary. Because of my lack of knowledge about Islam, this shocked me extremely. How can she work with that thing on her head? Who will ever hire a woman like that? My conclusion was that I would never become Muslim because it would stand out and would lessen my chances of getting the dream job.

I started secondary school at the age of 16. Living in a small suburb outside of the city, I was required to transfer to a school inside the big town. I chose the one which was supposed to have the highest status. I could not imagine that there would be so many foreign people. Immediately after I started, I felt I was not happy. I wanted to change my major, so I transferred from Media to Languages and came to a new class where I knew no one.

The first people who spoke kindly to me and became my friends were an African girl and an Iraqi girl who was wearing a scarf. It was so exotic to me! All my life I had been surrounded by people of my own background, and now I got a taste of other cultures and life styles. I was so fascinated by the Iraqi girl that I started to hang around a lot with her and also became friends with her friends.

The Muslims of my school sometimes had active discussions about Islam and that impressed me very much. I thought, how can it be that this religion is such an active part of their lives? It is not like Christianity, it is alive not dead! And it has an impact on everything in their lives.

One day when I went with my father to a second hand market, I looked for some books and found an old translation of the Qur'an in the Swedish language. I decided to buy it for historical purposes, and to gain a greater understanding of my friends' religion. By now, I started to add Islamic items to my journal. I was writing the opening Surah Al-Fatihah, and its translation. I also memorized it. I had no motive behind doing so, I was just interested in it. With little time, I was totally absorbed in the Qur'an. I felt like I had found a real treasure. There was something drawing me to it - something not logical. I went to my Iraqi friend, and told her that I was interested in Islam. She became very shocked and felt a need to sit down or else she would pass out! After the shock settled, she decided to take me to an Islamic organization and there I got some books, pamphlets and the phone number of another Swedish woman who had become Muslim.

I was afraid of what my family would say, and indeed my mother became outraged when I told her that I wanted to become a Muslim. The whole family searched my room and threw away my Islamic books. They said that Islam was like a cult and that I was brainwashed.

But this did not stop me. In the month of July 2001, I declared my Shahadah openly. I had called the Swedish woman who's phone number I had been given, and she arranged Islamic lessons in her home. I went to her villa, which had a garden, and we prayed the zuhr (forenoon) prayer there in the open air. For me this was a symbolical act, because in my society it is something not appreciated to show acts of worship openly. I felt so free. It was with a loud and proud voice by which I said the words which undoubtedly has had the strongest impact on my entire life: Ashhadu an laa ilaaha illa Allah, wa ashhadu anna Muhammadan rasool Allah. I bear witness that there is no deity worthy of worship save Allah; and I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. No other single sentence has influenced me as this one has.



12. HOW ALLAH BROUGHT ME TO ISLAM

by Talib Abdul Ahad

I was born of parents whose religion was Christianity and their denomination was Southern Baptist. My parents began going to church very shortly after I was born. From the time I was a small child I was taught stories from the Bible, of the various Prophets (peace be upon them all). Later, I began to read about the religion of Islam among some other religions. I was very suspicious at first. I was raised thinking that Muslims were all terrorists seeking to oppress women and cause violence. I only knew that they believed in one God and that Islam was a very strict religion.

Perhaps my first real interest in Islam came after reading an article in a 1979 National Geographic about an American Muslim's Hajj. I was unaware that there was such a thing as a non-Arab Muslim. I read about some events from the Prophet Muhammad's (s.a.w.) life in the article and began a month long study of the Qur'an and Sunnah. After studying the Qur'an, authentic hadith, listening to khutbahs, and reading lectures/articles of scholars, I became very attracted to the simplicity, clarity, and beauty of the message of Islam. When studying the life of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.), I read charges and refutations of the charges against the integrity of Allah's Apostle (s.a.w.).

I decided to embrace Islam and made my *Shahadah*. I have been growing in iman since then but still make many mistakes and forget my duty to Allah s.w.t. Insha Allah, I will learn from these mistakes.



13. HOW I BECAME MUSLIM

by Umm Tasneem

I can remember running to my room getting on my knees and looking up to the sky saying in Spanish my prayer, "Please God help me & my family, make my Dad stop drinking and protect my Mom." I was eleven years old. That would be my last prayer till I was seventeen. I was born in Georgetown, Washington. I am Hispanic American. My father is Nicaraguan and my mother is from Puerto Rico. I was raised in the Catholic Church but my father looked into many other religions. For two years, he turned us into Buddhists against our own will. I have a younger brother and sister. We all lived in fear of my father mostly because he was an alcoholic who used to beat all of us including my mother until I was thirteen. Ironically, anyone would assume the woman in a situation so harmful would pack her bags and bolt to the door. Instead he left us. I wouldn't see or hear from him again till I was fifteen.

Pregnant with my first child by then, I had no god. How could God let me down? I never did anything wrong! I was angry, disappointed. I thought God loved me, but He left me when I needed Him the most. The lesson begins. My freshman year of high school I met a Palestinian girl who became my best friend. I hung out at her house a lot. I got to see how close her family was. They are mostly a traditional Muslim family. The mother didn't cover nor did my friend, but they prayed. Her parents didn't approve of me for several reasons. One, I wasn't Muslim. I was also a pregnant teenager and they had the fear that I would corrupt their only daughter. I was amazed that a Muslim family living in America still had morals. My friend stayed with me even when I had my baby. She was the one that said the azan in my daughter's ear. I wanted my daughter to be like her: good, kind and modest. I wanted my child to have a good life.

With the disappearance of my father, my mom worked really hard to support us so she was never around and we got into a lot of trouble. I started drinking and smoking, inevitably using drugs. I partied all night. I couldn't even get up to take care of my daughter. My reputation was trashed. I still regret everything. I had no life, jumping from one relationship to another (Allah forgive me). I fell deeper into dunya (world) thinking that money, a car and some stylish clothes would make me happier. Instead of living a life, I was living in a three-minute music video.

Then came the nights when I would ask myself, "How did I get here?" I kept telling myself that I didn't want Josaline going through this. How am I going to raise my little girl? All alone one night I cried, begging God to forgive me, asking Him, "Please help me!" I knew deep in my heart I was wrong. Now the search begins... I was invited to my best friends house to watch a movie "The Book of Signs". I became very curious about the Qur'an. This book knew

things way before modern times, like the stages of pregnancy, and how Allah made the cow and mixed between the blood and the urine, milk that is beneficial. Wow! Not to mention that the Qur'an was written a little over fourteen hundred years ago. I asked if I could go to the Sunday class for converts at the Mosque. I was told I would have to cover out of respect for the Mosque, but I chose not to. I went a couple times each time getting more scared. What would my family say? Becoming Muslim meant no drinking, no clubbing, no eating pork. Hey! That's all we Puerto Ricans eat. I'm eighteen, a single mom who hadn't even read the Qur'an. What am I going to say?

I watched a thirty-minute movie and became Muslim. That's exactly what I did. I took my *Shahadah* five months before my nineteenth birthday in April of 1996. I felt so relieved like a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I swear the clouds that day looked like cotton, and the sky never looked so blue..." I'm Muslim!"

It took me a while to actually leave everything. I felt like a hypocrite. Eventually, another Muslim friend would teach me part of my prayer. Of course, the first year I struggled with myself, but also the persecution of others. I had a Muslim friend tell me not to be an extremist or I would ruin it for the rest of them. I thought not. That was the least of my worries. My main concern was who is going to marry me? I don't wear hijab (headscarf) and I have a three-year-old daughter. No practicing Muslim man would want me. At least that's what I thought...

In April of 1997, a couple months after my brother took *Shahadah*, we had this group of mutual friends of guys & girls. I had dated one of the guys when I was sixteen. We broke up but remained on and off for two years. He accepted Islam a year after I did. I couldn't believe it! He had a friend that I knew who also became Muslim. My brother had happened to work with his friend. One day my little brother came home to tell me someone is interested in marrying me. I thought it was my ex, but it was his best friend. I really wanted to marry my ex so I declined his offer, but told my brother my true intentions. The phone rang. My brother picked up and it was him calling to ask if I was interested in his friend. To make a long story short, I politely said no and we talked until dawn.

Our talks would increase over a period of two weeks until our wedding day June 14, 1997. I met him at fifteen and married at nineteen. We have three kids together and have been married for three in a half years. He was Christian, I was Catholic, and Allah brought us together as Muslims. Which takes me back to the little girl I was in the beginning. She was too young to understand fate and that everything happens for a reason. She blamed the Most Merciful. She never knew how much He really loved her. Right now, for the first time in my life, everything makes so much sense. May Allah forgive us and have mercy on us for what we do knowingly and unknowingly. Ameen!

14. HOW I CAME TO AL-ISLAM

by Omar Edmond

My Journey to Islam began when I was fifteen years of age. I was very much into rap music and many of the rap artists such as KRS-1, Public Enemy, Gangstarr, X-clan and others who were trying to reawaken a sort of cultural revival and positivity within the black community. Some of these rap artists, because of being exposed to certain movements (such as the 5% nation which was started by Clarence 13X and the Nation of Islam started by Elijah Muhammad), would often use Islamic terms such as Allah, Qur'an, Muhammad, etc. In particular, I had begun to grow fond of a group by the name of the X-Clan, who had pictured many black revolutionists on their album, including Malcolm X.

I started to read Malcolm X's autobiography. I did not even finish the whole book before I knew I wanted to be what I thought was a Muslim. I reflected very deeply on how the Nation of Islam were putting words into action independently of the mainstream society, bringing a true sense of religious values back into the home. They had set up programs that rehabilitated black men and women from drug addiction, which was destroying black families. My only dilemma was that there was no one to teach me anything about Islam. Eventually, I met some guys from the 5% Nation, one of whom told me that the first step to being a Muslim was being a 5% Muslim. So I became a 5% Muslim which in reality was a 100% Kafir. We studied lessons, drank alcohol, and smoked marijuana, while at the same time trying to study mathematics.

There was one guy that did not drink and did not smoke. In addition to that, he used to meditate. This brother lived in a neighboring city, which was close to a Masjid, and he met another brother who explained what True Islam was and he became Muslim. Immediately after he became Muslim, he called me to the truth of Islam and I responded with the testimony of faith, the *Shahadah*. In it, one bears witness that there is no deity worthy of worship except the One True God (Allah) and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
PERMUDAHAN
PERDANA

15. FINDING PEACE AND ANSWERS IN ISLAM

by Jennifer A. Bell

My search for God started when I was eight years old. I lived in a rural area, where you were either a Christian or you did not believe in God. There were no other types of religions. But, even at that early age, I had a problem with some of the Christian beliefs, especially the belief surrounding the Trinity and that Jesus (PBUH) was God or a part of God. Everywhere I turned to look for the answers came up empty. From one Christian church to another, still there were no answers. To my dismay, no other sources to the truth could be found. Or so I thought. As I went through my teenage years, American society took a hold of me.

Not finding any answers, I turned my back on God. During this time, I was in a lot of trouble. Not only spiritually, but I was putting myself into emotional and physical danger. There were a number of times where I was near death, either by others or by my own hand. I was into alcohol, drugs, sex, and almost anything else that was bad. Time and again I was spared. Then, during college, I met my future husband. He was not into the things that I was doing. He was a fine and good individual with a strong moral character, although he did not believe in God. I do not understand why, but he took an interest in me. He helped me leave the life I was living. He helped me become sober and clean.

It was at this time that I started to again feel the pull to find God. I started reading and learning about other religions that I had heard of: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Shintoism, etc. Nothing that I read felt right. Unfortunately, at this time, I still had not heard of Islam. I married my husband, and became content with my marriage and my career, for a while. I still felt that I needed more in my life. I wanted desperately to have a child, but had been told by my doctors that I would never be able to conceive. Because of my past history, there was too much damage to my uterus. But then, I was shocked when I found out that I was pregnant. Soon after I found out I was pregnant, I prayed to God. I thanked him for proving the doctors wrong. After my son was born, I had a terrible time emotionally. I ended up diagnosed with post-partum depression. During this time, I tried to take my life again.

When I finally understood what I had tried to do, I felt this pull toward God again. I would go on the Internet and visit chat rooms. One night, I was talking to this gentleman. He was different from other guys I had talked to. I immediately knew he was not from America; his English was understandable, but not good. There was something else about him, but I did not know what it was. I actually ended up talking to him again on other days. Then on our third or fourth meeting, he announced to me that he was Muslim. Then he started explaining what that meant and what Islam was about. We had many

discussions about the Trinity and about Jesus (a.s.). He would send me e-mails with verses from the Qur'an supporting everything he was telling me. I could not argue against anything he said. And furthermore, it all felt right. But, this still had not convinced me that Islam was indeed the true religion.

I told this man about my problems and what was going on. He seemed to know so much about everything. So, why not see if he could help? What he told me to do sounded bizarre and strange. He instructed me to take a bath, and clean myself from head to toe. After I was done with that, I was just to sit quietly, clear my mind, and concentrate only on God. What did I have to lose? I was in a desperate situation. No one was around to see me acting foolishly, so I tried it. Then, the most amazing thing in my life happened. I was sitting there, focusing my thoughts on God. I thought that was amazing by itself. I had not been able to focus on any one thing in the last few weeks. Then I just started shaking. I was not cold, and I did not know of any reason why I would start to shake. But, as quickly as it started, it stopped. Calming peace filled my heart and soul. This peace was so absolute. I felt God enter my heart and I accepted what HE had to offer.

It took about a week after I made this discovery, to find, contact, and meet with the Imam at the masjid. On my first meeting with the Imam, I said my *Shahadah*. The peace that I felt that day has not left me. There are times when I lose track of it because I get caught up in the world around me. But, when I stop for Salat, I put aside what is happening around me, and all of the peace settles down over me once again.



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA

16. HOW I CAME TO ISLAM

by Hayat Anne Collins Osman

I was raised in a religious Christian family. At that time, Americans were more religious than they are now. Most families went to church every Sunday, for example. My parents were involved in the church community. We often had ministers (Protestant “priests”) in the house. My mother taught in Sunday school, and I helped her. I must have been more religious than other children, although I don’t remember being so. For one birthday, my aunt gave me a Bible, and my sister a doll. Another time, I asked my parents for a prayer book, and I read it daily for many years.

In college, I continued to think and pray. Students often talk and argue about religion, and I heard many different ideas. Like Yusuf Islam, I studied the Eastern so-called religions: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Hinduism. No help there. I met a Muslim from Libya, who told me a little about Islam and the Holy Qur’an. He told me that Islam is the modern, most up-to-date form of revealed religion. Because I thought of Africa and the Middle East as backwards places, I couldn’t see Islam as modern. My family took this Libyan brother to a Christmas church service. The service was breathtakingly beautiful, but at the end, he asked, “Who made up this procedure? Who taught you when to stand and bow and kneel? Who taught you how to pray?” I told him about early Church history, but his question made me angry at first, and later made me think. Had the people who designed the worship service really been qualified to do so? How had they known the form that worship should take? Had they had divine instruction?

Soon after this, I found a translation of the meaning of the Qur’an in a bookstore, bought it, and started to read it. I read it, off and on, for eight years. During this time, I continued to investigate other religions. I grew increasingly aware of and afraid of my sins. How could I know whether God would forgive me? I no longer believed that the Christian model, the Christian way of being forgiven, would work. My sins weighed heavily on me, and I didn’t know how to escape the burden of them. I longed for forgiveness.

Finally, about eight years after buying my first Qur’an, I read: “This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favor for you, and chosen Islam as your religion.” - The Holy Qur’an, Chapter of the Table, Verse 3. I wept for joy, because I knew that, way back in time, before the creation of the Earth, Allah had written this Qur’an for me. Allah had known that Anne Collins, in Cheektowaga, NY, USA, would read this verse of the Qur’an in May of 1986, and be saved.

Now, I knew that there were many things I had to learn, for example, how to pray properly, which the Qur’an does not describe in detail. The problem

was that I didn't know any Muslims. Muslims are much more visible in the US now than they were then. I didn't know where to find them. I found the phone number of the Islamic Society in the phone book, and dialed it, but when a man answered, I panicked and hung up. What was I going to say? How would they answer me? Would they be suspicious? Why would they want me, when they had each other and their Islam? In the next couple of months, I called the mosque a number of times, and each time panicked and hung up.

Finally, I did the cowardly thing. I wrote a letter asking for information. The kind and patient brother at the mosque phoned me, and then started sending me pamphlets about Islam. I told him I wanted to be Muslim, but he told me, "Wait until you are sure." It upset me that he told me to wait, but I knew he was right, that I had to be sure because, once I had accepted Islam, nothing would ever be the same again. On several occasions, I drove to the mosque (at that time, it was in an old converted house) and circled it many times, hoping to see a Muslim, wondering what it was like inside.

Finally, one day in early November of 1986, as I was working in the kitchen, I suddenly knew, knew that I was Muslim. Still a coward, I sent the mosque a letter. It said, "I believe in Allah, the One True God, I believe that Muhammad was his Messenger, and I want to be counted among the witnesses." The brother called me on the phone the next day, and I said my *Shahadah* on the phone to him. He told me then that Allah had forgiven all my sins at that moment, and that I was as pure as a newborn baby. I felt the burden of sin slip off my shoulders, and wept for joy. I slept little that night, weeping, and repeating Allah's name. Forgiveness had been granted. Alhamdulillah.



17. FINDING THE TRUTH

by David Pradarelli

I came to Islam pretty much on my own. I was born and raised Roman Catholic, but I always had a deep fascination with the spiritualities of other cultures. My Journey started when I desired to have a relationship with my Creator. I wanted to find my spirituality, and not the one I was born with. I spent some time in the Catholic religious order known as the Franciscans. I had many friends and I enjoyed prayer times, but it just seemed too relaxed in its faith, and there was, in my opinion, too much arrogance and hypocrisy. When I had returned back from the order into secular living again, I once again was searching for my way to reach God (Allah).

One night I was watching the news on television, and of course they were continuing their one-sided half-truth reports on Muslims (always in a negative light instead of balancing it by showing the positive side as well) with images of violence and terrorism. I decided long ago that the news media have no morals whatsoever and will trash anyone for that “juicy story”, and I pretty much refused to believe anything they said. I decided to research Islam for myself and draw my own conclusions.

What I found paled all the negative images that the satanic media spewed forth. I found a religion deep in love and spiritual truth, and constant God-mindfulness. What may be fanaticism to one person may be devotion to another. I picked up a small paperback Qur’an and began devouring everything I could. It opened my eyes to the wonder and mercy of ALLAH, and I found the fascination growing every day...it was all I could think about. No other religion including Catholicism impacted me in such a powerful way...I actually found myself in God-awareness 24 hours a day 7 days a week...each time I went to my five daily prayers, I went with anticipation...finally! What I have been searching for all of my life. I finally got enough courage to go to a mosque and profess the *Shahadah* before my Muslim brothers and sisters. I now am a practicing Muslim and I thank ALLAH for leading me to this place.



18. MY JOURNEY TO ISLAM

by Brother Jamal

I was six years old when my mother accepted her Christian faith. My father on the other hand didn't dedicate himself to any specific church, but his beliefs were based on the trinity. For approximately five years my family would go to church every Sunday. By the time I reached eleven years old, the only two people in my family still attending the church were my mother and I. When I turned fourteen I started getting into lots of trouble, doing anything from stealing to drugs and drinking. At this point I started thinking why try and be good if I don't even have a religion anymore. From this age until eighteen I got involved in gangs, selling drugs, and even robbery. I moved out of my house and rented an apartment with two friends.

I went to one of my friend's houses. He was a non-Muslim, but I saw on his bookshelf a Qur'an. This book looked powerful and was very intimidating to me, and I had the urge to pick it up and start reading. My friend asked what I was doing and I told him I never saw a Qur'an before. Inside of my head I was thinking this is the religion of the Arabs. I asked him if I could borrow it to read, and he replied no but if you want to buy it that's cool.

I bought my first Qur'an for \$2.00 and rushed home to read. I remember going to my room and locking the door. I remember the first thing I wanted to know was what they said about Jesus. The verses that I read were so beautiful and I agreed with what they said in totality. I had been reading the Qur'an off and on now for two years and it was time for me to see the mosque.

I called one of my good friends and asked if I was allowed to go to the mosque. He rushed to my house that day and took me with him. What a beautiful place this was. I walked in and asked him where we sat, and he said follow me. We sat on the floor and waited for the prayer time to come. I was so curious, I couldn't stop looking around. I asked him, "Where are all the women?" He smiled and said, "Behind us." I was thinking: how weird, why don't the women and men sit together? At this point they were calling the azan (call to prayer). I didn't understand what it meant, but it sounded so beautiful and sent chills through my body. This azan is what put in my heart a softness that I never felt before. I saw everyone praying as I sat on the side. This made me think that I could not be a Muslim. I didn't speak Arabic and couldn't understand a word they were saying. My friend explained to me that I could learn Arabic and pray just as they did. After this experience, I left and was kind of confused. I was discouraged that I would have to learn Arabic in order to read the Qur'an in its authentic text.

I started going back to my old ways and began doing drugs and drinking. But there was something different now. Every time I did something bad I

would think of God. I tried to get it out of my head but it wouldn't work. Not too happy with everything I heard about Islam, I read about every one of the major religions. All of them seemed weird or contradicting. Then I read about Islam again and now it was different. I felt in my heart, this is real. I found out that they only believed in one God, and they were very strong about this. Once again, I went to Dar Al-Hijrah to a Sunday class they had. I remember not knowing where to go so I stood in the lobby and kept reading the same scripture engraved on the wall. The Imam came and asked if could he help me. I asked where the class was and he directed me there. I sat in the class and saw lots of non-Muslims asking questions. I just listened and left with my friend. My friend had actually been someone from my past whom I would hang out with frequently. He had accepted Islam two years ago. I went home and wanted to cry because I wanted this so bad, but I knew I had to stop drinking and doing drugs before I accepted the faith. About two years went by and I was reading here and there, but nothing serious.

One day my mother begged me to just go back to the church for one service. I agreed just to make my mother happy, but when I walked in the church it was as if everyone knew that I didn't believe the trinity anymore. Someone in the church congregation whom I had known for some time ask me over and over to accept Jesus in my heart. I refused, and then he asked me why, I wasn't knowledgeable enough to back Islam up so I said I'm just not ready. The man replied, "Son, you have to catch the fish, then you clean it, then you cook it, and after all that you eat it". What he said was so true, but not for this church.

This is what inspired me to want to accept Islam. I knew that in my heart I was a Muslim, but where do I go and who will give this to me? I didn't know what to do. So after a while, I once again went back to drugs. One night, I went out and I was so drugged up and drunk. When I came home and looked in the mirror, what I saw scared me. I couldn't even recognize my own face. It was as if I was looking at one of those people on the streets who are strung out. I fell to the ground and cried, wondering what had happened to me. I felt sick and disgusted, how could I even walk into that mosque again? I thought I wasn't good enough to be a Muslim. I prayed all night, begging God to help me be a better person and to help me with this situation.

The next day, I was sitting in my living room, when I heard a knock on my door at 11:00pm. I looked through my peephole and saw my friend who was already Muslim. This person was someone very beloved to me, and I fully trusted him. He came into my house and began to speak to me about Islam. At this moment I was crying inside wanted to just say yes. We talked about four hours and after that, I accepted Islam. This was the best decision I would ever make...

19. FROM DARKNESS, I CAN SEE THE LIGHT

by Haroon Cambel

As I entered the first year of college, I didn't really care about much. All I wanted was to be with my girlfriend and hang out with my buddies. It was strange though; I started to look at my friends in a different way. I started asking myself if they were true friends or just casual friends looking for a good time. To my dismay, I only had what amounted to three really close friends.

After studying several religions, I finally read the Autobiography of Malcolm X. Interestingly, the copy that I had was given to me by my former girlfriend whom I wanted to marry. After reading the book, the part that affected me the most was the chapter in which Malcolm talked about his journey to Mecca for Hajj. As I read that a man who had developed a hatred for whites in America due to the oppression and racism shown towards his people was now embracing people who had the blondest of hair and the fairest of skin, I couldn't believe it. He realized at that point that the real Islam wasn't about being a certain color, race or social status. It was about believing in the One True God, worshipping Him, and living in harmony with humanity. It seemed too good to be true.

I came across Muslims on campus at the university that I was attending. I had known very little about Islam up to this point, although part of my family is originally from Turkey. These Muslims that I met on campus explained to me the tenets of the faith and through that and their actions in practicing those beliefs, it became clear to me that this way of life called Islam was the truth. Over a period of six months, I struggled to surrender my soul to Allah.

It was in the blessed month of Ramadan of that year that I embraced Islam. I had been attending lectures and classes with my newfound friends throughout the month. I had the opportunity to meet scholars and feel the energy of fasting that exuded from Muslims on campus. On the third week of Ramadan, the moment of truth came. I had just finished listening to a lecture that was given by a scholar that had been visiting from South Africa. One of my friends introduced me to him, so we sat and spoke together about how I felt about Islam. By the end of the conversation, I had proclaimed my belief in Islam. My friends, who I now looked at as brothers, embraced me so warmly. I immediately began fasting the remainder of Ramadan.

I participated in my first 'Eid that year, meeting so many new faces that I truly started to feel the worldwide unity of Islam. I had been praying and fasting with people from all over the world. They were people who spoke different languages, shared different cultures and were different colors. None of that seemed to be an issue. We were too concerned with serving God to even pay any of those differences any mind.

20. HOW IT CAME TO BE

by Mrs. Cecilia Mahmuda Cannolly

First and foremost, I would say it was because fundamentally I had always been a Muslim without being aware of it. Very early in my life, I had lost faith in Christianity for many reasons. The major one being that whenever I questioned any Christian, whether it was a person belonging to the so called Holy Orders or a layman, regarding any point that puzzled me in regard to the Church teachings, I invariably received the monotonous answer: 'You must not question the teachings of the Church; you must have faith.' I did not have the courage in those days to say : 'I cannot have faith in something that I do not understand', and from my experience, neither do most of the people who call themselves Christians.

What I did do was to leave the Church (Roman Catholic) and its teaching and to place my faith in the one true god in whom it was much easier to believe, than in the three gods of the Church. By contrast with the mysteries and miracles of the Christian teaching, life took on a new and wider meaning, no longer cramped with dogma and ritual. Everywhere I looked I could see God's work. And although, in common with greater minds than my own, I could not understand the miracles that happened before my eyes, I could stand and marvel at the wonder of it all — the trees, flowers, birds and animals. Even a new born babe became a beautiful miracle, not the same thing that the Church had taught me to believe at all. I remembered how, when a child, I gazed at newborn babies and thought, 'It's all covered in black sin', I no longer believed in ugliness; everything became beautiful.

Then one day my daughter brought home a book about Islam. We became so interested in it that we followed it up with many other books on Islam. We soon realized that this was really what we believed. During the time I had believed in Christianity I had been led to believe that Islam was only something to joke about. Thus, all that I then read was a revelation to me.

After a while I looked up some Muslims and questioned them on some of the points that were not quite clear to me. Here again there was yet, another revelation. My questions were all answered promptly and concisely, so different from the frustration I had experienced when questioning Christianity. After much reading and studying of the religion of Islam, both my daughter and myself decided to become Muslims, taking the names of Rashida and Mahmuda respectively. If I were asked what impressed me most in the religion of Islam, I would probably say the prayers, because prayers in Christianity are used wholly in begging God (through Jesus Christ) to grant worldly favors, whereas in Islam they are used to give praise and thanks to Almighty God for all His blessings since He knows what is necessary for our welfare and grants us what we need without our asking it.

21. WHY I AM A MUSLIM

by Amina Cisse Muhammad

I cannot say how well my story represents those of the estimated over three million Americans of African descent who have converted to Islam in the last few decades, but I would guess our stories share common threads. While studying sociology in college in the 1970's, I was required to read the Autobiography of Malcolm X, which he co-authored with writer Alex Haley. Except for an occasional mention of "Moslems spreading Islam by the sword" in the Euro-centric textbooks used by my primary and secondary school teachers, and one or two encounters with followers of the Nation of Islam, my knowledge of Islam prior to reading this book was practically nil.

The book had a profound impact on me, particularly the last few chapters where Malcolm X related the events that led to his discovery of true Islam. Malcolm was one of the greatest spokesmen for the cause of the oppressed. For twelve years, as a follower and minister of Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, he taught that the condition of African Americans was the result of evils committed against them by whites, whom the Nation of Islam regarded as devils. Because of his teachings, Malcolm was labeled a black racist who incited riots and violence among poor blacks. However, before his murder in 1965, Malcolm was blessed to be exposed to true Islam when he made a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1964 and witnessed equality and brotherhood amongst Muslims with white skin, blonde hair and blue eyes; Muslims whose skin was the darkest of dark; and those whose skin color was of the many different shades in between. During this pilgrimage, Malcolm X became Al Hajj Malik Al Shabazz. I identified with Malcolm's analysis of the condition of African Americans, and I shared his frustration and anger over our four-century long exploitation.

I was also deeply moved by his account of his pilgrimage where he was introduced to the Islam practiced by Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) over fourteen centuries ago. This pilgrimage altered Malcolm's attitude toward whites and it broadened his perspective on life, from one focused on the personal circumstances he had encountered as an African American in his immediate surroundings to a global perspective that allowed him to identify with all of the world's oppressed peoples. The remaining less-than-a-year of his life he spent working to have African Americans identify with their long lost brothers and sisters in Africa - spiritually, culturally, and politically. Al Hajj Malik's story, along with events occurring at the same time in my personal life, prompted me to search for a belief system that was relevant to my life as a young African American female - one who recognized a Supreme Being that accounted for the many otherwise unexplainable phenomena that we observe and experience each and every day.

Around this time, I met the man who would later become my husband. We were in a philosophy class together. He had already embraced Islam, and I felt a certain unexplained attraction to him. As time went on, he began to tell me about Islam and the pieces in my life began to fall into place. Although I wrote to my parents one day to inform them of my interest in Islam and assure them I would not make any impulsive decisions, it was that very night that Allah sent those individuals to me who would offer the final persuasion that Islam is definitely that "submission to the natural order of things."

The peace that I felt when I uttered the *Shahadah* has been sufficient to keep away any doubt that this was the real thing. Allahu Akbar! Islam has brought peace to my life. Islam has taught me to more completely submit to the Divine order of things. It has given me purpose and direction in life, and so has filled the void I once felt. Islam has given me the vehicle by which I have established a personal relationship with my Lord and Creator, and by which I can continually move closer to Him. Islam has given me a practical and useful framework in which to conduct all of my affairs; hence, it encompasses all of my life - the physical as well as the spiritual and intellectual. The Muslims I have encountered in the last 24 years have not been perfect (no human being is), but they have come closer to practicing what they profess to believe and what they preach than the adherents of other faiths that I have encountered in my lifetime. "On this day I have perfected your religion for you and completed My favor onto you, and have chosen for you as your religion Al-Islam" (Holy Qur'an, Sura'tul Maida, Ayat 5). I thank Allah for Islam and for allowing me to be a Muslim. Allah is Most Kind!



CONVERSION CATEGORY II: TRAVEL

Al Qur'an tells us that if we feel constricted in our lives (literally, "in our chests"), we must travel the earth until we find a place where we may relax and expand again. Surah "Inshiroh" also promises us that, "After hardship cometh ease, after hardship cometh ease..." The meaning of "ease" in the historical context of early Islam may have meant safety from oppression. But if we consult an Arabic dictionary, we find a host of other meanings, so many in fact that we begin to suspect that this "Inshiroh" is another of those wonderful and perplexing words for which English equivalents do not really exist. Sometimes it is hard to escape the conclusion that the 85% of Muslims who do not speak Arabic must still make some effort to learn this language simply in order to understand their Islamic religion in a reasonable way.

Be that as it may, a substantial number of converts seem to have come upon their new religion by traveling, and in such a way that it is hardly possible they could have converted without journeying outside of their native lands. Indeed, they are following one of the deepest of the Islamic archetypal experiences, the Hijrah, or migration. Iranian scholar and martyr Ali Shariati has explained the Hijrah as having two possibilities or dimensions, inner and outer ("batin" and "lahir").

In order to comprehend this important principle of Islamic life, we must focus on those pivotal days when the last two Muslims in Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) and Abu Bakr (r.a., i.e., radhiAllahu 'anhu - Allah be pleased with him), hid together in a house while assassins gathered outside. All other Muslims had been sent ahead to Madinah to escape the increasing danger and violence against them. And we really should compare these last moments before our Prophet's successful escape with the equivalent moments in the life of Jesus, or Nabi Isa (a.s., i.e., 'alaihi salaam — Peace be upon him), to understand exactly why our Islam is the last and final revelation, completing or fulfilling Christianity and the other prophetic religions that had come before it.

In fact, history (in the form of our invaluable Ahadith) tells us that poor Abu Bakr (r.a.) was a nervous wreck, waiting for his Prophet (s.a.w.) to give permission to flee the assassins. Why did Prophet (s.a.w.) wait until such dangerous final moments, while the assassins were actually gathering outside to strike? If we compare with Nabi Isa (a.s.) waiting and praying in the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem, we find that both prophets were unwilling to take the decision to escape without Divine Permission. Jesus was said to have prayed, "My Lord, not my will but Thine be done."

Now it happened that Nabi Isa (a.s.) did NOT receive such permission from on high, from which he understood that he had no choice but to accept

martyrdom at the hands of his assassins, in order to fulfill his historic mission. Therefore, whether or not he escaped in a more secretive and profound way (as Muslims usually believe), in any case he did not migrate somewhere else to continue his ministry, nor did he found a city-state in order to demonstrate the implementation of his teachings. The Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) did precisely that, but only after he could be SURE of Divine Favor for his escape by waiting until he felt it in his heart.

And then what? By one miracle after another, he escaped his pursuers in that Arabian desert until, against all the odds, he arrived quite safely to Madinah, into the loving embrace of his followers and Companions. The success of his migration, which required several miracles along the way, was proof in itself of Divine Favor. And the rest really is history. We have not only the further revelations of Al Qur'an bestowing guidance on that new city-state of Madinah, but we also have the further example or Sunnah of the Prophet (s.a.w.) himself, implementing everything he had received and taught. Only Islam has such an example of prophetic implementation (Christians needed St. Paul to establish their church, which was not even a political entity), and only because the Prophet made SURE before his escape that he had Divine Permission to migrate in such a fashion.

As distant followers of the Muslims of those times, we may not quite be under threat of assassination. But some of us really have had to escape our native towns in order to protect and preserve our Islam, thus losing the favor and wealth of our families back home. Or some of us may have been unknowingly guided to leave our home countries, thus enabling us to find a future Ummah that could only exist for us somewhere else. Some of us never go back. We become modern-day Muhajirun (emigres), who then look for our Ansarun (hosts and helpers) to guide and protect us in our new homelands.

The conversion stories in this section all include other pivotal experiences, of course, but it seems clear that without an original migration away from the home culture, these other experiences would not have had a chance to be planted and take root. So in these cases, we see an initial "outer" Hijrah as prerequisite for the "inner" Hijrah we all must travel in leaving our Jahiliyah lives behind.

And we are blessed with Qur'anic sanction for such travels as a way of finding our true paths as Muslims, unhindered and free of harassment by the enemies of Islam who still seem to flood the earth. It may even be possible that "globalization" is another name for an essentially inimical and hostile pursuit.

So these are travel stories, some more elaborate than others. Some travelers intended to find new spiritual homes, some happened upon them as if by chance. Yet these latter always came to understand later that there was

no chance involved. There is always and forever, only the magnificent and precise Guidance of Allah s.w.t., Who brings us into His Favor as Muslims, sometimes before we even know what is happening. With hindsight, such precision can only be counted as miraculous.

There are other Calls, of course. Many cannot travel the earth, yet are chosen to become Muslims. Their stories are the subject of other sections in this book, but in these other stories, we will still always find a form of "inner" Hijrah at the very least. According to Ali Shariati, there is no Islam without some form of Hijrah, just as there WOULD HAVE BEEN no Islam without the Hijrah of the Prophet (s.a.w.). And so the stories in this "Travel" section are our "varieties of Hijrah experience", from which we can all learn and also increase our respect for the difficulties of our brothers and sisters in the course of their conversions. There is no superiority of suffering in Islam. We must all be, to some inner or outer extent, martyrs to our past lives.



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KERIMPINAN
PERDANA



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA

1. IT STARTED WITH THE AZAN

by Dr. Muhammad As'ad (Michael Berdine)

It might have started with the azan, the call to prayer that always fascinated a five-year-old boy, and then led him to accept Islam after a long trip across time and space. It was a spiritual odyssey of over thirty years that took me from my Irish-Catholic-American roots through agnosticism and New Age metaphysics to Islam. It was only in Islam where I found the answers to all my questions and the peace that I had been seeking for so long. It was also in Islam where I found, in 1992, solace and sanctuary, friendships and brotherhood, a new life, a spiritual home, and Allah.

In 1990, at the age of forty-five, I returned to graduate school at the University of Arizona to begin my studies for a Ph.D. in Modern British Empire History and Near Eastern Studies. This was the realization of a dream I'd had since obtaining my M.A. in British and European history twenty-one years earlier. At that time, in 1969, I had passed up pursuing a Ph.D. program at Brown University to raise a family and take some time off from school. It was at the University of Arizona through my studies of Middle East and India that I once again came in contact with Islam.

From the time I was three until eighteen, my father's position as an executive with the California-Texas Oil Company (Caltex) took our family to live and travel all over the world. Our first overseas assignment in 1949, when I was three, was in Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, where my parents, brother and I lived for five-and-a-half years. From there we moved to London for a short time before moving to India in 1956. Once in India, because there was no American schooling available locally, my parents sent me to Kodaikanal, an American Protestant missionary boarding school 600 miles to the south, where I attended school from the 5th to 10th grades.

But it was from Notre Dame International School in Rome that I graduated high school two-and-a-half years later in June 1963. Rome was a fascinating place to learn more about my religion, especially after the "negative" perceptions I'd received about Catholicism from some of my Protestant classmates at the missionary school. Ten years earlier, my parents, brother and I had had a private audience with Pope Pius XII and spoken directly with the Pope at his summer retreat at Castello Gondolfo. By the time I left Rome, I was thoroughly entranced with my Catholic faith and planned to become a priest.

However, as I look back, it was as a five-year-old in Bahrain and later as a young man in India, where the sight of Muslims at prayer and the muezzin's call to prayer made the most lasting impression of all my overseas experiences. Just hearing the azan excited me. It made me feel good inside

(as it still does today) and, no matter what I was doing, I always paused to listen whenever I heard it. Little did I know at the time that the azan would later become such an important part of my life. It took some time for this to sink in. It was only after moving back to the States, going to college and grad school, raising a family and having a twenty-year business career, that I returned to graduate school and once again became acquainted with Islam.

This time, however, it was in an academic setting and through books and class lectures. Once “hooked” on Islam, I eagerly and voraciously read anything and everything I could get my hands on in English on the subject. I bought and devoured all the books I could find. Many were written by western Islamic scholars, themselves converts to Islam, like Muhammad Asad, Martin Lings, Victor Danner, and Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall. The fact that there were Western converts to Islam of this caliber further piqued my interest and curiosity. After much reading and study, I sensed a strong, growing affinity with Islam and total agreement with all its teachings. During the summer of 1992, I read A.J. Arberry’s “The Koran Interpreted”, Danner’s “The Islamic Tradition: An Introduction”, Lings’ deeply moving and absorbing “Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources”, while I was away from home studying Intensive Arabic at summer school at the University of Washington.

In my Arabic class, I got to know an Irish-French-Canadian woman classmate who was a convert to Islam (and a former Catholic like me). I also got to know better a Pakistani-American Muslim, whom I’d met earlier that year at a conference at UCLA, where we both gave papers. Throughout the summer I talked with both of them about Islam and what it was like to be a Muslim. Soon it became apparent to all of us that my beliefs were the same as those taught by the Prophet (p.b.u.h. = Peace be upon him) and Islam. However, when gently asked why I didn’t become a Muslim, I had no answer. At the time, I was just intellectually content to have found a faith with which I could agree 100%. Moreover, as an historian I was most impressed with the fact that the authenticity of the Qur’an could be verified (two of the original Qur’ans from the time of Caliph ‘Uthman still exist), as could the teachings and traditions of the Prophet (p.b.u.h). This was quite the opposite of Christianity, as I’d learned to my surprise over many years of study.

Despite all this, I still gave little thought to becoming a Muslim myself. At the end of the summer, my UCLA friend suggested I read Muhammad Asad’s “The Road to Mecca” and get a copy of his translation and commentary of the Holy Qur’an. Asad was an Austrian-Polish Jew (Leopold Weiss) who converted to Islam and became a close friend of Abdul Aziz Ibn Sa’ud, founder of Sa’udi Arabia, in the 1920s. Among his many other activities over the years, including being a student and close friend of Pakistan’s Sir Muhammad Iqbal, Asad became a renowned Arabic and Qur’anic scholar. However, it was reading Arberry’s translation of the Holy Qur’an that summer,

and realizing no man could have written it, that did it for me. I finished reading Asad's "Road to Mecca" in mid-October, just before attending the Annual Meeting of the Middle East Studies Association in Portland, Oregon, where I was to give a paper.

As it turned out, the meeting became a reunion of sorts for me with my summer school friends, as both the Canadian Muslimah and my Muslim friend from UCLA were also giving papers at the same conference. Almost as soon as we ran into each other at a bookstore in Portland near the conference site, the Muslimah asked me pointblank, "When are you going to become a Muslim?" I could only respond that I guessed I already was one in my heart and mind. Without a pause, she suggested that I make the *Shahadah* right then and there. I hemmed and hawed, but could find no reason not to do so. So, right then and there, in the "new arrivals" section of Powell's Bookstore in Portland, Oregon, with another Canadian Muslimah as a witness, I made my *Shahadah*. Not long afterwards, I left the bookstore and walked to my room at a nearby dorm. I was in a state of euphoria and incredible joy, feeling as if I was walking two feet above the ground.

Later, when I saw my friend from UCLA and told him what had happened, and showed him the Qur'an I'd received from our Muslimah friend, he was overjoyed, hugged me warmly and welcomed me to Islam as his brother. Two weeks later, on November 13, I once again recited the *Shahadah* at Juma'ah prayers at the Islamic Center of Tucson. This time it was in front of several hundred people, after which I found myself at the front of a receiving line, where I was welcomed into the Islamic community with hugs and kisses from about 40 Muslim brothers in the most moving forty-five minutes of my life. It was an experience that still lives with me.

Attributing some of the final steps towards Islam to Muhammad Asad's book, I decided to take his name as my Muslim name. Since he was a convert to Islam like me, I felt his name would also be a good name for me and, hopefully, I would become a good Muslim and scholar like him. However, once back at the University of Arizona, both my Arabic and Islamic history professors to whom I told my story suggested I change my name to Muhammad As'ad, "The Happiest Muhammad" in Arabic. This name seemed to them (and to me) to more accurately reflect the change in my personality and over-all attitude since accepting Islam.

In the ten years since, my life has been a series of joys and efforts for Islam. While no one else in my family has yet become a Muslim, there is now sympathy and understanding where before there was none and — in sha' Allah — one day other family members will come to Islam. My wife in particular has been most supportive. Since then, I have become active in outreach and da'wah for the Islamic Center of Tucson, where I am on the Executive Committee and responsible for media and public relations.

Beginning early 1993, I have become a frequent speaker about Islam in schools, churches, synagogues and community centers in the area and elsewhere. I also spent the summers of 1994 and 1995 in Damascus, Syria, where I studied Islam and Arabic in an Islamic Call College. Since 1996, I've taught classes in Islam and introduced courses in Islamic Civilization and Middle East History at Pima Community College in Tucson.

During this time also, while working on my Ph.D. in History at the University of Arizona, I received a second M.A. in 1997 (in Near Eastern Studies) at the University of Arizona. In March of 2001, I went on Hajj. Finally, in August 2001 I was awarded my Ph.D. in History and, since August 2002, I have been a Visiting Assistant Professor of History at the University of Texas at El Paso. At UTEP, I teach Middle Eastern and Islamic History, as well as World History.



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA

2. A MIDDLE EAST ANTHROPOLOGIST SUBMITS

by AbdAllah Talib (Donald Powell Cole)

In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. I submitted to Allah on 6th Rabi'ah al-Awal 1424 (May 7, 2003) at the office of the Grand Imam, Sheikh of the Noble al-Azhar University, in Cairo. I stated in Arabic, "I bear witness that there is no god but Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His Servant and Messenger." I acknowledged that Moses, Jesus, and all other prophets (upon them be peace and blessings) are servants and messengers of Allah, I renounced all religions other than Islam, and I said that henceforth I adhere to Islam as my faith and sacred law. I was personally received and formally welcomed into Islam by the Sheikh of al-Azhar, Muhammad Tantawy.

I was 62, had lived, researched, and taught in the Muslim Arab world for 35 years, and was very familiar with Islam in both theory and practice. Yet, a long-time Egyptian brother who accompanied me that fateful day said that he had cried as he saw me listening to and answering the questions of the Sheikh who interviewed me and authenticated my submission. What had been my journey to Islam and why had it taken so long? What has been unfolding since my submission?

My first direct contact with Islam was in Berkeley, California, in the days of the Free Speech and anti-Vietnam War movements. I had been raised in Texas as a Presbyterian and had gone through multiple, albeit not atypical, identity changes in the 1960s at the University of Texas in Austin and in a wide range of student travels, including my studies in Mexico, Chile, Spain, Guatemala, Bolivia, and Argentina. I broke ties with the Presbyterian Church, saw Roman Catholicism as a gross exploiter of the poor and a supporter of the reactionary elite in Latin America, and seriously questioned United States foreign policy and business interests outside its borders. Within WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) America, I came to feel like a foreigner.

When I was a junior in college, I wanted to leave home and all things American in order to dedicate myself to the "revolution" in Latin America, which, led by Salvador Allende, was gaining momentum among socialist students and activists in Chile. My mother and a kind anthropology professor at UT-Austin talked me out of that bold move, and so I eventually moved to anthropology, a discipline on the fringe where cultural relativity and the pursuit of knowledge primarily among third-world peoples prevailed.

As a graduate student at the University of California in Berkeley, I plunged into social anthropology and was encouraged by my graduate advisor to focus on the Arab Middle East. I struggled with Arabic, studied Islamic institutions with a well-known professor who was Jewish and also, it

was said, a Zionist. I met and interacted with Arab graduate students, both Christian and Muslim. I found Sufism attractive and I fasted for a few days one Ramadan just to feel the experience.

Non-Christian religious experience had become fashionable at Berkeley and it was fashionable to sample as many such experiences as possible along with other exotica. Today, I see that period as a step on the return to paganism in much of the West; but it also reflected a search for a more meaningful spiritual life by some of America's best. The predominant materialism and the pursuit of capitalist values had become spiritually vacuous and even destructive. I was not a flower child during that period, but I was close to them.

I learned from them and from other counter-culture students to take religion in itself seriously. To do so went against the grain of much of anthropology, where religion was taken simply for the role it plays in society and culture and not for the power inherent within it. That I accepted the power of religion as religion did not, however, make me a believer. Yet, I was never an atheist. I remained neutral and content to observe what others did and said in the name of their religious beliefs.

Thanks to student deferments I escaped going to the Vietnam War and instead spent from 1968 to 1970 in Saudi Arabia doing field research for my Ph.D dissertation. Allah Almighty, I believe now, blessed me back then. I was able to know the old Riyadh and I can never forget the calls to prayer from Riyadh's 1000 minarets. They were powerful, and I wanted to respond; but I walked alone and without religion through dusty streets while mosques were filled with the faithful.

I later lived for 18 months with bedouin nomads in the Empty Quarter and Eastern Province. During my first night in the desert with them, when the sunset prayer was called, I found that I could not just sit alone and not pray with them. I could not deny their religion by saying that I was a Christian as others in similar situations before me had done. I knew in my heart that their Allah was the same God that I had known as a child. And so I prayed with them that prayer, and then every other prayer, five times a day throughout the year and a half that I lived, herded, and migrated with them.

Their leader, Talib, taught me the Fatihah (opening chapter of the Qur'an). I proclaimed the Shahadah (declaration of faith) many times, and in public. I fasted the two Ramadans that I spent with them. Islam was seamlessly integrated into everything we did. It punctuated and regulated our whole life from the most mundane to the most sublime, and it embraced everybody in the community. No one was left out. This was not particularly religious in a spiritual or intellectual way; the Islam we lived was "normal," how everyday life was constituted.

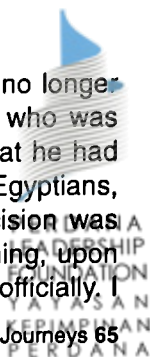
I wrote long ago that the happiest days of my life were those I lived among these Muslim Arab Bedouin. That is still true today, 35 years later; but I feel a new happiness now as I return once again to Islam. A Bedouin brother and friend asked me if I would continue to pray and fast after I left them. I asserted that of course I would continue and said that Islam did not end at the borders of Saudi Arabia.

But back in Berkeley life was different. My notes show that in the first course that I ever taught, I talked about Islam being a "beautiful religion." I expressed strong positive vibes for Islam but I no longer prayed and none of the nominal Muslims whom I knew in Berkeley prayed either. Soon afterwards I was employed at The American University in Cairo where a secular agenda dominated. Back then, in the 1970s, Arabic was hardly heard on campus. Islam at AUC was then mainly history, art and architecture, and field trips to the museum and some exquisite old mosques. Later in the 1980s, "political" Islam began to be heard, veils and a few beards began to appear on campus, and more students were fasting.

Then the Muslim students at AUC asked for the unheard of: a mosque or prayer area on campus. Many considered these changes a horrible slide backwards from modernity and progress. I, however, respected what these Muslim students were doing. I tried in my courses to present Islam and the changes underway in a positive light while also walking the tightrope of scientific "neutrality" or "value-free" social science. In my heart, and given my salafi (or Wahhabi) "upbringing" in Saudi Arabia, I liked what I saw happening and took offense at snide comments against these young Muslims made by colleagues - Muslim and Christian, Egyptian and American. Yet, I simply observed.

Around the same time, a Bedouin whom I had not seen for more than twenty years suddenly appeared at one of the gates of AUC, and I was soon in Saudi Arabia for a short visit. I was in the desert again. The magnificent desert Arabian night sky, miraculously without columns or any support, was overpowering. The camels were present chewing their cuds, just like before. The people were the same, my brothers of long ago and now also their sons and grandsons. An old friend asked if I would call the prayer. I deferred, but of course I prayed with them. More than 30 years had passed since I had prayed together with others, but I had not forgotten.

That night I knew that it was time for me to wake up. I could no longer remain an observer. Back in Cairo I asked an American Muslim who was taking a course with me how he had converted and he told me that he had simply said the Shahadah before a Sheikh. I asked a couple of Egyptians, and they told me to go to al-Azhar University. I asked if circumcision was required. The unofficial verdict was no, not at my age. Early morning, upon waking, I knew without doubt that I wanted to submit formally and officially. I



told my brother. We met the next day at the office of the Grand Imam of al-Azhar. I submitted to Allah. A few close friends who heard the news were very happy and congratulated me enthusiastically. A retired Egyptian police General, a close friend of a close friend, congratulated me but said that I must now pray regularly and in the mosque. I knew on my own that the purification (tahar) of circumcision was necessary, and so I had myself circumcised; it was not the big deal I had always imagined and feared.

Towards the end of the summer of 2003, I went for a month's vacation in eastern Saudi Arabia. My bedouin brothers said that I should perform the 'Umrah (the lesser pilgrimage). In a matter of hours, I was on an airplane from Dammam to Jeddah. When the pilot announced that in ten minutes we would cross the miqat, the line at which one must don the ceremonial robes, tears flowed and I cried like I have never cried before. Mecca, the Great Mosque, the Ka'aba, the tawaf (circumambulation), the sa'iy (running between the hills of Safwa and Marwah), the cutting of my hair, were all truly beyond words. Never have I experienced or even imagined anything like the 'Umrah, and then the praying and the sitting and the thinking in the Great Mosque. Islam does not belong to me. Islam does not belong to the reader. Islam belongs to Allah, Exalted is He! Perhaps my real journey is just now beginning. My ears are open, for the first time in a long time - perhaps the first time ever. I hear the call of da'wah (invitation to Allah). There is hope that America will be saved not from, but by Muslims. There is a lot of work for us Muslims to do and long roads to travel, both in America and in the whole world. Allahu Akbar!



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA

3. THE ROAD FROM ROME TO MECCA: THE CONVERSION OF NUH HA MIM KELLER

(Sheikh of the Shadilah Tarekat)

by Sulaiman Dufford

“Milenia Muslim” Magazine, Kuala Lumpur, May, 2004

The Catholic Church preserved itself over the centuries by means of a “liturgy” and various rituals known as the “sacraments”. “Liturgy” refers to a text and order of worship for the Catholic Mass, of which there are several types for different days and occasions. The Mass itself is one of the “sacraments”. Others are baptism, marriage, confession, extreme unction (for the dying), and so on. After centuries of stability in these matters, the so-called “infallible” Catholic Pope (by means of the “Second Vatican Council” of 1963) began ordering a series of changes that brought nothing but confusion and doubt into the life of a young farmboy from the northwest USA, Nuh Ha Mim Keller.

After entering a Catholic university, Keller also came to question Church “indulgences”, which he called “trading in stocks and bonds in the hereafter - do such and such, and so-and-so many years will be remitted from your sentence in purgatory”. He also came to reject belief in a Trinitarian God, which he declared that “...no one in the history of the world, neither priest nor layman, had been able to explain in a convincing way.”

Keller also felt a longing for a sacred scripture, a book that could furnish guidance as an integral whole. He had found the Bible could not be easily read or understood in this way, and that its authenticity was disputed even by Christians themselves. He found principal 20th century textual critics who could not reconstruct the life of Jesus from the New Testament with any degree of confidence. He quotes theologians Joachim Jeremias and Rudolph Bultmann that “...without a doubt it is true to say that the dream of ever writing a biography of Jesus is over.”

Keller’s further university studies in philosophy taught him to ask two things of whomever claimed to have the truth: What do you mean, and how do you know? About his Catholicism, he found no answers and saw that Christianity had “slipped from his hands”. He then embarked on a search identical with this author’s, the quest for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world.

He took a summer job on a fishing boat in Alaska, and returned for many summers after that. The money was good, and he found there the power and beauty of the natural world - the wind, water, storms, and rain, and the smallness of man before the “immense book” of these wonders. In his short

book, "Becoming Muslim", Keller writes: "...the great natural events of the sea surrounding us seemed to defy... our uncomprehending attempts to come to terms with them. Suddenly, we were just there, shaken by the forces around us without making sense of them, wondering if we would make it through. Some, it was true, would ask God's help at such moments, but when we returned safely to shore, we behaved like men who knew little of Him, as if those moments had been a lapse into insanity, embarrassing to think of at happier times."

Keller concluded that man was small and weak and did not control the large forces around him. Later, when he came upon an early translation of Al Qur'an, Keller appreciated its inimitable description of such events and admired the purity with which it presented fundamental concepts. In other words, his first validation of the Qur'an was AESTHETIC in nature. So he decided to learn Arabic and left for Egypt.

"In Egypt, I found something I believe brings many to Islam, namely, the mark of pure monotheism upon its followers... I met many Muslims in Egypt, good and bad, but all influenced by the teachings of their Book... One was a man on the side of the Nile near the Miqyas Gardens, where I used to walk. I came upon him praying on a piece of cardboard... I started to pass in front of him, but suddenly checked myself and walked around behind. As I watched for a moment, I beheld a man absorbed in his relation to God, oblivious to my presence... To my mind, there was something magnificently detached about this, altogether strange for someone coming from the West, where praying in public was virtually the only thing that remained obscene."

When Keller found A. J. Arberry's translation of Al Qur'an, "The Koran Interpreted", he recalled his early wish for a sacred book. Like myself, when he first encountered Arberry's rhapsodic translation style, he felt that the reality of divine revelation, the Wahyu, had now been placed before him.

"In its exalted style, its power, its inexorable finality, its uncanny way of anticipating the arguments of the atheist heart in advance and answering them - it was a clear exposition of God as God and man as man."

Then, when a Yemeni friend in Cairo brought him a Qur'an to study, he put it down with other books he had stacked on the floor. His friend silently stooped and picked it up, out of respect. Keller was impressed, because even though this man was not religious, he still displayed the effect of Islam upon him.

And again, while Keller was walking on the banks of the Nile, covered with dust and rather shabbily dressed, a woman dressed in black from head to toe approached him, pressed a coin into his hand, and hurried away. She had thought he was poor and gave him help, whether he was Muslim or not. When I myself happened to be without funds, I was also helped, without

solicitation or expectation of reward, by the poorest Muslims of Jakarta. These acts of spontaneous kindness caused us both to think a lot about Islam. Again from his book:

“Christianity had its good points to be sure, but they seemed mixed with confusions, and I found myself more and more inclined to look to Islam for their fullest and most perfect expression. I found myself thinking that a man must have some sort of religion, and I was more impressed by the effect of Islam on the lives of Muslims, a certain nobility of purpose and largesse of soul, than I had ever been by any other religion’s on its followers. The Muslims seemed to have more than we did.” One day in 1977, one of Keller’s friends in Cairo asked him why he didn’t become a Muslim. And so he did. He now lives in Amman, Jordan.



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
PERDANA

4. THE MOSQUES IN MY LIFE

by Sulaiman Dufford

“Milenia Muslim” Magazine, Kuala Lumpur, April 2004

It was the sight of Islam’s magnificent monuments to human worship that first attracted me to the religion. My bus to Istanbul left from Alexandroupoulos on the Greek border, where I had spent New Year’s Eve of 1960-61. After crossing to the Turkish side, a veritable parade of village children welcomed me into their country, literally singing and dancing all the way through town. This was a truly royal welcome from the Muslim children!

My bus then skirted Edirne, where I saw from a distance the masterpiece of the great architect Sinan. Sinan’s patron was none other than the renowned Sultan Sulaiman. Sultan Sulaiman has been called “The Magnificent” by Europeans, but not by Turkish Muslims. The Turks wisely and respectfully call him “Al Qanuni”, or “Lawgiver”.

Sulaiman’s “court” architect, Sinan, was commissioned to build a memorial to the Sultan’s predecessor and father, Sultan Selim, in Edirne, so it is called the Selimiye Mosque. Much of Istanbul’s famous skyline today consists of other mosques created by Sinan, and I can say from personal experience that the feeling of praying in these mosques is quite unique. The most aesthetically “perfect” Friday prayer I can remember, for example, was conducted while I was visiting Sinan’s Sulaimaniye Mosque on one of Istanbul’s prominent hills in 1990. These mosques are, after all, the crown jewels of a five-hundred-year stable unity of the Muslim Ummah under the Ottomans.

In Teheran and later Mashad, in Eastern Iran near the Afghan border, I marveled at the visionary splendor of the Iranian mosques. On my first morning in Mashad, I awakened to the most beautiful sound I thought I had ever heard - the azan or call-to-prayer, ringing out in sublime counterpoint from all the mosques in that holy city (one of the Shi’ite spiritual luminaries is buried there).

And then my first Ramadan began as I crossed the border into Afghanistan in 1961. At sunset, the bus simply pulled off the road and tea was brewed on a portable burner. Cakes were passed around. In the city, food was simply unavailable during the day, so the Ramadan was unavoidable! These Afghan mosques are massive and very austere in their desolation, and I was warned to stay away from them or possibly be mobbed by angry believers. After all, I was still an infidel.

I can remember the exact day that Islam really entered my heart forever. It was February 22, 1961. That morning, I felt at first as if something

alien had entered my being. I admit that it frightened me. Later, I realized my true conversion occurred then, in the middle of that first Ramadan, whose Id celebration I later joined in New Delhi when I arrived there. Upon return to the USA after my first circumambulation of the globe, I sought out teachers and further information about Islam.

After nine years of further study, my formal conversion occurred in 1970 in Los Angeles in a simple frame house that served as the Islamic Center of Southern California at that time. Thirty-three years ago, I was walking aimlessly down another nearby street, having been recently rejected in marriage, and I saw the house with the sign "Islamic Center" outside. So I went in to inquire.

Imam El Bialy answered my question about the formalities of becoming Muslim by taking my hand and asking me if I believed in certain things. I said yes. He then asked me if I could repeat certain words in Arabic. I did. He and his friends in that room then said, "Congratulations, you are now a real Muslim." I celebrated afterward by drinking my first glass of cold milk in many years. Only later did I encounter the Hadith that mentions the choice of the Prophet (s.a.w.) to drink fresh milk after his return from the Throne of Allah on Isra Mir'aj. Perhaps my conversion, my "Masuk Islam", was like a small Ascension to Heaven for my own soul. And Allah knows best.

Then I set about to learn how to pray. Many Pakistani brothers at a nearby university helped me a great deal. But in order to avoid falling into mechanization, I refused to simply memorize words and movements. I only learned very slowly, step-by-step, and I would not move to the next step until I had gained some inner understanding of the importance of the previous one in my personal daily life. So it took some years.

People cannot convert overnight. Even the Prophet himself (s.a.w.) took some years to receive all the details of the Holy Qur'an, Iman (creed), and Ibadah (devotions). But as I learned, I noticed an interesting phenomenon. There were inner changes accompanying each advance in the outer Ibadah. In fact, it was some years before this Ibadah really began revealing its secrets to me, in all their miraculous subtlety. And it was only during my second Umroh (Lesser Pilgrimage) that I was given a vision, while praying in Masjid An Nabawi in Madinah, of the exquisite perfection of our Ibadah, along with the sadness of recognizing how far short the world has fallen, of reaping its incredible blessings.

My final example of "Inner Hijrah" was the feeling of cutting a virgin pathway through the jungle of my soul as I began traveling every Friday to pray in the San Francisco mosque. It took a lot of determination, and there were so many distractions! How many times do we postpone our prayer because we are busy with something, we don't want to lose our concentration, and so on?

Finally, the INNER importance of the Friday prayer, especially for a convert, occurred to me. The influences of our previous religion and habits, our ancestry, our secular social milieu, traditions such as personal freedom and the pursuit of happiness above everything, and so on, are relentless in attempting to re-assert themselves in our hearts. So we must serve notice on all these influences and habits, that **WE ARE NO LONGER INTERESTED**. We join together with our born-Muslim brothers by praying shoulder-to-shoulder with them, whenever we can, and certainly whenever we hear the azan.

And this is only one simple example of how our Ibadah performs an incredible process of de-conditioning. Without it, we would be utterly lost in this modern world and the seduction of its commercial and sexual harassment. The jema'ah or congregation in the mosque serves as the initial goal of our Hijrah - inner and outer. Later, that Friday congregation, like our daily five prayers, becomes like breathing. Without it, we are disturbed, incomplete, **COURTING DANGER**. Muslim psychologists have only begun to understand the genius of our Ibadah. But we ourselves can come to realize this genius by simply establishing it as the true pillar of our worship and life on earth.



5. TWO JAPANESE WOMEN BECOME MUSLIM

Monica

I was guided to Islam by my heart and emotions. I was raised in the technologically-advanced atmosphere of Japan. I lived a peaceful, sedentary life and was blessed with a caring family and the tools to succeed in my studies and work. All avenues were open for me to enjoy an easy and fulfilling life.

My family was religiously Buddhist like many Japanese people, however my connection to Buddhism had been poor since my early childhood, and my parents were unconcerned with my devotion. Nevertheless, since my earliest days, many questions regarding the universe, existence, and life circled in my mind. They would remain with me until I reached the age of twenty when I finished my collegiate studies and began to work amongst the clouds as a flight attendant for a Japanese airline.

I hoped to find peace and meaning through work but rather a great emptiness in my life persisted. There was something missing from my life and I desperately hoped to find out what it was. Allah, the Controller of all affairs, willed that in 1988 I would work as a translator for a Japanese delegation to a tourism agency in Egypt for the duration of one year. Through my new colleagues, I came to learn about Islam.

After completing the year abroad, I returned to Japan and decided to study Islam in the hopes that I might find the answers to my lifelong questions. The information that I had previously gathered about Islam from school and television was not only extremely limited but also severely distorted. Such is the same with most Japanese people who read and hear about nothing but violence coming from the Muslim word.

When I returned to Japan, I went to the Islamic Center in Tokyo and asked for a translation of the Holy Qur'an in Japanese. I would visit the center repeated over a period of three years as I studied Islam with the local scholars. With the passage of time, my understanding and appreciation of Islam increased remarkably. I found the answers to the philosophical questions that had been hounding me for so many years in this beautiful religion.

I was impressed by the status of women in Islam. The Muslim woman is protected and honored, and her feelings, mind, and decency are respected much more so than I had previously imagined. I began to seclude myself and ask Allah to guide me to the Truth and educate me about it. I began to meditate upon the created world in order to see the Hand of Allah behind it. I

would meditate upon the trees, flowers, birds, animals and the carefully crafted design and balance that ruled them.

I felt that Allah had in fact two books — the spoken book in the form of the Holy Qur'an and the silent book in the form of the universe and all its miracles and majesties. Thus, I saw Allah in His creation and I was guided to Islam by my heart and emotions. I felt the Light of Allah fill my heart. An overwhelming happiness overcame me as my imaan (faith) grew and I felt as if Allah was with me at every moment.

Allah, the Controller of all affairs, willed that I would work as a flight attendant on a particular flight to and from Indonesia for the period of a year. I was taken by the Indonesians' temperament and their adherence to the Qur'an in their daily lives. The Indonesians that I befriended helped me to understand Islam better and increase my love towards it.

I faced several difficulties with my family but I had resolved that I must be a Muslim despite all hurdles that lay before me. I began to perform the five prayers in their correct times, and I exerted great effort in memorizing verses of the Qur'an to enable me to do this correctly. In 1991, I traveled to Egypt to announce publicly my conversion to Islam at the famous al-Azhar University.

I found work in Egypt to live on and soon married an Egypt Muslim man. I remained in Egypt and with time, Allah blessed me with a beautiful daughter named Maryam - the only female name specifically mentioned in the Qur'an. Al-Hamdulillah (all praises be to Allah), I currently live a happy life with my new religion and my new Muslim family. I am spending a lot of time and effort memorizing the Qur'an, and whenever time permits, my husband and I study the Qur'an together and read certain Islamic texts together.

I hope to one day guide my family to Islam, in shah Allah (God willing) soon. Generally speaking, the Japanese people are missing a major component of a happy life, despite their technologically-advanced civilization. I believe that great numbers of them would enter Islam in if they had the proper understanding. They are looking for such answers, and there is no doubt that they are in great need of them.

Sunaku

I lived a calm, secure life and was nurtured by my mother who took to raising me alone after the death of my father. All means of happiness and security were made available to me. However, since my childhood, I was never truly happy, and I was often overwhelmed by a sense of anxiety. I tried to overcome these feelings by working hard at my studies and traveling around the world as a tourist, but my anxieties persisted until I finished my secondary education and traveled to England to study English.

During a school holiday, I traveled with one of my Japanese friends to Jordan. My friend had visited the country before, and she arranged for us to stay with a Jordanian Muslim family. I found their lives very practical and organized, while their house was very clean. I was impressed by the strong family bonds that joined them and their sense of civil responsibility. There was sincerity and mutual trust between them that I had not noticed elsewhere. The husband of the family worked to earn the family's income while the wife maintained the house and appeared content and happy with her job.

I sensed that this was the happiness that I was missing, and I realized that my image of Islam was inherently wrong. I had no idea of the reality of Islam as I had never known Muslims before. My image of them was based merely on what I saw on the news, and thus I ignorantly felt that they were a violent people concerned only with money and oil. I judged Muslim women to be victims of gender persecution at the hands of their husbands.

After my trip to Jordan, I decided to study Islam to learn its true message. When I returned to Japan, I visited the Islamic Center of Tokyo and requested a Japanese translation of the Qur'an and a book on the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). I continued to visit the center and study Islam with scholars of Japanese, Pakistani, and Arab nationalities until I realized that Islam was in fact the Truth. My belief that Allah is the sole Creator and Sustainer of the universe had become unflinching, and the more I read about Islam, the more I increased in faith and understanding. I discovered that Islam in fact improved the status of women and freed her intellectually from objectification. I soon realized that my previous image of Muslim women was distorted, while in fact Islam offered a lifestyle that I had previously only dreamt of living.

After six months of study, I decided that I must become Muslim, thus I declared my conversion and soon became content and resolute in my new faith. I began to pray the daily prayers and fast the month of Ramadan. Allah gave me the ability to memorize some of the smaller chapters of the last part of the Qur'an. I was attracted by the Arabic language when I first heard it, and so I decided to learn this beautiful language. I spent some time learning Arabic in the Islamic Center of Tokyo, and later I would move to Egypt to continue my Islamic studies at an institution affiliated with al-Azhar University and specifically my Arabic studies at a language institute for non-native speakers. I pray that Allah uses me and my story to guide others to the light of Islam, the greatest gift that one can ever receive.



6. A CHRISTIAN ARAB FINDS HER ROOTS

by Aisha

To begin with, I would like to say that the ultimate conclusions that I reached in my quest were in fact a natural result of my initial disregard and indifference. My story begins before my birth with the marriage of my father, a Gulf-Arab Muslim, and my mother, an Arab Christian. She had promised to convert to Islam after the wedding, and thus they married in Europe where they were both studying at the time. However, six months after the wedding my mother refused to accept Islam, and since my father had stipulated her conversion as part of their marriage, he decided to divorce her.

My mother was pregnant with me at the time. After the divorce, she returned to her country. When I was born, my father demanded to take me with him, but my mother's maternal instincts prevented her from allowing it. She insisted and he acquiesced, thereby relegating my relationship with him to financial matters, holiday phone calls, and biennial visits. The effect of my isolation from him was that while I bore certain Muslim traits, most noticeably my Muslim name, I nevertheless knew next to nothing about Islam. My knowledge was confined to geography lessons, history books, and what I witnessed of the dealings of Muslims and Gulf-Arabs in my mother's country in which I lived.

From my early youth until the age of 18, I studied in a Catholic school and would attend church regularly with my mother. I had a Muslim name but I was Christian in faith. I admit that my devotion was halfhearted and I would not look forward to going to church, except occasionally. Nevertheless, I would rebuke myself for my indifference and would vow to attend church at the nearest opportunity. I spent my adolescence recklessly, going out all the time and staying out all night in mixed company. My mother simply advised me against this but otherwise remained aloof.

I finished high school with good grades but not good enough to merit my acceptance to my first-choice college in my mother's country. It was then that I decided to attend college in my father's country. However, when I informed him of my idea, he seemed generally unconcerned and simply asked, "Well, where will you live?" I understood from this that he did not want me to stay with him. In the meantime, my mother's second husband passed away and I suggested that she and my half-brother (through her second husband) come with me to my father's country. I proposed the idea to my father and he being well off agreed to finance the venture including paying for food and a maid, and increasing my monthly allowance.

My subsequent trip became one of the most influential decisions of my life, as I would come to know about Islam through it. In my father's country, I

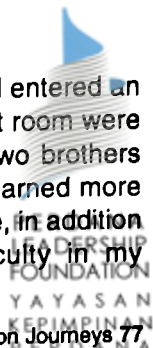
was taken by the Muslims, particularly the young girls in hijab whom I imagined to be precious diamonds and jewels protected in a black velvet cloth. On the other hand, they made me view myself, dressed in provocative clothing, to be like a newspaper advertisement that might draw a momentary glance but carries no real value in the mind of its audience.

It so happened that during my first year of college, I asked mother about Islam, and I will never forget her answer. She said, "I too was once impressed by Islam, and when I married your father, I truly believed in it. However, after studying it more, I reached the conclusion that it's not God's religion. Rather it is nothing more than the fancies of an illiterate Arab who could neither read nor write. It doesn't behoove an educated girl like you to let an illiterate man from over a thousand years ago play with your mind and restrict your life." When I heard this, I was silent and accepted her words at face value.

I was quite content with my carefree lifestyle and I needed little excuse to brush aside what I saw as the restrictions of Islam. Thus, three years passed in this state, and I would think about my religion intermittently. I was an avid Internet user and I would primarily use PalTalk to chat with people on the Net. One day, I accidentally entered the wrong chat room and I found a group of people finding fault with Christianity. They were referring to another room in which people were cursing Islam. Since I bore a Muslim name and had a Muslim father yet was raised on Christianity with a Christian mother, my sympathies were torn. I resolved to decide the matter once and for all, thus for almost two months I would enter each chat room daily for two hours each listening to what the members had to say without commenting. After that period, I was full of questions, so for an additional month I would ask a series of daily questions to the members of the two rooms.

Oddly, I found the Muslims to be much warmer and more welcoming than their Christian counterparts. In fact, the only thing I heard in the Christian chat room was "liars!" or "that's taken from the Old Testament!" I was confused that there should be two distinct heavenly books in a single religion, the later of which was acknowledged to be written by human hands. At the same time, the Muslims were offering me the Qur'an, a single divine book with no contradictions. I compared the two religions and found Islam to conform to my intellect and nature, in addition to my ideals of modesty, cleanliness, justice, and dignity.

After three months, I officially chose Islam as my religion and entered an Islamic chat room to declare my new faith. The people in the chat room were eager to offer their complete help and assistance, particularly two brothers whom I will never forget; may Allah reward them generously. I learned more about the details of Islam from my new brothers and sisters online, in addition to several other books and sites. I experienced little difficulty in my embracing the Sacred Law, as Islam conforms to human nature.



After pronouncing my *Shahadah* (declaration of faith) online, I took a shower and prayed. After three days, I donned the veil and thereby let my mother know of my decision. I cannot repeat what she said to me and what she tried to do to bring me back to Christianity, as her attempts and arguments were enough to fill volumes. Essentially, she called me to secular ideals, saying that I should be able to live my life as I pleased without restrictions. At one point, she even tried to tear apart my copy of the Holy Qur'an, but I fortunately stopped her just in time. Ultimately, my mother realized that she could not change my mind nor break my spirit, and thus we reached a truce in which I agreed that my Islam would not affect her life. She left me to do as I pleased.

I write this story three months after my reversion, and I feel that during this time I have learned more about my religion than if I had been raised Muslim. I entered Islam by my choice and free will and have subsequently rid myself of the bad influences in my life and have found a new definition of "freedom," that is freedom from the worship of my base desires. Allah has become my adoration for Whose sake I struggle to purify all my actions in order to achieve His Pleasure. I am currently working to develop my practice, and I am studying correct Qur'an recitation and have committed various parts of Allah's Book to memory. I also try to be very punctual in my prescribed prayers. I urge all of humanity to ponder Islam in the same manner that I did - with an open mind and a desire for sincere Guidance from Allah. Thank you for reading my story and forgive me if you found it too long (I actually shortened the original considerably, believe it or not). For those who are interested, I am now 21 years old and in my final year of college. Sincerely,
Your sister in Islam, Aisha.



7. ISLAM: A HOME FOR THE HEART

by Adam Ibrahim (Don Trammell)

I first heard about Islam back in 1999 while working for a Finnish software house. I was searching the Net and entered a chat room. While There I met an Egyptian woman that was curious about wireless technology. We continued to meet and chat via the Internet and discuss the different aspects of wireless solutions and the future of the technology. Throughout our conversations, I asked more and more about Islam and why does she believe what she believes. Through it all, she was very patient and understanding of my questions and was very good at explaining things to me about Islam and the differences between Islam and Christianity.

My religious upbringing was fostered by my mother, a devout Christian who has a deep sense of spirituality and belief in God. In some ways, I could say that seeing her faith throughout my upbringing has left my heart open in the search for the true meaning of life. Allah has blessed me with a mother, who in many ways lives a life of Islam through her daily Christian actions of compassion and understanding of those around her. My burgeoning interest in Islam coupled with an already instilled belief in God was perhaps the opening that I needed on my journey. Prior to my reversion, I was a Christian in name only. While I did believe in God, I had not to submitted Him as the maker and creator of my destiny. I felt that this was something I was better off handling rather than letting God decide my fate. Being raised in the West and subjected to the influences with which we are constantly bombarded, did not help the situation neither. In a word, you could say that I was living by my own set of rules.

Over the course of about a year, a business relationship developed and I was introduced to several other Muslim gentlemen and we arranged that I would travel down to Cairo. It just so happened that my trip coincided with the holy month of Ramadan. While in Cairo my hosts were celebrating Ramadan and so were all of the individuals that we were meeting with. I was intrigued that everyone was fasting and “suddenly disappearing”, to return about 15 minutes later. To be part of the crowd I decided that I would also begin to observe the days of fasting as a sign of solidarity with my hosts. I left Cairo a few weeks later wondering about the ritual in which I had just participated. I later returned to Cairo for business and was paired with someone in the marketing section of one of the largest ISP's in Cairo to talk about how to integrate wireless solutions into the market down in Cairo. We were preparing for Cairo Telecom, a large IT trade fair that required many sleepless days and nights of preparation.

My host, Ms Noha, and I were together night and day working on the presentation that we would deliver. I noticed that at certain times of the day,

she would simply excuse herself and suddenly return about 15 minutes later. After a few days of interruptions I confronted her as to what was so important that she had to stop in the middle of our preparations. Shyly, and after several minutes of avoidance, she admitted that she was going to do her daily prayers, and that she was performing them at their prescribed times. My feelings of annoyance quickly faded away and were replaced with feelings of awe and respect.

I too wanted to have this feeling of the importance of God in my life. Slowly I began to ask more and more questions about Islam and what it is like to be a Muslim. Noha never pushed but used a gentle hand to guide me in the direction where I could find the information that I needed. I left Egypt at the end of Cairo Telecomp confused but with a desire and burning on my heart, not to mention a suitcase full of books to quench my thirst to learn more. A quick four-day trip brought me back to Cairo towards the end of March 2001. My first stop was to my virtual Islam teacher, to ask her more questions about the things that I had read. The time passed faster than what seemed expected on this trip as there was not enough time in the day to work and to talk about Islam.

One important thing that I also realized is that I had fallen in love. My heart was completely taken with the warm and friendly people that I had grown to care for and to feel as my good friends. It was as if Allah was opening my heart to another side of humanity that I had not known before. Being from the West, one can easily become jaded and not trust or accept the basic acts of kindness that seem to be pervasive in the Middle East. I felt that my heart had found a home. Six long months passed by before I would step foot on Egyptian soil once again. In the previous months, the company that I worked for filed for bankruptcy and the thought of getting back down to Cairo seemed farther and farther away, but I was determined to continue my reading and learning and questioning.

Finally, on a warm summer night, while surfing the Internet a feeling of an epiphany came over me. I felt that I was no longer to hold on to the things of my past or to live my life the way that it was. Some people talk about seeing a light, or hearing a voice, or something of this nature and I would be the first to say that it sounds very theatrical but I too felt something more than just a whisper but a push or an opening of my heart. I wanted to scream, to shout, to cry, to dance, to run, to laugh all at the same time. I had a complete flood of emotions that to this day, I cannot explain, nor do I really need to. Some things are better enjoyed rather than analyzed.

I sent an email to Noha to tell her what I felt, and to ask her what I should do. She was gentle and kind and understood me completely. She told me to relax, to settle down and gather my feelings. From that day forward, I decided that I had to return to Egypt, to my people, to my home, to find what

was calling me there. My chance to return came while working for a telecommunications consulting firm. I was to consult for a top Egyptian company in the marketing section. I enjoyed the work with Hatem, with whom I had a business relationship that was cultivated several months earlier through my other Egyptian friends, Hany and Hisham. I was very happy to work for a friendly face. I departed for Egypt at the end of August with the hopes of completing my journey by answering the call that I could not explain. I started working the next day at offices where I met nice people who immediately made me feel at home.

On this day, I met two people that would be instrumental in helping me to take the steps that would point me down the road, Mohamad and Sherief. Upon hearing that I wanted to know more about Islam and possibly to convert, Mohamad invited me to a men's group where they talked about the Qur'an and the blessed prophet. After the end of the meeting, we all prayed the evening prayer, Isha. This was my first time to actually participate in a group prayer, and to hear the Al Fatihah. It was so moving and solemn. I could not help but cry as the words from Allah moved my heart. The next day, I related the story to Hatem and Sherief and they were very supportive. I continued to read and ask questions and felt that my trek was drawing to a close.

September 11th was the catalyst that began to bring things to a close or to fruition. After that attack, all of my work mates came to me and offered their condolences and to say that this is not Islam but something very terrible and please do not think that Muslims are bad people. I could feel the pain and sadness expressed by many. Measured by the climate following the attacks, people in the West would not believe that Muslims really felt that way. I felt that these words of comfort spoke for many Muslims around the world. As the next few weeks drew on, it was clear that maybe the Middle East was not a safe place for an American, as sentiment against American policy, not Americans, was running rather high. I began to feel rushed and that I would not convert at all, and this was the reason in the first place to come to Cairo.

Hundreds convert all over the world everyday but for me, it had to take place in an Islamic Arab country. Pure symbolism but important symbolism nonetheless. Sensing my frustration, Noha introduced me again to a business acquaintance, Sameh (my dear brother). Sameh gave me a crash course in Wudu, how to pray, how to behave, what to do and what to give up for. On October 2, 2001, Sameh picked me up to go for a ride, and we ended up at Al-Azhar's famous Mosque, and there I made my declaration that there is no God except Allah and Muhammad is His messenger. There was not a dry eye in the place. It was quite an experience for all involved. I look forward to the day when all those who helped me on my journey to Islam and myself will celebrate together in paradise. Wa Allahu Akbar.

8. AMAZED BY THE BEAUTY

by Colonel Donald S. Rockwell

The simplicity of Islam, the powerful appeal and the compelling atmosphere of its mosques, the earnestness of its faithful adherents, the confidence inspiring realization of the millions throughout the world who answer the five daily calls to prayer - these factors attracted me from the first. But after I had determined to become a follower of Islam, I found many deeper reasons confirming my decision. The mellow concept of life - fruit of the Prophet's course of action combined with contemplation - the wise counsel, the admonitions to charity and mercy, the broad humanitarianism, the pioneer declaration of woman's property rights - these and other factors of the teachings of the man of Mecca were to me among the most obvious evidence of a practical religion.

The broadminded tolerance of Islam for other religions recommends it to all lovers of liberty. Muhammad admonished his followers to treat well the believers in the Old and New Testaments; and Abraham, Moses and Jesus are acknowledged as co-prophets of the One God. Surely this is generous and far in advance of the attitude of other religions. The total freedom from idolatry is a sign of the salubrious strength and purity of the Muslim faith. The original teachings of the Prophet of God have not been engulfed in the maze of changes and additions of doctrinarians. The Qur'an remains as it came to the corrupt polytheistic people of Muhammad's time, changeless as the holy heart of Islam itself. The democracy of Islam has always appealed to me. Potentate and pauper have the same rights on the floor of the mosque, on their knees in humble worship. There are no rented pews nor special reserved seats. The Muslim accepts no man as a mediator between himself and God. He goes directly to the invisible source of creation and life, God, without reliance on formulas of repentance or belief in the power of a teacher to afford him salvation. The universal brotherhood of Islam, regardless of race, politics, color or country, has been brought home to me most keenly many times in my life and this is another feature that drew me towards the Faith.

Moderation and temperance in all things, the keynotes of Islam, won my unqualified approbation. The health of his people was cherished by the Prophet, who enjoined them to observe strict cleanliness and specified fasts and to subordinate carnal appetites. When I stood in the inspiring mosques of Istanbul, Damascus, Jerusalem, Cairo, Algiers, Tangier, Fez and other cities, I was conscious of the powerful and potent uplift of Islam's simple appeal to the sense of higher things, unaided by elaborate trappings, ornamentations, figures, pictures, music or complicated ceremonial ritual. The mosque is a place of quiet contemplation and self-effacement in the greater reality of the One God.

9. MY JOURNEY TO ISLAM

by Abu Abdur-Rahman

My father was in charge of the construction division of Hyundai Corporation. He lived in many countries overseeing the building and construction projects for Hyundai Corporation. When my father was stationed in Indonesia, our family moved there for two and a half years. Being an infant at the time, I do not remember much of Indonesia. However, I remember my two-and-a-half-year stay in Saudi Arabia very clearly. My father had been in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, for nine years building and constructing for the Saudi Royal family. We (our family) joined him for his last two and a half years in the Kingdom. My experience in Saudi was a memorable one, I got to experience and see many things. We had a very luxurious life in Saudi, however our experience with the people there in general had been a bad one. My father, to this day, hates Arabs (Saudis, but to my father they are all the same) for his ill treatment by the Saudis during his stay. I remember him complaining how arrogant the Saudis were, and how they looked down upon him with bad manners, how backward they were, how risky it was doing business with them, etc. As for me, I had my own problems. I remember getting into fights with the Saudi kids every other day. My brothers and I could not play in the playground because the kids would start throwing rocks at us if we got close to the playground.

With these memorable experiences, we (our family) moved to United States. I had a very close friend in High School (we will call him A.C. for anonymity). We played football together, and we tried to pull as many pranks as possible when the opportunities presented themselves, a pair of knuckleheads who could not avoid trouble to save their own lives. But through this friendship, Allah s.w.t. guided a lost soul to Islam (the Truth). After High School, I moved out of town and went to college. My parents had gone back to Korea when I was in High School, so I was used to being independent (except financially).

I reached my peak in terms of misguidance (being lost) while I was in college. The environment I was in was such that it only led me deeper and deeper into misguidance and self-destruction. But I was oblivious to this fact, and even if I did know I probably would not have cared. I was in this state when I received a phone call from A.C., my close friend from High School. He had called to tell me that he had become a Muslim. I did not take it seriously at first, because I knew that he was going through some personal problems at the time. I thought that he was going through a phase, and he would snap out of it once he cleared his problems.

But as time passed, it became obvious that my friend had become a fanatic (so I thought at the time). I started to avoid talking to him, all he would

talk about was Islam and we would end up having a religious argument, him for Islam and I for Christianity. It came to a point that whenever he called, I would find an excuse not to talk to him. Because my parents were in Korea, I did not have a place to stay when I came back to my hometown. I used to stay with A.C. whenever I was in town; his family treated me like a second son (May Allah guide them, Ameen). But after A.C. had become a Muslim, I started to avoid staying with him. It happened so that I came back in town for a break from college. I stayed with another friend of mine from high school instead of A.C.

One night, my friends and I went out to a party hosted by another friend from high school, but somehow A.C. found out. A.C. called the place where the party was going on and had asked to speak with me. When I picked up the phone, A.C. told me to stand and wait for him outside. I felt a little guilty because I had been trying to avoid him all break, so I decided to wait for him outside. Some of the people at the party asked me where I was going, so I told them that I was going outside to meet A.C. They decided to come outside with me, they were also friends with A.C. when we were in High School.

When A.C. pulled up in his car, he did not even get out of the car. He rolled down his window and told me to get in. I could sense a bit of urgency in his voice, so I got into the car. A.C. and I spent the rest of the night talking about religion. A.C. pulled out a book by Ahmed Didat, and started to ask me things that I could not answer. It was still very early in the morning and we were still discussing religion, when A.C. asked me if I would like to accompany him to the Mosque for Morning Prayer. I consented and we went to the Mosque.

There, in the Mosque, as I stood in the back and watched, I saw something that I never saw in any church. As people came in, I saw people of different ethnicity and social and financial status. They lined up next to each other filling the line. I remember saying to myself, "that's something you don't see everyday". After the prayer, a Muslim came up to me and asked me if I was a Muslim. I said "no". By this time, A.C. and two other Muslims had approached me, and one of them invited us for breakfast. So we ended up at a house eating breakfast, and the brothers started give me Da'wah. We watched a film about three youths who converted (reverted, I should say) to Islam. The host and another brother who was with us were two of the three youths in the film. Something was holding me back. I was not ready to accept the Truth yet. We thanked the host and were getting ready to leave when he gave me a copy of the Holy Qur'an as a gift.

A.C. had made me promise that I would read the Qur'an, so with that we parted and I went back to my college. It was not long before I settled back into my usual college life again. A.C. called every now and then to see what was going on with me. He would ask me if I had read the Qur'an, and my answer

would be “not yet, but I was going to”. And the Qur’an was sitting on my bookshelf, collecting dust all the while. One night, when all my friends had gone out, I decided to stay in and do some school work. I finished studying early and was left to ponder what to do next. Then I saw the Qur’an (English Translation) sitting on my bookshelf, and I said to myself “Why not, what could it hurt?”. So I picked up the Qur’an and started to read.

Allahu Akbar, never in my life have I heard a truer speech than the Qur’an. “This is the Book; in it is guidance sure, without doubt; to those who fear Allah” (Surah Al-Baqarah, Ayah #2). What a bold statement! I said to myself, “Either this book is a lie or it is the Truth”. But as I read, it became very clear to me that there is no falsehood in it. I was not able to put it down, I read and read through the whole night. I was shocked and amazed. A whole lot of things started to swirl in my head, my parents, my family, my friends, the worldly life that I so indulged in. But everything became insignificant before the Truth, except for my family. Thoughts were coming into my head : “What are my parents going to say? What are my brothers going to say? What if my family disowns me? What if they cut me off (both kinship and financially)?”

Around 6 a.m., I was still reading the Qur’an when the phone rang. I picked up the phone and it was A.C. He started with the usual “How are you doing? How is your school?”, etc. The whole time I kept quiet. Sensing something unusual, he asked me: “What is Wrong?” How can I deny myself the Truth after finding out about it? I asked him, “How do you become a Muslim?” A.C. was surprised (in a good way I am sure). A.C. told me to repeat after him: “I bear witness that there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah, and Muhammed (s.a.w.) is His messenger” -- “Ashadu ala ilaha ilallah, wa ashadu anna Muhammadan Rasululah.” And I was a Muslim.



10. MY JOURNEY TO ISLAM

by Yusuf Estes

In the first 50 years or so of my life I had been married, divorced, remarried, had 5 children, 4 grandchildren and lived under some poor and some rich conditions. I had been able to visit almost every state in the United States and visited 16 other countries around the world, including Monaco, the Grand Bahamas, Canada, Mexico, France, Germany, England, Italy, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Ireland, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Denmark and Austria.

I have enjoyed the company of princes, paupers, rulers and slaves (really). I have been the guest in palaces and been a member of exclusive country clubs and even sat in jails with prisoners. I have made and lost large fortunes of wealth on this earth. I started my own business at 12 years of age. I made my first million before the age of 35. I lost it by age 40. Several times after that I earned other fortunes and wasted them on foolishness. But I never considered I was a 'loser'. I was only: "In between successes."

Now, please allow me to make a few observations about us as human beings. No human can truly claim the 'happiness of success' unless and until he comes to grips with the truth of the purpose of life. I had to ask some questions: Is there a purpose to life? Is this all there is? Is there a plan? Who am I? Where am I going? Is there a god? Is there life after death? Is there proof?

Unless and until these questions are satisfied within the soul of the human, he can never truly claim a peace within. That 'peace' which only comes with the compliance to the purpose of the individual with regard to his Creator can never be achieved and will always be sought for until he comes to the reality of the 'Purpose of Creation', 'Purpose of Life', and 'Fulfillment of Purpose' within. This concept of total reality can only be developed when the individual realizes that he or she is not the creator or the sustainer of 'self'. Nor did he/she create this environment. All of this came from outside of his/her control and abilities.

This life He put us into is then, in fact, merely a test to show us our own true nature and characteristics. Although, He has All Knowledge and does not need to put us in this test to know our nature. But rather, that we would be reconstructed on the Day of Judgment by Him, to be shown our behavior and deeds in this life. He will then let us see, One Day, that we were indeed most ungrateful for what He has given us and have not fulfilled the terms and conditions of the 'Purpose of Life' here in this material world. In a sense, being brought forward as it were, to bear witness against ourselves on this Day of Judgment. These are the teachings of the True religion: Islam & its followers; The Muslims.

11. MY JOURNEY TO ISLAM

by Abu Mohammed Abdullah Yousef

I was born in England just after World War II. My family are Catholic. My father, who was a Methodist, converted to Catholicism to marry my mother. We were brought up in a strictly religious manner and I could answer the Mass in Latin before I could read or write in English. Religion was one of my favorite subjects at school. I did well at it too. By the time I was eleven I earned a scholarship to a boarding school run by Jesuit priests and my parents were hoping that they would have a priest in the family - every Catholic parent's dream. One time after being beaten, I ran away and when I arrived home I was beaten again by my father because I left the school. He was insisting that I should go back, but I told him I was determined that if he took me back, I would run away again. There was no option but for me to leave the school and go to a normal high school. All the time that I remained at home, I was made to attend Church with the rest of my family, but my heart was no longer in it.

At that time, I became an Agnostic... not sure of my beliefs, but knowing that the one religion I did know anything about was not correct. As soon as I could, I left home. I joined the Royal Air Force when I was 15 years old and did not go to Church at that time. I met my future wife when I went to her home on vacation with her brother. She belonged to the Church of Scotland (a Protestant Church). We decided not to have a church wedding. After I finished my service in the RAF, I left the UK in 1976 to work in a Muslim country teaching Electronics to air force officers and NCOs.

I never knew a Muslim before this time, and I had certain preset ideas (all wrong I hasten to add) of what Islam was about. There was nothing in the behavior of the students that really impressed me. They were not praying and in general they did not have a religious attitude; some were even drinking and womanizing. Most of them had a rather lackadaisical attitude to their studies, saying "Insha'Allah" to all my instructions, and they gave me the impression that they didn't really have to work hard; their philosophy was "whatever will be, will be".

I started to read the Qur'an for two reasons: firstly, I wanted to be a good instructor, and had hoped that if I could get inside the students' mindset then I would get my points across to them better and hopefully instill in them more enthusiasm for their studies. And secondly, I wanted to prove Islam wrong. Once the students found out that I was reading Qur'an, they brought a Sheikh to the classroom to talk to me. We had several detailed discussions, and he questioned me about my beliefs. At the end of one of our talks, the Sheikh said to me, "You are Muslim, you just don't know it yet". For several months I continued to read Qur'an, and the more I read, the more impressed I was by the logic, consistency and purity of Islam. I made the *Shahadah* late in 1976.

12. THE RISING RELIGION

by Ali Muhammad Mori

About 18 years ago, I was in Manchuria where Japan was still wielding power. It was in a desert near Pieching that I first came across a group of Muslims. They were leading a pious life and I was deeply impressed by their way of living and by their attitude on life. This impression became deeper and deeper as I traveled into the interior of Manchuria. I returned to Japan - a defeated country - in summer of 1946 and I found that the situation in Japan had changed altogether.

There was tremendous change in the realm of thinking of the people. Buddhism, the faith of the majority of Japanese, was thoroughly corrupted and instead of providing salvation it was exerting an evil influence upon society. Christianity, after the war had made rapid strides in Japan. Although it had existed there for the previous 90 years, it had remained a formal religion only. At first, Christianity seemed to be accepted by the innocent, pure and simple young people who in a way had killed their love for Buddhism, but to their great disappointment they soon found out that behind the cover of Christianity there existed the network of British and American capitalist interest. Christianity, which has largely been given up in Christian countries, is now being used for export, to serve their capitalistic interest.

Japan is geographically located between Russia on the one hand and America on the other. Both wish to exert their influence on the Japanese people. None can offer a lasting and happy solution to the spiritually disturbed Japanese people. To my mind it will be the doctrine of Islam and none other that undoubtedly offers the much sought solution. Particularly, I am appreciative for the fraternity in Islam. All Muslims are brethren unto one another and God has enjoined that they should live in peace and harmony with each other. I believe that it is this type of 'Brotherhood' which is so vital and needed most by the world today.

Last summer three Muslims visited Tokushima. They had come from Pakistan and it was from them that I learned a great deal about Islam and what it stands for. Mr. Motiwala in Kobe and Mr. Mita in Tokyo came to my help and I embraced Islam.



13. PEACEFUL ISLAM

by Muhammad Asad

In 1922 I left my native country, Austria, to travel through Africa and Asia as a Special Correspondent to some of the leading Continental newspapers, and spent from that year onward nearly the whole of my time in the Islamic East. My interest in the nations with which I came into contact was in the beginning that of an outsider only. I saw before me a social order and an outlook on life fundamentally different from the European; and from the very first there grew in me a sympathy for the more tranquil Islamic life rather than the more mechanized mode of living in Europe.

This sympathy gradually led me to an investigation of the reasons for such a difference, and I became interested in the religious teachings of the Muslims. At the time in question, that interest was not strong enough to draw me into the fold of Islam, but it opened to me a new vista of a progressive human society, of real brotherly feeling. The reality, however, of present day Muslim life appeared to be very far from the ideal possibilities given in the religious teachings of Islam. Whatever, in Islam, had been progress and movement, had turned, among the Muslims, into indolence and stagnation; whatever there had been of generosity and readiness for self-sacrifice, had become, among the present-day Muslims, perverted into narrow-mindedness and love of an easy life.

Prompted by this discovery and puzzled by the obvious incongruence between the Then and Now, I tried to approach the problem before me from a more intimate point of view: that is, I tried to imagine myself as being within the circle of Islam. It was a purely intellectual experiment; and it revealed to me, within a very short time, the right solution. I realized that the one and only reason for the social and cultural decay of the Muslims consisted in the fact that they had gradually ceased to follow the teachings of Islam in spirit. Islam was still there; but it was a body without soul.

The very element that once provided the strength of the Muslim world was now responsible for its weakness. Islamic society had been built, from the very outset, on religious foundations alone. The weakening of those foundations has necessarily weakened the cultural structure - and possibly might cause its ultimate disappearance. The more I understood how concrete and how immensely practical the teachings of Islam are, the more eager became my questioning as to why the Muslims had abandoned their full application to real life.

I discussed this problem with many thinking Muslims in almost all the countries between the Libyan Desert and the Pamirs, between the Bosphorus and the Arabian Sea. It almost became an obsession which ultimately

overshadowed all my other intellectual interests in the world of Islam. The questioning steadily grew in emphasis - until I, a non-Muslim, talked to Muslims as if I was to defend Islam from their negligence and indolence. The progress was imperceptible to me, until one day — it was in autumn 1925, in the mountains of Afghanistan — a young provincial Governor said to me: “But you are a Muslim, only you don’t know it yourself.” I was struck by these words and remained silent. But when I came back to Europe once again, in 1926, I saw that the only logical consequence of my attitude was to embrace Islam. So much about the circumstances of my becoming a Muslim.

Since then I have been asked, time and again: “Why did you embrace Islam? What was it that attracted you particularly?” — and I must confess: I don’t know of any satisfactory answer. It was not any particular teaching that attracted me, but the whole wonderful, inexplicably coherent structure of moral teaching and practical life program. I could not say, even now, which aspect of it appeals to me more than any other. Islam appears to me like a perfect work of architecture. All its parts are harmoniously conceived to complement and support each other: nothing is superfluous and nothing lacking, with the result of an absolute balance and solid composure. Probably this feeling that everything in the teachings and postulates of Islam is “in its proper place,” has created the strongest impression on me. There might have been, along with it, other impressions also which today it is difficult for me to analyze. After all, it was a matter of love; and love is composed of many things; of our desires and our loneliness, of our high aims and our shortcomings, of our strength and our weakness. So it was in my case. Islam came over me like a robber who enters a house by night; but, unlike a robber, it entered to remain for good. Ever since then I have endeavored to learn as much as I could about Islam. I studied the Qur’an and the Traditions of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him); I studied the language of Islam and its history, and a good deal of what has been written about it and against it. I spent over five years in the Hijaz and Najd, mostly in al-Madinah, so that I might experience something of the original surroundings in which this religion was preached by the Arabian Prophet. As the Hijaz is the meeting center of Muslims from many countries, I was able to compare most of the different religious and social views prevalent in the Islamic world in our days. Those studies and comparisons created in me the firm conviction that Islam as a spiritual and social phenomenon is still - in spite of all the drawbacks caused by the deficiencies of the Muslims - by far the greatest driving force mankind has ever experienced. Since then, all my interest has become centered around the problem of its regeneration.



14. REVERSION THROUGH ARCHITECTURE

by Karima Burns

I sat in the Alhambra Mosque in Granada, Spain, staring at the script that bordered the walls. It was the most beautiful language I had ever seen. "What language is that?" I asked a Spanish tourist. "Arabic," he answered. The next day, when the tour attendant asked which language I wanted my tour book in, I answered, "Arabic." "Arabic?" she said, surprised. "Do you speak Arabic?" "No," I replied. "Can you give me one in English too?" By the end of my trip I had a bag full of Arabic tour guides to all the sites I had visited in Spain. In fact, my bag was so full that at one point I had to give away some of my clothes so I could make everything fit. But I hung on to my Arabic tour books as if they were made of gold. I would open them every night and look at the letters of the language as they flowed across the page. I imagined being able to write such beautiful script and I thought to myself that there must be something worth knowing about a culture that had such an artistic language. I vowed that I would study this language when I started college in the fall.

Only two months before, I had left my family in Iowa to take a trip through Europe, alone. I was only 16 years old, due to enter Northwestern University in the fall, and I had wanted to "see the world" first. At least, that is what I told my friends and family. In reality I was searching for answers. I had left the church only a few months before and did not know where to turn. I knew that I was not comfortable with what I was being taught, but I did not know of any alternatives. Where I grew up, in the Midwest, there was no room for confusion - you were either part of the church or you were not. So, I had no idea there was something else. When I set off for Europe I hoped that there was.

One day, I went to a teacher's house and saw a shelf lined with Bibles. I asked what they were. "Different versions of the Bible," my teacher replied. It did not seem to bother him at all that there were so many different versions. But, it bothered me. Some of them were really different and some chapters were even missing from the version I had. I was very confused.

I returned to college that fall disappointed that I had not found the answers I was hoping for in Europe, but with a passion for a language I had only just learned about - Arabic. Ironically, I had stared right at the answers I was searching for, on the walls of the Alhambra. But, it took me two more years to realize that. The first thing I did when I reached the campus was enroll in Arabic classes. I was one of only three people in the highly unpopular class. I immersed myself in my Arabic studies with such a passion that my teacher was confused. I did my homework with a calligraphy pen and I went into the Arab areas of Chicago just to track down a Coca Cola bottle

written in the language. I begged him to lend me books in Arabic just so I could look at the script.

By the time my second year of college came around, I decided I should consider a major in Middle Eastern Studies. So, I enrolled in some classes focusing on the region. In one class we studied the Qur'an. I opened the Qur'an one night to "do my homework" and could not stop reading it. It was like I had picked up a good novel. I thought to myself, "Wow. This is great. This is what I have always believed. This answers all my questions about how to act during the week and it even states very clearly that there is only one God." I went to class the next day and asked about the author of the book so I could read more such books. My professor informed me that according to the Muslims, no one had written the book. The Qur'an was the word of God and had not been changed since it was inspired, recited and then transcribed. Needless to say, I was fascinated. After that, I became passionate, not only about my studies of Arabic, but about studying Islam and about going to the Middle East.

My senior year in college I finally went to Egypt to continue my studies. My favorite place to go became "Islamic Cairo," where the mosques always gave me a sense of comfort and awe. I felt that by being in them, one could really feel the beauty, power and awe of Allah. And, as always I enjoyed staring at the elegant calligraphy on the walls. One day a friend asked me why I didn't convert to Islam if I liked it so much. "But I am already Muslim." My answer surprised me. But then, I realized that it was a simple matter of logic and common sense. Islam made sense. It inspired me. I knew it was right. Why did I then have to convert? My friend informed me that in order to "be official," I needed to actually go to the mosque and state my intention in front of two witnesses. So, I did. But, when they gave the certificate to me, I just filed it in my file cabinet with my "other" medical and personal record, because to me, I had always been Muslim. I didn't need to hang a piece of paper on my wall to tell me that. I had known it the minute I picked up the Qur'an. The minute I opened it, I felt like I had found my long lost family. I hung a picture of the Alhambra Mosque on my wall instead.



CONVERSION CATEGORY III: AL QUR'AN

“**T**hat inimitable rhapsody which moves men to the very edge of tears...” Marmaduke Pickthall, British Muslim convert, used such words to describe Al Qur'an in the introduction to his "Qur'an Interpreted", one of the classic modern translations into English. This writer and one of the converts in this section (Nuh Ha Mim Keller from Jordan) were also powerfully drawn to Islam by the Arberry translation, at certain crucial moments in our respective approaches to becoming Muslim.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that such feelings have been evoked in us as western converts by translations done by other westerners. The Pakistani and other translations may not have quite the same penetrating power, although they have other virtues. For sheer supportive academic detail ("Tafseer"), Yusuf Ali still takes first place with many Muslims. Maulana Maududi provides even more explanatory detail in his multi-volume translation. Mohammad Asad, Austrian Jew convert, devoted his later years to a translation based on his intimate knowledge of Bedouin Arabic, an understanding of which he felt was necessary in order to grasp the deeper meanings of the revelation. So it is no surprise that timely exposure to this "veritable symphony of sounds" (again from Pickthall) becomes the sine qua non for the conversion of a significant number of non-Muslims. But not for the majority, it seems. Why might this be? A deep intellectual and emotional immersion into the text of Al Qur'an was not relevant for some of us until long after our actual conversion. So we know there are other valid paths of approach. Yet, again, why should this be, given that Al Qur'an is the absolutely unique document that it is? Why was it twenty years before I myself began to appreciate its true significance on the stage of human history?

Islam is actually more than a religion. It is a "deen", or complete way of life. All of Islam, including Al Qur'an, involves both personal and communal miracles. As a sometime performer of European classical music on the piano, I have seen how impressed many people are with the simple ability to perform this music completely by memory for one or two hours in concert. Many more pianists perform various scores year-after-year for their personal pleasure, without ever referring to the musical scores after initial memorization early in life. Yet, two hours (for example) are needed for recitation of only one single "juz", or one-thirtieth of Al Qur'an.

I was of course deeply moved by Al Qur'an almost from the very beginning. But it did not occur to me until later, after my visits to Mecca had begun, wherein lay the communal miracle of Qur'anic recitation. During the month of Ramadan in Mecca and Madinah, Qur'an is recited by memory from cover to cover, one-thirtieth for each night of the fasting month. Nowadays,

literally several million Muslims from all over the world stand in silent respect while this recitation takes place. Here is an “oral tradition” without compare, the real heart and core of the Ramadan devotions, the culmination of each day’s personal fasting effort.

It is not obligatory upon Muslims to attend these Ramadan evening prayers (“Taraweh”), yet many from all levels of Muslim life, rich and poor alike, freely and eagerly choose to do so. Where among westerners is such an event? Where among westerners can you find thousands of ordinary young people, able to recite their holy books cover-to-cover? Where can you find several million people, young and old alike, willing to stand silently for two hours at a stretch, simply for the privilege of hearing such recitation? There have been many oral traditions in human history, but the only one that accompanies such vast numbers of humankind during their march into the future is the Qur’anic recitation.

The Qur’an is usually not recited in its entirety outside Mecca and Madinah during Ramadan, although it is in some places such as Penyengat Island south of Singapore. But whether we hear the entire book or understand all its words may not be so important as the osmosis of simply being within hearing that pure Qur’anic Arabic from native speakers of the language. I am listening to a CD of Al Qur’an being recited by one of the Imams of Mecca as I write. I can only mouth one single verse along with him, out of the entire Surah he is reciting, yet I feel it is enough because it is the best I can do at present.

We seem to have two fundamental languages on earth, one for business and technology (English), and one to bear the spiritual revelation directly from Allah s.w.t. (Arabic). There is no single language that can do both, not even Chinese. So no matter how converts may be initially touched by reading Qur’an in translation, they all seem sooner or later to repair to the original Arabic for their deeper respect and adulation. We become convinced, and there is much evidence to suggest, that Qur’an has not been corrupted, that these are the original words recited by Prophet (s.a.w.) as he was taught in trance by the Angel Gabriel. We believe that Qur’an is therefore the best source of our own hopes for incorruptibility, that the Devil himself will never be able to touch Al Qur’an though he may spread corruption world wide.

There is some scientific evidence that the two hemispheres of the human brain carry out differing cognitive functions. For example, Dr. Robert Ornstein of Stanford University reports that listening to the Sufi teaching stories of Mullah Nasruddin (as recounted by Idries Shah) stimulate right brain areas more than other language activities. We need similar investigation of how the human brain is stimulated while listening to the Qur’anic recitation, such as Tibetan Buddhist meditations are now being researched with non-intrusive brain-scan technologies.

1. ITALIAN CATHOLIC FINDS MEANING IN ISLAM

by Rafael (Suleyman) Castro

I was raised in a non-devout Italian Catholic family. I was baptized, attended Sunday school, and took First Communion. I had a happy childhood — the wonderful world of saints and trinitarian dogmas protected me from harm, so I believed, and sparked my imagination. But this beautiful reality was shaken at the age of 12 when my mother stopped bringing me to Sunday Mass. She let me know officially that she didn't believe in Sunday services and that I was old enough to make my own choices about religion. Thus, I was free to go alone to church, as she had discharged her duty as a Catholic mother to teach me Catholicism. These words left me hurt and disappointed not only with my mother but also with God. How could God have given me a family that had taught me religion out of a sense of tradition rather than inspired by sincere faith? I stopped going to church and I was so disappointed with religion that by the age of 14 I started to forget Him.

By the time I reached high school, existential questions began to harass me. After all, who is able to live without God for long? As I grew up and matured I realized that life is only worth living if it is more than the sum of its parts. I believe that God inspires this realization in many. But where to look for God? I had a wonderful Indonesian friend who lent me a copy of the Qur'an. However, in high school I was too immature and too brainwashed by Hollywood movies to appreciate its beauties. I only looked out for sentences that I interpreted as hostile towards non-Muslims in order to satisfy and confirm my prejudices. I was blind, biased, and foolish. At the age of 18, I went to college and became seriously interested in Judaism. I liked it because it was truly monotheistic, unlike the Christianity in which I had lost faith. I studied Judaism for over seven years, and went as far as entering yeshiva. Yeshivas are the rabbinical schools where students wear the traditional black suit, black hat, and study long hours. I appreciated the rigorous learning and brilliant rabbinical polemics; yet today I embrace Islam.

Why? To begin, I saw several Iranian movies that dispelled the stereotypes I had about Muslim culture as backwards and violent. I realized that Muslim countries may not shine today in terms of military prowess or on economic rankings, but that Islam offers a worldview that is far more respectful of human dignity and human self-sacrifice than any other (I highly recommend "The Colors of Paradise" to readers who really wish to understand what I mean). Secondly, I understood that Judaism teaches compassion for the Jewish people, whereas Islam sees in every human being a person who deserves to be a Muslim regardless of ancestry or brilliance in legalistic discussions. This is especially apparent in the warmth and hospitality that one experiences in most mosques, whether one is Muslim or not. Last and most importantly, the beauty and nobility of Surah Al-Baqarah,

moved me to bear witness to Islam. I think that any honest reader of those pages would admit that only an angel could inspire such a beautiful proclamation of God's wisdom. And that those who are too materialist to admit God's existence should read through the hundreds of Prophetic Traditions and ask themselves: How could nature/ destiny/chance concentrate so much wisdom in one man without the gift of prophecy?

Thanks to Islam my life has changed. Before Islam I used to lethargically sleep until late-morning at every possible opportunity. Nowadays I wake up for morning prayers before six and live my days far more productively. I believe Islam has renewed my will to live, has given me self-respect, and made me a more generous person. These are three virtues that are hard to find elsewhere. Islam is not withdrawal from the world, nor a worldly conquest in the name of God. In my two months as a Muslim, I am beginning to understand that Islam is a re-conquest of one's life by surrendering one's will to God rather than to worldly pursuits. And that is true freedom. It goes without saying that my conversion cost me some friends and worried my family for some time.

Nevertheless, my family eventually grew more comfortable with my decision, and I am glad to say that the new friendships that I made amongst the Muslims have proven invaluable during this period of transition. This along with the new outlook on life that Islam has given me have made my reversion to Islam a rewarding experience.

2. I AM A NEW MUSLIM

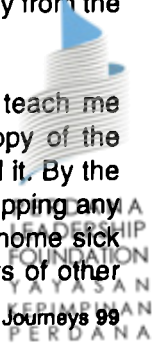
by Asma' A'lia

My name is Asma' A'lia and I am a new Muslim - since February 13, 2001. Alhamdulillah! I am 15 years old and I am of Mexican descent - born in Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico on June 14, 1986. Right now, I am the only Muslim in my entire family; however, Insha'Allah, there will be more. This is the story of my life - the long and short of it - including the time before I discovered the truth in Islam and converted, and all of the blessings that Allah s.w.t. has given me since then. Before Islam, my life seemed worthless. I saw no point in it. Half of it was made up, and I wasn't sure what the other half even was. Actually, I thought my life was worse than it really was. I was hurting myself and my family - especially my parents - because I often took out my anger on them. My parents, who gave me everything for nothing. At school, I felt as if I didn't belong. I had friends - I thought I had a lot of friends, but I treated them like they were strangers. They knew nothing about me and I knew nothing about them. Sometimes, people made me feel bad - like I was an outcast. I was overweight when I was small, and I got even bigger as I grew older until 8th or 9th grade. I would come home crying because they would talk about me behind my back. I always had very low self-esteem, and whenever anyone insulted me, I couldn't handle it. I started having even more problems with people because of my big mouth and all the lies I started telling.

Eventually, my problems at school made me want to stay home even though I liked learning. And even though I felt like there was nothing to go home for. My parents constantly argued, and I was in the middle. I felt trapped. In fact, I felt trapped everywhere - like a bird in a cage. I cried more than a baby cries for food. More than a baby cries, period. I was jealous of my friends who had boyfriends.

I wanted to be beautiful, and the only way I could believe that I was, was if someone told me that I was. However, when my mom said nice things, I never believed her - I always thought that she was lying to me and that she was just saying them because she was my mother. Now that I think back, I did not look all that bad. I was just overweight, and not even that much. But I felt I had a miserable life. Until Allah s.w.t. decided to guide me away from the Kufar (those who deny Truth).

During the summer of 2000, I met someone who began to teach me about Islam. On November 4th, a Saturday, they gave me a copy of the Qur'an, and I started to read it. In about 3-1/2 months, I completed it. By the way, it was the first book that I read completely through without skipping any words. Masha'Allah! Then on February 13, 2001, I was sitting at home sick and very depressed. I had been waiting to get the phone numbers of other



Muslims. That day, I couldn't take the pressure of everything that was going on - with my friends, my family, and with a guy I had been dating and felt that I loved. He loved me back, but his family wanted him to be with another girl from his country. I was thinking of committing suicide when an idea popped into my head. Alhamdulillah! I told myself that it was time to make a change, and I called Masjid Hamza, a mosque in Mira Mesa here in Southern California. I asked for the phone numbers of some Muslims, and I got to talk to a couple of sisters.

I told them that I had been learning about Islam and asked them for their advice. I ended up talking to a 13-year old sister and telling her that I wanted to become Muslim and I didn't know how. She told me that I just needed to have the Kalimah in my heart to be a Muslim, but that I should declare it before at least two witnesses. She then asked me if I wanted to say it before her, her father and his assistant who were both with her at home. I decided to say it - right over the phone. I was so happy - even before I declared it. I testified, "ASH HADU AN LA ILLAHA ILLA ALLAHU WA ASH HADU ANNA MUHAMMADAN ABDUHOO WA RASOOLUH!"

I was so happy that I was shaking. I had now been forgiven my sins. I started to cry. My Muslim sister, her father and his assistant were very happy for me. As soon as I hung up, I called my friend that had been teaching me about Islam to let him know that I had converted. He was also very happy for me. I then took a shower, looked into the mirror and told myself, "I am a Muslim, I am a Muslim. Oh, my gosh, I am Muslim. Masha'Allah!"

As the days went by, I talked to more and more Muslim sisters. I was learning about Islam. But I hadn't told my parents - I was scared to because I thought they would kill me when they found out. I asked a sister what I should do, and then a very knowledgeable sister asked some scholars for their advice. They told me that it was okay not to tell them until I felt it was a good time because I was under age - only 14.

I eventually told my mom and she got very upset, but as the days passed, things got better. She wanted to tell my dad, but I didn't think it would be a good idea. Although she didn't agree, she understood me and that was progress. On June 11, 2001, I wore my scarf to school for the first time - 3 days before my birthday. I was planning to wear it for the first time on my birthday, but I thought to myself that if it was hard on the first day, it could be hard the next day as well. So I wore it on June 11th. I stopped caring so much about what others were thinking of me. It was hard but I felt more confident. I loved the way I looked in my scarf and I still do.

I started talking to my dad about Islam. I had already been talking to my mom, and I decided it was time for my father to find out about it. I no longer feared him or what he'd do to me because I knew that Allah s.w.t. would make

it easier for me and guide me through hardship, and that He was with me. When my dad did find out, it wasn't as hard as I thought it would be.

Since I have become a Muslim, I feel so lucky. I have more friends. And these are real friends. I have also realized the kind of person I really am and the beauty that Allah s.w.t. has granted me. Now, I am happy with the way I look. I have lost weight, and I love my skin, my hair and my personality. I love the fact that Allah s.w.t. has given me appreciation for who I am and what I look like. I am so happy that Allah s.w.t. has given me the chance to be Muslim and someday, Insha'Allah, marry a pious husband, and have kids and teach them. I am very thankful for everything I have achieved so far, and to know that I am here for a reason and that to Allah s.w.t., I will someday return. I ask Allah s.w.t. to keep me on the straight path and to help me learn more about the deen (Islam as a way of life).



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEREMBINAN
PERDANA

3. A JOURNEY TO ISLAM

by Abdul Muhsin Al-Muhajir

I looked at the world around me and saw a lot of suffering. 'Never mind', I said to myself, 'Things could be worse'. And sure enough, as if to prove the point, things indeed became worse. So I began to ask, 'What is to be done?' But the answers I heard did not satisfy me. Then I began to ask, 'Am I part of the problem or part of the solution?' And I looked inside myself and saw that I was both. In the UK, the young people of my generation often referred to these or similar terms of reference. As a young man I was no different from my peers.

Finally, I began to pray to God, or whomever I should pray to as the Master of the Universe, the Creator of Mankind. I must confess I was confused and uncertain as to 'who' or 'what', in fact, is that which we call God in the English language. In the beginning, I was not even assured of the existence of God, since it was the habit of people in my country to question everything.

I asked God to give me a sign that He existed. When I learnt that not all people are given such signs, I asked God to show me the way that I should live my life, and what I should do. I prayed for guidance. I prayed for God's help. I use the term 'pray' but perhaps the word 'ask' is more correct, as I was not even sure how I should pray, or what I should pray for. Although I was brought up in a family that were nominally Church of England, I did not have a close relationship with the Church. I knew no one and trusted no one well enough to ask advice on how I should pray. I also could not find prayers in the prayer books that included the words or meanings I was trying to express in my prayers.

After several chaotic years as a teenager, I eventually came to know of a family that belonged to an organisation founded by a Javanese Ustaz who travelled the world trying to restore religion in people's lives. On reading some books about this man, I felt that this was something real and genuine, and a way of approaching God that seemed to be right, according to my understanding. I hoped that the type of *zikir* he taught would perhaps contain the experience of God that I was seeking.

After some years, I came across a copy of the Qur'an. The Javanese Ustaz had always told us to continue following and practising our religion, and that the major religious texts, i.e. the Qur'an, the Bible and the Torah, contained all the teachings that we needed in order to do this. However, on reading the Qur'an, I came to realize that it contained the purest revelation of God that mankind possesses. Although I could only understand the English translation (by Abdullah Yusuf Ali), it spoke to me more clearly than the Bible.

and I became convinced that this was the true word of God, as revealed by the Angel Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him. Although it was ten years before I formally embraced Islam and began learning and practising the five daily prayers, the conviction of the truth of these revelations had stayed within my heart since those days when I had first begun to read the Holy Qur'an. To this day, Alhamdulillah, I still continue to ask God to show me the way.

My guidance has taken me to Yogyakarta in Central Java, with my Javanese wife and our young son, to set up a supplemental facility for the many local schools in this area. We now have a three-story building, library, classrooms, snack bar, and various programs for the local college students. Alhamdulillah, the funding for this project has come from British Muslims among others. Even after many years, however, there are still obstacles to my acceptance among the local Muslims. I always hope for total freedom from prejudice that is so important a value in Islam, yet being British sometimes causes problems. Even after many years, I still encounter mild prejudice among the born-Muslims due to political tensions.

However, we are patient and also trustful ourselves that Allah s.w.t. will bring about a real benefit from our activities, for these Javanese Muslims who are less prosperous than ourselves. We must always strive to help those more needy than ourselves, and this principle of Islam is one of the main reasons I became Muslim in the first place.



4. A Former Arab Priest Accepts Islam

by Ibrahim Khalil

I was born in an Arab city on the 13th of January 1919 and was sent to American Mission schools until I got my secondary education certificate there. In 1942, I got my diploma from an Arab university and then I specialized in religious studies as a prelude to join the Faculty of Theology. It was no easy task to join the faculty, as no candidate could join it unless he got a special recommendation from the church, and also, after he should pass a number of difficult exams. I got a recommendation from a few churches after passing many tests to know my qualifications to become a man of religion. My entrance was sanctioned into the Faculty of Theology in 1944 as a boarding student. My acquaintance with Islam started in the Faculty of Theology where I studied Islam and all the methods through which we could shake the faith of Islam and all the methods through which we could shake the faith of Muslims and raise misconceptions in their understanding of their own religion.

In 1952 I got my MA from Princeton University in the USA and was appointed as a teacher in the Faculty of Theology in another Arab city. During the period I decided to enlarge my study of Islam, so that I should not read the missionaries books on it only. I had enough faith in myself to read the other point of view.

Thus I began to read books written by Muslim authors. I also decided to read the Qur'an and understand its meanings. This was helped by my love of knowledge and moved by my desire to add more proofs against Islam. The result was, however, exactly the reverse. My position began to shake and I started to feel a strong internal struggle. I discovered the falsehood of everything I had studied and preached to the people. But I could not face myself bravely and tried instead to overcome this internal crisis and continue my work. I was sent to another Arab city as secretary general of the German Swiss Mission. That was only my apparent position for my real mission was to preach against Islam in an Arab country especially among Muslims.

A missionary conference was held at that time at a hotel there. That day I spoke too much, reiterating all the repeated misconceptions against Islam. I began to ask myself: Why should I say and do all these things when I know for sure I am a liar, as this is not the truth? I took my leave before and left the conference and went out alone to my house. I was completely shaken. As I walked through [a] public garden, I heard a verse of the Qur'an on the radio: "Say: It has been revealed to me that a company of Jinns listened (to the Qur'an). They said: We have really heard a wonderful recital! It gives guidance to the Right, and we have believed therein: We shall not join (in worship) and gods with our Lord" (Surah Al-Jinn: 1-2). "And as for us, since we have listened to the Guidance, we have accepted it: and any one who

believes in His Lord, has no fear of either a short (account) or of any injustice” (Surah Al-Jinn: 13).

I felt a deep comfort that night and when I return home I spent the whole night all by myself in my library reading the Qur’an. My wife asked me about the reason of my sitting up all night and I pleaded from her to leave me alone. I stopped for a long time thinking and meditating on the verse, *“Had We sent down this Qur’an on a mountain, verily thou wouldst have seen it humble itself and cleave asunder for fear of Allah”* (Surah Al-Hashr: 21). And the verse: *“Strongest among men in enmity to the believers wilt thou find the Jews and the Pagans, and nearest among them in love to the believers wilt thou find those who say, ‘We are Christians’. This is because amongst them are men devoted to learning, and men who have renounced the world, and they are not arrogant. And when they listen to the revelation received by the messenger, thou wilt see their eyes overflowing with tears, for they recognize the truth: They pray: ‘Our Lord! We believe, write us down among the witnesses. What cause can we have not to believe in Allah and the truth which has come to us, seeing that we long for our Lord to admit us to the company of the righteous?’ “* (Surah Al-Ma’idah: 82-84).

That same night I took my final decision. In the morning I spoke with my wife from whom I have three sons and one daughter. But no sooner than she felt that I was inclined to embrace that she cried and asked for help from the head of the mission. His name was Monsieur Shavits from Switzerland. He was a very cunning man. When he asked me about my true attitude, I told him frankly what I really wanted and then he said: “Regard yourself out of a job until we discover what has befallen you.” Then I said: “This is my resignation from my job.” He tried to convince me to postpone it, but I insisted. So he spread a rumor among the people that I had gone mad.

Thus I suffered a very severe test and oppression until I moved to the capital of the country I was in. In the capital, I was introduced to a respectable professor who helped me overcome my severe trial and this he did without knowing anything about my story. He treated me as a Muslim for I introduced myself to him as such although until then I did not embrace Islam officially. Dr. Jamal was highly interested in Islamic studies and wanted to make a translation of the Qur’an to be published in America. He asked me to help him because I was fluent in English since I had got my MA from an American university. He also knew that I was preparing a comparative study of the Qur’an, the Torah and the Bible. We cooperated in this comparative study and in the translation of the Qur’an. In 1955 I did complete my study and my material and living affairs became well established.

I resigned from the company and set up a training office from importing stationery and school articles. It was a successful business from which I gained much more money that I needed. Thus I decided to declare my official

conversion to Islam. My official conversion to Islam was in January 1960. Since 1961 until the present time I have been able to publish a number of books on Islam and the methods of the missionaries and orientalists against it. I am now preparing a comparative study about women in the three Prophetic Religions with the object of highlighting the status of women in Islam. In 1973 I performed Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). I hold seminars in universities and charitable societies. I received an invitation from Sudan in 1974 where I held many seminars. My time is fully used in the service of Islam. My faith in Islam has been brought about through reading the Qur'an and the biography of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings of God be upon him. I no longer believe in the misconceptions against Islam and I am especially attracted by the concept of unity of god, which is the most important feature of Islam. God is only One. Nothing is like Him. This belief makes me the servant of God only and of no one else. Oneness of God liberates man from servitude to any human being and that is true freedom.



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA

5. A Mexican-American Discovers the Truth of Islam

by Ali Mexici

My name is Ali. I'm a 29 year old Mexican-American, or as some would say, a Chicano. I think my story will help people understand Islam and why it attracted me, Inshallah. Many people have a wrong perception about Islam and Muslims. What little they know is usually from movies and television, which is almost all the time false.

My life before Islam was bad – I had no direction. I was wasting my life away by dropping out of school in the 11th grade. I would hang out in the streets with my friends “partying”, getting high, drinking and selling marijuana. Most of my friends were gang members (I myself was never in a gang). I knew most of them before they were criminals and drug dealers, so it was not a problem. I slowly began to use harder drugs. I had dreams but they seemed to far away for me to make them a reality. The more I became depressed, the more I turned to drugs for temporary escape.

One day a friend of mine told me that someone had invited him to his apartment to give him a book. We left for the guy's apartment, and when we got there, he gave my friend a book and asked him to read it, saying that it might help him out with his problems in life. On the way home I asked my friend to show me the book. It was the Qur'an I had never in my life heard of The Holy Qur'an. I began to briefly read some pages. While I was reading, I knew that what I was reading was true. It was like a slap in the face – a wake up call.

The Qur'an is so clear and easy to understand. I was really impressed and wanted to know more about Islam and Muslims. The strangest thing is that I was not looking for a new religion. I used to laugh at people who went to church, and sometimes I said that there was no God, although deep down I knew there was. I decided to go to the library a couple of days later and check out the Qur'an. I began to read it and study it. I learned about the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the true story of Jesus, son of Mary (peace be upon him).

The Qur'an stressed the fact that God was one and had no partners or a son. This was most interesting to me since I never understood the concept of the Trinity. The Qur'an describes the birth of Prophet Jesus (peace be upon him) and his mission. There is also a chapter called “Mary” which tells her story as well. Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the last Messenger of God sent to all mankind. The Qur'an tells the stories of all the Prophets such as Adam, Abraham, Noah, Isaac, David, Moses, Jesus (Peace be upon them all) in a clear and understandable manner. I did months of research on Islam, and I bought a Holy Qur'an at a bookstore and studied about world history and

Islam's contributions to medicine and science. I learned that Spain was a Muslim country for about 800 years, and that when the Muslims were expelled from Spain by the Christian king and queen (Ferdinand and Isabela), the Christian Spaniards came to Mexico and forced the Aztecs and others to become Catholic.

History and my Islamic roots were all becoming clear to me. After months of study and research, I could not deny the Truth anymore. I had put it off too long, but was still living the same life as before and knew that if I became Muslim I had to give all that up. One day while reading the Qur'an, I began to cry and fell to my knees and thanked Allah for guiding me to the Truth.

I found out that there was a mosque by my house so I went one Friday to see how Muslims prayed and conducted their services. I saw that people from all races and colors attended the mosque. I saw that they took off their shoes when entering and sat on the carpeted floor. A man got up and began to call the azan. When I heard it, my eyes filled with tears – it sounded so beautiful. It was all so strange at first, but seemed so right at the same time. Islam is not just a religion but a way of life.

After going to mosque for a couple of Fridays, I was ready to be a Muslim and say my *Shahadah* (declaration of faith). I told the *Khateeb* (person giving the lecture) that I wanted to be a Muslim. The following Friday, in front of the community, I said my *Shahadah*, first in Arabic then in English: I bear witness that there is no other God but Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is His Messenger. When I finished, a Brother shouted, "Takbir!" and all of the congregation said, "*Allahu Akbar!*" (God is great!) a few times. Then all the Brothers came and hugged me. I never received so many hugs in one day. I will never forget that day, it was great. I have been Muslim since 1997. I feel at peace with myself and clear in my religion.

Being Muslim has really changed my life for the better, thanks to Almighty God. I received my G.E.D. and now work in the computer field. I had the blessing of being able to perform Hajj (Pilgrimage) to the Holy city of Mecca. It was an experience of a lifetime. About 3 million people from every race and color in one place worshipping one God. Truly amazing! Alhamdulillah (all thanks be to God) in December of 2002, I got married in Morocco to be very good Muslim woman. I think that Islam is the answer for the problems of the youth and society in general. I hope my story will attract more Latin and people of all races to the Light of Islam, Inshallah.



6. An Ultra-Orthodox Jew Accepts Islam

by Melech Yacov

When I was born I was given the Hebrew name Melech Yacov. Today I still live in the area in New York where I was born. We were a semi-religious family. We belonged to a Chasidic congregation to which we went every Saturday, but we did not keep all the strict observances required in Chasidic Judaism. For those who don't know, Chasidism is known in the mainstream as "Ultra Orthodox" Judaism. They are called so because of their strict observances of Halacha (Jewish Law) and their following of Jewish mysticism (Kabala). They are the strange people that you see walking down the street wearing black suits and hats and letting their beards and sideburns grow long.

We were not like that though. My family cooked and used electricity on the Sabbath, and I didn't wear a yarmulke on my head. Moreover I grew up in a secular environment surrounded by non-Jewish schoolmates and friends. For many years I still felt guilty about driving on Saturdays and eating non-kosher food. Although I did not observe all of the rules, I nevertheless felt a strong sense that this was the way that God wanted me to live, and every time I omitted a rule, I was committing sin in the eyes of God. From the earliest days, my mother would read to me the stories of the great Rabbis like Eliezar, the Baal Shem Tov, and the legends from the Haggada (part of the Talmud other than the Halacha) and Torah. All of these stories had an ethical message that helped me to identify with the Jewish community, and later Israel.

The stories showed how Jews were oppressed throughout history, but God always stood by His people until the end. The stories that we Jews were brought up on showed us that miracles always saved the Jews whenever they were in their greatest time of need. The survival of the Jews throughout history, despite all odds, is seen as a miracle in itself. If a person wants to take an objective view on why most Jews have the irrational Zionist stance regarding Israel, then they must understand the way by which we were indoctrinated with these stories as children.

That is why the Zionists pretend that they are doing nothing wrong at all. All of the *goyim* (gentiles) are seen as enemies waiting to attack, and thus they cannot be trusted. The Jewish people have a very strong bond with one another and see each other as the "chosen people" of God. For many years I believed this myself. Although I had a strong sense of identity as a Jew, I could not stand going to Saturday services. I still remember myself as a little boy being forced to go to shul with my father. I remember how dreadfully boring it was for me and how strange everyone looked with their black hats and beards praying in a foreign language. It was like being thrown into a

different world away from my friends and the people I knew. This was what I thought I was supposed to be, but I (and my parents) never adopted the Chasidic life like the rest of my family.

When I turned 13, I was bar-mitzvahed like every other Jewish boy who becomes a man. I also began putting *tefilin* (Hebrew amulets) on every morning. I was told that it is dangerous to skip putting it on because it was like a talisman and bad things might happen to you. The first day I skipped putting on *tefilin* my mom's car got stolen! That event encouraged me to wear it for a long time. It was only a little while after my bar-mitzvah that my family stopped going to synagogue altogether. They could not stand the three-and-a-half hours of prayer and felt that getting me bar-mitzvahed was the most important thing. Later on, my father got into a silly quarrel with some congregation members, and we ended up not going to services anymore at all.

The something strange happened: my father was convinced by a friend to accept Jesus into his heart. Praise God my mother did not divorce my father for his conversions to Christianity, but she has kept a silent hatred of it ever since. This was also a period in my early-teen years when I sought to find something to identify with. My father's conversion helped me question my own beliefs. I began asking questions like: What exactly is a Jew anyway? Is Judaism a culture, a nation, or a religion? If it is a nation, then why are the prayers recited in Hebrew, prayers for Eretz Israel, and observance of "Oriental" rituals? If Judaism was just a culture, then would not a person cease to be a Jew if he stopped speaking Hebrew and practicing Jewish customs? If a Jew was one who observes the commandments of the Torah, then why is Abraham called the first Jew when he lived before the Torah came down to Moses? Incidentally, the Torah doesn't even say he was a Jew; the word Jew comes from the name of one of Jacob's 12 sons, Judah. Jews were not called Jews until the Kingdom of Judah was established after the time of Solomon. Tradition holds that a Jew is someone whose mother was Jewish. So you can still be a Jew if not practice Christianity or atheism.

More and more I began to move away from Judaism. There were so many laws and *mitzvahs* (good deeds) to observe. What is the point of all these different rituals, I began to question. To me they were all man-made. I was fascinated with Native American culture and their bravery in the face of the white settlers who stole their land. The Native Americans had over 250 treaties broken with them, and they were given the worst strips of land that no one wanted. The story of the native Americans is similar to that of the Palestinians. The first Palestinians were living in Palestine for thousands of years and suddenly Jews replaced them, and the natives were forced into refugee camps in which they still live. I asked my parents how the Palestinians are different from Native Americans, and the only answer I got was "because they want to kill all Jews and drive them into the sea."

My understanding of the Palestinian people put me above any of the Jews, their leaders, and Rabbis whom I once viewed as wise men. How could any good Jew deny the Palestinians were killed and forced from their land to make way for Jewish settlements? What justifies this act of ethnic cleansing – the fact that many Jews died in the Holocaust? Or is it because the Bible says it's "our" land? Any book that justifies such a thing would be immoral and hence not of God.

Honestly I do not remember what got me interested in Islam, especially after many years of strong anti-religion feeling. As a child, I remember hearing my mother talk about Islam, and how Muhammad (peace be upon him) worshipped the same God as us, and also how Jews are related to Arabs through Abraham. So in a way I kind of accepted Islam as just another religion that worships God. I have a faint memory of my cousin (a Chasid) who said to me that if a Jew gives up his life as a Jew and lives like a Muslim, he wouldn't be committing any sin! Looking back I am astonished to have heard such a thing.

When September 11th happened, there was a surge in anti-Islamic propaganda in the news. From the very beginning, I knew that it was all lies because I already had developed the perspective that everything in the media protects the interests of those who control it. When I saw that the most militant people in attacking Islam were fundamentalist Christians, Islam started looking more attractive to me. I thank God for what I learned in my activist days, because without the knowledge of society and the media, I would have believed all the garbage that I heard about Islam on the television.

One day I remember hearing someone talk about scientific facts in the Bible so I wondered if the Qur'an and scientific facts in it. I did an Internet search and I discovered a lot of amazing stuff. I subsequently spent a great deal of time consuming articles on various aspects of Islam. I was surprised of how logically consistent the Qur'an was. As I read the Qur'an I would compare its moral message to that of what I learned from the Bible and understood how much better it was. Also the Qur'an was not nearly as boring as reading the Bible. It's fun to read.

After about 5 months of intense study I said my *Shahadah* and officially became Muslim. Unlike my old religion, everything in Islam made sense. All the practices like prayer and Ramadan I understood already. Although I imagined Islam to be like Judaism in which one follows a series of different rules dogmatically, I was wrong. My understanding of the world also matched what Islam taught me – that all religions are basically the same but have been corrupted by man over time. God didn't make a name called Judaism and Christianity and tell people to worship him. God taught the people only Islam, that is, submission to Him alone. It is as clear and simple as that.

7. Born in the Fist of the Revolution: A Cuban Professor's Journey to Allah

By Julio Cesar Pino

Are there many Muslims in Cuba? Why would a Cuban want to become a Muslim? These are the two questions I am most frequently asked when introducing myself, or in the case of old friends, reintroduce myself by my Muslim name, Assad Jibril Pino. The answer to the first query is a simple yes. Several thousand Muslims reside in Cuba, most of them descendants of Lebanese immigrants. However, the second question always makes me pause and ponder before I reply, even though I have heard it hundreds of times. I have come to believe that there is a path, however crooked, that connects Cuba to Islam for me personally, beyond the Moorish heritage of my ancestors.

That I was born in Havana in 1960, "in the first of the Revolution" to use the phraseology of the island Cubans ("island Cuban" versus "Miami Cuban"), had a decisive impact on my decision to revert to Islam in the summer of 2000. Fidel Castro has often said that a revolution allows no neutrals. From the moment a child reaches school age in Cuba he or she is confronted with problems of war and peace, justice and oppression, and integration or marginalization from family, friends, neighbors, and nation. My father made the decision to take our family out of Cuba in 1968.

The experience was particularly traumatic for me, being an only child, since I was leaving behind my cousins, who all belonged to the Castroite side of the clan. Moving to Los Angeles, I was pushed into parochial school, and sent to Sunday mass on special occasions like Epiphany or the Day of the Three Kings. Mercifully, the priests and nuns at the high school I attended during the 1970s deprogrammed me from Christianity. What can I possibly say about putative Christians who blessed the Vietnam War? After three years of this ridiculous situation, I screamed for a release and received my parents' consent to transfer to a public high school.

I also became an agnostic, a view I maintained until finding Islam. My release from parochial school and enrollment at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1980, majoring in history and specializing in Brazil, furthered my estrangement from organized religion. The 1980s posed terrible and challenging tasks for Latinos on campus. Our brothers and sisters in Central America were being butchered by American-trained death-squads daily. Poverty and unemployment inside the United States surged while the rich grew fatter under the presidency of Ronald Reagan. 1991: the USSR is gone.

That year I gave up drinking for good, received my doctorate in History from UCLA, and headed into the job market. The next year, I married a sweet

Korean-American woman of my age, and landed a tenure-track job at Kent State University (KSU) of Ohio, where I currently teach the History of Latin America and the History of Civilization. For six agonizing months, my wife left me, and not a day went by that I did not cry and scream like an animal for her to return. I got down on my knees and prayed to whatever higher power might exist to grant me the courage of Jesus, Buddha, and Muhammad just to survive. The only thing I knew for sure about these messengers is that they underwent and understood personal tragedy and yet came out victorious, charged with a mission to help others in distress.

The supplication (today I would say do'a) was answered. My wife came back, although I did not merit such mercy from Allah, and this miracle made me want to explore why the Divinity, which I was now sure existed, would want to help me. Sometime in the mid-90s, I purchased the famous Muhammad Pickthall translation of the meanings of the Holy Qur'an for the sake of augmenting my history lectures on Islam. I had never gotten around to reading it. Then, on a trip from Cleveland to Miami in 1999, for some reason I decided to take it along on the plane. I devoured roughly half the book during the plane ride and finished it during my stay at my parents' house. What amazed me is that the book addressed everything – from usury to divorce to women's rights. Many religions claim they are more than just a religion but a complete way of life, but only Islam fulfills this vow. Do Catholics arrange their day around prayer? I asked myself. Is Buddhism anything more than just playing with the meaning of words? I reflected on the lectures I gave in my History of Civilization course. What had I been teaching the students at Kent State about Islam? I taught that it was the most democratic and egalitarian of all the world's religions since it recognized no distinction or merit based on race, social class, nationality or gender. Rather merit was based only on degrees of faith. But now, for the first time, the words hit home.

All that was needed to make my conversion final was a triggering event: Recife, Brazil, June, 2000. I was attending a conference of scholars who specialized in Brazil. For reading material I brought along a book of Sufi poetry and prayers, which I had perused during my "mystical" phase but had never finished. Up in my hotel room, between sessions of the conference, I finally reached the last page and tucked the book away in my luggage. Later, walking along the lovely beach, I flashed back to the book hidden inside my layers of clothes. A voice from inside says, "This is what I want to be, and will be from now onwards – a Muslim." After returning to the United States, I had to find some local Muslims. But how? Should I just look up "Islam" in the telephone book?

Suddenly, I remembered that I once had a student in my Latin America class, a young African-American named Musa. He was a quiet but very resourceful and devoted brother who, when not attending KSU, worked with troubled teens in Akron. He had told me that there was a small mosque in

Akron, and that I was welcome to visit any time. The Internet found the address for me. Knowing that Jumaah services were held on Fridays, I spent Thursday night on my knees praying to Allah to do the best thing for me. Was I worthy of joining the Ummah (Islamic nation)? How would I be received, since there are relatively few Latino Muslims? As I prayed I felt tears flowing down my face, for the first time in many years. Something dramatic was about to happen in my life, I knew it. That Friday, I drove from Kent to Akron to attend my first Jumaah prayer. Walking upstairs of the modest two-tiered mosque, I was startled by the variety of faces: African-Americans, South Asians, one brother who “even looked European”, as I said silently to myself, and several Arabs, including the Imam. He gave a fiery but controlled *khutbah* (sermon). I do not remember the topic, but will never forget his frequent incantation: “O, Slaves of Allah!” That phrase resonates for me until this day.

Why would anyone want to be a “slave” of the Divinity? I found the answer surrounding me that day: men of resolution, at peace with themselves, because they had surrendered their lives to Allah to do with as He willed. The following week I came back, and after the sermon, I shyly asked one of the brothers if he would be witness to my conversion. Much to my surprise, he called the entire congregation to gather around me. The Imam administered the *Shahadah* (public declaration of faith), and what I remember most was his promise, “All your previous sins are forgiven. On the Day of Judgment, we shall be your witnesses that you took the *Shahadah* in front of us.” Julio Cesar Pino died that day, and Assad Jibril Pino was born.

Professionally, I have undergone conversion also. My current research project involves the lives of Muslim slaves in 19th-century Brazil, and their continual connection to their African homelands. In my History of Civilization class, which made me interested in Islam in the first place, I now always include the contemporary Middle East, and have had the pleasure of hosting Palestinian guest speakers. Almost all of my students enjoy this part of the course, and some have even asked me to teach a class exclusively on the history of Islam. In my period of *Jahiliyah* (days before Islam), depending on how I felt that day, I would tell those who asked that I was Cuban, Cuban-American, or even American (if I happened to be living in Brazil). Now, I just say Muslim, and leave it up to them to place me in a category. If they are pleased, and curious, then by permission of Allah, I tell them the astonishing story of how a Cubano became a Muslim.



8. Canadian Catholic Discovers Islam

by Yusuf Ali Bernier

If you were to ask me why I converted to Islam, my answer would fill volumes. However, if you were to ask me what led me to Islam I would have to say, now looking back, that it was my first encounter reading the Bible at the age of about ten. I used to sit bewildered reading the Bible into a tape recorder. After finishing, I would play the tape back in hopes of grasping the meaning of what I had just read, usually to no avail. This continued for a year or so until finally I became too frustrated, lost, and honestly bored with the whole process.

My first encounter with Muslim people was through business dealings. Their warm and generous hospitality won my heart. Their loyal remembrance of Allah intrigued me in phrases like, *al-Hamdulillah* (all Praise be to God) and *inshah Allah* (God Willing). I had never come upon people in a state of such strong faith before. Their kindness, generosity, and compassionate nature, I would discover later, were all part of being a Muslim. I wanted to be like them. This is what attracts people to Islam; this is what attracted me.

I began to learn the basics of Islam. The more I learned the more I wanted to know. Before long, I was studying Islam through books written by Muslims in addition to reading a translation of the Holy Qur'an. Only a select few knew that I was studying Islam, since I did not want any interference from Muslims and especially from my Christian and Jewish friends. I knew that if anyone was going to guide and aid me in my quest for Truth it would be Allah. Shortly thereafter, I departed on a holiday taking the Qur'an with me. Four days later, alone in a foreign country, I became severely ill. I was bed stricken for a month, each day losing almost a pound of my body weight. Facing my mortality and alone in my agony, I remember pleading to Allah not to let me die incomplete. I had not yet converted but I knew in my heart that I wanted to be a Muslim. I was procrastinating by trying to learn everything humanly possible. I now believe that this was my wake up call from the Most Merciful. That is to say that life is too short to put things off that you want to do. You never know if tomorrow will ever come.

Two weeks after my return to Canada, I converted to Islam. Allah is Merciful. He gives people many chances and signs. The part that is difficult is not so much recognizing them, but rather acting upon them will all your heart.

9. The Gift of Islam

by Abdullah Archibald Hamilton

The beauty and simple purity of Islam have always appealed to me. Though born and brought up as a Christian, I could never believe in the dogmatic aspect of the Church and have always placed reason and common sense above blind faith. As time progressed, I wished to be at peace with my Creator, and I found that both the Church of Rome and the Church of England were of no real use to me. The present-day so-called Christianity, indirectly in theory and invariably in practice, teaches its followers, it would seem, to pray to God on Sundays and to prey on His creatures for the rest of the week – whereas Islam guides humanity in the daily workaday life. In becoming a Muslim, I have merely obeyed the dictates of my conscience, and have since felt a better and a truer man.

There is no religion that is so maligned by the ignorant and the biased as is Islam. Yet if people only knew, it is the religion of the strong for the weak, the rich for the poor. Humanity is divided into three classes – first, those on whom God has, out of His Bounty, bestowed possessions and wealth; secondly, those who have to work to earn their living; and lastly, the great army of the unemployed, or those who have fallen by the wayside through no fault of their own.

Islam recognizes genius and individuality. It is constructive and not destructive. Islam strictly forbids its adherents to gamble or to indulge in any games of chance. It prohibits all alcoholic drinks and interdicts usury, which alone has caused untold sorrow and suffering to mankind. We neither believe in fatalism nor in predestination, but only in pre-measurement, that is to say, the fixity of the laws and the intelligence to follow them. To us, faith without action is a dead-letter; for in itself it is insufficient unless we live up to it. We believe in our own personal accountability for our actions in this life and the Hereafter. Islam teaches the inherent sinlessness of man. It teaches that man and woman come from the same essence, possess the same soul, and have equipped with equal capabilities for intellectual, spiritual and moral attainment. The Universal Brotherhood of man in Islam is a recognized fact. Lord and vassal, rich and poor, are all alike. I have always found that my brother Muslims have been the soul of honor and that I could believe their word. They have always treated me justly, as a man and a brother, and have extended to me the greatest hospitality, and I have always felt at home with them.



10. Islam Is For Everyone

by Yahiyeh Adam Gadahn

My first seventeen years have been a bit different from the youth experienced by most Americans. I grew up on an extremely rural goat ranch in Western Riverside County, California, where my family raises on average 150 to 200 animals for milk, cheese, and meat. My father is a *halal* butcher who slaughters in an Islamic manner) and supplies to an Islamic Food Mart a few blocks from the Islamic Center in downtown Los Angeles. My father was raised agnostic or atheist, but he became a believer in One God when he picked up a Bible left on the beach. My mother was raised Catholic, so she leans towards Christianity (although she, like my father, disregards the Trinity).

I and my siblings are home-schooled, and as you may know, most home-school families are Christian. In the last 8 or so years, we have been involved with some home-schooling support groups, thus acquainting me with fundamentalist Christianity. It was an eye-opening experience. Setting aside the blind dogmatism and charismatic wackiness, it was quite a shock to me when I realized that these people, in their prayers, were actually praying TO JESUS. You see, I had always believed that Jesus (p.b.u.h.) was, at the very most, the Son of God (since that is how the Bible mistranslates "Servant of God"). As the Trinity, something I find absolutely ridiculous, is considered by most Christians to be a prerequisite for salvation, I gradually realized I could not be a Christian.

In the meantime, I had become obsessed with demonic Heavy Metal music, something the rest of my family (as I now realize, rightfully so) was not happy with. My entire life was focused on expanding my music collection. I eschewed personal cleanliness and let my room reach an unbelievable state of disarray. My relationship with my parents became strained, although only intermittently so. I am sorry even as I write this. Earlier this year, I began to listen to the apocalyptic rabblings of Christian radio's "prophecy experts." Their paranoid espousal of various conspiracy theories, rabid support of Israel and religious Zionism, and fiery preaching about the "Islamic Threat" held for me a strange fascination. Why? Well, I suppose it was simply the need I was feeling to fill that void I had created for myself. In any case, I soon found that the beliefs these evangelists held, such as Original Sin and the Infallibility of "God's Word", were not in agreement with my theological ideas (not to mention the Bible) and I began to look for something else to hold onto.

The turning point, perhaps, was when I moved in with my grandparents here in Santa Ana, the county seat of Orange, California. My grandmother, a computer whiz, is hooked up to America Online and I have been scooting the information superhighway since January. But when I moved in, with the intent

to finding a job (easier said than done), I begin to visit the religion folders on AOL and the Usenet newsgroups, where I found discussions on Islam to be the most intriguing. I discovered that the beliefs and practices of this religion fit my personal theology and intellect as well as basic human logic.

Islam presents God not as an anthropomorphic being but as an entity beyond human comprehension, transcendent of man, independent and undivided. Islam has a holy book that is comprehensible to a layman, and there is no papacy or priesthood that is considered infallible in matters of interpretation. All Muslims are free to reflect and interpret the book given a sufficient education. Islam does not believe that all men are doomed to Hell unless they simply accept that God (apparently unable to forgive otherwise) magnanimously allowed Himself to be tortured on a cross to enable Him to forgive all human beings who just believe that He allowed Himself to be tortured on a cross... Islam does not believe in a Chosen Race. And on and on... As I began reading English translations of the Qur'an, I became more and more convinced of the truth and authenticity of Allah's teachings contained in those 114 chapters. Having been around Muslims in my formative years, I knew well that they were not the bloodthirsty, barbaric terrorists that the news media and the televangelists painted them to be. Perhaps this knowledge led me to continue my personal research further than another person would have.

I can't say when I actually decided that Islam was for me. It was really a natural progression. In any case, last week (November 1995) I went to the Islamic Society of Orange County in Garden Grove and told the brother in charge of the library I wanted to be a Muslim. He gave me some excellent reading material, and last Friday I took *Shahadah* (accepted the creed of Islam) in front of a packed masjid. I have spent this week learning to perform Salat and reflecting on the greatness of Allah. It feels great to be a Muslim! Subhaana rabbiyal 'azeem!



11. The One And Only

by Diane Charles Breslin, Ph.D

When I am asked how I became a Muslim I always reply that I had always felt myself to be a believer in the ONE AND ONLY, yet I first realized what that meant when I heard about a religion called Islam, and a book called the Qur'an. It was in my preparation for my Master's Degree that I first heard of the Qur'an. Up until then, as most Americans, I knew only of "the Arabs" as mysterious, dark predators out to plunder our civilization. Islam was never mentioned, only the surly, dirty Arabs with their camels and tents in the desert. As a child in religion class I often wondered who were the other people? Jesus walked in Canaan and Galilee and Nazareth but he had blue eyes – who were the other people?

I had a sense that there was a missing link somewhere. In 1967 during the Arab-Israeli war we all got our first glimpse of the other people, and they were clearly viewed by most as the enemy. But for me, I liked them, and for no apparent reason. I cannot to this day explain it except that I realized they were my Muslim brothers.

I was about 35 when I read my first page of Qur'an. I opened it with the intention of a casual browse to get acquainted with the religion of the inhabitants of the region I was majoring in for my Master's Degree. Allah caused the book to fall open to Surah al-Mu'minin (The Believers) Verses 52-54: *"Verily, this your nation is one nation and I am your Lord so keep your duty to Me. But they broke up their command into sects, each one rejoicing in its belief. So leave them in their error until a time"*. (Qur'an, Surah Al-Mu'minin 52-54). The first of the "Ten commandments" states: *1. I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt not have false gods before me. 2. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.* Anyone who knows the correct meaning of "la ilaha illa Allah" (there is no god but Allah) will immediately recognize the similarity in this testimony. Then we can really start to bring together the real story of all the prophets and put an end to the distortions. *"And they said the Most Merciful has taken a son. Indeed you have brought forth a terrible, evil thing, whereby the heavens are almost torn, and the earth split asunder, and the mountains fall in ruins"*. (Qur'an, Surah Maryam 88-90).

It took three full years of my searching and studying Qur'an before I was ready to proclaim that I wanted to be a Muslim. Of course I feared the changes in clothing and habits such as dating and drinking to which I had become accustomed. Music and dancing were a big part of my life, and bikinis and mini skirts were my claim to fame. All the while I had no chance to encounter any Muslims as there were none in my area except a few immigrants who could barely speak English, and hour's drive away at the only mosque in the state at that time. When I would go to Friday Prayer, to try and

check out what I was considering, I would receive furtive glances as I was perhaps suspected of being a spy. There was not a single Muslim American available to help me and, as I said, all the immigrant population were rather chilly, to say the least.

In the midst of this phase of my life, my dad died of cancer. I was at his bedside and literally witnessed the Angel of Death (*Asrael*) remove his soul. He was gripped by fear as tears rolled down his cheeks. A life of luxury, yachts, country clubs, expensive cars for both him and mom, all a result of interest income, and now its all over. I felt a sudden desire to enter Islam quickly, while there was still time, and to change my ways and not to continue blindly seeking what I had been raised to believe to be the good life.

Shortly thereafter I came to Egypt and took a long slow journey through the miracle of the Arabic language and the discovery of the clear truth – Allah is One, the Everlasting, the Eternal; Who never was born or gave birth, and there is nothing at all like Him. It is also the resulting equality between humans that attracted me to the religion. The Prophet Muhammad said that people are like teeth of a comb, all equal, the best being the most pious. In Qur'an we are told that the best are the pious ones. Piety involves love of and fear of Allah alone. Yet before you can really be pious you must learn who Allah is. And to know Him is to love Him. I started learning Arabic to read the word of Allah in Arabic as it was revealed.

Learning Qur'an has changed every facet of my life. I no longer wish to have any earthly luxuries, neither cars nor clothes nor trips can lure me into that web of vain desires that I was so called up in before. I do enjoy a fairly good life, but it is no longer embedded in the heart... only at hand. I don't fear the loss of my former friends or relatives. If Allah chooses to bring them close, then so be it, but I know that Allah gives me exactly what I need, no more, no less. I don't feel anxious or sad anymore, nor do I feel regret at what has passed me by. I'm safe in the care of Allah, THE ONE AND ONLY – Whom I always knew but didn't know His Name.



CONVERSION CATEGORY IV: DA'WAH MODELS

Da'wah means outreach. It is clear that very few of the influencing Muslims in these stories practiced their outreach with any degree of systemization. Da'wah courses and centers abound all over Indonesia and Malaysia, but what they actually teach is not standardized or refined in any way. Can the present anthology help us to improve on this state of affairs?

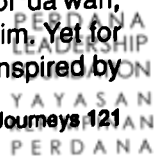
The three stories comprising this section address these concerns. We have saved them for the end of this book, so that readers may judge for themselves what may be relevant and what may be spurious.

The first of these stories comprises various observations and suggestions from a Scottish convert who finds Muslim outreach methodologies in need of immediate and rapid refinement, if Islam is ever to achieve the same global status that western Jahiliyah (paganism) is securing right now. Only by careful attention to effective principles of Public Relations and da'wah methodologies can we Muslims halt the West from running roughshod over the less rich cultures and countries of the world. Ironically, Islam now has the role previously served by the communist world in checking and challenging the cultures of conspicuous consumption by which the human spirit is debased and molded into passivity by hidden "others". Woe to those Muslims who debase their destiny by succumbing to rampant consumerism themselves.

The second of these stories highlights gross inadequacies in the customary Muslim way of arranging for conversions to take place. This was a very intense experience in my own life, not without its dramatic and even dangerous aspects. The story will be told exactly as it happened.

The final story is an appreciation and analysis of the da'wah style of one of the outreach superstars mentioned earlier in the book, Bapak Muhammad Subuh Sumohadiwidjojo from Central Java. He was my personal Ustaz or religious teacher, although he never represented himself as such. People all over the world saw him in the ways that they needed or chose for the furtherance of their spiritual evolution. For me, he filled the role of the long-sought teacher or helper to a conversion process that had already begun many years earlier, consequent to my youthful travels in various Muslim countries of the world (see "The Mosques in My Life," in the Travel Section).

Not everyone would have responded to Pak Subuh's style of da'wah, especially in its firm refusal to overtly invite people to become Muslim. Yet for me as a westerner, and for many others whose conversions were inspired by



this one man, the reliance on personal experience and verification was a literal godsend. In this way, some of the deepest tenets of our own scientific culture were honored and respected. Nobody was forcing us to accept certain beliefs “on faith”. Nobody was insulting our intelligence. Nobody was threatening us with hellfire and damnation. And for these blessed innovations in Bapak’s missionary style, I remain eternally grateful. My conversion was my own. Bapak even warned me against possible future difficulties if I insisted on becoming Muslim, especially without the full support of my family. He was right. In this way, however, I have learned a bit of the meaning of the Qur’anic verse, “And none shall be burdened with a burden greater than he can bear.” Alhamdulillah.



1. SENSE AND SENSITIVITY: HOW TO ACCOMMODATE NEW CONVERTS

by Joanne McEvan

There are numerous articles as well as videos and books to satiate us Muslims on the growth of Islam, giving us that 'feel-good factor' often needed in this Islamophobic milieu. But there is an issue that is too often ignored. What about how new and prospective Muslims are dealt with in our communities? After people revert to Islam how do we go about advising, helping, guiding and most of all befriending them? Is it a case of "You are on your own now, you've said your *Shahadah!*" or, "Come to my house and meet the family, but there are a long list of do's and don't's you must follow."

Aspects of the early years as a Muslim are all too often forgotten and ignored. This article may emerge as polemic on Muslims' attempts to help those who have entered the fold of Islam. My aim is not to have a good moan at the Muslim community. That would be futile and only widen the gaps that may already exist between us all. I prefer to see this as one of those methods of self-development where to improve we must accept our faults, but to accept them we must first be aware of them.

I hope that we can reflect on issues or 'syndromes' experienced by many new Muslims in the hope that those Muslims who have converts in their midst may carefully consider their motives and etiquette when befriending them. But most importantly, all of us must develop some kind of empathy and understanding. I ask every person in this situation to try to put on the shoes of every new Muslim or prospective Muslim. If they don't fit, then give them to someone they actually fit and ask them to take over this ardent task. I say 'we' because it may not only be native Muslims who lack empathy: converts also sometimes have very short memories, myself included at some stages. I would also like to point out that even native Muslims who have been brought up in the West, unaware of the Islam that they should have inherited from their parents, but who feel they have 'returned to the fold' so to speak, are in some ways similar to converts from non-Muslim family backgrounds.

In many ways, the struggle to exist as a new Muslim has to do with the lack of moderation in available information and help. Very often new and prospective Muslims are left to either grope in the dark at anything that is seemingly Muslim, or be spoiled by people who smother them with attention and knowledge - sometimes, unfortunately, not the correct knowledge. For many people it is a case of feast or famine - from having no friends, information or help, to being overwhelmed with them all.

This imbalance is often part of the new Muslim's learning process, a part he or she must work through alone. Too much information may go over their heads. Too little may be starving them. After my quiet and personal conversion 15 years ago, I made many attempts to find out more about Islam. The most obvious place of course was the mosque — the beautiful and rather imposing mosque overlooking the river near the Glasgow city center. But my visits were never taken with the seriousness they deserved. In fact, I was shown the door on more than one occasion.

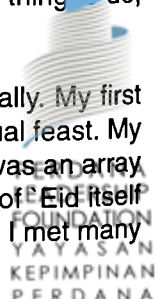
One event sticks clearly in my mind. I approached the patrons of the mosque: five rather middle-aged men in long beards, wearing their traditional dress. There wasn't a woman in sight. I told them that I was a Muslim and I wanted to know how to pray. They stood in disbelief - "A Muslim! You are not a Muslim." "But I am," I insisted, "and I want to know how to pray." After a few minutes trying to convince them that I was Muslim, one of them said, "Well you need to learn about the basics first." "But I already know the basics. I want to know how to pray!" I said. The embarrassment was too much for them.

They produced an introductory booklet on Islam in English, which cost 50 pence. I delved into my bag to pay for it, but I was just not quick enough. One of them paid for it in the hurry to get me out. I left stunned and completely demoralized, not knowing where to go to find out about that one fundamental pillar in Islam. I did pray with the help of that little booklet, but not correctly. It took another ten months before I decided to phone the same mosque in a last bid for help. The kind man who answered the phone directed me to his wife and the local Islamic center.

I discovered a few years later that another woman had had a similar experience. She eventually went to an Arab country to take the elementary steps as a Muslim, only to return to find that the same Islamic center was a few miles from her home all along.

Ramadan was a similar experience. Anyone who has fasted for the first time as an adult will be able to understand how difficult it is. In my case it happened to be in the early summer (that means sunset was after 10 pm), being on my own, and with not a soul to break fast with. 'Eid wasn't much fun either. Well I fasted on 'Eid, actually. The Ramadan schedule I got from a halal meat shop said it was still Ramadan, so I followed it — the logical thing to do, it seemed to me at the time.

Now for the feast, and I say 'feast' both figuratively and literally. My first encounter with the Muslim Ramadan was an overwhelming spiritual feast. My ignorant life as a solo Muslim was a thing of the past. Ramadan was an array of prayers in the mosque and invitations to break fast. The feast of 'Eid itself was a multicultural extravaganza. I visited five houses in one day. I met many



friendly and warm Muslims who in many ways became my adoptive families. As for knowledge and direction in Islam, it was delivered at a speedy rate. Probably it was a rate that was just right for me at that time. I had been starved enough and I had a big appetite. But this was not the same for others.

Many I knew took a wide berth or were never seen again. Over-enthusiastic Muslims really willing to help wanted in no time at all to know the life stories of the converts, and some new Muslims began to feel that their personal space was encroached upon. It is quite understandable why new or prospective Muslims would be of interest to the born-Muslims. But they must remember to be moderate in their interest. Too many questions make people feel uncomfortable. What about the contents of this generous information?

I don't think I need to impress upon how preaching Islam often falls prey to dominance of cultural traditions rather than Islam itself. This is a common problem and consulting the 'appropriate' books on Islam can remedy this. What is difficult to expound is sifting through what is relevant and what is irrelevant. For example, a new Muslim needs time to come to grips with his/her new faith. It may take one person a day to accept and act upon one Islamic principle, and another person years. As we are all unique individuals, our absorption levels are variable. All Muslims take their time in absorbing concepts, and native Muslims should be no strangers to this.

A good example on the relevance or irrelevance of certain principles and their immature timing is the emphasis on the hadith, which states "religion is advice". This means that many Muslims feel the propensity to constantly advise new Muslims. "Marriage is half of faith" is one example. Many Muslims are in such a rush to get new Muslims married off, due to the sheer "buzz" of matchmaking, their good intentions, or to keep the sister (as in most cases) on the straight path. Marriage may be half of one's faith, but not being married at any certain stage does not make the person half a Muslim. By all means, marriage can be the best step for a new Muslim, but it can also be the most trying step if the person is still coming to terms with his/her new identity.

A measured approach is the key. This is an immense issue, and due to its complexity it cannot possibly be dealt with correctly under the rubric of this article. While new Muslims are struggling to grasp their new faith and identity, many people urge them to adopt a 'Muslim' name. I have never been able to understand the need for this, particularly when the Prophet only changed the names of those whose names had bad meanings. The non-Arab companions Bilal and Salman the Persian kept their names. Similarly, Salman's wife, Marya, who was a Jew Coptic Christian before embracing Islam, did not change her name. I know countless converts who have Muslim names now only because they were told it was a must, and if they had known that it wasn't, they would have not changed them. I must admit that I did

actually accept an Arabic name but only for the sheer novelty and experimental value. It lasted three hours.

Compounded with this barrage of knowledge, there is also the use of another language. In my case, Arabic or Urdu terms were often used instead of English. I often laugh at the following example, but reflect on how typical a scenario it is for many. There was one kind sister who helped my friend and myself in reading the Qur'an. She was also a convert. She did, however, have this tendency to go on about the vices of the devil and often referred to him in the Arabic as 'shaytan'. She also often spoke about her duties towards her husband. Then one day, she began to mention 'shaytan' doing this and that. With the amount of times she mentioned 'shaytan' anyone would think I would have been well acquainted with him, and I innocently said, "Who is 'shaytan', again? Is that your husband?" She was horrified. Naturally!

This not only typifies the problems in using jargon that new Muslims (and converts whose language has no aspect of Muslim culture) are unaware of, but also indicates how some aspects of Islam are presented in an unbalanced manner. Instead of being reminded of Allah's mercy, I had constantly to listen to references to the devil, hell, and evil. What a turnaround to embrace a religion that seemed to be as full of hell and damnation as the one I had just left, I thought. Maybe this approach is better for an ex-priest, ex-nun, or people from certain Protestant denominations. But I was previously a lapsed Catholic, and like many, left Catholicism due to its lack of compassion for and understanding of the real world.

Again, there is a call for born-Muslims to empathize with that new Muslim in his/her previous life. Not easy! But neither is guiding them, if it is to be done fruitfully. Whether these examples make up for the cultural clutter, I cannot say exactly. Some aspects will be inherited from Muslim cultures, and some will be over-zealous attempts to help new Muslims without that all-encompassing empathy, or even with a taint of ignorance of how Islam should be disseminated. If born-Muslims were only to look at how the Prophet and his Companions dealt with new Muslims, it might enlighten them.

Disseminating Islam in its most beautiful form to new Muslims or non-Muslims is an ardent task. With a few examples from my own personal experiences, I feel I have only exposed the tip of the iceberg. I recommend anyone in this situation to read the book "Even Angels Ask" by Jeffrey Lang. This is an honest and touching account of a man who reverted to Islam, but saw himself and others fall into the many holes that new Muslims encounter.

2. THE ALCOHOLIC CONVERT

by Sulaiman Dufford

One day in 1994 I entered the Pasar Jodoh mosque on Batam Island in East Sumatra to find an older American sitting on one of the walls there, looking a bit timid and uncomfortable. He was a retired seaman who said he had always wanted to live out his life as a Muslim in some Muslim country, and he asked for my help in arranging for his conversion. He had visited many Muslim ports and countries in his capacity as a seaman and was favorably impressed. Of course I readily agreed. The conversion took place a few days later in that mosque, witnessed by one of the Indonesian government officials living there, myself, and the mosque congregation. He took for himself the Muslim name "Ismail", following the hero of Moby Dick ("Call me Ismail"), another seaman with much experience in world travel.

The other local Muslims left Ismail in my care after that, and we used to meet at the Indonesian coffeehouses in the evenings, whiling away the time by chatting with locals and reminiscing about our previous lives in the West. We shared a lot those first few weeks, but I noticed that Ismail usually drank ten to fifteen cans of beer each evening without ever appearing to be drunk. He had evidently not paid any attention to the prohibition of alcohol in Islam, although he had a particular translation of Al Qur'an that he liked, and which he treated with great diffidence and respect. Nevertheless, he continued to drink his beer as if there were no end of it.

One evening he announced that he had had an "epiphany". This is of course a Catholic term (he had been raised in the Catholic religion), what we would call "Ilham" in Islam. The meaning of both terms is, roughly, "a personal revelation". He wanted me to help him start an English school. He was not a qualified teacher, but he wanted to help the local people and he felt this was one way he could do it, using me as the qualified school director, while he provided funding and taught classes now and then as he felt moved. Ismail had a suitcase full of money. He passed about ten thousand dollars over to me and asked me to get started. Meanwhile, he planned to return to the States and collect all sorts of memorabilia to place in the school. This was a sound marketing strategy, so I agreed.

My younger son was visiting me when Ismail came back, and the three of us often played billiards together. Ismail played the part of a good uncle. He had never been married and had no children of his own. He still consumed his daily ration of beer without ever getting drunk. The Indonesian government official who had witnessed Ismail's Profession of Faith offered to accompany him to Mecca for Umroh, so he could see Islam "from the top", as it were. This was really quite a compliment, coming from that particular official.

Strangely, I thought at the time, Ismail declined to go. He had the money. He was free. He could easily have gone. I felt this journey would have vindicated our decision to make him Muslim with only a minimum of screening. Then I left Batam for Jakarta for a week or so, to put my son on his flight home.

When I came back, I couldn't find Ismail. He wasn't at any of his usual haunts. Then, one day when I was returning to my small hotel after a visit to one of the younger Qur'an-reading champions in residence on Batam, I found Ismail with a group of strange men in front of the hotel. He informed me that these men carried guns, and advised me to do what they said with no fuss. My first order was to check out from the hotel and bring my checkbook with me. Then we went to my bank, where I was ordered to close my account and give Ismail whatever money was there. Then I was taken to another hotel room and told I would be held captive until I had found enough money to repay Ismail completely for what had been spent on getting school licenses, and other expenses attendant to running up a new school. This amounted to about seven thousand dollars more.

Evidently, drinking alone while I was gone, Ismail had gone completely paranoid. A friend of his had informed him how he could recoup his investment by hiring a certain bunch of thugs to kidnap me and hold me for ransom. The police could be paid off to issue a warrant for my arrest (on false grounds, of course), so that if I did run, I would be arrested and thrown into the Batam jail. This was deemed by all concerned to be much worse than being held temporary captive in various hotel rooms. Other gangs, catching the scent of a kidnapped westerner, had to be evaded every day by moving me to different hotels.

While I was gone, a thief had also broken into Ismail's hotel room and stolen four thousand dollars from the suitcase of his. Somehow, I was held responsible. Actually, that was the money Ismail should have used to go to Mecca, but when I unwisely pointed that out to him, he became even more angry.

Where could I find the ransom? At first, I called the government official who had left Ismail completely in my care, beer cans and all. This scoundrel abandoned me completely, refused to help. After a few days of constant threats of physical violence or even being murdered, I thought of a Muslim convert friend who had recently inherited a small amount of money, so I instructed the thugs to contact him and he agreed to try to help.

Then began the worst part of the ordeal. The transfer of bank funds from the American bank to Singapore dragged on and on. Every day, Ismail was drinking and trying to decide whether to break my thumbs, my legs, or simply kill me and throw me in a gutter somewhere. Every day, my convert friend,

who had arrived on Batam, tried to cool Ismail off. I saw no one these days other than my friend as middleman and the thugs who surrounded me. I prepared a few letters to give to my friend to post should I be killed. I realized how few other human beings were still in my heart then, my two sons and then-wife. But the then-wife was in the process of abandoning me and could not be located. So there remained only two other beings close in my heart, my sons, and no more. The rest was Allah s.w.t. and total emptiness.

I prayed the requisite five times a day, which may have helped slow the thugs down, I don't know. I did not have it in me to escape, so I was left only with prayer. Finally, after six days of being terrorized and threatened daily, sometimes hourly, my friend received his transfer in nearby Singapore. Then, on day seven, Ismail was paid off and I was released. But I was warned never to return to Batam, and forced to promise never to interfere in Ismail's life again, or he would find my sons in America and take them. Finding my wife gone from Batam to some undisclosed location in Singapore, I returned to Jakarta for the post-trauma stress period. I stayed several months with my former sister-in-law there, who was my only family remaining anywhere nearby.

After several months in Jakarta, some more thugs knocked on my door at three am one morning and threatened to burn the house down if I did not pay them \$10,000 cash. So I told them to go ahead and burn the house down, and returned to my Tahajjud prayers inside. When I asked the servant to call the police, she said, "Those ARE the police". I left for Malaysia shortly thereafter, where I have lived safely ever since.

The point of this story is clear. We cannot simply welcome newcomers into our Ummah without serious screening. Ismail suffered from "maintenance alcoholism". He had to have a certain level of alcohol in his blood simply to feel normal, and would not necessarily show any signs of it. So we did not realize that he was prone to the ideation common to all alcoholics, namely, the expectation of being betrayed and the inability to trust anyone, i.e., serious paranoia. In retrospect, we realized he could not go to Mecca for fear of being cut off from his daily fix of alcohol. And of course, I was blamed for an imaginary failure to establish his language school within only a few weeks.

Ismail had also been having a love affair with someone else's wife from a nearby island, who would visit him secretly on Batam. He had always stolen other people's wives and did not really intend to change his habits, as he felt too old to marry. On the other hand, he was all the while paying the living expenses for a paraplegic older woman in her small apartment in New Orleans, as an act of charity. From these discoveries, we realized that a Profession of Faith and even love of Al Qur'an was not enough. The danger came from not having examined this man's totally inconsistent HABITS, some of which he either could not or would not change.

How often do we screen our candidate Muslims? And how often do we lose them sooner or later, as they become *murtad* (apostates)? Some say the penalty for apostasy in Islam is death. That very issue is being debated in one of the northern Malaysian states right now. But what happened to Ismail is partly the fault of those other Muslims who witnessed his conversion with such glee and then abandoned him entirely to me. How could I handle such a case on my own? As it seems, I may have barely escaped with my life. And the permanent scars of my kidnapping will remain with me to the end of my days. I despise terrorists, Muslim or not, because I have been terrorized. I doubt whether any of the scholars who remain quiet on the terrorism issue have been personally terrorized themselves. Had they been, they might take a more active stand against such methods of intimidation, however just the causes may seem.

Later I spotted this "Ismail" in an Indonesian ferry terminal. My response was one of instant fear. I ran down the stairs and into the safety of the Indonesian citizens milling about there. He had previously threatened to simply grab my hands and break my thumbs, so I ran. Ismail had failed to visit Mecca due to his need for beer. He must have some anxiety in his subconscious mind about what he did. Blaming me for it only defers his Judgement, as well as the Judgement against those fellow Muslims who witnessed his conversion and then forgot all about him.

3. INDIRECT DA'WAH by Sulaiman Dufford

Muslims are often so eager to spread their faith that they neglect the First Principle of good "da'wah" - hearing or at least fully accepting the non-Muslim's point-of-view. Conditions, and people, do not change if they are not fully accepted beforehand. This was my Ustadz' method, and it was also a principle of "Gestalt Therapy" as developed by the renowned Dr. Fritz Perls, one of my early-life teachers. So we may say that "prior acceptance" is a psychologically sound principle in seeking significant behavior-change among those who do not transgress too much against the public peace.

Yet right here is an immediately "up front" dilemma. If we are confronted by a renegade — someone who has many viewpoints, habits, and problems that come from disregarding even normal traditional morality such as the Ten Commandments — how many of his/her opinions and delusions can we be expected to entertain while listening quietly and respectfully? How far gone is too far?

What happens if we convert an alcoholic, for example? Or a prostitute? Or a proud adulterer? Or others for whom legal punishment may be due? Are we prepared to take the responsibility of bringing these renegades into our Ummah? Do Americans who eschew any and all religious moral codes qualify? Or those who practice "situational ethics" - believing that what is right and wrong depends entirely on each individual situation? In other words, do we convert those who question or deny the existence or validity of the Wahyu Allah, those who remain uncertain of it?

There are da'wah experts who can disregard this "First Principle" and plunge directly into their conversion "sales pitch", but they are few and far between. Amateur "penda'wah" do it all the time. Most do more harm than good, especially when they challenge the non-Muslim's "syirik" (iconoclasm) straightaway. "Indirect Da'wah" - da'wah by personal example, or what we might call the "soft sell" - is much more successful, especially when so much violent political behavior is carried out in the name of Islam, whether rightly or wrongly, and subsequent media disinformation overwhelms almost everyone.

In line with my oft-repeated suggestion that born-Muslims learn their da'wah techniques from researching the experiences of well-established converts, I would like to describe my own experiences with the man who did more than anyone to bring me into Islam, and analyze his method of Indirect Da'wah. It may seem a bit unusual to some, yet the fact remains that literally thousands of followers outside his home country of Indonesia (see for example p. 101) became Muslim as a result of his round-the-world journeys, which were more than twenty in number altogether.

The First Principle that he followed was, as mentioned above, to always encourage his followers to accept themselves in full truth and reality, and to accept them as such himself, whatever their religion or lack thereof. Americans are Americans. They cannot be expected to behave as Javanese. And vice versa. There must be no judgement between cultures. Much of his work was to explore and discover, with us, how the different nationalities really were - how they walked, talked, moved, laughed, or did anything differently from each other. He celebrated ethnic and racial distinctions and encouraged us to study them and deepen our sensitivity to them.

His Second Principle was NEVER to represent himself as a “penda’wah”, or Islamic missionary. He spoke to thousands of non-Muslims without ever inviting them to convert. He expressed himself with equal attention to all major religions, and paid respect to the teachings of their prophets and leaders far more than any Muslim teacher I know. He never once offered to debate or challenge them. So we may say his da’wah style, which we may call our Third Principle, was to be completely NON-CONFRONTATIONAL. He was as much beloved by those who never converted, but were literally reborn into their own religious lives, as to Muslims and converts.

In achieving this, he developed a terminology that was equally applicable to all religions. He did not dwell on Islamic observances that would not be comfortable to non-Muslims. He always advised us to follow the moral and ethical guidelines of our religions as they then were, often describing his mission as that of a caller-to-religious life in general, a reviver of respect for religion in a world gone seemingly quite mad in the NAME of religion. The problem, he said, was not religion. It was the subversion of religion by forces lower than religion.

Therefore, we may say that his Fourth Principle was NEVER to call himself a “TEACHER” or to offer further religious “teachings”. He always said that we had already had enough advice. Religious advice from Almighty God is already available in Holy Books such as Al Qur’an, the Gospels, the Psalms, the Torah, the Vedas, the Sutras, etc. Our problem is to rise to the occasion of respecting that advice and really following it in our individual lives, rather than disturbing or even killing each other in the name of God.

His movement was NOT an Islamic Tarekat — it really did not have teachings, and was dedicated only to emphasizing and strengthening the benefits and power of religion in the daily life of the world. Yet he himself carried out all Muslim public functions and obligations, and always invited followers of all religions to accompany him if they wished. As a result, many of those whose ancestral religions were either dead or defunct in their own lives, seeing and sensing his devotion to Islamic observances and values, chose to follow his example.

He especially offered training in the Ramadan fasting to those non-Muslims who would care to seek that experience, and it was by this means that he was able to finally convince me of the dominant reality of Islam in the world. Even though Bapak (as we called him) passed away in 1987, Muslims and non-Muslims alike continue to flock to his Jakarta home every year to observe the Ramadan with his family and friends. He is survived by a son and daughter and several grandchildren who have continued to host and sometimes address such gatherings, often reluctantly and feeling quite inadequate to “fill his shoes”.

More important than the terminology of his talks, Bapak passed on to his followers what he himself had received, in the form of nightly experiences for one thousand nights in the 1920's, until they also felt a deepening of the meaning of their religious observances IN DAILY LIFE. There was therefore no contradiction between what he passed on to us, and any religions we may have been following at the time. And yet many quite naturally and spontaneously decided to convert to Islam, even though Bapak sometimes warned us of possible difficulties ahead! He was always the realist, which increased our respect for him as compared to so many pie-in-the-sky dreamers or evangelists who purport to represent Islam or other religions in front of large crowds of eager people.

Thousands of men of various religious faiths practiced a type of interfaith *zikir* with Bapak (and women separately with his beloved wife, whom we called “Ibu”), and came closer to their inner beings as a result. And many of them felt for themselves that Islam was indeed more correct and appropriate than their previous religions, and decided to convert.

No one ever spontaneously converted out of Islam. And they did not convert with Bapak. He always advised them to convert in the normal way with local religious authorities. He himself always reminded us that he was neither “imam” nor “teacher”. Others who did not convert continued to reap the benefits of these *zikir* sessions in their own religions and cultures, without prejudice. Bapak continued to encourage and guide them all until he passed away in 1987, leaving small groups practicing their devotions in more than eighty countries of the world.

One can hardly imagine a more magnificent service to the human race, short of the Prophethood itself. Yet, when Bapak was asked by some Indonesians whom I was with, how they could be more like him, he replied vehemently, “No! Do not follow Bapak, follow Prophet Muhammad!”



AFTERWORD

Islamic outreach is evidently far more extensive and colorful than many of us had supposed. If we can “kick the habit” of assuming that political and media reality are as important as we are always told, we might be able to take hope in the future of Islam on this planet, and therefore the future of the human race.

Doomsday scenarios notwithstanding (based on some rather mystifying apocalyptic Hadith), the turn of the Muslim century back in 1979, when the Hijrah calendar moved from 1399 AH to 1400 AH, saw a little band of converted Muslims fasting in South Jakarta for the future of Islam in the new century. I was among them. Our unanimous conclusion, after feeling with our very souls how the new century might be, was that the future of Islam on the planet was bright, although not necessarily in the land of its birth. If these conversion stories are any indication, perhaps it is so.

Media reality is part of the Jahiliyah brainwashing of its own, as well as its neo-colonial, subjects. Reality is not like that. Media reality is the illusion of those who, in the inimitable words of Al Qur’an, “plot their plots”. Reality, however, is with Allah s.w.t. - “the best of plotters”.

We need not fear the future. These stories should instill hope. They are not literary masterpieces, yet they speak of the most precious commodity on earth, humankind’s sincere yearning to know and honor their Creator. Where such yearning has been lost, neglected, or degraded, let these stories penetrate and uplift.

After all, this book is also a media production, an Islamic media production. Let us hope it is accepted as part of the ground swell of such productions we now see all over the world. Let us join in establishing a dominant view of reality that emanates from Allah s.w.t., our Creator in truth, before we suffer too much more at the hands of all these idiot plotters. What a laugh, that they imagine they have such power, simply because they refuse to put their faces down on the ground in utter humility before Allah s.w.t.!

“The Truth; and what is the Truth? What would make you realize what the Truth is?... When the Trumpet sounds a single blast; when the earth with all its mountains is lifted up and with one mighty crash is shattered into dust - on that day the Truth will come to pass. The sky will be rent asunder; so that day it will be frail. The angels will stand on all sites. On that day you shall be displayed before Him, and no secret of yours will remain hidden. He who is given his book in his right hand will say: ‘Ah here! Read my book. I knew that I should come to my account.’ His shall be a blissful state in a lofty garden, with clusters of fruit within reach. We shall say to him: ‘Eat and drink to your

heart's content because of what you did in days gone by.' But he who is given his book in his left hand will say: 'Would that my book were not given me! Would that I knew nothing of my account! Would that my death had ended all! My wealth has availed me nothing and I am bereft of all my power.' We shall say: 'Lay hold of him and bind him. Burn him in the blazing Fire, then fasten him with a chain seventy cubits long. For he did not believe in Allah, the Most High, nor did he urge the feeding of the poor. Today he shall have no friend, nor will he have any food except filth which only sinners eat'. This is the despair of the unbelievers. It is the indubitable truth. Praise, then, the name of your Lord Most High." — From Surah 69, Al Qur'an (Zayid translation).



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA

APPENDIX I:

AN INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM AND MUSLIMS

by Sulaiman Dufford

(www.iiie.net/articles/introtoislam.html)

I. Islam and Muslims

The name of this religion is Islam, the Arabic root of which is "Silm" or "Salam", both meaning peace. "Salam" may also mean greeting one another with peace. One of the beautiful names of God is that He is The Peace, but this Divine Name also means more than that: it means submission to the One God, and living in peace with the Creator. It means living in peace with one's self, with other people, and with the natural environment. A Muslim is supposed to live in peace and harmony with all these segments. Hence, a Muslim is any person anywhere in the world whose obedience, allegiance, and loyalty are to God, the Lord of the Universe, and to the innate harmony of His Creation. Thus, Islam is a total system of living.

II. Muslims and Arabs

The followers of Islam are called Muslims. Muslims are not to be confused with Arabs. Muslims may be Arabs, Turks, Persians, Indians, Pakistanis, Malaysians, Indonesians, Europeans, Africans, Americans, Chinese, Russians, or other nationalities.

An Arab could be a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew, or an atheist. Any person who adopts the Arabic language is called an Arab. However, the language of the Qur'an (the Revealed Book of Islam) is also Arabic. Muslims all over the world try to learn Arabic so that they may be able to read the Qur'an and understand its meaning. Although personal supplications can be in any language, Muslims pray their five required daily prayers in the language of the Qur'an, namely Arabic, which is also, and perhaps not by coincidence, one of the most stable, sophisticated, and beautiful languages in modern history.

Thus, whereas some religions have their liturgical languages (such as the Catholics used to have Latin), the Muslims are blessed with more than that. The Muslims have a Revelatory Language, the unchanged and incorruptible language in which the Qur'an was actually received. The Prophet Muhammad was confronted and entranced by the Angel Gabriel off and on over a period of years in both Mecca and Madinah, and all of these segments of the Qur'an were immediately dictated to his Companions.

Yet, even though there are more than a billion Muslims in the world, there are only about two hundred million Arabs, of whom about ten percent are not

Muslim. Thus, Arab Muslims constitute only about twenty percent of the Muslim population of the world.

III. Allah, the One and Only God

Although Allah is the name of the One and Only God, we may call Him by ninety-nine other beautiful names, such as: The Gracious, The Merciful, The Beneficent, The Creator, The All-Knowing, The All-Wise, The Lord of the Universe, The First, The Last, and others. He is the Creator of all human beings. He is the God for the Christians, the Jews, the Muslims, the Buddhists, the Hindus, the atheists, and others. Muslims put their trust entirely in Allah, and they seek only His help and only His guidance.

IV. Muhammad

Muhammad was chosen by God to deliver His Message of Peace, namely Islam. Muhammad was born in 570 C.E. (Christian or Common Era), in Mecca in Arabia. He was entrusted with the Message of Islam when he was at the age of forty years. The revelation that he received is called the Qur'an, while the message is called Islam.

Muhammad is considered to be the summation and the culmination of all the prophets and messengers that came before him. He purified the previous messages from adulteration and completed the Message of God for all humanity. He was also entrusted with the power of explaining, interpreting, and living the teachings of the Qur'an. When asked why he did not perform miracles as other prophets before him were said to have done, he replied that the Qur'an was his miracle.

V. The Sources of Islam

The legal sources of Islam are the Qur'an and the Hadith. The Qur'an contains the exact words of God - its authenticity, originality, and totality are intact. The Hadith are reports by Companions of Muhammad of indisputable integrity of the sayings, deeds, and explanations of the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet's sayings and deeds themselves are called "Sunnah". Those related to explication of verses of the Qur'an are considered binding upon all Muslims. Those Hadith related to Prophet Muhammad's dress and personal behavior as an Arab are considered optional. However, the "Seerah" or writings of followers of Muhammad about his life and actions, provide examples of daily living for Muslims.

VI. The Islamic Creed

Muslims, or those who wish to convert to Islam, must agree to and hold the following beliefs as inviolable:



1) Oneness of God

He is One and the Only One. He is not two-in-one or three-in-one. This means that Islam rejects the idea of a trinity, a son of God, or any man-god. By implication, people are created equal in front of the Law of God. There is no superiority for one race over another. However, God has created the races with different ethnic cultures, colors, languages, beliefs, and skills, so as to interest and inspire one another. The Qur'anic teaching is that the different races are meant to be complementary, not confrontational. The concept is global, not tribal. If there is superiority among mankind, it is only God Who knows what it really is. It is only God Who knows which men or women are among the truly pious or the truly righteous.

2) The Revealed Books

Christians, Jews, and Muslims are all "People of the Book". All have received teachings revealed directly from God, and perhaps others before them have received revealed Books as well, even though their books may have been lost or fragmented. The Qur'an, being the only fully authentic and unchanged of the revealed Books, is considered the final treasure given to mankind. Further advice is not needed, only deeper understanding of divine advice already given in the Qur'an, as well as earlier books. Muslims are required to believe in and respect all revealed Books that have descended to mankind throughout its history.

God promised in the Qur'an to protect its contents until the end of history, and evidence of that protection can be found in the thousands and thousands of children, as well as devout adults, who can recite the entire Qur'an BY MEMORY, from cover to cover, as well as the millions who can and do recite portions of it every day of their lives.

3) The Prophets of God

Muslims believe that God sent different messengers throughout the history of mankind. All came with the same message and the same teachings. It was the people who misunderstood and misinterpreted them. Muslims believe in, among others, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Ismail, Jacob, Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad. The Prophets of Christianity and Judaism are indeed the Prophets of Islam. Even the Buddha may have been a prophet whose original teachings were lost or corrupted, since the Qur'an states that many prophets unknown to modern history also brought revealed Books and teachings. The Hindu Vedas may have been fragments of the Book brought by Abraham (Brahmanism).

4) Angels

Muslims believe that there are unseen creatures such as angels created by God for special missions in the universe. At the end of every prayer,

Muslims give the greeting of “Peace” to the angels which accompany them over each shoulder - to the right, the Recording Angel for our good deeds; to the left, the Recording Angel for our sins. The Qur’an was revealed and taught to Prophet Muhammad through the agency of the Angel Gabriel. The Prophet tells many stories in his Hadith about angels appearing in the world.

5) The Day of Judgement

Muslims believe that there is a Day of Judgement when all people of the world throughout the history of mankind till the last day of life on earth, are to be brought for accounting, reward, and punishment. The Prophet enjoined all Muslims to hold the reality of this day in awe and trepidation, and to manage all their earthly affairs with the inevitability of this day in mind. To that end, the following Islamic rituals and actions have been given by God to the Prophet, and thence to all the Muslims, to protect and sharpen Muslims’ remembrance of the Last Day.

VII. Islamic Practices

Whereas the Islamic creed shares much with other world religions, the true Muslim distinguishes himself from the followers of these other religions by means of diligent study and practice of the following rituals and practices, known as the FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM:

1) Witnessed Profession of Faith (“Shahadah”)

The verbal commitment and pledge that there is only One God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God, is considered to be the Creed of Islam. In addition to anyone who is born to Muslim parents, anyone who utters the words of this creed before two sane, adult Muslim witnesses has become Muslim all the rest of his or her life, both in this world and the next.

2) Prayer (“Salat”)

In further witness thereto, children and Muslim converts eight years of age and up are required to learn the distinctive Islamic way of approaching the One God by means of the Muslim Prayer, or “Salat”, as revealed to Prophet Muhammad on his miraculous Ascension to the Throne of Allah, which began from the famous golden “Dome of the Rock” in Jerusalem. This Dome is not really a mosque, as is often supposed. It is rather a shrine to the Prophet’s Ascension. However, it is sometimes also referred to as the “Mosque of Omar”, because it was built by the Caliph Omar to mark and protect the large rock within it, from which the Prophet’s journey to Heaven traditionally began. The third holiest mosque in Islam is nearby, the “Aqsa Mosque” at the other end of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

Although children and new Muslims are given any amount of time to learn their “Salat” properly, it is an absolute requirement for anyone who calls himself Muslim. It generally becomes second nature, something like the act of respiration, for those of sincere dedication to Islam. The absence of “Salat” may create various hazards for Muslims who think they can ignore this bedrock of Muslim worship with impunity. “Salat” contains many benefits and secrets for the worshipper, psychological as well as spiritual.

3) Fasting (“Saum”)

Every ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar is Ramadan, and the Qur’an orders all Muslims of sound mind and body to fast from dawn until sunset all the days of the month. No drinking, eating, or marital relations are permitted. In addition, harsh words, acts of anger, and various other emotional indulgences are also not permitted. As with “Salat”, this Ramadan fast holds many secrets and benefits. Many Muslim converts come to Islam AFTER practicing this fast and experiencing the proofs and benefits thereof.

4) Purifying Tax (“Zakat”)

The distinction between pure and impure financial gain is important in Islam, and in order to protect oneself against the temptations of undeserved or impure gain, every Muslim must pay a given percentage of his wealth to the poor or other rightful beneficiaries before the end of every Ramadan month. There have been eras in Islamic history when the “Zakat” system solved all the problems of poverty and hardship within Muslim communities.

5) Pilgrimage (“Hajj”)

The performance of pilgrimage to Mecca is required once in a lifetime if means are available. “Hajj” is partly in memory of the trials and tribulations of Prophet Abraham, his wife Hagar, and their eldest son Prophet Ismail. A successful “Hajj” may not be performed on credit. It is sometimes taught that a reasonably successful Ramadan fast must precede the “Hajj”, which is then considered a response to an invitation from Allah, the Most High, to visit His Holy House on earth. The reality of heaven, hell, prayers of supplication, and forgiveness of one’s sins, are all often experienced by sincere “Hajjis”.

VIII. Other Related Aspects

Following from the beliefs and practices mentioned above, Muslims gain personal conviction that people are born free of sin. It is only after they commit sins that they are to be charged for their mistakes. No one is responsible for or can take responsibility for the sins of others. However, the door of forgiveness through true repentance is always open, provided it is accompanied by sincere remorse.

Muslims believe that Islam is a total and a complete way of life. It encompasses all aspects of life. As such, the teachings of Islam do not separate religion from politics. As a matter of fact, both private and public life are considered under the obedience of Allah through His teachings. Hence, economic and social transactions, as well as educational and political systems, are also part of this obedience.

However, early Islamic polities did not call themselves, “Islamic States”. All states must be Islamic in values and beliefs, whether or not they refer to themselves as “Islamic”. Admittedly, many modern states do not yet reach this standard, though they may be full of Muslims.

Islamic practices and celebrations are based on the lunar calendar. However, most Muslim countries use the Gregorian solar calendar for business or economic purposes. Central to Islamic culture, however, is the “Hijrah”, or migration of the Prophet and all Muslims from Mecca to Madinah in the year 623 C.E. This “Hijrah” enshrines each Muslim’s individual effort to free himself from the bonds or dangers of the non-Muslim elements of the culture into which he or she may have been born. Therefore, only the “Hijrah”, or lunar calendar, truly expresses distinctively Muslim culture, and should hang in every Muslim home on earth.

The two main celebrations marked by the “Hijrah” or lunar calendar, are the Idul Fitri, which follows Ramadan and celebrates whatever degree of inner revelation we may have attained by virtue of our diligent fasting; and the Idul Adha, which follows the Pilgrimage Season and celebrates our gratitude for the performance of a successful “Hajj” by ourselves or those Muslims who were able that year, by means of sacrificing dedicated animals to feed the poor.

Charity at the end of Ramadan is economic, charity at the end of Hajj season is by feeding the poor.

As for the Islamic diet, only animals slaughtered in the name of the One God should be eaten by Muslims, although some jurists allow western meat to be eaten since western Christians are still considered “People of the Book”. A further consideration, however, is that “halal” slaughter must also involve draining of the blood, so that most western meat supplies cannot be considered fully “halal”. Muslims are also restricted from consuming pork, alcohol, or any dangerous or addictive drug.

The Muslim place of worship is called a Mosque or Masjid. The three most holy places of worship in the world for Muslims are: Mosque of Ka’abah in Mecca, Mosque of the Prophet Muhammad in Madinah, and Masjid Aqsa, adjacent to Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

A Muslim may pray anywhere in the world, whether in a Mosque, a house, an office, or outside. The whole world is a place of worship. Muslims may pray individually anywhere, though it is preferable to pray in congregation.

The special day for Muslims is Friday. It is considered sacred. A leader (“Imam”) gives a sermon (“Khutbah”) and leads the congregational prayer. However, in contrast to the Jewish and Christian “Sabbath” days (Saturday and Sunday), Muslims are allowed to return to their economic activities immediately after the Friday prayers.

Although differing in days of congregational worship, Muslims, Christians, and Jews are all called “People of the Book” in the Qur’an and they are advised to work together for common terms, to worship the One God, and to cooperate in solving the many problems in society.

Modern European Jewish Zionism is considered a political maneuver that is totally distinct from Judaism as a monotheistic religious entity, with whom Muslims have no quarrel. Proof of the peaceful relations between Muslims and Jews can be found in the many Jews who fled the Catholic Inquisition in Spain and were welcomed by the Muslims. These Jews settled in the heart of the Islamic Caliphate. They enjoyed positions of power and authority.



APPENDIX II: A COGNITIVE ANALYSIS OF ISLAMIC PRACTICES

by Sulaiman Dufford

(www.archiveoflearning.net/religion/islam.html)

Some conventional ways of looking at Islam are through theology, politics, economics, or history. Historical studies are often irritating to Muslims because they want to find answers to questions that arise AS IF Revelation from the Angel Gabriel is only folklore or myth.

Having been challenged to present an essentially Islamic ethical training to a pluralistic student body in my music courses at UPM (University Putra Malaysia or Prince University of Malaysia), I attempted a neurological approach that would skirt theological considerations. In my Psychology of Music laboratory sections, I tried various techniques of Right Brain Access to first expand the cognitive repertoire of the students, hoping to use new perspectives to explain or instill essentially moral or spiritual values to guide them in their artistic training.

Reflecting later upon this attempt, I was able to view Islam itself from a neurological point of view. My conclusion was that all religions attempt to achieve Right Brain Access to some extent, but that only Islam, or rather the rituals and practices of Islam, finally succeed in integrating brain hemisphere function into a proper Whole Brain Balance.

Moreover, such Whole Brain Balance as may be achieved by Islamic practices is the most suitable cognitive style for a safe and healthy progress into the modern and post-modern ages. This statement may seem to call for defence. A thesis would be required. Here, I can only suggest an interpretation of the disciplines and celebrations of the last three and a half months of the Islamic lunar calendar in terms of refinement of human brain function.

We begin our annual brain tune-up with "Nisfu Sha'aban", the day of the full moon in the month preceding Ramadan. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) used to fast on this day, and mentioned that it was a day for assigning provision to each Muslim for the coming year. The Prophet preferred to be examined in a fasting state by angels sent down for this purpose, and recommended (but did not require) the Muslims to follow his example.

Already we doubtless strain the credulity of the non-believers, not to mention the vast majority of Muslims themselves who have no clear idea of what angelic examination might involve. However, my purpose here is not to

defend, but rather to explicate. Please follow along. My E-mail will be provided for those who wish to challenge or further explore my neurological interpretation.

The neurology comes in when we discuss both fasting and angels. Left Brain is our quantitative and proving brain, the skeptical and questioning brain. Its operations and interference must be suspended if we wish to experience the benefits of angelic interventions or many other spiritual insights.

Moving on then, during Ramadan, we have the individual Right Brain Access par excellence. If the fast has been effective, we may experience the greatest single blessing of the inner Islamic life, the Lailatul Qadr, or "Night of Power". This night, according to Al Qur'an, is better than a thousand months at any other time. Here is our clue. Right Brain is not time bound. Linear time, like monetary systems, is exclusively Left Brain (hence the well-known Left Brain insistence that "Time is Money").

So if we achieve a true liberation from linear time and enter Right Brain cognition, Qur'an assures us we will find it good. After all this, i.e., the transition to energies and perceptions that are not "food bound" or "time bound", we may celebrate our good fortune (or at least the good fortune of those who may have been given the Night of Power), as well as the many lesser benefits of the fasting month which all can experience to some degree (such as sympathy for the poor, generosity with loved ones, stronger devotions, deeper religious understandings, increased social harmony, etc.).

This is the Idul Fitri, which Muslims celebrate for several days each lunar year. Social solidarity restores our brain function for normal life, and then, if our fast has been accepted by Allah s.w.t., we may be fortunate enough to feel invited to do our Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca.

In Islam, there is a brain function that is considered superior to that which we may achieve individually in the isolation of our personal fasting. Achieving this function is the neurological purpose of the Hajj. The personal fast is clearly a prerequisite. That done, we plunge into another supreme test of patience and suspension of left - brain critical faculties.

Hajj facilities are improving yearly, but it was not long ago that the lack of crowd control, lack of access to plumbing, lack of pipes for water distribution, lack of transit space for literally millions to move from one site to another, etc., all made the Hajj quite an ordeal. This is not to mention the low educational standards prevailing in many Muslim countries, predisposing some of the pious poor to trampling each other to death trying to get somewhere during the rites and rituals.

Assuming you are protected from such dangers, what will you experience? Well, only the Muslims may really know this, but I can suggest

that an integration of individual brain balance with social brain balance is the aim. If I may take one simple moment within the rites of both the Greater Hajj and the Lesser Hajj (called "Umroh"), this moment itself may be of almost indescribable sublimity. It, too, is NOT a required rite, yet it has been my good fortune to experience it almost each time I have visited the Holy Land. I refer to the kissing of the Black Stone set in one corner of the Ka'aba, or empty black cube that marks the center of Mecca's Grand Mosque.

The history of this Stone is itself a topic of interest. Suffice it to say here that kissing it seems a moment in which the entire universe disappears, a moment in which one is totally alone and totally empty (like Ka'aba itself), and this includes empty of one's previous sins. In other words, one feels totally forgiven. Look at those Muslims seeming to pulsate in their eagerness to reach the stone. You enter the pulsating mass of beings, you are thrown about hither and thither, and then you are suddenly alone before the Stone. You kiss the Stone. Time ceases once again, and this timelessness, or at least the memory of it, will remain with you all the rest of your days on earth (Inshallah!). And then one is ejected, still pulsating, out the other side. One then emerges again into the social group, purified from passing through Allah's heart-on-earth.

After this kiss, you may, if you wish, throw some Zam Zam water down the front of your white robe, to cleanse your spiritual heart with Holy Water in symbolic recognition of what you have now felt deep within your being. Zam Zam water is yet another aspect of the Hajj rites that may be considered from a neurological point of view, and if you generalize this into all such religious rituals and symbolic meanings, you may realize that these repeated duties and holy traditions are part of Right Brain Access as well!

Finally, you circle the Ka'aba seven times before leaving for home. The Ka'aba, as mentioned above, is empty. This emptiness symbolizes the cessation of Left Brain mentation for the duration of your approach to Allah s.w.t. Allah has no need of our thoughts. Only the world needs our thoughts and its fruits. Not Allah. We encircle Ka'aba seven times, once for each of the Seven Heavens said to be part of Allah's creation, and in dedication of our continuing allegiance to a cognitive mode (Right Brain!) that far transcends theology, extending into the sphere of the experienced eternal.

So we have learned this Left-to-Right-to-Left-Brain shuttle, which even Einstein in his published letters credits with the full expression of his Theory of Relativity. If Islam enhances a facility for such cross-hemisphere cognition, Muslims may yet achieve another step on the way to Whole Brain Balance, which, according to anthropologist Julian Jaynes in his book, "The Rise of Consciousness from the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind", may be the ultimate aim and end of the evolution of human consciousness. In this sense, modern neurology confirms Islam as the evolutionary peak of human religions as well as an individual stimulus to improved brain function.

APENDIX III: ISLAM AND THE BRAIN – A QUR'ANIC INTERPRETATION

by Sulaiman Dufford

“Milenia Muslim” Magazine, Kuala Lumpur, October 2004

Al Qur'an often describes the miracles of the natural universe as the first basis of our faith, so I want to muse about how the brain works. Undoubtedly, the human brain is the primary miracle of the human body. It is the human brain that makes man Khalifah of the created universe, because those few genes that separate us from the monkeys have produced this organic marvel – in man, and no other creature. All the organs of the human body are similar to those found in other animals, except the brain. No other creature has a brain like ours.

In Ayah 18 from Surah 61, “The Cave”, Nabi Musa (a.s.) says to his servant: *“I will not give up until I reach the point where the two seas meet, though I may march for ages.”* Human blood is salty, it has the same salinity as the ocean 70% of the rest of the human body is made of fresh water, which is why we can fast from food for many days whereas we must drink water or we soon die. Hajjis die every year in Mecca, because they do not drink enough water. The fresh water of Zam Zam is symbolic of human life.

Between the ocean-salty blood and the fresh-water-based brain cells, there is the “blood-brain barrier”. If the blood escapes into the brain cavities in a hemorrhage, one usually dies. The salty blood must always be kept separate from the fresh-water brain cells, even while it supplies nutrients the brain cells must have. Hence the Qur'an states that fresh and salt water shall never meet. Yet Nabi Musa (a.s.) is determined to find the place where “the two seas” DO meet. If he is not talking about oceans and rivers, what IS he talking about?

Inside the human brain, there are two hemispheres, right and left. These two hemispheres are connected by a neural bridge, the “corpus callosum”. When surgeons cut through the “corpus callosum” to stop seizures in epileptic patients in the 1950's, they found that right and left brains, when separated, behaved in quite different ways. Left brain loved to talk, while right brain only understood pictures but could not talk about them! On the other hand, left brain could not even draw a good picture! A famous article in “Scientific American” magazine of those days was entitled, “One Brain or Two?”. The conclusion was, two

Shari'ah, Hadith, and all those words used to regulate our behavior as Muslims, must therefore be understood by left brain, which has the language

processing skills. Right brain, on the other hand, is the artistic side and must be addressed by images, chants, *zikir*, rhythms, intuitive insight, inspiration, and the like. In other words, Tarekat!

A famous Muslim scholar (Imam Malik) said that Tarekat without Shari'ah corrupts a man's faith, while he who learns sacred law without practicing Tarekat corrupts himself. Perhaps he meant that we need our Islam to come from BOTH sides of our brain, from BOTH brain hemispheres - "Only he who combines the two proves true."

Some people are left-brain dominant. They, like Nabi Musa (a.s.), want to follow the written laws very strictly, because laws are made up of words and left brain understands words. But what did Nabi Musa's people do while he was on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments from Allah s.w.t.? They made an image (the "Golden Calf") and they sang and danced around it! While Nabi Musa was taking care of their left brains, their right brains wanted to express themselves in artistic activity. Yet although what they did may have been "human nature", it made Nabi Musa (a.s.) very angry when he came back down the mountain with new religious laws in his hands. If there was any way his people could have entertained themselves without going against Shari'ah, for example, by chanting a *zikir* from any of the Tarekat, perhaps he could have excused them.

That is our challenge today - how to follow both brain hemispheres without going against either one of them, in other words, WHOLE BRAIN BALANCE. A left-brain code-of-law (the "letter of the law") is not enough, by itself. It must be accompanied by right-brain holistic understanding of the total situation (the "spirit of the law"), in other words, true JUSTICE. In Surah "The Cave", when Al Khidhir was teaching Nabi Musa (a.s.), he tried to give the "big picture", an overall understanding that explained why he (Al Khidhir) had to go against the written law in certain cases when JUSTICE required him to take action. And Nabi Musa, back in those days of his life, had not yet understood his right-brain function, so he was dismissed by Al Khidhir. As usual, the left-brain dominant individual (even a Nabi!) objected to right-brain understanding of the situation, because it was not logical.

What does it mean to be right-brain dominant, like myself? Many of us are! We are the "silent types". We are not very moved or impressed with lots of words, sermons, logic, analysis, or even money (which is a left-brain invention!). But if we are lucky, we have a good left brain and therefore good verbal skills. I can write this story for you because of my left brain. My left brain may be only 40% to my 60% right-brain dominance, but there is always a balance of some sort. I do not prefer Tarekat to Shari'ah (this would be highly unbalanced), but I am sure that Shari'ah without Tarekat can lead to fanatic fundamentalism, even terrorism. I dread Shari'ah without Tarekat. Many converts come to Islam from Tarekat, because there is more feeling in it, more "heart".

Balance is best. This is my interpretation of what Nabi Musa (a.s.) was looking for, the total cooperation of right and left brains. It was so valuable for him that he was ready to “march for ages”, until he found it. Whole Brain Balance means, among other things, that Muslims must serve humanity not only with law and order, but also with wisdom and justice. The spiritual destiny of humankind is in the hands of those who have achieved, and will achieve, Whole Brain Balance. For us Muslims, it is right there in the beauty of our recited Al Qur’an, and in the example of our last and wisest prophet, Muhammad (s.a.w.). We follow him not by imitation alone, which is Left Brain. And not by improvisation alone, which is Right Brain. But by the skillfully balanced shuttle between them, which is Whole Brain.

Only further cognitive and neurological research will clarify this issue. My point is that Islam is amenable to the most rigorous scientific examinations, of which many suggest themselves. Sheikh Abdul Majeed Al a from the Yemen reports identical brain scans for people listening to Qur’anic recitation whether or not the listeners understand the Arabic language, a fascinating finding with very important implications for Islam as a “Herald” of things to come.

Let us attempt to navigate this difficult way, each according to his or her individual capacity. Let us be brought together at the end of this centuries-long road, so that we cherish and protect our entire species with the same devotion that we now cherish and protect our own souls, AMEEN.





PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA

CONVERSION COUNSELING – AN OVERVIEW

By Sulaiman Dufford

(“Milenia Muslim” Magazine, Kuala Lumpur, May & June, 2005)

Muslim converts, in their quest to seek the truth, face a lot of challenges in their daily lives. Shunned by their family members, isolated by friends and left alone by the very people who converted them, they are at a loss — nowhere to go and no one to talk to. Instead of fulfilling the emptiness in their lives through the conversion, they find themselves being thrown into an abyss, an endless emptiness.

Given this situation, it is very important that a system be devised to ensure the converts' faith is strengthened and they remain faithful for the rest of their lives. It is vital that they do not feel disappointed after being converted and that their beliefs are not shaken when they are left alone in the wilderness of seeking the truth.

Here are my suggestions for counseling services I myself did not find thirty years ago, when I formally embraced Islam. My way might have been much smoother had such services been available. And even this discussion barely scratches the surface.

In addition to access to knowledgeable religious teachers, converts also need counseling from other converts - those familiar with the conversion process and problems of adjustment to Islamic ideology and practice in their everyday social and family environment.

Coupled with the well-known counseling techniques derived from secular psychology, the role of learning a new “*ibadah*” must play a central role. The difficulties of learning this new “*ibadah*” are psychological as well as technical. The new “*ibadah*” should be taught with special attention given to psychodynamic changes involved in leaving the previous commitment(s), both ideological and social.

The conversion timeframe is usually not as short as expected. The Prophet (s.a.w.) himself required more than twenty years to have his Islamic conversion completed by Allah s.w.t. After the initial “*Syhadah*”, conversion counseling should address issues involved in integrating the new beliefs and practices into the convert's daily life.

Timing of advice offered within conversion counseling must pay heed to the concept of “therapeutic intervention”, in which the new advice or interpretation must be properly timed in order to assure permanent effect. Nothing should be introduced by force, threat, or coercion. New Muslims can and sometimes do back down when force-fed. We must take care not to push

them into the status of "*murtad*" through our own impatience or insensitivity to their inner difficulties.

In addition to the complex issues related to learning the Islamic "*ibadah*", conversion counseling should pay careful attention to the effects of adopting the new faith at the different levels of the convert's life.

1 - Socialization

Two aspects must be addressed — first, rapid and far-reaching changes in the convert's peer group activities. The switch from non-Muslim to Muslim friends takes time and involves a certain fortitude as well as delicacy on the convert's part. These changes involve both social contact and behavioral change. The Islamization of personal habits will itself necessitate finding new friends, as previous non-Muslim practices lose their appeal and one loses one's tolerance for such habits in others. In the struggle to change one's daily habits to bring them into line with one's new ideological commitments, old friends can sometimes become a very negative influence.

Secondly, we must re-consider the new convert's relations with his blood relatives, both for the future of his or her own Islamic development as well as for possible opportunities to invite family members to convert later. It is not uncommon for converts to face ostracizing and disinheritance. And how can one remain kind to one's parents and siblings if they turn hostile to Islam? If the image one's friends have of one is difficult to change, how much more difficult is it to change one's image before one's own family?

2 - Trans-valuation of the Body

It is in the genius of the Islamic prayers and fasting, as revealed directly to the Prophet for our immense benefit, that the entire body participates in prescribed ways in the worship of Allah s.w.t. These rituals and practices bring about long-term changes in body function and even brain (cognitive) function. Research has only begun to identify mind/body interactions attendant to adopting the Islamic "*ibadah*". Conversion counseling must meanwhile observe and honor such changes as they arise. A long-term counseling relationship for each convert, were it to become available in future, could be of great value in recognizing and nurturing these physical, medical, neurologic and psychological changes, as well as in furthering scientific research into the effects of the Islamic "*ibadah*" on the human organism. Changes in metabolism, food and sleep habits, energy patterns, language usage, perceived meanings of sensory input, and other factors even deeper than the social changes mentioned above, present many challenges to the new Muslim and to his own self-image.

3 - Purification

Conversion changes may not all appear positive while still in progress. It is essential that a "purification model" be understood and applied to converts in order to assure tolerance for negative difficulties along the way. One example would be the assumption that returning from Hajj, or Pilgrimage to Mecca, will be followed by an improvement in one's daily life thereafter. Sometimes this is not the case. Having experienced the reality of heaven and hell, one's "*Taqwa*" will increase and there may be changes in one's aggressiveness, assertiveness, levels of serenity, economic ambitions and so on. Indeed, the rise of "*Taqwa*" in the new converts who visit Mecca for the first time is a fascinating phenomenon. "*Taqwa*" is one of many Islamic concepts that cannot be understood very well merely from attempts to translate it into English, and in fact appears not to be understood very well by those who have not yet visited the Holy Land. People who experience life-changes after returning home from Mecca-Medina may be said to be experiencing "purification".

In any case, "before-and-after Hajj" or "before-and-after conversion" comparisons have not yet been systematically researched and may vary widely in nature. The importance of a "purification model" is that it allows for negative as well as positive experiences, as previous habits and attitudes are purged from the system. The Greeks called this process "catharsis". Modern psychiatry calls it "abreaction".

Purification difficulties must be understood as temporary in nature and not a cause for alarm. Born-Muslims also need not be alarmed upon witnessing such phenomena, whether in their own experiences or among their convert friends. Attendance at the "*zikir*" sessions of *Tareqa* groups – "remembering the names of Allah", according to Al Qur'an - may contribute to the purification process. Purification needs to be distinguished from backsliding or merely bad behavior, and then witnessed with compassion and understanding. Conversion counseling can provide this service.

4 - Professional Commitments

It is not easy to carry a change-of-religion into the workplace. One's peers may be easily confused or disturbed by changes in the image and roles formerly projected. No one likes to have the image he or she has formed of his office mates suddenly and drastically changed. On the other hand, the new Muslim also longs to have his new identity reinforced everywhere he or she goes every day. Yet one may not wish to lose one's livelihood. Living in a Muslim-majority country makes this easier but most converts will not have that opportunity. Counselors who are themselves converts may assist in integrating the new routines and perceptions into one's previous work life. Job changes

may sometimes become advisable and so career-change counseling must be among the counselor's skills.

5 - Recreation and Entertainment

No one should be without the relaxation to body, mind and spirit that appropriate entertainment enables. One word for such relaxation in Al Qur'an is "*Inshiroh*", the title of Chapter 94. However, what assists the relaxation of the Muslim convert cannot always remain the same as before conversion or as the non-Muslim habitually enjoys. The formation of an entertainment industry among Muslims is indeed still in formative stages while western sources continue to predominate.

It will do no good, however, to strive to become Muslim and then relax into previous "*Jahiliyah*" (pagan) entertainment forms such as are offered in the usual TV and film fare. Insidious influences are often at work in such entertainment because secular psychologists have found that while the brain is relaxed, it can be more easily programmed or "washed". The entire advertising industry relies on this truth. While relaxation should not become a source of further stress and uncertainty, Muslim converts do usually go through changes in their entertainment preferences. Guidance for such changes could be very helpful in the smooth transition of the organism's healthy physical and intellectual life from the non-Muslim to the Muslim mode.

6 - Politics

While it is true that Islamic religious values and attitudes cannot be divorced from political behavior, as is the secular tendency, it may also be difficult for the new convert to immerse himself in Islamic political life right away. Many western converts remain "in the closet" by avoiding the Ummah in its political manifestations, or even the Friday prayers themselves. This is true especially in America. For seven years, I never saw a single other white man at the Friday prayers in San Diego, where I lived. Two years ago, I was warned that attendance as the only white man at an Arizona mosque might bring governmental interrogation. Counseling on these issues may be vital in safeguarding the new Muslims' initial peace-of-mind, by easing his/her transition into the mandatory Islamic political life. Muslims suffer too much from political and economic woes to avoid these concerns, but modern Muslim political life is so fraught with contradictions as to need some delicate analysis for and with the new Muslims. Otherwise, the secular option for personal exemption from political life may still prevail, although not Islamic in itself.

On the positive side, Muslims are now involved in the evolution of political systems appropriate to themselves. Indonesia has achieved a presidential election by popular vote, in which the incumbant who usually has the advantage,

was replaced by a challenger. Whatever difficulties they still face, the Indonesian public is loyal to their president in a new way. In Malaysia, serious attempts are being made to integrate Islamic and secular legal systems, and in clarifying the positive role of their monarchy in the governance of an Islamic country. The Middle East still relies on the excellence of individual all-powerful leaders, with mixed results. Nevertheless, what it means to be a citizen of the Muslim-majority world is still difficult to know or achieve by converts, or even by the Muslim majorities themselves.

7 - Prayers and Charity

Coming from the secular world, many good people have forgotten what “ritual space” really is. Left Brain discards ritual activity whenever it cannot be analyzed or put to some use. Even the Catholic Church has discarded many of its former rituals. Islam, on the other hand, continues to place ritual worship at the center of the search for personal salvation. And many converts from secular life have trouble learning these rituals, or even evaluating their efficacy.

For Muslims, rituals descending from Prophetic Revelation are sufficient unto themselves. They need not be “evaluated”, and certainly must not be modified. Fortunately, Islam had no “infallible Pope” to dilute the original Islamic rituals after further generations.

Nevertheless, establishing the Islamic Solat as a pillar of one's daily life is not that easy. Born-Muslims who think it is tend to thrust their convert friends or spouses into many unwelcome and even disturbing intricacies, for which new Muslims can have very little appreciation. PRINCIPLE NUMBER ONE in learning the Muslim prayers is to take them step-by-step, and not to follow the well-meaning guidance of the born-Muslims if they try to teach the prayer all at once in full. From birth, born-Muslims have practiced verbal and other ritual details that may be quite alien to converts, as well as not required of them. These optional “extras” may be avoided temporarily or even discarded.

Scholars generally agree that the essence of the Muslim prayer, that moment at which the supplicant is closest to his Creator, is the prostration (“Sujud”), in which the Muslim's forehead, nose, hands, knees, and toes (and only these!) touch the prayer carpet that is oriented toward Mecca. My suggestion to Muslim newcomers is to establish the five times of prayer beginning with this action. Choose a clean, simple prayer rug, preferably without images of any kind (even of mosques), and use it EXCLUSIVELY for the purpose of prostrating forehead to the ground at the appropriate prayer times.

PRINCIPLE NUMBER TWO is that after the prayer TIMES are securely established, the prayer MOVEMENTS should then be learned and practiced

five times a day, without words or thoughts of any sort, although an “Allahu Akbar” (“Takbir”) can be uttered before each new movement, as is normally done.

PRINCIPLE NUMBER THREE requires facing the hard fact that the Arabic language is uniquely constituted to carry the religious meanings that are best suited to be placed before our Creator. Memorizing our Qur’anic recitations in good Arabic must begin. Statements of intention, or other non-Qur’anic Arabic insertions, are NOT required in fulfilling the purity of the prayer, and can be postponed or eliminated entirely. Various supplications (“do’a”) that some Muslims recite after completion of the formal prayers can be memorized in Arabic LATER or even improvised in the convert’s native tongue. What is most important is to keep the initial task of memorization as simple as possible.

It may take several years for converts, especially older ones, to complete this learning cycle, especially if learning the deep meanings of the prayer are part of the process. Children may complete rote memorization quickly, but older adults usually cannot. What is most important is that the convert must be given TIME to learn the basic details, especially by praying in congregation or in mosques whenever possible. In this manner, the seemingly mechanical or routine nature of the Muslim prayer will eventually be transformed into a practice whose health and spiritual benefits begin to manifest.

The Muslim prayer is one of the most profound activities of which the human being is capable, and our scriptures sometimes suggest that the details of our performance of these prayers will constitute the very first issue on which we will be examined on the Day of Judgement. Although converts need time to master these details, on the other hand, there is not a moment to be lost. —

By breaking the ritual prayer up into its constituent parts, we have attempted to preempt any reason or excuse for the new Muslim to postpone fulfillment of his first and absolute duty to pray in the Muslim manner, a manner not given to any other religious group. For this, we have the Prophet Muhammad to thank, yet even he required many years to perfect his understanding and ritual practices. Prophet (s.a.w.) himself came from an entirely corrupt idol-worshipping environment, so how can we expect more speed than that from our modern-day converts?

The whole concept of charity for the Muslim is different from other religions or even secular charitable activities. The different categories of Islamic charity are precisely defined. They must be understood and undertaken in certain ways by the new Muslim. The reason for this is the overwhelming importance of charity on the Day of Judgement. Virtually nothing goes with us when we face Allah s.w.t. after our life on earth — not our families, not our IQ, not our professional success, not our college degrees, not our fame, wealth, or health.

— EXCEPT what we have done to help those less fortunate than ourselves. Indeed, Qur'an refers to the absolute necessity for SHADE in the Afterlife, which must come from the trees planted by our good deeds. A convert must be carefully guided in adopting suitably Islamic charitable skills, for the sake of his ultimate forgiveness and salvation. If we fail to assist our converted brothers and sisters in the techniques of "applied charity", we fail to assist them in the Afterlife. It should not take them years to learn the categories of Islamic charity and their proper performance. Guidance is required. And for many born-Muslims, this is also a pressing need as modern life distracts us from the eternal verities.

8 - Pre-Conversion Counseling

Adequate screening must assure that the Ummah is not burdened with intractable behavioral or attitudinal problems in its new members. Prospective converts must be informed that certain habits will have to change out of respect to other Muslims, not to mention the well being of the convert himself. The social aspect of a convert's responsibilities, such as guarding his or her social reputation, may be heavier than in the previous culture. Pre-conversion screening should be far more rigorous than is usually the case, in order to identify potentially trouble-making habits. Such screening is not for the purpose of refusing conversion, but rather to alert the convert as well as Muslim *da'wah* workers and conversion witnesses to the need of continuing support of behavior-change. The story entitled "The Alcoholic Convert" in this book describes some of the hazards involved in an over-eager acceptance of the new convert.

It may be easier to institute new rituals than to change old habits, but both must occur for the sake of the convert's future development. This development will have individual intra-psychic aspects, as well as interactive social aspects with the convert's family-members, professional colleagues, and previous or newfound peers.

9 - Conversion for Marriage

When a family or state requires a non-Muslim to convert for marriage (although not always required by Islamic Law itself), an "involuntary apostasy" may result. We often see that when the new convert fails to move beyond obtaining a document permitting marriage, the born-Muslim spouse experiences disturbances to his or her religion, especially in its "*ibadah*", and in spite of whatever love there may have originally been between the partners. This is why Muslim families are so cautious in allowing marriage of their daughters to men from non-Muslim cultures, even though the men may agree to convert. It is easy to share "*iman*" (beliefs), but much more difficult to share "*ibadah*" (rituals and disciplines). How can the new husband lead his wife in

the Muslim prayers, when it may take years for he himself to learn them? Who is “imam” in the meantime?

Backsliding and even apostasy may occur under the influence of the “sham conversion” of the new partner, if he or she in effect retains many pre-Islamic traits and behaviors. There may be no actual purification or Islamization, especially without a balance of shared ritual practices (“*ibadah*”). The imbalance in “*ibadah*” between born Muslim spouses is already a potential trouble spot in Islamic marriages, and so how much more difficult will be such imbalances between born-Muslim women and their newly converted husbands? Therefore, as with the individual conversion counseling mentioned above, conversion-for-marriage counseling must deal with issues of “*ibadah*” well before many other problems can hope to be solved.

An enlightened counseling position with newly married couples would be that neither partner has the ultimate responsibility for correcting unacceptable habits of the other. Rather, both should surrender together in their acts of ritual observance, allowing Allah s.w.t. to bring about needed changes within the understanding of each one. Coerced behavior change is always less stable than spontaneous behavior-change. This difference should be pointed out to all Muslim newlyweds. Men tend to order their wives about. Women tend to try to “change” their husbands – both untenable strategies, according to the principles of modern marriage counseling.

Therefore, pre-marital counseling is highly recommended for marriages requiring conversion of one of the partners, especially if their cultures differ (as is usually the case). Future needs and possible difficulties of such partnerships must be addressed. Family counseling techniques may be useful as well, with families of either or both partners. Problems with marriages not agreed to by one partner’s family members must be considered. Such problems can be tragic if not foreseen and prepared for. The Qur’anic injunction to rely on family members to help overcome difficulties between marriage partners cannot be applied if one of the families has not agreed to the marriage, or has little understanding of the principles of Islamic marriages. In this case, how will the difficulties be managed?

Perhaps the pre-nuptial contract often used in the western world may be relevant to Muslim marriages. In order for the bride, for example, to protect herself from “empty promises” made before marriage and then forgotten, she may ask her future spouse for a signed and witnessed statement. Such a statement could specify whether she will be allowed to work, required to wear her scarf in public, asked to bear more than the agreed number of children, be informed of her husband’s whereabouts, required to cook all the meals, asked to wash and iron her husband’s clothing, given her husband’s monthly salary to manage, etc.

On the groom's side, he may ask to be guaranteed a certain number of undisturbed, solitary hours at home (especially if he is a scholar, teacher, writer, musician, etc.), ask his wife to dress in certain ways in public, inform her of the likely consequences of her jealousy, inform her what rituals they must share, hand him a cup of coffee or even wash his feet when he returns home, etc. He may promise her a certain number of baby-sitting hours per week, or a certain number of meals that he will cook, etc. He may freely promise to inform her at all times of his location and when he intends to return home, whether he will expect her to share his business pressures, etc.

Such a pre-nuptial contract is limited only by the imagination of the partners and their advisors. It also enshrines certain good intentions on both sides, as well as protecting spouses from later mood-swings. Duty is duty, and a promise is a promise. Marriage depends on such stability. Agreement may be sought on these matters within the counseling format. Above all, there is no shame in bringing these issues to discussion and confirmation before other family members. Ayat 283 in "Surat Baqarah" ("The Cow") in Al Qur'an stipulates the same safeguards for all financial agreements entered into between Muslims. This is the longest single verse in the entire Qur'an, which may testify to the importance of witnessed safeguards for important agreements between Muslims. No matter how trustworthy they may consider each other previously, matters of marriage and money have the potential for disrupting all such relationships.

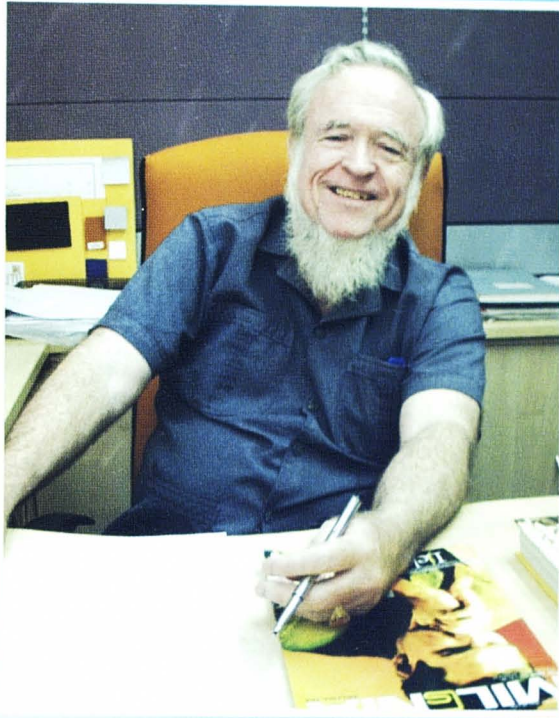
"*Shura*", or consensus, is the great pillar of Islamic social and family life. Especially when one of the partners comes from outside the other's culture or religion, some techniques of consultation can be taught and trained in advance. Role-playing is useful for such training. Sample dilemmas can be acted out in mutual discussion. The priority of each partner to honor the agreements made and consensus reach, regardless of later changing moods or feelings, must be sworn to. Marriages can hardly be managed if yesterday's plans and agreements are forgotten or disregarded today. The results of "*shura*" must always be given priority over individual preferences that later contradict those original agreements. It may be that old-school Muslim men or spouses from modern, non-Muslim cultures have differing ideas about "*shura*" and the management of authority in family life. A clear understanding **MUST** be reached on this issue prior to any Muslim marriage, but especially one involving a new convert.

"Sunnah" fasting on Mondays and Thursdays is an excellent way to manage unruly feelings or other perplexing difficulties between marriage partners, especially if both partners enter into the fasting for this purpose. One purpose of both Ramadan and "Sunnah" (Monday-Thursday) fasting is to reduce the "nafs" that fuel disagreement and altercation. The new convert

can therefore be usefully instructed as to the application of such fasting to the resolution or at least amelioration of marriage problems. A partner's longing to seek real solutions may be expressed to Allah s.w.t. as well as to his or her spouse by agreement to perform this fasting. (According to several Hadith, an additional benefit of "Sunnah" fasting is that it distances the believer from the Hellfire on the Day of Judgement.)

To summarize, Muslim conversions and marriages are often not prepared for properly. Secular psychology does not teach the requisite counseling skills. Imams are not trained in pastoral counseling. A truly Islamic counseling system has not yet been devised. Such services are needed urgently everywhere.





Sulaiman Dufford embraced Islam in 1970 in Los Angeles, one of the first generation of Caucasians inspired by the conversion of Muhammad Ali. Since graduating "With Honors" from Stanford University in 1965, Sulaiman has taught or traveled in over fifty countries of the world, including Saudi Arabia. He encountered his faith in 1961 and then formally converted in Los Angeles in 1970, after visiting Mecca in 1969.


He has also traveled to Malaysia. He is writing his PhD dissertation in theology, dealing with issues in Islam. He is a frequent contributor to magazines and newspapers in Lumpur. His two sons are studying in the United States, though they have also visited Malaysia.

Contacted at:

sulaiman4444@yahoo.com



PUSTAKA
PERDANA
LIBRARY



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA



Salvador Dali depicting "Hidayah Allah"

"Conversion Journeys" occur in inner space, the last frontier. So many are crossing over to a religion other than what they were born into, it is high time that notice is taken of these pioneers of inner space travel, and of their pilot for the journey, man among men, prophet among prophets, our beloved Prophet Muhammad, the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him.

The simple, sincere stories in this book tell more of reversion than conversion, reversion to the original faith of the Prophet Adam, father of us all. But this book aims at more than pious devotion. This book brings to our attention not only the impressive spectrum of conversion journeys, but also new ways of analyzing the dynamics of religious change sweeping the world today.

The book can be read all at once, bit by bit, or at random. It does not ask you to convert. It only invites your attention to this peaceful revolution that places allegiance to God and His Law over and above culture and country, without denigrating either. This book radiates the bright personal hopes of the new Muslims whose stories it tells, as well as their genuine optimism for the future of all mankind.

-- Mamdouh Mohamed Hawash, Director
Al-Tasneem Islamic Media Productions Sdn Bhd
Kuala Lumpur, January, 2006

RM 15.00

ISBN 983-42868-0-5



9 789834 286804

PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAKSI
KEMIMPINAN
PERDANA