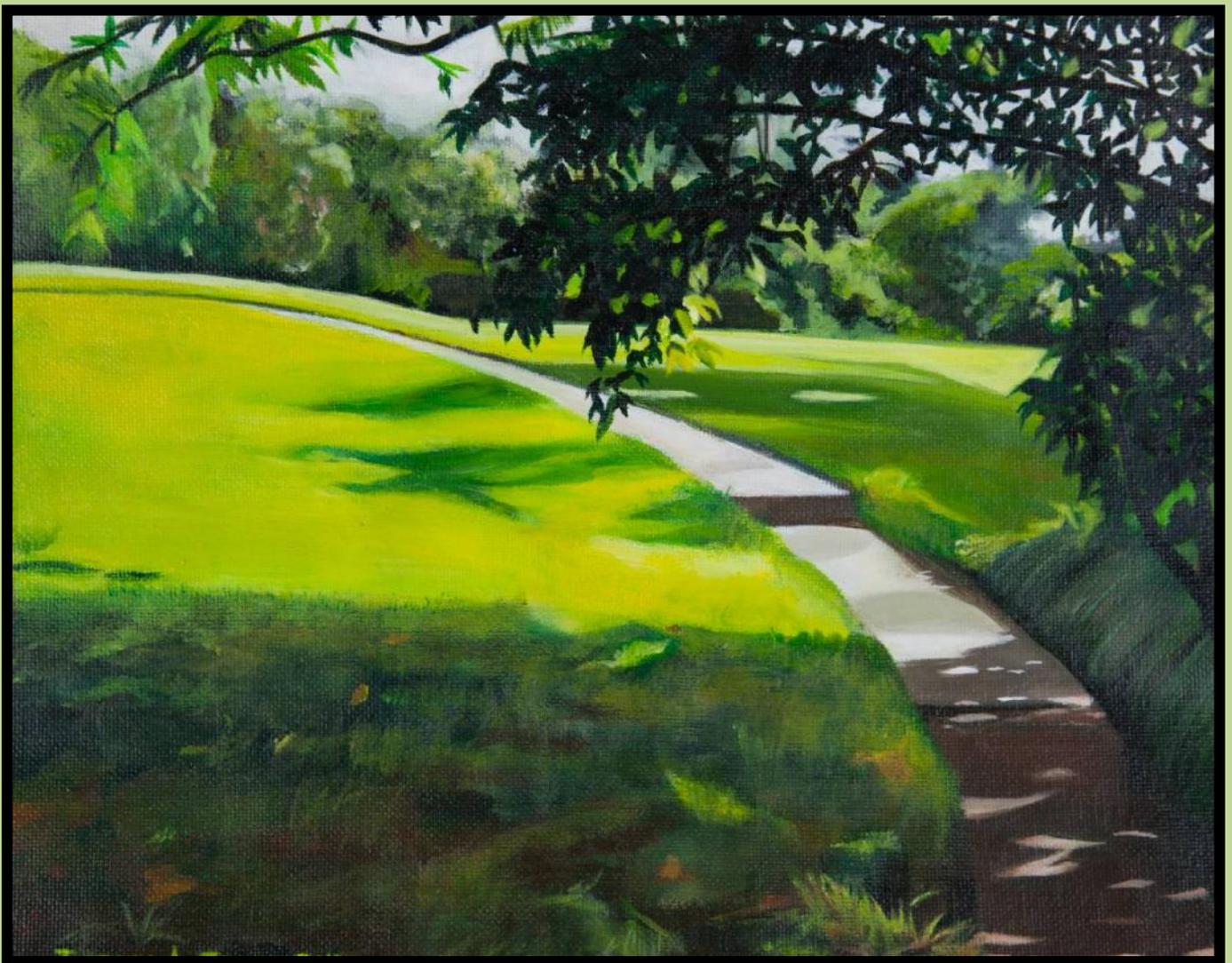


THE ROAD TO ISLÁM

SOME PERSONAL ACCOUNTS



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“The Road To Islám — Some Personal Accounts” is a compilation of the accounts of former non-Muslims on how they came to accept Islám. Their personal accounts of their journeys to Islám will inspire all those who read these very interesting personal narratives. The compiler has very skillfully selected those accounts which also have strong arguments on some very important aspects of Islám, underlining the truth of Islám.

A number of articles by women who have come into Islám, are also included. These provide very strong proofs that Islám does not oppress women — otherwise why would these well-educated women opt for Islám?

The compiler has made some pertinent OBSERVATIONS which appear at the end. These are worth pondering over and taking lessons from.

On the whole, an excellent book — inspiring, motivational, educational. A very useful book for *Dáwah*. Recommended reading for Muslims and non-Muslims.

■ Dr. A.H.Hoosen

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In the name of Alláh, the Beneficent, the Merciful

INTRODUCTION

We are seeing two apparently contradictory movements with regard Muslims: On the one hand we see the distressing effect of Christian missionary activity in Muslim lands causing millions of Muslims to convert to Christianity.¹ On the other hand we see the inspiring phenomenon of Christians and others entering the fold of Islám. There appears to be a contradiction in these processes. Trying to find an explanation the following have been pointed out to us by the experts who have studied these two phenomena. Briefly, looking at the cause of Muslims turning to Christianity at the hands of missionaries, the following have been noted:

Muslims leaving Islám

The Muslims converting are those who have had no Islámic education at all or negligible education. Having no exposure to Islám, they are easy prey to the missionaries.

The Muslims are so poor that they cannot afford to send their children to places where Islámic education is available and are too poor to employ teachers to teach their children and themselves. Growing up in ignorance, they know no better and are also easy prey to missionary efforts.

The people are so poor that the only way that they can find some employment is to give in to the missionaries and become Christians. This form of pressure is widely used by the missionaries.

In the same way, in many areas the only way to receive a western education is to go to an institute run by the Christians – there being no other facilities available – which inevitably implies that by becoming a Christian this person will assured of receiving a secular education.

This indirect pressure also comes in other forms: granting of bursaries and scholarships, promotion in firms, etc., where the monetary benefit is held as a carrot. In simple terminology, it is simply bribing people into becoming Christians. There is a definite material gain for the individual by becoming a Christian.

The carrot held out may be in the form of an increase in status, with or without a monetary benefit as well: prominent positions in organisations, sponsored trips overseas, lecture tours, research grants, hosting or attending conferences, etc. Obviously, the missionaries are well supported by educational institutes, government bodies and NGOs.

NGOs offering aid, health services, etc. play a big role in enticing or simply blackmailing the helpless into converting to Christianity.

The use of “dirty tricks”. The Muslim is enticed into evil like drinking of

¹It is estimated that the Christian population of Bangladesh, a Muslim country, rose from ten million to forty million in the ten-year period from 1992 to 2002.

alcohol, using drugs, or adultery and fornication, making certain that the activities are recorded on video, etc. This evidence is then used to blackmail the person into “converting” to Christianity.²

The tricks used by the missionaries and their accomplices are numerous. In summary, the reasons for Muslims turning away from Islám can be categorised into the following:

Ignorance. These people have a profound ignorance of Christianity and an even greater ignorance of Islám.

Extreme poverty, whereby the need to survive forces them to turn to the Christians.

Greed and the desire to be recognised and be honoured in the eyes of men, making them unable to resist the different forms of the carrots that are dangled in front of them. An interesting fact to note is that those who have left Islám due to poverty and ignorance, come back into the fold of Islám when their eyes open to the reality of the missionary subterfuges.

Another situation is where a Muslim who is weak in his faith and practice marries a partner of another faith. The pressures from the partner and the in-laws have made many turn away from Islám. If any of the other factors are also present then the chances of leaving Islám are even greater.

Coming into the fold of Islám

Looking at those who are turning to Islám, we see a completely different picture emerging. There is a complete contrast to the people turning away from Islám. The following have been noted:

Very highly educated individuals are entering the fold of Islám. The numbers that have university degrees are astounding. They do not only have an in-depth knowledge of Christianity, but of other religions as well. Not being born into Muslim homes, they have had to study Islám from scratch and are very often more informed and committed than Muslims born into Muslim homes.

Many already earn well, so that there is no question of them coming into Islám for monetary gain. In fact, the opposite is often the case. The persecution, in very subtle forms at times, causes them to suffer financially when becoming Muslims.

Many suffer in other ways: promotions in the workplace come to an end, often there may be demotions or even dismissals. Grants and scholarships are withdrawn or not given, etc.

Many have to undergo other trials and tribulations: rejection from families and marriage partners, social ostracisation, and so forth.

² Some of these techniques are recorded in “Manufacturing Kufr - Christian Missionaries in the Muslim world”, published by the Y.M.M.A. P.O.Box 18594, Actonville, 1506, Republic of South Africa.

We also note that the dedication of those coming into Islám is tremendous. The trials and tribulations that they face make their Ímán very strong.

In order to illustrate what has been mentioned above, we have collected just a few articles (from numerous others) wherein those who have come into Islám describe their journeys to Islám. As these descriptions are very inspirational, we hope that the Muslim readers will become motivated to become more dedicated Muslims. The lessons to be leant from these articles are numerous. A few points have been listed at the end of the booklet. Readers are requested to pay careful attention to these.

The numbers of articles by those coming into the fold of Islám are so numerous that it is not possible to put together even a fraction of them into a booklet of this size. We have, therefore, placed in this booklet a sample of these articles skimmed from the internet. The first article is by a former Christian minister. Some articles and parts of articles are by women who have come into the fold of Islám. The reason for having more articles by women in this publication is twofold: Firstly, there appears to be a greater number of women accepting Islám and, secondly, critics of Islám have been brainwashing the ignorant into believing that Islám oppresses women. The views of these women, who have voluntarily accepted Islám, will show up the falsity of the propaganda of the critics of Islám, Alláh willing.

Besides inspiring the Muslim reader, it is hoped that this booklet would also be of benefit to others who are interested in Islám or who are in search of the Truth.

Ismail Mangera

A CHRISTIAN MINISTER'S CONVERSION TO ISLÁM

(Abu Yahya) Jerald F. Dirks, M.Div., Psy.D

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One of my earliest childhood memories is of hearing the church bell toll for Sunday morning worship in the small, rural town in which I was raised.

The Methodist Church was an old, wooden structure with a bell tower, two children's Sunday-school classrooms cubbyholed behind folding, wooden doors to separate them from the sanctuary, and a choir loft that housed the Sunday school classrooms for the older children. It stood less than two blocks from my home. As the bell rang, we would come together as a family, and make our weekly pilgrimage to the church.

In that rural setting from the 1950s, the three churches in the town of about 500 were the center of community life. The local Methodist Church, to which my

family belonged, sponsored ice cream socials with hand-cranked, homemade ice cream, chicken potpie dinners, and corn roasts. My family and I were always involved in all three, but each came only once a year. In addition, there was a two-week community Bible school every June, and I was a regular attendee through my eighth grade year in school. However, Sunday morning worship and Sunday school were weekly events, and I strove to keep extending my collection of perfect attendance pins and of awards for memorizing Bible verses.

By my junior high school days, the local Methodist Church had closed, and we were attending the Methodist Church in the neighboring town, which was only slightly larger than the town in which I lived. There, my thoughts first began to focus on the ministry as a personal calling. I became active in the Methodist Youth Fellowship, and eventually served as both a district and a conference officer. I also became the regular “preacher” during the annual Youth Sunday service. My preaching began to draw community-wide attention, and before long I was occasionally filling pulpits at other churches, at a nursing home and at various church-affiliated youth and ladies groups, where I typically set attendance records.

By age 17, when I began my freshman year at Harvard College, my decision to enter the ministry had solidified. During my freshman year, I enrolled in a two-semester course in comparative religion, which was taught by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, whose specific area of expertise was Islám. During that course, I gave far less attention to Islám than I did to other religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, as the latter two seemed so much more esoteric and strange to me. In contrast, Islám appeared to be somewhat similar to my own Christianity. As such, I didn’t concentrate on it as much as I probably should have, although I can remember writing a term paper for the course on the concept of revelation in the Qur’án. Nonetheless, as the course was one of rigorous academic standards and demands, I did acquire a small library of about a half dozen books on Islám, all of which were written by non-Muslims, and all of which were to serve me in good stead 25 years later. I also acquired two different English translations of the meaning of the Qur’án, which I read at the time.

That spring, Harvard named me a Hollis Scholar, signifying that I was one of the top pre-theology students in the college. The summer between my freshman and sophomore years at Harvard, I worked as a youth minister at a fairly large United Methodist Church. The following summer, I obtained my License to Preach from the United Methodist Church. Upon graduating from Harvard College in 1971, I enrolled at the Harvard Divinity School, and there obtained my Master of Divinity degree in 1974, having been previously ordained into the Deaconate of the United Methodist Church in 1972, and having previously received a Stewart Scholarship from the United Methodist Church as a supplement to my Harvard Divinity School scholarships. During my seminary education, I also completed a two-year externship program as a hospital chaplain at Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston. Following graduation from Harvard Divinity School, I spent the summer as the minister of two United Methodist churches in rural Kansas, where attendance

soared to heights not seen in those churches for several years.

Seen from the outside, I was a very promising young minister, who had received an excellent education, drew large crowds to the Sunday morning worship service, and had been successful at every stop along the ministerial path. However, seen from the inside, I was fighting a constant war to maintain my personal integrity in the face of my ministerial responsibilities. This war was far removed from the ones presumably fought by some later televangelists in unsuccessfully trying to maintain personal sexual morality. Likewise, it was a far different war than those fought by the headline-grabbing pedophilic priests of the current moment. However, my struggle to maintain personal integrity may be the most common one encountered by the better-educated members of the ministry.

There is some irony in the fact that the supposedly best, brightest, and most idealistic of ministers-to-be are selected for the very best of seminary education, e.g. that offered at that time at the Harvard Divinity School. The irony is that, given such an education, the seminarian is exposed to as much of the actual historical truth as is known about:

- 1) the formation of the early, “mainstream” church, and how it was shaped by geopolitical considerations;
- 2) the “original” reading of various Biblical texts, many of which are in sharp contrast to what most Christians read when they pick up their Bible, although gradually some of this information is being incorporated into newer and better translations;
- 3) the evolution of such concepts as a triune godhead and the “sonship” of Jesus, peace be upon him;
- 4) the non-religious considerations that underlie many Christian creeds and doctrines;
- 5) the existence of those early churches and Christian movements which never accepted the concept of a triune godhead, and which never accepted the concept of the divinity of Jesus, peace be upon him; and
- 6) etc. (Some of these fruits of my seminary education are recounted in more detail in my recent book, *“The Cross and the Crescent: An Interfaith Dialogue between Christianity and Islám,”* Amana Publications, 2001.)

As such, it is no real wonder that almost a majority of such seminary graduates leave seminary, not to “fill pulpits”, where they would be asked to preach that which they know is not true, but to enter the various counseling professions. Such was also the case for me, as I went on to earn a master’s and doctorate in clinical psychology. I continued to call myself a Christian, because that was a needed bit of self-identity, and because I was, after all, an ordained minister, even though my full time job was as a mental health professional. However, my seminary education had taken care of any belief I might have had regarding a triune godhead or the divinity of Jesus, peace be upon him.

(Polls regularly reveal that ministers are less likely to believe these and other dogmas of the church than are the laity they serve, with ministers more likely to understand such terms as “son of God” metaphorically, while their parishioners understand it literally.) I thus became a “Christmas and Easter Christian”, attending church very sporadically, and then gritting my teeth and biting my tongue as I listened to sermons espousing that which I knew was not the case. None of the above should be taken to imply that I was any less religious or spiritually oriented than I had once been. I prayed regularly, my belief in a supreme deity remained solid and secure, and I conducted my personal life in line with the ethics I had once been taught in church and Sunday school. I simply knew better than to buy into the man-made dogmas and articles of faith of the organized church, which were so heavily laden with the pagan influences, polytheistic notions, and geo-political considerations of a bygone era.

As the years passed by, I became increasingly concerned about the loss of religiousness in American society at large. Religiousness is a living, breathing spirituality and morality within individuals, and should not be confused with religiosity, which is concerned with the rites, rituals, and formalized creeds of some organized entity, e.g. the church. American culture increasingly appeared to have lost its moral and religious compass. Two out of every three marriages ended in divorce; violence was becoming an increasingly inherent part of our schools and our roads; self-responsibility was on the wane; self-discipline was being submerged by a “if it feels good, do it” morality; various Christian leaders and institutions were being swamped by sexual and financial scandals; and emotions justified behavior, however odious it might be. American culture was becoming a morally bankrupt institution, and I was feeling quite alone in my personal religious vigil.

It was at this juncture that I began to come into contact with the local Muslim community. For some years before, my wife and I had been actively involved in doing research on the history of the Arabian horse. Eventually, in order to secure translations of various Arabic documents, this research brought us into contact with Arab Americans who happened to be Muslims.

Our first such contact was with Jamal in the summer of 1991. After an initial telephone conversation, Jamal visited our home, and offered to do some translations for us, and to help guide us through the history of the Arabian horse in the Middle East. Before Jamal left that afternoon, he asked if he might: use our bathroom to wash before saying his scheduled prayers; and borrow a piece of newspaper to use as a prayer rug, so he could say his scheduled prayers before leaving our house. We, of course, obliged, but wondered if there was something more appropriate that we could give him to use than a newspaper. Without our ever realizing it at the time, Jamal was practicing a very beautiful form of Dáwah (preaching or exhortation). He made no comment about the fact that we were not Muslims, and he didn't preach anything to us about his religious beliefs. He

“merely” presented us with his example, an example that spoke volumes, if one were willing to be receptive to the lesson.

Over the next 16 months, contact with Jamal slowly increased in frequency, until it was occurring on a bi-weekly to weekly basis. During these visits, Jamal never preached to me about Islám, never questioned me about my own religious beliefs or convictions, and never verbally suggested that I become a Muslim. However, I was beginning to learn a lot. First, there was the constant behavioral example of Jamal observing his scheduled prayers. Second, there was the behavioral example of how Jamal conducted his daily life in a highly moral and ethical manner, both in his business world and in his social world. Third, there was the behavioral example of how Jamal interacted with his two children. For my wife, Jamal’s wife provided a similar example. Fourth, always within the framework of helping me to understand Arabian horse history in the Middle East, Jamal began to share with me:

- 1) stories from Arab and Islámic history;
- 2) sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him; and
- 3) Qur’ánic verses and their contextual meaning.

In point of fact, our every visit now included at least a 30 minute conversation centered on some aspect of Islám, but always presented in terms of helping me intellectually understand the Islámic context of Arabian horse history. I was never told “this is the way things are”, I was merely told “this is what Muslims typically believe”.

Since I wasn’t being “preached to”, and since Jamal never inquired as to my own beliefs, I didn’t need to bother attempting to justify my own position. It was all handled as an intellectual exercise, not as proselytizing. Gradually, Jamal began to introduce us to other Arab families in the local Muslim community. There was Wa’el and his family, Khalid and his family, and a few others. Consistently, I observed individuals and families who were living their lives on a much higher ethical plane than the American society in which we were all embedded. Maybe there was something to the practice of Islám that I had missed during my collegiate and seminary days.

By December, 1992, I was beginning to ask myself some serious questions about where I was and what I was doing. These questions were prompted by the following considerations:

- 1) Over the course of the prior 16 months, our social life had become increasingly centered on the Arab component of the local Muslim community. By December, probably 75% of our social life was being spent with Arab Muslims.
- 2) By virtue of my seminary training and education, I knew how badly the Bible had been corrupted (and often knew exactly when, where, and why), I had no belief in any triune godhead, and I had no belief in anything more than a

metaphorical “sonship” of Jesus, peace be upon him. In short, while I certainly believed in God, I was as strict a monotheist as my Muslim friends.

3) My personal values and sense of morality were much more in keeping with my Muslim friends than with the “Christian” society around me. After all, I had the non-confrontational examples of Jamal, Khalid, and Wa’el as illustrations. In short, my nostalgic yearning for the type of community in which I had been raised was finding gratification in the Muslim community. American society might be morally bankrupt, but that did not appear to be the case for that part of the Muslim community with which I had had contact. Marriages were stable, spouses were committed to each other, and honesty, integrity, self-responsibility, and family values were emphasized. My wife and I had attempted to live our lives that same way, but for several years I had felt that we were doing so in the context of a moral vacuum. The Muslim community appeared to be different.

The different threads were being woven together into a single strand. Arabian horses, my childhood upbringing, my foray into the Christian ministry and my seminary education, my nostalgic yearnings for a moral society, and my contact with the Muslim community were becoming intricately intertwined.

My self-questioning came to a head when I finally got around to asking myself exactly what separated me from the beliefs of my Muslim friends. I suppose that I could have raised that question with Jamal or with Khalid, but I wasn’t ready to take that step. I had never discussed my own religious beliefs with them, and I didn’t think that I wanted to introduce that topic of conversation into our friendship. As such, I began to pull off the bookshelf all the books on Islám that I had acquired in my collegiate and seminary days.

However far my own beliefs were from the traditional position of the church, and however seldom I actually attended church, I still identified myself as being a Christian, and so I turned to the works of Western scholars. That month of December, I read half a dozen or so books on Islám by Western scholars, including one biography of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. Further, I began to read two different English translations of the meaning of the Qur’án. I never spoke to my Muslim friends about this personal quest of self-discovery. I never mentioned what types of books I was reading, nor ever spoke about why I was reading these books. However, occasionally I would run a very circumscribed question past one of them.

While I never spoke to my Muslim friends about those books, my wife and I had numerous conversations about what I was reading. By the last week of December of 1992, I was forced to admit to myself, that I could find no area of substantial disagreement between my own religious beliefs and the general tenets of Islám. While I was ready to acknowledge that Muhammad, peace be upon him, was a prophet of (one who spoke for or under the inspiration of) God, and while I had absolutely no difficulty affirming that there was no god besides God/Alláh, glorified and exalted is He, I was still hesitating to make any decision. I could

readily admit to myself that I had far more in common with Islámic beliefs as I then understood them, than I did with the traditional Christianity of the organized church. I knew only too well that I could easily confirm from my seminary training and education most of what the Qur'án had to say about Christianity, the Bible, and Jesus, peace be upon him. Nonetheless, I hesitated. Further, I rationalized my hesitation by maintaining to myself that I really didn't know the nitty-gritty details of Islám, and that my areas of agreement were confined to general concepts. As such, I continued to read, and then to re-read.

One's sense of identity, of who one is, is a powerful affirmation of one's own position in the cosmos. In my professional practice, I had occasionally been called upon to treat certain addictive disorders, ranging from smoking, to alcoholism, to drug abuse. As a clinician, I knew that the basic physical addiction had to be overcome to create the initial abstinence. That was the easy part of treatment. As Mark Twain once said: "Quitting smoking is easy; I've done it hundreds of times". However, I also knew that the key to maintaining that abstinence over an extended time period was overcoming the client's psychological addiction, which was heavily grounded in the client's basic sense of identity, i.e. the client identified to himself that he was "a smoker", or that he was "a drinker", etc. The addictive behavior had become part and parcel of the client's basic sense of identity, of the client's basic sense of self. Changing this sense of identity was crucial to the maintenance of the psychotherapeutic "cure". This was the difficult part of treatment.

Changing one's basic sense of identity is a most difficult task. One's psyche tends to cling to the old and familiar, which seem more psychologically comfortable and secure than the new and unfamiliar.

On a professional basis, I had the above knowledge, and used it on a daily basis. However, ironically enough, I was not yet ready to apply it to myself, and to the issue of my own hesitation surrounding my religious identity. For 43 years, my religious identity had been neatly labeled as "Christian", however many qualifications I might have added to that term over the years. Giving up that label of personal identity was no easy task. It was part and parcel of how I defined my very being. Given the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that my hesitation served the purpose of insuring that I could keep my familiar religious identity of being a Christian, although a Christian who believed like a Muslim believed.

It was now the very end of December, and my wife and I were filling out our application forms for U.S. passports, so that a proposed Middle Eastern journey could become a reality. One of the questions had to do with religious affiliation. I didn't even think about it, and automatically fell back on the old and familiar, as I penned in "Christian". It was easy, it was familiar, and it was comfortable. However, that comfort was momentarily disrupted when my wife asked me how I had answered the question on religious identity on the application form. I immediately replied, "Christian", and chuckled audibly.

Now, one of Freud's contributions to the understanding of the human psyche was his realization that laughter is often a release of psychological tension. However wrong Freud may have been in many aspects of his theory of psychosexual development, his insights into laughter were quite on target. I had laughed! What was this psychological tension that I had need to release through the medium of laughter? I then hurriedly went on to offer my wife a brief affirmation that I was a Christian, not a Muslim. In response to which, she politely informed me that she was merely asking whether I had written "Christian", or "Protestant", or "Methodist". On a professional basis, I knew that a person does not defend himself against an accusation that hasn't been made. (If, in the course of a session of psychotherapy, my client blurted out, "I'm not angry about that", and I hadn't even broached the topic of anger, it was clear that my client was feeling the need to defend himself against a charge that his own unconscious was making. In short, he really was angry, but he wasn't ready to admit it or to deal with it.) If my wife hadn't made the accusation, i.e. "you are a Muslim", then the accusation had to have come from my own unconscious, as I was the only other person present. I was aware of this, but still I hesitated. The religious label that had been stuck to my sense of identity for 43 years was not going to come off easily.

About a month had gone by since my wife's question to me. It was now late in January of 1993. I had set aside all the books on Islám by the Western scholars, as I had read them all thoroughly. The two English translations of the meaning of the Qur'án were back on the bookshelf, and I was busy reading yet a third English translation of the meaning of the Qur'án. Maybe in this translation I would find some sudden justification for...

I was taking my lunch hour from my private practice at a local Arab restaurant that I had started to frequent. I entered as usual, seated myself at a small table, and opened my third English translation of the meaning of the Qur'án to where I had left off in my reading. I figured I might as well get some reading done over my lunch hour. Moments later, I became aware that Mahmoud was at my shoulder, and waiting to take my order. He glanced at what I was reading, but said nothing about it. My order taken, I returned to the solitude of my reading. A few minutes later, Mahmoud's wife, Ímán, an American Muslim, who wore the Hijab (scarf) and modest dress that I had come to associate with female Muslims, brought me my order. She commented that I was reading the Qur'án, and politely asked if I were a Muslim. The word was out of my mouth before it could be modified by any social etiquette or politeness: "No!" That single word was said forcefully, and with more than a hint of irritability. With that, Ímán politely retired from my table.

What was happening to me? I had behaved rudely and somewhat aggressively. What had this woman done to deserve such behavior from me? This wasn't like me. Given my childhood upbringing, I still used "sir" and "ma'am"

when addressing clerks and cashiers who were waiting on me in stores. I could pretend to ignore my own laughter as a release of tension, but I couldn't begin to ignore this sort of unconscionable behavior from myself.

My reading was set aside, and I mentally stewed over this turn of events throughout my meal. The more I stewed, the guiltier I felt about my behavior. I knew that when Ímán brought me my check at the end of the meal, I was going to need to make some amends. If for no other reason, simple politeness demanded it. Furthermore, I was really quite disturbed about how resistant I had been to her innocuous question. What was going on in me that I responded with that much force to such a simple and straightforward question? Why did that one, simple question lead to such atypical behavior on my part? Later, when Ímán came with my check, I attempted a round-about apology by saying: "I'm afraid I was a little abrupt in answering your question before. If you were asking me whether I believe that there is only one God, then my answer is yes. If you were asking me whether I believe that Muhammad was one of the prophets of that one God, then my answer is yes." She very nicely and very supportively said: "That's okay; it takes some people a little longer than others."

Perhaps, the readers of this will be kind enough to note the psychological games I was playing with myself without chuckling too hard at my mental gymnastics and behavior. I well knew that in my own way, using my own words, I had just said the Shahádah, the Islámic testimonial of faith, i.e. "I testify that there is no god but Alláh, and I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of Alláh". However, having said that, and having recognized what I said, I could still cling to my old and familiar label of religious identity. After all, I hadn't said I was a Muslim. I was simply a Christian, albeit an atypical Christian, who was willing to say that there was one God, not a triune godhead, and who was willing to say that Muhammad was one of the prophets inspired by that one God. If a Muslim wanted to accept me as being a Muslim that was his or her business, and his or her label of religious identity. However, it was not mine. I thought I had found my way out of my crisis of religious identity. I was a Christian, who would carefully explain that I agreed with, and was willing to testify to, the Islámic testimonial of faith. Having made my tortured explanation, and having parsed the English language to within an inch of its life, others could hang whatever label on me they wished. It was their label, and not mine.

It was now March of 1993, and my wife and I were enjoying a five-week vacation in the Middle East. It was also the Islámic month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from day break until sunset. Because we were so often staying with or being escorted around by family members of our Muslim friends back in the States, my wife and I had decided that we also would fast, if for no other reason than common courtesy. During this time, I had also started to perform the five daily prayers of Islám with my newfound, Middle Eastern, Muslim friends. After all, there was nothing in those prayers with which I could disagree. I was a

Christian, or so I said. After all, I had been born into a Christian family, had been given a Christian upbringing, had attended church and Sunday school every Sunday as a child, had graduated from a prestigious seminary, and was an ordained minister in a large Protestant denomination. However, I was also a Christian: who didn't believe in a triune godhead or in the divinity of Jesus, peace be upon him; who knew quite well how the Bible had been corrupted; who had said the Islámic testimony of faith in my own carefully parsed words; who had fasted during Ramadan; who was saying Islámic prayers five times a day; and who was deeply impressed by the behavioral examples I had witnessed in the Muslim community, both in America and in the Middle East. (Time and space do not permit me the luxury of documenting in detail all of the examples of personal morality and ethics I encountered in the Middle East.)

If asked if I were a Muslim, I could and did do a five-minute monologue detailing the above, and basically leaving the question unanswered. I was playing intellectual word games, and succeeding at them quite nicely.

It was now late in our Middle Eastern trip. An elderly friend who spoke no English and I were walking down a winding, little road, somewhere in one of the economically disadvantaged areas of greater Amman, Jordan. As we walked, an elderly man approached us from the opposite direction, said, "Salam-Alaykum", i.e., "peace be upon you", and offered to shake hands. We were the only three people there. I didn't speak Arabic, and neither my friend nor the stranger spoke English. Looking at me, the stranger asked, "Muslim?"

At that precise moment in time, I was fully and completely trapped. There were no intellectual word games to be played, because I could only communicate in English, and they could only communicate in Arabic. There was no translator present to bail me out of this situation, and to allow me to hide behind my carefully prepared English monologue. I couldn't pretend I didn't understand the question, because it was all too obvious that I had. My choices were suddenly, unpredictably, and inexplicably reduced to just two: I could say "N'am", i.e., "yes"; or I could say "La", i.e., "no". The choice was mine, and I had no other. I had to choose, and I had to choose now; it was just that simple. Praise be to Alláh, I answered, "N'am".

With saying that one word, all the intellectual word games were now behind me. With the intellectual word games behind me, the psychological games regarding my religious identity were also behind me. I wasn't some strange, atypical Christian. I was a Muslim. Praise be to Alláh, my wife of 33 years also became a Muslim about that same time. Not too many months after our return to America from the Middle East, a neighbor invited us over to his house, saying that he wanted to talk with us about our conversion to Islám. He was a retired Methodist minister, with whom I had had several conversations in the past. Although we had occasionally talked superficially about such issues as the artificial construction of the Bible from various, earlier, independent sources, we

had never had any in-depth conversation about religion. I knew only that he appeared to have acquired a solid seminary education, and that he sang in the local church choir every Sunday.

My initial reaction was, “Oh, oh, here it comes”. Nonetheless, it is a Muslim’s duty to be a good neighbor, and it is a Muslim’s duty to be willing to discuss Islám with others. As such, I accepted the invitation for the following evening, and spent most of the waking part of the next 24 hours contemplating how best to approach this gentleman in his requested topic of conversation.

The appointed time came, and we drove over to our neighbor’s. After a few moments of small talk, he finally asked why I had decided to become a Muslim. I had waited for this question, and had my answer carefully prepared. “As you know with your seminary education, there were a lot of non-religious considerations which led up to and shaped the decisions of the Council of Nicaea.” He immediately cut me off with a simple statement: “You finally couldn’t stomach the polytheism anymore, could you?” He knew exactly why I was a Muslim, and he didn’t disagree with my decision!

For himself, at his age and at his place in life, he was electing to be “an atypical Christian”. Alláh willing, he has by now completed his journey from cross to crescent. There are sacrifices to be made in being a Muslim in America. For that matter, there are sacrifices to be made in being a Muslim anywhere. However, those sacrifices may be more acutely felt in America, especially among American converts. Some of those sacrifices are very predictable, and include altered dress and abstinence from alcohol, pork, and the taking of interest on one’s money. Some of those sacrifices are less predictable. For example, one Christian family, with whom we were close friends, informed us that they could no longer associate with us, as they could not associate with anyone “who does not take Jesus Christ as his personal savior”. In addition, quite a few of my professional colleagues altered their manner of relating to me.

Whether it was coincidence or not, my professional referral base dwindled, and there was almost a 30% drop in income as a result. Some of these less predictable sacrifices were hard to accept, although the sacrifices were a small price to pay for what was received in return. For those contemplating the acceptance of Islám and the surrendering of oneself to Alláh - glorified and exalted is He - there may well be sacrifices along the way. Many of these sacrifices are easily predicted, while others may be rather surprising and unexpected. There is no denying the existence of these sacrifices, and I don’t intend to sugar coat that pill for you. Nonetheless, don’t be overly troubled by these sacrifices. In the final analysis, these sacrifices are less important than you presently think. Alláh willing, you will find these sacrifices a very cheap coin to pay for the “goods” you are purchasing.



“I WAS AMERICAN AND WHITE.”

I was completing a degree in Recreation, when I met my first Muslims. It was the first year that we had been able to pre-register by computer. I pre-registered and went to Oklahoma to take care of some family business. The business took longer than expected, so I returned to school two weeks into the semester (too late to drop a course).

I wasn't worried about catching up my missed work. I was sitting at the top of my class, in my field. Even as a student, I was winning awards, in competition with professionals.

Now, you need to understand that while I was attending college and excelling, ran my own business, and had many close friends, I was extremely shy. My transcripts actually had me listed as severely reticent. I was very slow to get to know people and rarely spoke to anyone unless I was forced to, or already knew them. The classes I was taking had to do administration and city planning, plus programming for children. Children were the only people I ever felt comfortable with.

Well, back to the story. The computer printout held one enormous surprise for me. I was registered for a Theatre class...a class where I would be required to perform in front of real live people. I was horrified! I could not even ask a question in class, how was I going to get on a stage in front of people? My husband was his usual very calm and sensible self. He suggested that I talk to the teacher, explain the problem, and arrange to paint scenery or sew costumes. The teacher agreed to try and find a way to help me out. So I went to class the following Tuesday.

When I entered the classroom, I received my second shock. The class was full of “Arabs” and “camel jockeys”. Well, I had never seen one but I had heard of them.

There was no way I was going to sit in a room full of dirty heathens! After all, you could catch some dreadful disease from those people. Everyone knew they were dirty, not to be trusted either. I shut the door and went home. (Now, there is one little thing you should know. I had on a pair of leather hot pants, a halter top, and a glass of wine in my hands...but they were the bad ones in my mind.)

When I told my husband about the Arabs in the class and that there was no way I was going back, he responded in his usual calm way. He reminded me that I was always claiming that God had a reason for everything and maybe I should spend some time thinking about it before I made my final decision. He also reminded me that I had a scholar's award that was paying my tuition and if I wanted to keep it, I would have to maintain my G.P.A. Three credit hours or “F” would have destroyed my chances.

For the next two days, I prayed for guidance. On Thursday I went back to the class convinced that God had put me there to save those poor ignorant heathens from the fires of hell.

I proceeded to explain to them how they would burn in the fires of hell for all eternity, if they did not accept Jesus as their personal savior. They were very polite, but did not convert. Then, I explained how Jesus loved them and had died on the cross to save them from their sins. All they had to do was accept him into their hearts. They were very polite, but still did not convert. So, I decided to read their own book to show them that Islám was a false religion and Mohammed was a false God.

One of the students gave me a copy of the Qur'án and another book about Islám, and I proceeded with my research. I was sure I would find the evidence I needed very quickly. Well, I read the Qur'án and the other book. Then I read another 15 books, Sahíh Muslim and returned to the Qur'án. I was determined I would convert them! My studies continued for the next one and half years.

During that time, I started having a few problems with my husband. I was changing, just in little ways but enough to bother him. We used to go to the bar every Friday and Saturday, or to a party, and I no longer wanted to go. I was quieter and more distant. He was sure I was having an affair, so he kicked me out. I moved into an apartment with my children and continued my determined efforts to convert the Muslims to Christianity.

Then, one day, there was a knock on my door. I opened the door and saw a man in a long white night gown with a red and white checkered table cloth on his head. He was accompanied by three men in pajamas. (It was the first time I had ever seen their cultural dress.) Well, I was more than a little offended by men showing up at my door in night clothes. What kind of a woman did they think I was? Had they no pride or dignity? Imagine my shock when the one wearing the table cloth said he understood I wanted to be a Muslim! I quickly informed him I did not want to be a Muslim. I was Christian. However, I did have a few questions. If he had the time....

His name was Abdul-Aziz Al-Sheik and he made the time. He was very patient and discussed every question with me. He never made me feel silly or that a question was stupid. He asked me if I believed there was only one God and I said yes. Then he asked if I believed Mohammed was His Messenger. Again I said yes. He told me that I was already a Muslim!

I argued that I was Christian; I was just trying to understand Islám. (Inside I was thinking: I couldn't be a Muslim! I was American and white! What would my husband say? If I am Muslim, I will have to divorce my husband. My family would die!)

We continued talking. Later, he explained that attaining knowledge and understanding of spirituality was a little like climbing a ladder. If you climb a

ladder and try to skip a few rungs, there was danger of falling. The Shahádah was just the first step on the ladder. Still we had to talk some more.

Later that afternoon, May 21, 1977 at Asr, I took Shahádah. However, there were still some things I could not accept and it was my nature to be completely truthful so I added a disclaimer. I said: “I bear witness that there is no god but God and Mohammed is His Messenger, but, I will never cover my hair and if my husband takes another wife, I will castrate him.”

I heard gasps from the other men in the room, but Abdul-Aziz silenced them. Later I learned that he told the brothers never to discuss those two subjects with me. He was sure I would come to the correct understanding.

The Shahádah was indeed a solid footing on the ladder to spiritual knowledge and closeness to God, but it has been a slow climb. Abdul-Aziz continued to visit me and answer my questions. May Alláh reward him for his patience and tolerance. He never admonished me or acted like a question was stupid or silly. He treated each question with dignity and told me that the only stupid question was the one never asked. Hmm...my grandmother used to say that.

He explained that Alláh had told us to seek knowledge and questions were one of the ways to accomplish that. When he explained something, it was like watching a rose open – petal by petal, until it reached its full glory. When I told him that I did not agree with something and why, he always said I was correct up to a point. Then he would show me how to look deeper and from different directions to reach a fuller understanding. Alhamdulillah!

Over the years, I had many teachers. Each one special, each one different. I am thankful for each one of them and the knowledge they gave. Each teacher helped me to grow and to love Islám more. As my knowledge increased, the changes in me became more apparent. Within the first year, I was wearing hijab. I have no idea when I started. It came naturally, with increased knowledge and understanding. In time I even came to be a proponent of polygamy. I knew that if Alláh had allowed it, there had to be something good in it.

“Glorify the name of thy Guardian – Lord Most High, Who hath created, and then moulded; Who determined and guided; and Who brings forth (green and lush) pasture, then turns it to blackened stubble, We shall make you read (the Qur’án), so that you shall not forget, except what Alláh wills. He knows what is manifest and what is hidden. And We shall ease your way to the state of ease.”(S.87:1-8)

How Islám changed my Life

When I first started to study Islám, I did not expect to find anything that I needed or wanted in my personal life. Little did I know that Islám would change my life. No human could have ever convinced me that I would finally be at peace and overflowing with love and joy because of Islám.

This book spoke of THE ONE GOD, THE CREATOR OF THE UNIVERSE. It described the beautiful way in which He had organised the world. This wondrous Qur'án had all the answers. Alláh is The Loving! Alláh is the Source of Peace! Alláh is the Protector! Alláh is the Forgiver! Alláh is the Provider! Alláh is the Maintainer! Alláh is the Generous One! Alláh is the Responsive! Alláh is the Protecting Friend! Alláh is the Expander!

“Did We not expand your breast for you; And eased you of the burden which weighed down your back; And increased your fame? So, verily, with every difficulty, there is relief: Verily, with every difficulty there is relief!” (S.94:1-6)

The Qur'án addressed all the issues of existence and showed a clear path to success. It was like a map for living, an owner manual for life!

“How much more we love the light...If once we lived in Darkness.”

When I first embraced Islám, I really did not think it was going to affect my life very much. Islám did not just affect my life. It totally changed it.

Family life: My husband and I loved each other very deeply. That love for each other still exists. Still, when I started studying Islám, we started having some difficulties. He saw me changing and did not understand what was happening. Neither did I. But then, I did not even realise I was changing. He decided that the only thing that could make me change was another man. There was no way to make him understand what was changing me because I did not know.

After I realised that I was a Muslim, it did not help matters. After all...the only reason a woman changes something as fundamental as her religion is another man. He could not find evidence of this other man...but he had to exist. We ended up in a very ugly divorce. The courts determined that the unorthodox religion would be detrimental to the development of my children. So they were removed from my custody.

During the divorce, there was a time when I was told I could make a choice. I could renounce this religion and leave with my children, or renounce my children and leave with my religion. I was in shock. To me this was not a possible choice. If I renounce my Islám...I would be teaching my children how to be deceptive. For there was no way to deny what was in my heart. I could not deny Alláh, not then, not ever. I prayed like I had never prayed before. After the thirty minutes was up, I knew that there was no safer place for my children to be than in the hands of Alláh. If I denied him, there would be no way in the future to show my children the wonders of being with Alláh. The courts were told that I would leave my children in the hands of Alláh. This was not a rejection of my children!

I left the courts knowing that life without my babies would be very difficult. My heart bled, even though I knew, inside, I had done the right thing. I found solace in Áyet-Ul-Kursi.

“Alláh! There is no god but He – the Living, the Self-subsisting. No slumber can seize him or sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is there can intercede in His presence except as He allows it? He knows what is in front of them and what is behind them, while they understand nothing of His knowledge except what He wishes. His Throne encompasses the heavens and the earth, and He never tires in protecting them. He is Most High, The Supreme (in Glory).” (S.2:255)

This also got me started looking at all the attributes of Alláh and discovering the beauty of each one.

Child custody and divorce were not the only problems I was to face. The rest of my family was not very accepting of my choice either. Most of the family refused to have anything to do with me. My mother was of the belief that it was just a phase and I would grow out of it. My sister, the “mental health expert”, was sure I had simply lost my mind and should be institutionalised. My father believed I should be killed before placing myself deeper in Hell. Suddenly I found myself with no husband and no family. What would be next?

Friends: Most of my friends drifted away during that first year. I was no fun anymore. I did not want to go to parties or bars. I was not interested in finding a boyfriend. All I ever did was read that “stupid” book (the Qur’án) and talk about Islám. What a bore. I still did not have enough knowledge to help them understand why Islám was so beautiful.

Employment: My job was next to go. While I had won just about every award there was in my field and was recognised as a serious trend setter and money maker, the day I put on hijab, was the end of my job. Now I was without a family, without friends and without a job.

In all this, the first light was my grandmother. She approved of my choice and joined me. What a surprise! I always knew she had a lot of wisdom, but this! She died soon after that. When I stop to think about it, I almost get jealous. The day she pronounced Shahádah, all her misdeeds had been erased, while her good deeds were preserved. She died so soon after accepting Islám that I knew her “BOOK” was bound to be heavy on the good side. It fills me with such joy!

As my knowledge grew and I was better able to answer questions, many things changed. But, it was the changes made in me as a person that had the greatest impact. A few years after I went public with my Islám, my mother called me and said she did not know what this “Islám thing” was, but she hoped I would stay with it. She liked what it was doing for me. A couple of years after that she called again and asked what a person had to do to be a Muslim. I told her that all person had to do was know that there was only ONE God and Mohammed was His Messenger. Her response was: *“Any fool knows that. But what do you have to do?”* I repeated the same information and she said: *“Well...OK. But let’s not tell your father just yet.”*

Little did she know that he had gone through the same conversation a few weeks before that. My real father (the one who thought I should be killed) had

done it almost two months earlier. Then, my sister, the mental health person, she told me that I was the most “liberated” person she knew. Coming from her that was the greatest compliment I could have received!

Rather than try to tell you about how each person came to accept Islám, let me simply say that more members of my family continue to find Islám every year. I was especially happy when a dear friend, Brother Qaiser Imam, told me that my ex-husband took Shahádah. When Brother Qaiser asked him why, he said it was because he had been watching me for 16 years and he wanted his daughter to have what I had. He came and asked me to forgive him for all he had done. I had forgiven him long before that.

Now my oldest son, Whitney, has called, as I am writing this book, and announced that he also wants to become Muslim. He plans on taking the Shahádah as the ISNA Convention in a couple of weeks. For now, he is learning as much as he can. Alláh is The Most Merciful.

Over the years, I have come to be known for my talks on Islám, and many listeners have chosen to be Muslim. My inner peace has continued to increase with my knowledge and confidence in the Wisdom of Alláh. I know that Alláh is not only my Creator but, my dearest Friend. I know that Alláh will always be there and will never reject me. For every step I take toward Alláh, He takes 10 toward me. What a wonderful knowledge!

True, Alláh has tested me, as was promised, and rewarded me far beyond what I could ever have hoped for. A few years ago, the doctors told me I had cancer and it was terminal. They explained that there was no cure, it was too far advanced, and proceeded to help prepare me for my death by explaining how the disease would progress. I had maybe one year left to live. I was concerned about my children, especially my youngest. Who would take care of him? Still I was not depressed. We must all die. I was confident that the pain I was experiencing contained Blessings.

I remembered a good friend, Kareem Al-Misawi, who died of cancer when he was still in his 20's. Shortly before he died, he told me that Alláh was truly Merciful. This man was in unbelievable anguish and radiating with Alláh's love. He said: “Alláh intends that I should enter heaven with a clean book.” His death experience gave me something to think about. He taught me of Alláh's love and mercy. This was something no one else had ever really discussed. Alláh's love!

It did not take me long to start being aware of His blessings. Friends who loved me came out of nowhere. I was given the gift of making Haj. Even more importantly, I learned how very important it was for me to share the Truth of Islám with everyone. It did not matter if people, Muslim or not, agreed with me or even liked me. The only approval I needed was from Alláh. The only love I needed was from Alláh. Yet, I discovered more and more people, who for no apparent reason, loved me. I rejoiced, for I remembered reading that if Alláh

loves you, He causes others to love you. I am not worthy of all the love. That means it must be another gift from Alláh. Alláh is the Greatest!

There is no way to fully explain how my life changed. Alhamdulillah! I am so very glad that I am a Muslim. Islám is my life. Islám is the beat of my heart. Islám is the blood that courses through my veins. Islám is my strength. Islám is my life so wonderful and beautiful. Without Islám, I am nothing and should Alláh ever turn His magnificent face from me I could not survive.

“O Alláh! let my heart have light, and my sight have light, and my hearing (senses) have light, and let me have light on my right, and let me have light on my left, and let me have light above me, and have light under me, and have light in front of me, and have light behind me; and let me have light.” (Bukhárí, vol. 8. pp. 221, #329)

And you will find those who say: We are Christians, nearest of them in affection to those who believe. That is because there are priests and monks among them, and because they are not proud.

When they listen to what has been revealed to the messengers, you see their eyes flow with tears because of their recognition of the truth. They say: Our Lord, we believe. Record us as among the witnesses.

How should we not believe in Alláh and what has come to us of the truth. And (how should we not) hope that our Lord includes us among the righteous people?

Alláh has rewarded them for what they said - Gardens underneath which rivers flow, in which they will stay forever. That is the reward for those who do good.

But those who disbelieve and deny Our signs, are the people of the hell-fire.
(S.5:82-87)

DEANNE/ MOI'S TESTIMONY

In the Name of Alláh, The Beneficent, The Merciful

October, 1998.

Often when people ask me, “How did you come to Islám?”, I take a deep breath and try and tell them the “short version”. I don't think that Islám is something that I came to suddenly, even though it felt like it at the time, but it was something that I was gradually guided towards through different experiences. Through writing this piece I hope that somebody may read it, identify with some things and may be prompted to learn more about the real Islám.

I was born in 1978 in Australia, was christened and raised “Christian”. As a child I used to look forward to attending church and going to Sunday school. Even though I can still remember looking forward to it, I can't remember much about it. Maybe it was getting all dressed up in my best clothes; maybe seeing the other children, maybe the stories, or maybe it was just that I could look forward to my grandmother's famous Sunday lunch when I got home. My family wasn't strict about religion at all – the bible was never read outside church from what I knew, grace was never said before eating. To put it simply I guess religion just wasn't a major issue in our lives. I can remember getting annoyed when the other members of my family chose not to come. So for the last couple of years I attended church alone. At the time that I attended primary school “Religious Education” was a lesson that was given weekly. We learned of “true Christian values” and received copies of the bible. While I wouldn't admit it at the time, I also looked forward to those classes. It was something interesting to learn about, something that I believed had some sort of importance, just that I didn't know what.

In my high school years I attended an all-girls' high school. We didn't have any sort of religious classes there, and I guess to some degree I missed that because I starting reading the bible in my own time. At the time I was reading it for “interest's sake”. I believed that God existed, but not in the form that was often described in church. As for the trinity, I hoped that maybe that was something I would come to understand as I grew older. There were many things that confused me, hence there seemed to be “religious” times in my life where I would read the bible and do my best to follow it, then I would get confused and think that it was all too much for me to understand. I remember talking to a Christian girl in my math classes. I guess that gave me one reason to look forward to math. I would ask her about things that I didn't understand, and whilst some explanations I could understand, others didn't seem to be logical enough for me to trust in Christianity 100%.

I can't say that I have ever been comfortable living with a lot of aspects of the Australian culture. I didn't understand for example drinking alcohol or having multiple boyfriends. I always felt that there was a lot of pressure and sometimes cried at the thought of “growing up” because of what “growing up” meant in this

culture. My family traveled overseas fairly often and I always thought that through travelling I might be able to find a country where I could lead a comfortable life and not feel pressured like I did. After spending 3 weeks in Japan on a student exchange I decided that I wanted to go again for a long-term exchange. In my final year of high school I was accepted to attend a high school in Japan for the following year.

Before I left Australia to spend the year overseas I was going through one of my “religious stages”. I often tried to hide these stages from my parents. For some reason I thought that they would laugh at me reading the bible. The night before I flew to Japan my suitcase was packed however I stayed up until my parents had gone to sleep so I could get the bible and pack it too. I didn’t want my parents to know I was taking it.

My year in Japan didn’t end up the most enjoyable experience in my life by any means. I encountered problem after problem. At the time it was difficult. I was 17 years old when I went there and I learned a lot of valuable lessons in that year. One of which was “things aren’t always what they seem”. At one stage I felt as though I had lost everything – my Japanese school friends (friends had always been very important to me, even in Australia), my Japanese families, then I received a phone call saying that I was to be sent home to Australia a couple of months early. I had “lost everything” – including the dream that I had held so close for so many years. The night that I received that phone call I got out my bible. I thought that maybe I could find some comfort in it, and I knew that no matter what, God knew the truth about everything that everybody does and that no amount of gossip and lies could change that. I had always believed that hard times were never given to us to “stop us”, but to help us grow. With that in mind, I was determined to stay in Japan for the whole year and somehow try and stop the ridiculous rumours. Alhamdulillah I was able to do that.

From that year I came to understand that not only is every culture different, but they both have good points and bad points. I came to understand that it wasn’t a culture that I was searching for... but something else.

I attended an all-girls’ Buddhist school in Japan. We had a gathering each week where we prayed, sang songs and listened to the principal give us lengthy talks. At first I wasn’t comfortable attending these gatherings. I was given a copy of the song book along with the beads that you put over your hands when you pray. I tried to get out of going to them at the start, but then decided that I didn’t have to place the same meaning to things as others did. When I prayed, I prayed to the same God that I had always prayed to – the One and Only God. I can’t say that I really understand Buddhism. Whenever I tried to find out more I met with dead ends. I even asked a Japanese man who taught English. He had often been to America and he said that in Japan he was Buddhist, and in America he was Christian. There were some things about Buddhism that I found interesting, but it wasn’t something that I could consider a religion.

In a lot of ways I picked what I liked out of religions and spiritual philosophies and formed what I considered to be my “Deanne Religion”. I collected philosophical quote after quote in high school, read into things such as the Celestine Prophecy and Angels when I returned to Australia, and still held onto the Christian beliefs that made sense to me. I felt like I was continually searching for the truth.

When I returned to Australia from Japan I had grown closer to a girl that I went to high school with. She was always somebody who I considered to be a good friend, but wasn't in “my group of friends” whom I sat with in class or for lunch. Some of the people in that group I haven't heard from and haven't seen since I returned. I realised that this other girl and I had a lot more in common than I had first thought. Maybe this was because I had changed a lot in Japan, or maybe it was because I had learned that being “socially acceptable” and popular wasn't important because the people that are making those judgments are not always morally correct. I didn't really care who was my friend and who wasn't anymore, but I did care that I was true to myself and refused to change to suit other people. I felt like I had found who I really was by losing everything that I had previously considered important.

The girl that I had grown closer to was Muslim, not that I thought of it at the time. One night we sat in McDonalds, taking advantage of their “free refill coffee” offer and talked about religion, mainly in what way we believed in God. She was the one asking the questions mostly, about how I thought God to “be”. I enjoyed the discussion and felt somehow that I might be making some sense to her with my “Deanne Religion”. When we got home she got out the 40 Hadith Qudsí and read them for herself. She read some of them to me which of course got me interested. I asked to borrow the book from her so I could sit and read them all too, which I did. Reading the book in some ways was frightening. To me, examples of Islám could be found in TV news reports and in books such as “Princess” and “Not without my daughter”. Surely, I thought, the Hadith were just a good part of it, but the bad part was there too.

From there I moved back to my university for the start of semester and couldn't really get books from my friend anymore so I started looking on the internet. I had already “met” some Muslims on the IRC but I considered them my friends too and that they wouldn't tell me the “truth” about Islám. I thought that they would only tell me the good parts. I did ask them some questions though and, Máshá-Alláh, they were a great help. I still remember asking a Muslim guy whether he believed in angels. Angels were a part of my “Deanne Religion” and I certainly didn't believe that a Muslim guy would admit to believing in the existence of Angels! My limited and ignorant understanding of a Muslim male was one who beat his wife, killed female babies and was a terrorist in his spare time. This sort of person couldn't possibly believe in angels I thought. Of course, I was shocked when he said “Of course I believe in angels”. From then I was interested to know

what else Muslims believed in.

I often think that I initially continued reading about Islám through the internet to prove it wrong. I was always looking for that “bad part”. Everybody couldn’t have such a bad view of Islám if there was no reason for them to. I had always found a bad or an illogical part to every religion that I had read into. So, why would Islám be different? I remember finding an Islámic chat site for the first time and expected to see suppressed females just reading what the males were saying. I expected them not to have an opinion, I expected the “typical Muslim girl” that I had always felt sorry for. To my shock I saw girls happily chatting, with opinions that they were allowed to express. Muslim girls were somehow more liberated than I felt.

My learning about Islám through the internet continued through chatting to lots of people and printing out homepage after homepage. The more I learned the more scared I was. I didn’t tell any of my friends that I was reading about Islám, not even my best-friend. At first it was because I didn’t want them telling me only the “good parts”, and then even when I came to realise that I wasn’t going to find any of the bad parts, I didn’t want them to get their hopes up about me reverting to Islám. I wanted this “decision” to be one that I made on my own – without pressure.

This “decision” that I refer to wasn’t really a decision at all. I am often asked: “What made you decide to become Muslim?”, but when something as clear and logical as Islám is put in front of you, there is no choice. This is not to say that it made the decision to say Shahádah any easier. There were many things that stopped me at first. Firstly, I didn’t think that I knew enough about Islám. But then it didn’t matter because I knew that I would never find anything that was illogical or “bad”. I came to realise that saying Shahádah is not the final step, but the first. Inshá-Alláh throughout my life I will continue to learn. The other thing that made me hesitant, was turning the meaning of the word “Islám” from all the bad things that I had linked with it. I always thought that I couldn’t possibly be Muslim! To then learn that my “Deanne Religion” and beliefs for example of God being One, was actually Islám was hard at first. Islám brought everything together. Everything made sense. To me, finding Islám was like one big bus ride – I had stopped and had a look at all of the stops along the way, taken a bit from all of them, and continued on with the journey. When I found Islám I knew it was the “last stop” of my long ride.

In October of 1997, my best friend came with me for me to say my Shahádah at an Islámic Centre in Melbourne (Jeffcott St.). I was still scared at the time, but after one of the sisters going through the articles of faith, and me putting a mental tick next to each of them, I knew that there was nothing left to do but to say it with my mouth. I still cry when I think of the moment that I said “Yes.. I’ll do it.” I finally dropped the mental wall that had been stopping me. I was to repeat in Arabic after the sister. With her first word I cried. It is a feeling that I can’t explain.

My friend was sitting beside but a little behind me, I didn't realise it then but she was already crying. I felt so much power around me and in the words, but I myself felt so weak.

Sometimes I think my family wonders if this is a phase I am going through – just like my other phases. I was even vegetarian until mum told me what was for dinner that night – a roast. There is still so much for me to learn, but one thing that I would like people to understand is that I know Alhamdulillah, that Islám is a blessing for mankind. The more you learn, Inshá-Alláh, the more beauty you will see in Islám.

The Qur'án

And if you are in doubt about what We have revealed (the Quran) to Our worshiper (Muhammad) then produce a chapter like it, and call your witnesses (supporters and helpers) besides Alláh if you are truthful. And if you do not do it, and you can never do it, then fear the Fire (Hell) whose fuel is men and stones. It has been prepared for disbelievers. And give good news (O Muhammad) to those who believe and do good deeds, that for them are gardens (Paradise) in which rivers flow....(S. 2:23-25)

Will they not then ponder about the Qur'án? If it had been from anybody other than Alláh they would have found much contradiction in it. (S4:82)

ARTICLE BY KHADIJAH JANDHLI

How did a devout Christian from an actively practicing Christian family, born and raised in the middle of the United States of America, never knowing anything at all about Islám and never meeting any Muslims until she was in her 40's, come to accept Islám? It was completely the result of the Great Mercy of Alláh (Most High), to Whom all thanks and praise is due. This is my story; I never tire of telling it, as praise to Alláh (Most High) for His Love for me and His Mercy to me.

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. Alláh (Most High) 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 was a preacher and one of my grandmothers was a preacher. Alláh (Most High) 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, and direct children's choirs, etc. In fact, when I first heard about Islám and met a Muslim who was a university student, I was 49 years old and still employed by a church and was still an active Christian.

All through my life, however, I was a person who asked questions. I read everything in the library about many subjects. The ability to read quickly and the desire to seek knowledge were blessings from Alláh(Most High) because they would eventually lead me to discover the Truth of Islám. However, where I grew up, there were no books about world religions, and certainly no books about Islám.

I always wanted to go to college, but when I graduated from high school, we could not afford it because my mother and father had divorced, so I went to work. That was also a blessing from Alláh (Most High), because the college I wanted to attend at that time had no international students and was in a town with no Muslims at all. Eventually, I married, had children, and was divorced, re-married, and divorced again. This, I am sorry to say, is too often the story among non-Muslims who do not understand Islámic values and ways relating to the rights and duties of husbands and wives.

After my second divorce, my friends and family encouraged me to audition for a music scholarship at the college near where I lived at that time (The University of Tulsa, Tulsa, OK). I was accepted and enrolled at the university. I loved school. I met people from all over the world and I read many books in the extensive library. I read something about the Prophet Muhammad (peace and salutations be on him) and how his religion was called "Muhammadism" by some, but that it was not correct to call it that, that the real name of that religion was "Islám." That's all I knew about Islám at that time.

While at the university, I began tutoring college athletes and very soon, other college students wanted me to tutor them, especially in writing. That is where I met the Malaysian (Muslim) sisters – about 90 of them. I was impressed by their good manners, the way they treated me so politely, and the way they excused themselves every day for a few minutes at certain times to go to prayer. I thought that their religion must have something good in it, because it affected the way they lived in a positive way. Also, I loved the beautiful way they looked in their scarves, but I thought that might just be their culture and not their religion that affected the way they dressed. I did not realize that it was Alláh's way of protecting them.

Over the years, I had many problems with migraine headaches. Often, these headaches would become so severe that I would have to go to the doctor and get strong medicine to alleviate the pain. While I was going to college and

tutoring the Malaysian students, these headaches increased to the extent that I had a headache every day and I was spending most of the day in bed, taking strong drugs. Finally, I could not stop taking these medicines and the headaches were still so bad that I could not go to school.

It was at this time that the Malaysian sisters showed me the real Muslim heart. I left the doors to my house unlocked and they came in whenever they wanted, to see if I was awake. If I was asleep, they just waited or came back later for their tutoring sessions. Sometimes I would waken to find one of them putting a paste of hibiscus leaves on my temples to relieve the pain or to find one of them cooking soup for me to eat. I was so ill that I could not work. I had no money. My family was not helping me. Even the church where I was employed (just across the street from the house I lived in) did not call me or send anyone to see if they could help me. During the entire two years of this migraine problem, only one friend came to see me or called me on the telephone. It was like a knife in my heart.

I prayed many times every day for God to take away my headaches and for Him to help me not to have to take those strong drugs. I begged... I pleaded... I cried...I read the Bible..... But the headaches and problems continued. Some terrible things happened. For example, I had no money to pay the rent. My son, who was living with me, did not give me any money. When I could not pay the rent, he moved out of my house and went to live with his friends. I could not afford even a small apartment, so one of my sons said I could live in the back room of his house. However, he put all his “junk” back there, such as trash, old washers and dryers, and broken furniture.... And he shut the doors between his part of the house and the back room so that I had no heat. In Tulsa, the winters are cold and it was winter when I moved into his back room. He also told me not to eat any of his food, although he knew that I did not have any food.

One day I asked Amina (one of the Malaysian sisters who covered herself from head to toe in the best Islámic manner) if she would tell me something about her religion. She said that she would rather get a more knowledgeable person to tell me about the religion because she did not want to give me any wrong information. So, she referred Mahmood (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) became also 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 when they spoke with each other. 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 Alláh (Most High) loving me through them and showing me how beautiful Islám really is. Subhánalláh.

Always wanting to learn new things, I asked Saif for something to read about Islám. Wisely, he brought me Jamal Badawi's book on *The Status of Women in Islám* and some copies of Ahádíth (sayings of the Prophet) that spoke of "*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 Islám 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 Islám. One day, I asked him if the Holy Qur'án had been translated into English. He explained that the Word of Alláh could not be translated into English, but that the meanings of the Words of Alláh had been translated into English. I asked if he would bring me a Qur'án, and he agreed. What he brought was a beautiful, hardback, Arabic-English Qur'án 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; not to put anything on top of it; never to 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'án was that it was the true Word of Alláh 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 after the events had happened, and 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'án, I did so with a holy fear and awe of Alláh (Most High).

For a strong Christian, reading the Qur'án for the first time is shocking. For example, the Qur'án repeatedly says that Jesus (Isá) was only a man and that those who say he was the son of God are in terrible error. To me, at that time, it almost seemed like I should not be reading these words.... It was like these words were saying bad things about God. The reason is that Christians are taught that they must believe that Jesus was the son of God and that he came to earth, lived a

perfect life, and was crucified on the cross so that Christians, who believe that, would never go the hellfire. In fact, Christians are taught that if you do not believe that Jesus was the son of God, you will never go to heaven. So, as I began reading, it was hard for me. However, in my heart I knew, absolutely and completely, that I was reading the Words of Alláh (Most High), the Truth. I could not stop reading. I read for hours every day.

On the fifth day of reading the Qur'án, I found Súrat – 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 Súrat (chapter) to me in Arabic. He was happy to read it, and, as I had thought it would be, it was even more beautiful in Arabic than in English. From that time on, I finished my reading each day with that Súrat.

The headaches continued, but as I prayed, I began to think more and more of calling God by His real name, Alláh. I asked for more books and read several books about Islám. I began thinking that I was going to have to make a big decision soon about my beliefs...But I was afraid.

Suddenly, my son announced that I would have to move out of his house because he had decided to move to another house and I would not be welcome to come with him. I borrowed money to rent an apartment and the Muslim brothers helped me move. The date was August 10, 1994. On the first night in my new apartment, I decided to become a Muslim, but I was not ready to tell anyone yet. I knew that Muslims prayed with their faces on the floor (sujud), so I positioned myself on the floor, facing Mecca (although at that time I did not even know what direction Mecca was or that I was supposed to face Mecca when I prayed) and I prayed:

“Oh Alláh! You know me better than I know myself. You know every sin I have committed and every good deed I have done. You know I have been searching for Your Truth all my life. You know I have been studying about Islám and reading the Qur'án. I am afraid. But I think I have to make a decision. I have called you God all these years and now I know Your Name is Alláh, but I have tried to worship you in the only way I knew how to worship. If I have done wrong, please forgive me. If I am wrong about Islám, please do not send me to the hellfire for believing that Jesus was only a prophet. But I believe that Islám is the Truth and that you, Alláh, are the One True God.... that you have no son.... that there is no Alláh but you.... and that Muhammad was your Prophet. I want to be a Muslim because I want to worship you in the right way, because I do not want to go to the hellfire, and I want to go to heaven when I die. O Alláh. I am so afraid of You, but I believe You love me and You understand my intention.”

When I finished praying, I just sat in the floor, feeling very peaceful and

very sleepy. I lay down after a short time and went to sleep.

When I awakened in the morning, I was surprised. I did not have a headache. I immediately began thanking Alláh (Most High) because I did not have a headache. I began praying five times a day, because I knew that Muslims did that, but I did not know how to pray. Nevertheless, I prayed what I could, making sujud.

About the headaches? I threw away my strong medicines that very day and since then, I have never had to take any medicine stronger than aspirin for a headache and I have never had to go to the doctor for a headache. Alhamdulillah. I did not ask Alláh (Most High) for anything about the headaches, but He is so Merciful that He took them away immediately and completely.

From August 10 to November 8, I read about Islám, I 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 Islám on November 8, after he finished his tutoring session and had made his intention to Alláh 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 Islám.” Our words passed by each other in the air between us. There was a moment of silence, then we both began to cry. Alláhu Akbar. Subhánalláh. Do you see how Alláh (Most High) 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 take shahádah, as he explained to me that taking shahádah 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 took shahádah. Then, they went to the mosque to announce my conversion. I asked if they could bring me “everything you can find” to read about Islám. They brought me a stack of books that day and every 2 – 3 days, they brought me more books to read. I read books, read the Qur’án, and asked many, many questions about my new religion. I was particularly happy to find a book that showed me how to pray. I read that one first and planned to make all my prayers correctly from then on.

The next morning, although I had no alarm clock, I was awake for Fajr

(dawn) prayer. Why? Because I was awakened just before dawn by the sound of a small kitten meowing at my door. I went to the door and this very young, starving kitten was waiting for me. I brought her in, fed her some milk, washed, and made my first Fajr prayer on time. From that time on, that kitten climbed up on my bed and meowed loudly before dawn every day. Subhánalláh.

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 Islámic dress. When I finally put on my “Islámic clothes” I felt I had finally come to my real home, my real faith, my real identity, my real language, my real family.

O Alláh (Most High). Thank you for opening my heart to Islám. Thank you for sending someone to invite me to Islám. O Alláh (Most High). Please forgive all my sins and admit me to Jannah because of Your Mercy. O Alláh (Most High) help me and all Muslims to love You, to love our Prophet (peace and salutations be on him), to love the Arabic language...the language in which You revealed Your Holy Words to Prophet Muhammad (peace and salutations be on him), and to be willing, yes eager, to share our knowledge with others. Ameen.

Say: He is Alláh, the One! Alláh, the Self Sufficient! He does not give birth and was not born. And there is no one equal to Him. (S.112:1-4)

They surely disbelieve who say: Alláh is the Messiah, son of Mary. The Messiah (himself) said: O Children of Israel, worship Alláh, my Lord and your Lord. For whoever associates partners with Alláh, Alláh has forbidden the Garden. His final place is the Fire. For evil doers there will be no helpers.

They surely disbelieve who say: Alláh is the third of three; when there is no god except the One Alláh. If they do not stop saying so, a painful punishment will fall on those who disbelieve. Will they rather not turn to Alláh and seek forgiveness of Him? For Alláh is All Forgiving, All Merciful. The Messiah, son of Mary, was no other than a messenger, Messengers (the like of whom) had passed away before him. And his mother was a saintly woman. And they both used to eat (earthly) food. See how We make the signs clear to them, and see how they are turned away! (S.5:72-74)

EXPERIENCE OF A CONVERTED HINDU WOMAN

“My Experiences and How I Find that Islám does not Oppress Women” *By Sister Noor*

I came from a purely Hindu family where we were always taught to regard ourselves (i.e. women) as beings who were eventually to be married off and have children and serve the husband – whether he was kind or not. Other than this I found that there were a lot of things which really oppressed women.

Subsequently, when I came to England to study, I thought that at least this is a country which gives equal rights to men and women, and does not oppress them. We all have the freedom to do as we like, I thought. Well, as I started to meet people and make new friends, learn about this new society, and go to all the places my friends went to in order to “socialize” (bars, dance halls, etc.). I realized that this “equality” was not so true in practice as it was in theory.

Outwardly, women were seen to be given equal rights in education, work, and so forth, but in reality women were still oppressed in a different, more subtle way. When I went with my friends to those places they hung out at, I found everybody interested to talk to me and I thought that was normal. But it was only later that I realized how naïve I was, and recognized what these people were really looking for. I soon began to feel uncomfortable, as if I was not myself: I had to dress in a certain way so that people would like me, and had to talk in a certain way to please them. I soon found that I was feeling more and more uncomfortable, less and less myself, yet I could not get out. Everybody was saying they were enjoying themselves, but I don't call this enjoying.

I think women in this way of life are oppressed; they have to dress in a certain way in order to please and appear more appealing, and also talk in a certain way so people like them. During this time I had not thought about Islám, even though I had some Muslim acquaintances. But I felt I really had to do something, to find something that I would be happy and secure with, and would feel respected with. Something to believe in that is the right belief, because everybody has a belief that they live according to. If having fun by getting off with other people is someone's belief, they do this. If making money is someone's belief, they do everything to achieve this. If they believe drinking is one way to enjoy life then they do it. But I feel all this leads to nowhere; no one is truly satisfied, and the respect women are looking for is diminishing in this way.

In these days of so called “society of equal rights”, you are expected to have a boyfriend (or you're weird!) and to not be a virgin. So this is a form of oppression even though some women do not realize it. When I came to Islám, it was obvious that I had finally found permanent security. A religion, a belief that was so complete and clear in every aspect of life. Many people have a misconception that Islám is an oppressive religion, where women are covered

from head to toe, and are not allowed any freedom or rights. In fact, women in Islám are given more rights, and have been for the past 1400 years, compared to the only recently rights given to non-Muslim women in some western and some other societies. But there are, even now, societies where women are still oppressed, as I mentioned earlier in relation to Hindu women.

Muslim women have the right to inheritance. They have the right to run their own trade and business. They have the full right to ownership, property, disposal over their wealth to which the husband has no right. They have the right to education, a right to refuse marriage as long as this refusal is according to reasonable and justifiable grounds. The Qur’án itself, which is the Word of God, contains many verses commanding men to be kind to their wives and stressing the rights of women. Islám gives the right set of rules, because they are NOT made by men, but made by God; hence it is a perfect religion.

Quite often Muslim women are asked why they are covered from head to toe, and are told that this is oppression – it is not. In Islám, marriage is an important part of life, the making of the society. Therefore, a woman should not go around showing herself to everybody, only for her husband. Even the man is not allowed to show certain parts of his body to none but his wife. In addition, God has commanded Muslim women to cover themselves for their modesty:

“O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks (veils) over their bodies (when outdoors). That will be better that they could be known as such (i.e. decent and chaste) and not molested.” [S.33:59]

If we look around at any other society, we find that in the majority of cases women are attacked and molested because of how they are dressed. Another point I’d like to comment on is that the rules and regulation laid down in Islám by God do not apply just to women but to men also. There is no intermingling and free-running between men and women for the benefit of both. Whatever God commands is right, wholesome, pure and beneficial to mankind; there is no doubt about that.

A verse in the Qur’án explains this concept clearly:

“Tell the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their private parts (i.e. from indecency, illegal sexual acts, etc.); that will make for greater purity for them. And Alláh is well aware of what they do. And tell the believing women that they should lower their gaze and be modest; and that they should to display only their ornaments which are apparent.” [S.24:30-31]

When I put on my hijab (veil), I was really happy to do it. In fact, I really wanted to do it. When I put on the hijab, I felt a great sense of satisfaction and happiness. Satisfied that I had obeyed God’s command. And happy with the good and blessings that come with it. I have felt secure and protected. In fact people respect me more for it. I could really see the difference in behavior towards me.

Finally, I'd like to say that I had accepted Islám not blindly, or under any compulsion. In the Qur'án itself there is a verse which says "*Let there be no compulsion in religion*". I accepted Islám with conviction. I have seen, been there, done that, and seen both sides of the story. I know and have experienced what the other side is like, and I know that I have done the right thing. Islám does not oppress women, but rather Islám liberates them and gives them the respect they deserve. Islám is the religion God has chosen for the whole of mankind. Those who accept it are truly liberated from the chains and shackles of mankind whose ruling and legislating necessitates nothing but the oppression of one group by another and the exploitation and oppression of one sex by the other. This is not the case of Islám which truly liberated women and gave them an individuality not given by any other authority.

These are times when people all over the world are coming to Islám in unprecedented numbers. At a time that Muslims have lost control of the pen and the sword, Islám is finding new followers everywhere. It is quite revealing that even as Islám continues to spread, despite the sword, some people should continue to insist that it [i.e Islám] is spread by the sword!

– Khalid Baig

TESTIMONY OF FATHIMA LIEBENBERG

(South African)

I am Fathima Liebenberg, a white Muslim woman converted to Islám in 1995. I am very proud to say I am a Muslim, but if it was not for my son I would never have been a Muslim. For me it was a hard and long struggle because it cost me my job, friends and family

My life before Islám

I was a very pious Christian who went to the Pentecostal churches. I used to collect the street children and take them to the church and Sunday school. My life consisted only of reading and studying the bible, until my son told me about Islám.

My son came home one day and said, "Mummy! Why don't you become a Muslim?" I was shocked at the very idea and said, "Never".

He said, “Mummy! Islám is such a pure and clean religion, they pray five times a day”.

That is when I decided to read the books and the translation of the Noble Qur’án. The more I read the Qur’án, the more I was convinced that Islám was for me. I turned to Alláh and finally I found peace and tranquility. I hid it from my family until one day I decided to phone my brother and tell him I was now a Muslim.

My brother was so shocked, because we were very devoted and pious Christians, and I was the only one to be converted to Islám.

My family phoned me about a year ago and told me never to contact them again as I now was no longer their sister. I love my family very much and miss them but I know one day we will meet again. Inshá-Alláh.

I was so happy when I received my “Muslim Identity Card” that I felt like standing on the roof tops and shouting out to the world that I am a Muslim. I lost my family, but gained a new family in Islám. My new family, the Muslims, were so wonderful, I cannot express it. I would like to make special mention of my appreciation to the Fakrodeen family of Prince Edward St. I love you who treated me as if I was part of the family, May Alláh reward you all.

Aapa Tasneem, Jazákalláh, when I am in your madrasah with all the little ones, it feels like I am in Jannah surrounded by little angels. I am so happy that Alláh Ta’álá has chosen me to be a Muslim.

I have worn the hijab since I became a Muslim and will never take it out. My only wish is to go to Makkah even though I doubt that it will be possible but Inshá-Alláh, one day Alláh will provide me with the means to reach there. Each time I want to be closer to Alláh, I read the Sunnats of our Beloved Prophet (peace and salutations be on him).

Paper will not be enough for everything that I wish to tell you about Islám. I also want to say Jazákumulláh to the Kazi family, and I would like to thank our Úlama of the Jamiatul Ulama (KZN). And to our brother Ahmad Deedat who is so ill. May Alláh Ta’álá cure you and return you back to all of us.

Islám is a way of life. Islám means peace and a Muslim is one who strives for peace through his submission to Alláh Ta’álá. A Muslim’s first duty is to Alláh the Almighty and it is out of your deep love for Alláh that your duties become acts of devotion.

It is no easy task for me as a white Muslim lady, living amongst Christians, but I keep my head up high and I am so very proud to be a Muslim. **So, my dear brothers and sisters if you are born Muslim but have not been a dutiful one, it is not too late. If you have not started yet, you can start tomorrow or even tonight. Brothers and sisters, as Muslims, keep your heads up high and show the world that you are proud to be Muslims.**

All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety (taqwá) and good action. Learn that every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and that the Muslims constitute one brotherhood. Nothing shall be legitimate to a Muslim which belongs to a fellow Muslim unless it was given freely and willingly. Do not, therefore, do injustice to yourselves. Remember, one day you will appear before Alláh and answer your deeds. So beware, do not stray from the path of righteousness after I am gone...

O people, no prophet or apostle will come after me and no new faith will be born. Reason well, therefore, o people, and understand the words which I convey to you. I leave behind me two things, the Quran and my example, the Sunnah and if you follow these you will never go astray.

[Extract from the Farewell Sermon of the Messenger Muhammad (peace and salutations be on him)]

CARDIOLOGIST DOCTOR SAFIYYAH FORMERLY SARWAJ SHAALINI ACCEPTS ISLÁM.

Introduction

Dr. Safiyyah narrates her personal life, which goes as follows:

I was formerly Sarwaj Shaalini, born on the 24th of September 1978 near Lucknow in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), at a place called Mohanlal Ganj. I was born in a Brahmin family. My father was Dr.K.A. Sharma, a professor who had specialised in cardiology. He was a man who adopted eastern values and culture; therefore, despite the opportunity of marrying educated female doctors he preferred marrying a homely lady. I have two brothers, one is a Reader at Banaras University and the other is an engineer.

Currently I am specialising in cardiology at AIIMS as per the wishes of my father. I am also currently working in the Department of Cardiology at AIIMS. I accepted Islám on Thursday the 20th May 2004 at 11:00 at the Green Park Musjid on the hands of Moulana Muhammed Kaleem Siddiqui.

Doctor Safiyyah's accepting Islám

Dr. Safiyyah narrates her accepting Islám as follows:

In June 2003, while on duty in the children's I.C.U. ward, I noticed a Moulana who came to visit a child from the Haryana state. Although it seemed as if permission was given for the Moulana to visit and pray for the recovery of one child, I observed that the Moulana was praying for and blowing upon several of the little patients.

As it was time for the head of the department Dr. Tijaani to do his ward rounds, I was concerned about Moulana going around blowing on the various children, so I went up to Moulana and enquired, "Who is your patient? Sometimes you are blowing on this patient and sometimes on that. This is an I.C.U. ward and there is the danger of infection." Moulana gently responded, "All of these are my patients. Our elders have taught us that every human being is the child of one mother and father, therefore, every patient that is admitted at this hospital is my blood relative. That All-Powerful Being Who has created you and me does not like 'mine' and 'yours'. Whatever I am reading and blowing are the words of this very same All-Mighty Creator, Who has said in His Divine Book, the words of His Noble Prophet Hazrat Ibraahim (peace be on him):

"When I become sick then He (the All-Mighty Creator) grants me cure"
(S.26:80).

"And mind you, it is upon this Prophet's name that the Brahmin's (Ibrahimee) call themselves.

"You may notice that according to your understanding you supply fairly good and suitable medication to the patients who, after recovery, passaway; and sometimes incorrect medication is used and the patient recovers."

Such words I had heard for the first time and especially when just the previous week six children had died in our ward, all of whom were beautiful, handsome and lovable. I had developed an attachment to them especially because they had been in the ward for two weeks. Their passing away created a deep sadness within me. After hearing these words of love and caring from Moulana I desired to hear more and therefore, requested him to come to my desk.

Accepting my invitation, Moulana said, "You are my small sister or like my child and with affection you have called me to your table so I humbly advise you to regard every patient as your own child or brother and sister and consider their pain as your own. Our Master and Creator have given you a most wonderful opportunity that you can become part and parcel of the difficulty of those who are ill and in pain. You know very well that whichever mother's child is admitted into an I.C.U. and that too in a government hospital where only those patients seek admission that are generally very desperate. They must be quite critical. Therefore, even a little kind, humanitarian

treatment shown to them would not only be a means of every hair on their body supplicating for you, even their insides will supplicate in your favour.”

At the end, with extreme love and concern Moulana, taking my name said, “Dr. Shaalini, you are my blood sister therefore, I advise you, rather it is a bequest and; mind you a bequest is that advice given by a person on the throes of death to his children you should regard the serving of patients who come to your ward as the greatest form of worship. Even with thousands of years of worship you will not achieve that position by our Creator and Owner as you would by comforting the troubled patients who come to you.”

I thanked Moulana excessively and promised to make a concerted effort to follow his advice. Moulana went away. The head doctor, Dr.Tiyaagi completed his rounds. Thereafter, I went to the mother of the patient from Haryana to whom Moulana had essentially come and enquired, “Who was that Moulana?” She said that he was their Hazratji, a very good man and on his hands thousands of Hindus had, accepted Islám.

For several days Moulana’s words had a profound effect on my heart; and constantly rang in my ears was his saying, “All these patients are mine, that Creator and Controller Who has made us does not like ‘mine’ and ‘yours’.” I also felt that after Moulana’s prayers and blowing, the patients made a very noticeable change as all of them recovered and were discharged. However, after some days my experience with Moulana was forgotten.

Meeting with Doctor Reena

One of my friends, Dr. Reena, worked as a gynaecologist at Moulana Azaad Medical College. She was specialising in gynaecology. She was later appointed as gynaecologist at the Safdarjang hospital. We were very good friends. One day she invited me for meals. While talking after meals I enquired from her why she had employed a Muslim female cook. Did she not find any Hindu cook? She replied, “She’s a very good girl, very honest several times my purse was mislaid and, without interfering with the contents, she returned it.”

This brought our conversation and discussion to Muslims and Islám. Dr. Reena commented that as much as the media in our country and in the world spoke out against the Muslims many non-believers were embracing Islám. Even world renowned people had reverted to Islám. She further added that I maybe aware that Michael Jackson had also embraced Islám. She continued that in our very own hospital a young doctor by the name Dr. Balbir, a few years ago, accepted Islám and his desire was that every person at the hospital become Muslim. She also said that Dr.Balbir was once called to the ward to diagnose a patient and he began explaining to her (Dr. Reena) that if she wanted to avoid hell fire then she should accept Islám and become a Muslim.

Hearing these words of Dr. Reena I thought of the Moulana who had come to my ward and spoken to me about similar things. I therefore, requested Dr. Reena to arrange a meeting with Dr. Balbir for me. This meeting was arranged for the next Sunday at 10:00 a.m. in Dr. Reena's hospital room. I found Dr. Balbir to be a very articulate and intelligent person who seemed to be constantly engrossed in deep thought. Upon my enquiry, he told me that he had accepted Islám approximately 8-9 years ago and he further stated that he had changed his religion since Islam alone is the truth and it is the first and the most correct religion. Without Islám there is no salvation in the life after death and one will suffer eternal damnation and punishment in the fire of hell. To accept Islam is necessary for me as it was for him. To my question of whether he had changed his name he replied that he was now "Waliullah" which means "the friend of Alláh". I informed him of my meeting with a Moulana who had come to my ward approximately one and a half years ago. I briefly explained to him what the Moulana had said about Islám.

Dr. Balbir seemed to take this as an opportunity to further enlighten me about Islám. He said that what the Moulana had spoken to me about were the teachings of the Messenger of Islám, Hazrat Muhammad (May Alláh shower upon him Blessings and Peace) and were to be found in his lecture at the time of the farewell pilgrimage (Hajj).

Upon my request he informed me that it was available in print form, just as various other sayings (Ahádíth) of our Beloved Messenger (May Alláh shower upon him Blessings and Peace) had been well recorded, documented, printed and published. A few days later Dr. Balbir sent me the English translation of the afore mentioned sermon.

I was greatly affected by the teachings in the final sermon, especially those pertaining to the rights of women. I once again began thinking of the Moulana who had come to my ward 18 months ago and regretted not having taken his particulars. I began searching for that Haryana patient's details among the various ward records in the hope that the parents of that patient could provide me with Moulana's particulars. However, my efforts were to no avail. I had that great desire within me to learn more about Islám so I again contacted Dr. Balbir and arranged to meet him at his work place, Safdarjang Hospital. I met Dr. Balbir at the appointed time and requested for Islámic literature so that I could understand the teachings of his religion.

The next day Dr. Balbir came to my hospital room and gave me a little booklet in Hindi entitled, "Your Trust at your service". He introduced it with the words, "This little booklet serves the purpose of a hundred books in explaining the need for Islám." He further said that in order to benefit from it I should read it with this thought that a Great Benefactor is specifically addressing me. He further said, "After you read it, you will experience this feeling that I have mentioned." He also stated that he himself had accepted

Islam upon the hands of the author of this little booklet. Dr. Balbir had told me that after reading the book I would understand compassion and love for fellow human beings within the writer's heart who lived in U.P. (Uttar Pradesh) a province near Delhi and he was from a Rajput family.

After giving me the book Dr. Balbir had his tea and departed. Thereafter, I read the entire book in one sitting. This book found a place in my heart and I again fondly remembered the Moulana who had come to see the Haryana patient in my ward. Furthermore, I phoned Dr. Balbir and requested him for other books from the same author and if possible to arrange a meeting with the author, for which I would be most grateful. After four days, on the 18th of May, Dr. Balbir informed me telephonically that Moulana Muhammad Kaleem Siddiqui was at the Green Park Masjid in Delhi and if I wished to meet him then I should take leave from work and come immediately as Moulana will be there by 11:00 a.m.

Meeting Moulana Kaleem Siddiqui

I immediately hastened to the Masjid. Moulana had reached the Masjid by 10:30. He had an onward journey from there. My happiness knew no bounds when the author of "Your Trust – at your service" Moulana Muhammed Kaleem Siddiqui, turned out to be the very same Moulana I had met 18 months ago when he came to visit the Haryana patient in my ward. He was that very same individual whom I was searching for several months!

My extreme love, faith and trust in Moulana compelled me to drop down to his feet. Moulana strongly prohibited me from this action and he said, "What is the delay now, after reading, 'Your Trust – at your service'. Do you have any doubts now?" I had only come to meet Moulana but I could not restrain myself so I told Moulana that I had come to become a Muslim. Moulana was extremely overjoyed at hearing this and immediately made me recite the Kalimah of Islám: *Ash hadu al laa ilaaha il lal laahu wa ash hadu an na muham madan'abdu-hoo wa rasooluh.*

"I testify that there is none worthy of worship but Alláh and I testify that Hazrat Muhammad (May Alláh shower upon him Blessings and Peace) is His Servant and Messenger."

Moulana thereafter, kept my Islámic name as Safiyyah (S. Shalini). Moulana wrote the names of some books that he advised me to study and also emphasized that I should learn how to read Salaah. Moulana prevented me from announcing my acceptance of Islám. However, I mentioned my accepting Islám to some of my special friends and family. Sometimes emotions would overcome me that when Islám is the religion of truth then what is the need for hiding it and leading a life of secrecy? But then the thought would disturb me that when I had accepted Moulana as my guide, who was a means, contrary to all expectations of a filthy and evil person like

me accepting Islám, then its incorrect for me to go against such a guide's directives. I should follow his advice.

Doctor Reena

I also informed Dr. Reena about my accepting Islám. Both Dr. Waliullah (Balbir) and I continuously made effort on Dr. Reena by explaining the teachings of Islám to her. Dr. Reena, through the Grace of the Almighty Alláh, also accepted Islám and recited the Kalimah. However she was a married lady. Her husband was also a Doctor and had his own clinic. He was from a very religious family and had recently attached himself to a swami. Therefore, Dr. Reena was not announcing her acceptance of Islám. Doctor Reena was given the Muslim name Faatimah. Dr. Waliullah was inviting Dr. Faatimah's husband to Islám, however, Dr. Waliullah had accepted a position in Saudi Arabia and the responsibility of educating Dr. Reena's husband was upon my shoulders and I, being a lady, found this a very difficult task.

Dr. Waliullah

Dr. Waliullah married a lady who was working in a government department. Prior to the marriage he had told her about his being a Muslim and that he would only be able to marry her if she accepted Islám and that the marriage would be in accordance to the teachings of Islám. However, Dr. Waliullah's wife did not show much keenness on practising Islám after the marriage. The primary reason of this was her job. This non-inclination to Islám caused Dr. Waliullah immense pain and he developed a heart ailment. He was often at our hospital for treatment where he had a pace-maker implanted and, for the duration of the treatment, I had contact with him. However, the normal medication did not really help him. Therefore, Moulana Kaleem Sahib suggested that he uses the unani medicine and after approximately two months he completely recovered. Moulana, looking at his marital situation, also advised him to seek employment in some Arab country so that his wife may find a suitable environment to enjoy the beauty of Islám. Dr. Waliullah, through the Grace of the Almighty, found a job in Saudi Arabia and his wife also joined him there.

Doctor Safiyyah's (Shalini's) appointment to Jeddah Hospital

As regards my parents, they did not happily accept my accepting Islám. But slowly they changed their opinion. My father was very worried about marriage and he began talking to me about this six years ago. Very good proposals came for me. Some of the men who proposed were my father's students, but I was not ready as I was confident that Alláh desired something else. I kept refusing, presenting the excuse that I wanted to specialize in cardiology. I requested Moulana Kaleem Sahib to allow me to announce my Islám, however his advice was that I should silently work upon my family members, introduce

Alláh to them. When I expressed my difficulty as far as fulfilling my Islámic responsibilities of reading Salaah, Fasting, etc. then Moulana also advised me to seek employment in the Arab world like Dr. Waliullah. All praise is due to Alláh that the King Abdul Aziz Hospital in Jeddah appointed me for a two year term. I took three months leave for making preparations for my trip overseas.

My Wedding

One day Moulana Kaleem Siddiqui Sahib enquired whether I would be prepared to marry a surgeon by the name of Dr. Asad Faridi who was a specialist at the PGI Chandigarh. He was the only doctor in the entire history of that hospital who wore a sherwani and kept a beard. I responded that nothing would make me happier, but how would it be possible since Moulana has not granted me permission to announce my Islám? Moulana said that I should first grant my consent and show my willingness and he would then solve the problem. I granted my consent, Moulana then requested Dr. Asad and his parents to meet me. Both parties were happy with each other so Moulana called a few people and conducted my nikah. Alláh is the best of planners. Dr. Asad had been posted to the King Abdul Aziz Hospital in Jeddah also, he had applied earlier and on the 6th of September he departed. I planned to join him after my visa and other formalities were finalised

Total submission to the will of Alláh

Did I feel uneasiness at marrying a man who adorned the beard and wore a sherwani? It was the Grace of Alláh that I liked every aspect of Islám from the bottom of my heart. Furthermore, the truth of the matter was that Islám was my natural way and my natural religion. When I learnt that in the history of PGI Hospital Dr. Asad was the first individual to keep a beard and wear the sherwani then my heart desired that I announce my accepting Islám. It was my desire, and this created a sense of joy within me, that I be the first new Muslim lady doctor who donned the burqa in the All India Institute of Medical Sciences and that my action should become the means of other non-Muslims taking a step closer to Islám and gaining more knowledge about this truthful religion. However, Moulana Kaleem Sahib despite praising this emotional state of mine advised that I spend a few years in Saudi Arabia.

My nikah and marriage took place quickly. Moulana Kaleem Sahib presented my husband to my parents and explained to them that this wedding did not cost a cent as there was no wedding ring, no formalities, no customs and no rituals of society. The manner of the nikah would prevent arguments and quarrels in society about a Muslim man marrying their daughter. Furthermore, Dr. Asad was leaving for Saudi Arabia and soon their daughter would also be departing, so nobody would be aware that their marriage had taken place in India. People would assume, when they returned as husband

and wife, that their marriage took place in Saudi Arabia. It therefore, should not be a means of the family members feeling uneasy and a matter of dishonour for them.

My parents were happy especially after they saw Dr. Asad. My father especially kept telling me that I was very lucky and most fortunate as I had a husband who was handsome like the moon. The truth of the matter was that he was much more good-looking than me. My parents came to bid farewell to Dr. Asad at the Delhi airport and displayed immense love for him.

I prostrate long in the presence of my Alláh whenever I ponder upon the bounties with which He had blessed me. I was not fit for these bounties, I was immersed in the darkness of disbelief and polytheism and it was Alláh alone Who blessed me with the good fortune of Islám. This indeed was a great favour of my Creator upon this filthy slave of His. As regards my parents I have, through the grace of the Almighty, been working upon them and it seems as if that the distance to traverse now for them to accept Islám remains very little.

Conclusion

This thought always comes to my heart that this scientifically and technologically advanced world needs only Islám and without Islám it is penniless. Readers should understand that this is not mere poetry that I am reciting but I have studied the world from very near and after a deep study of it I realise that this world is bankrupt and only Islám can treat and cure it. The wealth of Islám is only with the Muslims, but however, it is sad that we Muslims are today overawed with this bankrupt world. I am saddened and also astonished that we possess the greatest wealth but have failed to benefit mankind with it. We should be grateful for this immense bounty of Alláh. As regards this, we should regard ourselves as the wealthy and the world as needy and therefore, spread the wealth of Islám.

Adapted from Nasim-e-Hidayat ke Jhonke.
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O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full Knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).

O People, it is true that you have certain rights with regard to your women, but they also have rights over you. Remember that you have taken them as your wives only under Allah's trust and with His permission. If they abide by your right then to them belongs the right to be fed and clothed in kindness. Do treat your women well and be kind to them for they are your partners and committed helpers. And it is your right that they do not make friends with any one of whom you do not approve, as well as never to be unchaste.

“ALLÁH CAME KNOCKING AT MY HEART.”

By Giles Whittell. The times – Monday January 07 2002

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been a surge in conversions to Islám since September 11, especially among affluent young white Britons. Six months ago Elizabeth L. a graduate in political science, the daughter of affluent white British parents, an opponent of terrorism in all its forms climbed Mount Sinai at night to watch the desert sunrise from its summit. “It was the stillest, most peaceful place I’ve ever been,” she says. “I could hear my feelings come up from within me, and in one surreal moment it all seemed to come together.”

Last Friday, at 4.45pm, Elizabeth went to Regent’s Park Mosque in Central London and converted to Islám. It wasn’t hard. She didn’t even have to wear a scarf. Witnessed by two Muslim men and nine other friends, squeezed into the imam’s office, she pronounced in Arabic, learnt from a tape the night before, the words she will repeat like a mantra five times a day for the rest of her life: “*There is no God but Alláh and Muhammad is His messenger*”. Afterwards there was a modest celebration at Al-Dar on the Edgware Road. Elizabeth and her well-wishers sipped mint tea and smoked apple-flavoured tobacco from a hookah. There was no booze, but she never drank much anyway.

Why has she done this? “I know it sounds clichéd, but Alláh came knocking at my heart. That’s really how it feels. In many ways it is beyond articulating, rather like falling in love.” It was, in other words, intensely personal. As she read the Koran and prepared for her conversion, the September attacks came and went and failed to derail her spiritual journey.... In as far as they featured in her thinking, they even elicited some sympathy.

“All terrorism is cowardly,” she says. “But I can see why people get fed up with the West. Capitalism is enormously oppressive.” Elizabeth is not a freak, and she is certainly not alone. There is compelling anecdotal evidence of a surge in conversions to Islám since September 11, not just in Britain, but across Europe and America. One Dutch Islámic centre claims a tenfold increase, while the New Muslims Project, based in Leicester and run by a former Irish Roman Catholic housewife, reports a steady stream of new converts. This fits a pattern set by recent history. Similar surges followed the outbreak of the Gulf War, the Bosnian conflict and the declaration of a fatwa against Salman Rushdie.

Some of the newcomers doubtless do not share David Blunkett’s enthusiasm for overt espousals of Britishness. They may even have been caught on police videos flag-waving for the Taliban. But most will speak our language and support our football teams with roughly average fervour, and some by all accounts a rapidly expanding minority, are white, more educated and more middle-class than the Home Secretary himself.

These are some of Islám’s more surprising converts. They have chosen their new creed over the world’s other great religions having had the privilege of choice, often confounding their own and their families’ prejudices in the process. They are highly articulate and tolerant to a degree. They’re people like us, only they’re not. They’re Muslims. They pray five times a day, fast during Ramadan and hope to go to Mecca before they die. They answer their mobiles with *salaam alaikum*. Unlike Richard Reid, the would-be shoe bomber of American Airlines Flight 63, Britain’s pukka Muslim converts, as the label implies, tend to be over-privileged, not under. Unlike James Mc Lintock, the Scots lecturer’s son being held in a Peshawar jail, the fighting in Afghanistan has dismayed rather than attracted them. They are people like Elizabeth (who asked for her name to be changed because she has not told her parents yet); like Lucy Bushill-Matthews, a 30-year-old graduate of Newnham College, Cambridge, who flirted with Islám as a student in order to dismiss it, “but found it so simple and logical I couldn’t push it away”; like Yahya, whose father is a pillar of the Anglo Establishment and who feels that Islám fits right into British tradition; and like Joe Ahmed-Dobson, a son of the former Labour Minister, Frank Dobson, who believes that Islám transformed his spiritual life and helped him to get a first at university.

If there is something familiar about these people’s startling choices, there should be. We have been here before, or at least Imperial Britain’s adventuring classes and their moneyed gap-year successors have. T. E. Lawrence fell hard for the romance and otherness of Islám and came to embody them for succeeding generations even though he never converted. Gai Eaton, a former British diplomat now in his seventies, did convert. His influential work, *Islám and the Destiny of Man*, has become required reading for bright young Anglo-Saxons turning to his adopted faith, often as an expression of dissatisfaction with a Western culture that appeared to have offered them everything. Matthew

Wilkinson made headlines when he converted and changed his name to Tariq in 1993; he was a former Eton head boy. He and Nicholas Brandt, another Etonian and the son of an investment banker, swapped their destinies as scions of the Establishment for a Slough semi shared with four other Muslims. Lord Birt's son, Jonathan, forsook a fast track into the ranks of the great and the good by converting in 1997 and starting a Ph.D on British Islám. So did a son and a daughter of Lord Justice Scott, the scourge of Tory sleaze and the chairman of the Arms to Iraq inquiry. And so did Jemima Khan. "My decision was entirely my own choice and in no way hurried," the 21-year-old daughter of the billionaire James Goldsmith declared angrily after suggestions that she had converted to marry Imran Khan, the former Pakistan cricket captain. She noted accurately that the Koran allowed Imran to marry any Muslim, Jew or Christian (even though it bars Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men). She pointed out that Imran's sisters, far from being oppressed by his brothers-in-law, were all educated professionals, and she insisted that she found the tunic and trousers she would henceforth have to wear far more elegant and feminine than anything in my wardrobe. Her plea seemed hard to credit in the circumstances, but it is a common one from educated British women trying to persuade baffled non-Muslims that conversion did not mean surrendering their independence or their critical faculties.

For Lucy Bushill-Matthews, it meant the reverse. "When I went to Cambridge I joined the Christian and Islámic societies and all three political parties," she says. "I wanted to explore all the possibilities in order to dismiss them." She thinks of herself as pragmatic and not all that spiritual, and as such she found Islám irresistible. It made sense of all the world's faiths. It was a clear, simple way to believe in God. She claims that it has even helped her to land good jobs by marking her out as a free thinker. Her husband is a Muslim of English and Iranian descent whom she married after converting.

Yahya, too, chose Islám from the broadest possible religious gamut. He was raised in a high-profile London family that, because of his father's position, could not be seen to favour one faith over another. He then took a degree in comparative religion, the theological equivalent of a blind wine-tasting, and Islám, quite simply, won. "It's pure monotheism," he says. "It has a clear moral system and an intact tradition of religious scholarship. No scripture expresses its message of the oneness of God as clearly as the Koran. It also has a remarkably rich mysticism, which may be what appeals to middle-class white Brits like me." Yahya converted five years ago. Now 33, he is at Oxford writing a Ph.D on British Islám and is dismayed not just by last September's attacks, but also by the mauling he says his religion has suffered since in the media, even – or especially – at the hands of would-be sympathisers. "It's very painful for all of us to be associated with such sickening barbarism (of the attacks)," he says. "That's not what we signed up for. And now we can't portray our religion in

undiluted form. It's always mediated by someone else. It's incredibly frustrating to have Polly Toynbee trying to save you from yourself." So does this wry and thoughtful soul share the credo of al-Qaeda? Of course not.

But the belief system in which he and the terrorists co-exist has a serious and often lethal public relations problem. The parallel that comes to mind is with the environmental movement, boasting tens of millions of members paying dues to the World Wide Fund for Nature and the Sierra Club, and a handful bent on burning down ski lodges in the Rockies. Well before September 11, well-heeled defectors from Anglicanism to Islám proved so unsettling to traditionalists that the Cold War author and journalist Philip Knightley branded them the new Philbys. They were running from privilege, he suggested, driven as much by a sense of guilt at what they had, as wonder at the mysteries of Islám.

The fact that Kim Philby's father happens to have converted to Islám was taken to support the accusation. Levelled at Joe Ahmed-Dobson, it quickly seems ridiculous. The son of the former Health Secretary is a child of new Labour and the opposite of a rebel. He works on inner city regeneration, finds spiritual satisfaction in Islám's constant impetus to do the right thing, and credits his first-class degree to the structure his faith has brought to his life.

All those I spoke to agreed that Christianity claims to answer the same yearnings for meaning and guidance. All had rejected it on intellectual grounds. Why grapple with mental puzzles such as the Holy Trinity and Original Sin, they asked, when the alternative, asserting neither, proved to them so much more satisfying? It was this clarity that won over Batool Al-Toma, the former Catholic who offers guidance to converts at the New Muslims' Project. She tells them they need not change their names, advises women to dress modestly but not alienate their families with radical wardrobe changes and checks they have converted freely. "Islám is not generally a missionary faith," she says. At one billion and counting, history shows it doesn't need to be.

FAMOUS CONVERTS

Jemima Goldsmith: The daughter of Sir James, the late financier, she converted of her own conviction in preparation for her marriage to Imran Khan in 1995. "It would seem that a Western woman's happiness hinges largely on her access to nightclubs, alcohol and revealing clothes," she said. "However, as we all know, such superficialities have very little to do with true happiness."

Malcolm X: A former street hustler, Malcolm Little converted to Islám in jail, where he was serving time for burglary. He initially joined the Nation of Islám. The turning point for him was his pilgrimage to Makkah, where he saw Muslims of all races collectively praying to One Alláh. This changed his anti-white prejudices and he left the Nation of Islám. He was assassinated 1965.

Muhammad Ali: The 59-year-old boxer, previously known as Cassius Clay, became an international role model, revered as much for his political stance over Vietnam and adherence to his faith, as for his showmanship in the ring.

Cat Stevens: Born Steven Georgiou, the singer dropped his nom-de-plume to become Yusuf Islám in 1977. The previous year, his brother gave him a copy of the Koran. From being a superstar at the age of 19, became a high-profile spokesman for the British Muslim community.

Mike Tyson: The former world heavyweight champion was sentenced to three years in jail for raping a teenager. He converted to Islám before returning to the ring in 1995. He told visitors that he had spent his time studying the Koran, Machiavelli, Voltaire, Dumas and a lot of Communist literature.

Timothy John Winter (born 1960), **Abdal Hakim Murad**, is a British researcher, writer and academic; He is the Dean of the Cambridge Muslim College, Director of Studies (Theology and Religious Studies) at Wolfson College, and is the Shaykh Zayed Lecturer in Islamic Studies at Cambridge University. In 2003 he was awarded the Pilkington Teaching Prize by Cambridge University and in 2007 he was awarded the King Abdullah I Prize for Islamic Thought. He has consistently been included in the '500 Most Influential Muslims' list published annually by The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre, and in 2012 he was ranked as the 50th most influential.

Yvonne Ridley, English journalist for several newspapers. She was chief reporter when the Sunday Express sent her to Afghanistan after 9/11 where she was captured by the Taliban. During her captivity she was asked by one of her captors to convert to Islam; she refused, but gave her word she would read the Quran after her release. Once freed, she kept this promise to read the Quran and she found it was “a magna carta for women”, saying, “the Koran makes it clear that women are equal in spirituality, worth and education. What everyone forgets is that Islam is perfect; people are not.” She converted to Islam in the summer of 2003.



THE NEW FACE OF ISLÁM

by Nick Compton

At first she tried to resist. She did not want this to happen. She was not that sort of person. After all, there were no gaps in her life, no spiritual ache. She did not need support or direction. But she kept reading and it kept making sense.

“I had absolutely no expectation or desire to end up where I am,” she says. “It was almost with trepidation that I kept turning the pages and the trepidation just increased. I kept thinking: ‘OK, where’s the flaw? Where’s the bit that

doesn't make sense?" But it never came. And then it was like: 'Oh no, I can see where this is leading. This is disastrous. I don't want to be a Muslim!'" Caroline Bate is 30 years old, blonde, blue-eyed and pretty, with a soft Home Counties accent. She has a degree from Cambridge (she studied Russian and German before switching to management studies) and works for an investment bank in the City. She is Middle England's dream daughter or daughter-in-law. And though she has yet to make her formal declaration of faith in Alláh and the prophet Mohammed – a two-line pledge called the Shahádah – she considers herself Muslim. She ticked the box on a form recently. It felt good, she says.

Caroline is not alone. Several London mosques have been reporting an increase in the number of converts to Islám, especially since 11 September. Like Caroline, many of these converts are from solid middle-class backgrounds, have successful careers, enjoy active social lives and are fundamentally happy with their lot.

This is not a new trend, however. Matthew Wilkinson, a former head boy of Eton, became Tariq, when he converted to Islám in 1993. Jonathan Birt, son of Lord Birt, late of the BBC and now the government's transport guru, converted in 1997. The son and daughter of Lord Justice Scott also converted and Joe Ahmed Dobson, the 26-year-old son of the former Health Secretary Frank Dobson, has recently and, somewhat reluctantly, emerged as the voice of new Muslim converts in Britain. But it is a trend that has been pushed along by recent events. So far it has gone largely unnoticed, as the press concentrates on some of the more colourful characters that 11 September has thrown up.

Talking to recent Muslim converts, it is striking how similar the descriptions of their embrace of Islám are. Most were introduced to Islám, and Islámic history and teaching, by friends. And, given that Islám is not generally a missionary faith, these were gentle introductions. For most, conversion was born of curiosity, an attempt to better understand the people around them.

Caroline first started reading about Islám last April. A school friend she has known since she was 11 was marrying a Tunisian, a Muslim. "My best friend was marrying into a different culture so I wanted to know more about it," she explains. "I came at it from more of a cultural perspective than a religious one. But the literature that I picked up just stimulated me. And Islámic teaching made perfect, logical sense. You can approach it intellectually and there are no gaps, no great leaps of faith that you have to make."

Roger (not his real name) is a doctor in his mid-thirties. About a year and a half ago, he started talking about Islám to Muslim colleagues at work. "All I had ever heard about Islám in the media was Hezbollah and guerrillas and all of that. And here were these really decent people whom I was beginning to get to know. So I started to ask a few questions and I was amazed

at my own ignorance.” He became a Muslim a couple of months ago.

For these new converts, embracing Islám is usually a covert operation. They quietly read, talk, listen, learn. The hard part is coming out, declaring your newly acquired faith to friends and family, and, in some cases at least, facing up to fear, scepticism and even loathing.

Caroline insists that the coming-out process has not been too painful. “The reaction has been pretty much what I expected. I’ve had everything from ‘Do you know how they treat women?’ to ‘Wow, great timing!’ But your friends are your friends and I expect them to deal with it.”

Others have had a harder time. Eleanor Martin, now Asya Ali (or some other combination of these names, depending on the circumstance), was a 24-year-old TV actress when she met Mo Sesay. She had a regular role as WPC Georgie Cudworth in BBC’s *Dangerfield* during the mid-Nineties and Sesay, who later starred in *Bhaji on the Beach*, was also a *Dangerfield* regular. Sesay is a Muslim.

“Mo was such a kind man, just a good person. He wanted to know me as a person, there was nothing else going on. And I thought, well, here is this really decent guy and he is a Muslim. And the image I had of Islám was of men beating up women and going round in tanks killing people.

“The thing is we both had regular parts on the show, but they weren’t very big parts, so we had a lot of time to sit in the caravan and talk. He really opened my eyes.”

Eleanor finally converted in 1996. “I wasn’t sure I was going to until the last minute and then it just felt as if everything had fallen into place and there was no other option.”

At first she kept her conversion secret. “I was afraid of an adverse reaction from friends and family. I was really worried about what my father would say.” Her father was a devout Christian. A former radiotherapist, he had taken early retirement to go into the priesthood. But circumstances forced Eleanor’s hand. A few months after she converted she met a Muslim African-American actor, Luqman Ali, and they decided to get married. “I went home and said: ‘I’ve got some news. I’m getting married and I’m a Muslim.’ My mum was great. My dad said: ‘I think I’m going to get a drink now.’”

“It took Dad time. He went to see his spiritual adviser, a nun, whose brother happened to be a convert to Islám, and that helped. And he’s great now, too. He’s just happy that I’m following a path to God.”

Roger, meanwhile, has yet to tell family or work colleagues of his conversion. “I worry it will affect my career prospects,” he admits. “I know first-hand how little people understand Islám. I know there is prejudice based on ignorance. A couple of years ago, if someone had told me they had converted, I would have thought they were odd. I don’t want people to think I

am an oddity or a curiosity because I don't think of myself like that."

Most converts acknowledge that living in an ethnically diverse city has made conversion easier than it might have been elsewhere. Stefania Marchetti was born and raised in Milan but came to London to study in 1997. She converted to Islám from Catholicism in April last year. "It would have been far more difficult for me to convert in Italy," she admits. "The Italian media is very anti-Islám and generally Italians think that Muslim men are all terrorists and all Muslim women are slaves."

Certainly Karen Allen, a 28-year-old scheduler for Sky TV from Stoke Newington, has enjoyed a relatively smooth transition period. She converted to Islám last June and soon started wearing the traditional headscarf or hijab. "When I first started wearing the hijab to work, there were a few jibes about Afghanistan and stuff, but people are fine now. They say things like: 'That's a nice one you're wearing today.'"

"I think it might be more difficult outside London, but here there are a lot weirder things to look at than me." What is especially striking about this stream of converts to Islám is that the majority seem to be women. Some suggest that twice as many women as men are turning to Islám.

Batool Al-Toma, who heads the New Muslim Project at the Leicester-based Islámic Foundation, which offers advice and support to recent converts, suggests this might be exaggeration, but admits that female converts are in the majority. "A lot of people seem to think that women are more susceptible to Islám. I think it's largely because a lot of people are obsessed with the idea of an educated, liberated British woman converting to Islám which they feel subjugates and represses them in some way. We just get a lot more attention I suppose and that sparks people's interest."

The lure of Islám for women is surprising, given that the conversion process may be even more problematic for them than for men. There is the commonly held belief that Islám represses women and female converts often have to deal with recrimination from female friends who view their adoption of Islám as some sort of betrayal. The wearing of a headscarf or hijab (a sartorial option, it should be noted, not a requirement) also makes Muslim women more visible than their male counterparts.

Certainly, all the women I spoke to were quick to refute the idea that Islám imposes a woman know-thy-place ideology.

"The perception of how women are treated is completely incorrect," insists Caroline. "Women have a fantastic position in Islámic society."

Indeed, many women converts talk about the adoption of the Islámic dress code as a liberation. They see it not as a denial of sex and sexuality but rather as an acknowledgment that these are treasures to be shared with a loved one and them alone. They are not hidden but rather freed from objectification.

Asya insists that the trick is to turn preconceptions on their head. She wears a scarf to show she is a Muslim and a smile to prove she is happy being one.

One problem for converts is that they are caught between two cultures. “Young Muslims are very accepting,” says Caroline. “They are really happy that you have chosen to become Muslim. The older generation is not so accepting. For them, Islám is part of their cultural background, it’s about the country they came from and it’s what binds their communities together.”

One step towards greater acceptance came last October when Reedah Nijabat opened Ar-Rum, an Islámic restaurant/members’ cultural centre/social club in Clerkenwell. Nijabat, a 31-year-old former barrister and management consultant from Walthamstow, originally conceived Ar-Rum as a meeting place and networking venue for professional first and second-generation London Muslims. But it has also become a focal point for many of London’s Muslim converts.

It is easy to see why. On any work evening, a mixed bag of middle-aged Pakistani men, young couples (some Muslim, some curious non-Muslim), kids and white British converts chat and tuck into halal “fusion” food. While the club promotes Islámic culture, the vibe is a Hempel temple of inner calm. Sufi wailing calms the nerves, while the bar specialises in healthy juices.

Ar-Rum accents Islám’s USP among the major faiths: its openness and lack of hierarchy. And Nijabat has realised that if there is an endemic suspicion of stuffy organised religion among the British (and increasingly, one suspects, second-generation British Muslims) there is great interest in “spirituality”, whatever that might mean. “I think that the problem has not been with the substance of the major faiths, whatever they are, but a marketing defect,” argues Nijabat. “Everything we do here is about remembrance of God and Islám, but you can get that across in a cool way. I’m not saying anything that isn’t in the Koran, but you have to talk to people on their level.

“I’m beginning to see that there is a huge misunderstanding and a bridge that needs to be crossed between ethnic communities, host communities and spiritual communities, and I think we are making a contribution to that. You can get so hung up on the divisions and how different we are, but it is the same God for all of us. And we still feel that loss whether it is an American life or a Palestinian life. A lot of people are going through a period of soul-searching and that can only be a good thing.”

For many, that soul-searching has led them to Islám, not the Islám of the suicide bombers but mainstream Islám. And, as Joe Ahmed Dobson points out, Ar-Rum and its new converts do not represent some kind of liberal Islám-Lite, a media-friendly dilution of the real thing. Dobson and the other new converts are orthodox, in the truest sense, and proud.

They are also part of a project that may help all parties see Islám in new ways. As Nijabat admits: “You can end up being quite defensive about it. And you can either get hung up about it or be proactive. Opening Ar-Rum has helped me recognise that I can be British and Pakistani and a Muslim and a woman. And I’m not going to be a victim in any of this.”

Those who say: Our Lord is Alláh, and are steadfast, the angels will descend on them, saying: Do not fear nor grieve, but hear good news of the Garden which you are promised. We are your protecting friends in the life of the world and in the Hereafter. There you will have (all) that your souls desire, and there you will have (everything) which you ask for. A gift of welcome from One Who is forgiving, merciful.

And who could say anything better than he who invites to Alláh and does right, and says: I am one of the Muslims (submit to Him). (S.41:30-33)

OBSERVATIONS

Those searching for Truth need to have certain qualities for them to reach their destination. These are:

- 1) **Intelligence.**
- 2) **Sincerity.**
- 3) **Courage.**
- 4) **Willingness to sacrifice.**

There are also certain **OBSTACLES** and there are also factors that **AID & ASSIST**.

The above require a bit of explanation:

1) INTELLIGENCE

The seeker of Truth must have enough intelligence to ponder about the coming into existence of the creation, the purpose of existence, Who is the Creator, what does the Creator want from His creation, etc. This should lead him to the

realisation that there is only One Creator Who has created the whole universe and Man himself. Note that intelligence is not the same as being CLEVER. There are many people who are clever, and may even possess university degrees and doctorates, but who are unable to think further than their noses. On the other hand, there are also numerous un-educated people whose intelligence soars beyond that of so-called “educated” people.

2) SINCERITY

Sincerity is that quality that will make the seeker of Truth not to sit back after true realisation dawns on him or her, but follows up on the realisation that there is only One Creator. Contemplating on the Attributes of one’s Creator, the seeker must come to the conclusion that, out of love for the creation, the Creator would not let Mankind wander around aimlessly but would send down some form of guidance whereby Man could live successfully. Obviously, it would follow that a guide to demonstrate how to live according to the guidelines will also accompany the set of rules.

Sincerity would make him look through the proofs of all those who claim to have the above two: i.e. a set of Divine Scriptures and Messenger whose character is impeccable. The seeker will have no other option than to admit that it is only the Qur’án and Muhammad (peace and salutations be on him) which will fit the required criteria, as nobody else can come forward with any stronger proofs than the Muslims can. This would also be logical from our first principles that the Creator would not send several conflicting guidelines that will confuse the ordinary human being. For example, a government will not set two sets of laws for the citizens to follow simultaneously. If a new set of laws are promulgated, the old set of laws are abrogated. It is only logical that there has to be only ONE SET of guidelines.

3) COURAGE

The seeker requires a lot of courage to act on the Truths that he / she has discovered. This is a very big test for the seeker. Many fall down here because they are not prepared to give up the comfortable lifestyle that they had built up over the years. However, it is important to remember that Alláh Ta’álá does not tax a person beyond his / her means. Those who have resolved to go ahead, as these articles show, have not regretted their decisions to take courage in both their hands and stay firm on Truth. This aspect of courage goes hand-in-hand with the next quality:

4) WILLINGNESS TO SACRIFICE

Acting on the Truth has entailed sacrifices form the earliest history of mankind. All the Messengers sent down by Alláh Ta’álá, and their sincere followers, were

tested in some way or other by placing before them the choice of materialism and Truth. This is not anything new. Sacrifices have to be made in worldly affairs in exchange for spiritual benefits. This simple equation has been there throughout the ages. Loss of income, loss of “friends”, loss of “pleasures”, etc. etc. will and must be encountered. If a seeker of Truth does not encounter such challenges then it seems something is wrong somewhere!

Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and fair warning, and reason with them in the better way. Your Lord knows best who strays from His way, and He knows best who are guided. (S16:125)

OBSTACLES

The negative behaviour of Muslims in not setting an example is one of the major obstacles why seekers of Truth may become disillusioned. When Muslims discard their own Divinely revealed values and hanker after the artificial materialistic values of others, Shaitán puts doubts into the mind of the seeker as to his destination. Many coming into the fold of Islám wonder at those Muslims who aspire for those very western values which they have discarded and opted for Islámic values.

It is another sign that Guidance comes from Alláh Ta'álá by the fact that those coming into the fold of Islám do not turn away from Islám by seeking the negative behaviour of some Muslims,

AID & ASSISTANCE

The converse is also true. When Muslims show a high standard of morality, show steadfastness in observing their Islámic lifestyles and display the qualities shown by the early Muslims, it becomes so much easier for the seeker of Truth to know in which direction he has to proceed. The brotherhood, the compassion, the justice and numerous other qualities shown by the Muslims living according to the Sharí'at, all play a vital role in supporting the newcomer adjust to his / her newly discovered values.

It is also a known fact that the stronger the Muslim is in his inner spiritual self, the more effective his example is. This has been stated that clearly in an Urdú couplet which states that the Dín of Islám comes alive not by mere lectures or books, but the essential quality is the spiritual strength that emanates from those who are close to Alláh Ta'álá.