

A CHRISTIAN MINISTER'S CONVERSION TO ISLAM

© 2002 (Abu Yahya) Jerald F. Dirks, M.Div., Psy.D.

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 it 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 Islam. During that course, I gave far less attention to Islam, 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, Islam 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'an*. 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 Islam, 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'an*, 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 Islam*, 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 Dawa (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 biweekly to weekly basis. During these visits, Jamal never preached to me about Islam, 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 Islamic history; 2) sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him; and 3) Qur'anic 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 Islam, but always presented in terms of helping me intellectually understand the Islamic 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 Islam 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 Islam 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 Islam 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'an*. 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 Islam. 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/Allah, 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 Islamic 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'an* 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 Islam, 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 Islam by the Western scholars, as I had read them all thoroughly. The two English translations of the meaning of the *Qur'an* were back on the bookshelf, and I was busy reading yet a third English translation of the meaning of the *Qur'an*. 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'an* 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, Iman, 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'an*, 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, Iman 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 Iman 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 Iman 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 Shahadah, the Islamic testimonial of faith, i.e. "I testify that there is no god but Allah, and I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah". 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 Islamic 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 Islamic 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 Islam 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 Islamic testimony of faith in my own carefully parsed words; who had fasted during Ramadan; who was saying Islamic 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 Allah, 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 Allah, 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 Islam. 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 Islam 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". Allah 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 Islam and the surrendering of oneself to Allah—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. Allah willing, you will find these sacrifices a very cheap coin to pay for the "goods" you are purchasing.

Dr. Jerald F. Dirks - Former minister (deacon) of the United Methodist Church. He holds a Master's degree in Divinity from Harvard University and a Doctorate in Psychology from the University of Denver. Author of *The Cross and the Crescent: An Interfaith Dialogue between Christianity and Islam* (ISBN 1-59008-002-5 - Amana Publications, 2001). He has published over 60 articles in the field of clinical psychology, and over 150 articles on Arabian horses