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Seeking the Straight Path: Reflections of a New Muslim

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Common challenges and issues faced by converts, the reasoning behind conversion, analysis from a Western view of many controversial or misunderstood topics in Islam, and basic information needed by new converts. Spanish translation is also available.

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Introduction

It is a long time now that I have wanted to write regarding my conversion to Islam. My problem has been that I did not know what to write or how to write it. One of my main concerns now is that I want to write something that is of value to someone other than me.

I can remember a few times when I was asked to speak at a masjid and I was a little bit horrified, because I had come to learn from the people there and, in turn, they wanted to learn from me. What could I say that they didn't already know or that would be of use to them? Whenever I've asked myself that, the answer has always been that I could speak only of my own experiences. Well, it seems arrogant to think that other people would want to listen to me talk about myself. But, perhaps there is some value in the tale of the experience of someone who chose to become Muslim.

In the past, I have written a few very brief accounts of how I came to be Muslim and I got tremendous feedback. People wrote to me who were investigating Islam and could relate to my story or wanted information. Other people who wrote to me were born Muslim and had found inspiration in the stories of converts. I have really enjoyed meeting so many people through those brief accounts. It made me realize that something in my story must be of value to other people, so that by telling my story I may be able to improve someone's situation.

Therefore, I begin this work in the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful, and I ask His help in making this a work that has value and that will benefit others.

Diana (Masooma) Beatty

Note: Throughout the text, "swt" is written to mean *subhanahu wa ta'aala*, which in the way I have remembered means "Most Glorious Most High", and is written whenever the name of God appears. Also, "saw" is written to mean "Peace be upon him and his family", and appears always after the mention of the Prophet of Islam. Lastly, "as" or "sa" is written to mean "Peace be upon him/her/them". To a non-Muslim reader this may seem strange, but it is not meant to be a mystical thing. It is something like Islamic etiquette to use them, and many Muslims believe it is obligatory. I use both the words God and Allah in this text. "Allah" is simply the Arabic word for the One God, and it is used by all Muslims and Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews.

The translations of Qur'an used are by Pickthall and Yusuf Ali, and the version of the Bible used is NIV.

I humbly dedicate whatever is good in this work to Imam-e-Zamana (as), may Allah (swt) hasten his reappearance.

How Could Everyone I Have Ever Known

Be Wrong?

As a child growing up in America, my education about Islam was very poor. There were one or two times when Islam was presented briefly in a history book at school. What I remember from those readings is that Muslims had a god called Allah and a warlike prophet named Muhammad and that they prayed and dressed strangely and, finally, that Islam was an Arab religion.

I guess that the rest of my education about Islam came from the media. Islam was exotic, backward and evil. Muslims were uneducated, led by tyrant rulers, and were cruel. Some of them thought it were good to blow up babies on airplanes and to beat women and treat them like property.

I did not understand that there was any relationship between Islam and Christianity or Judaism. As far as I knew, Christianity and Judaism were the only two religions that dealt with the One God, the God of Moses and Abraham (as). Islam was bunched with all the other religions like Buddhism and Hinduism.

There was not much out there to make me want to learn about Islam. I was sure that Christianity held the Truth, and had no inclination to look at other religions, especially not one that was so obviously evil. In those days, I could actually believe that an entire nation of people was evil at heart, and that we (meaning the West, or America) were surely the good guys. After all, how could everyone I had ever known be wrong?

An obvious question, then, is what made me finally look at Islam. In order to answer that fairly, it is necessary to first briefly explain my religious life prior to that point. Mostly everyone I knew believed in God and that Jesus (as) had died for our sins. Often, it didn't go much beyond that. People I knew had religious belief and tried to be moral people, but they did not associate with a particular church or do anything outlandishly different in their lives that marked them as religious. Spirituality and religion were not the stuff of conversations. God was not talked about at home or at school. Religion was a private thing between the individual and God.

When I was little I was sent to a few Sunday Schools to gain a basic acquaintance with religion. My parents very rarely went to church but rather dropped my brother and I off at the Sunday School and then picked us up when it was over. By the time I was in second or third grade our religious training was over.

That was enough for me until I got to junior high school. Perhaps it was then that I began to realize that the world was not a fair place and question what was going on around me. I went through periods of depression and low self-esteem. During this time, I began to question religion. Where was the scientific proof of God? If He existed, why was He hidden from us? Why did He allow bad things to happen? What made something right, and another thing wrong? Did the universe and life on Earth come about as a course of purely random events without a Creator? Why did I exist?

For awhile I nearly convinced myself that God did not exist, but rather that He was a fantasy created by humans. However, when I got into high school I was searching for God

again. I became very serious about Christianity. I joined the Fellowship for Christian Athletes and I read the Bible regularly. I found a magazine called The Plain Truth advertised on a religious TV show and published by the Worldwide Church of God, and I became interested in that particular church.

This group took the Bible literally. They did not celebrate Christmas because it was not in the Bible. They did not celebrate birthdays, they did not eat pork, and they observed the same holidays that Jesus (as) was recorded as observing in the Bible. They kept the Sabbath on Saturday based on what was written in the Bible. I was strongly attracted to this group because it took God seriously, and it took the Bible seriously. It did not regard religion as just a feel-good thing like so many groups seemed to be doing. They seemed more logical than other groups, and they were making religion a daily part of life instead of an occasional one. The idea of religion as a way of life appealed to me. I knew that God had something in mind when He made us, and I believed that there ought to be a best way, or a most-correct way of doing everything. So when I found this church, I was attracted. Yet, I never went to their meetings because I thought my family would not approve of me getting involved with such a radical group (one that I later learned is often considered a cult) especially while I was in high school. I put it in my mind that when I got older I would investigate the group more closely.

In my freshman year of college I joined a Bible study group sponsored by Campus Crusade for Christ. And, I finally went to the Church of God after meeting someone at school who belonged to the church. They were very nice people and very welcoming. However, after one visit I knew that church was not what I was looking for. My host was telling me how the church was in a state of chaos because of a major division among the national leaders. It was splitting into two churches; one group cleaving off because they felt the original church had become corrupted. This man and his family were at odds to decide which side of the fence they were on. Which of the two factions held the Truth?

After hearing him speak, I was disappointed. I felt this group was closer to the Truth that I was looking for, but probably neither of the two factions had it right. After all, they all were just humans and were not gifted with perfect judgment. I wanted whatever it was that God had originally sent and that was truly intended for us; not something concocted by men. Not even by men with good intentions. So, I never went back.

I had resigned myself to being one of those many religious people without a church because I was convinced that all churches were flawed. After all, they were all man-made. In my Bible study group, I often felt uncomfortable. The other members seemed to have much greater joy in their faith. When we would study a Bible verse, they had so many different interpretations and they always seemed to see the verses differently than me. I wondered what I was doing wrong and why things did not make sense to me like it did to everyone else, but I was still very devout. My friends talked about inviting Jesus (as) to live in their hearts, and that when they did, he came in and their lives were changed forever. I had made that invitation many times, but my life never changed forever. I had done it when I had gone to church with friends, I had done it when I watched the preachers on TV, and I had done it on my own time. What did they mean by saying that he lived in their hearts? Were they really changed so much by the experience, and if so, why hadn't I been? It wasn't due to lack of sincerity, at least.

As I pondered these questions, my life began to change around me. That year, I met a Muslim. When I met him, I didn't know he was Muslim or even that he was an Arab. In time,

we became acquainted, and I learned that he was a Muslim; I didn't really know what that meant but it made me worried about him because I had been taught that unless he believed Jesus (as) died for his sins, he would go to hell. At least that is what everyone in my Bible study said.

Could it be true that this guy would go to hell simply for not believing Jesus (as) died for his sins, when in every other way he was more pious and more humble before God than anyone I'd ever met? It did not seem right. I told him about my fears and he was very concerned for me instead of for himself. I even talked him into going to one of the Campus Crusade meetings with me. That amazes me more today than it did then because now I think of the name of the group - Campus Crusade - and realize how offensive it really is. However, the meetings were not so bad; we sang or listened to religious songs, had a guest speaker and met with my Bible study leader.

I was hoping to save my friend, and at the same time I wanted the Bible study leader to meet him because I really needed help to clear my confusion. I had questions after I'd picked up a translation of the Qur'an and was surprised by what I read. It talked about the very same God of the Bible, the One whose Truth I was seeking. It talked about the prophets (sa) I already knew, but it did not describe them as adulterers and those who commit incest and other lewdness like the Bible did.

"We believe in Allah (the One True God) and that which is revealed unto us, and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them." (Qur'an, 2:136)

The only major thing that really bothered me about the Qur'an was what it said about Jesus (as). But why? How did I know what I knew about him -- that Jesus was in a three-part God and that he died for our sins? I went back to the Bible and looked for those beliefs that were so important to Christianity. I knew I had read them a hundred times so they ought to have been easy to find, but they weren't! I could find verses that seemed to say those things, but they weren't very clear. And other verses seemed to say the opposite. Why, I pondered, if this belief that Jesus is God and that he died for our sins -- why if it is the most essential thing to believe, is it not absolutely clear?

I asked my Bible study friends, "Where does it say this?" They would direct me to a verse and I would read it and I found that most of the time it did not clearly say what I had asked for, but was open to interpretation. Mark 10:18 reads, "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered, "No one is good - except God alone." That verse clearly seemed to indicate that Jesus was not God. Other verses were interpreted by my friends to indicate that he was God, although he never came right out and said, "I am God."

Some Christians would say that while Jesus was on Earth, he lived as a man but was still God or a part or form thereof, yet being in the flesh made him fully human, facing all the trials and temptations of human life. I didn't get it. I'd never really gotten it before, either, but I had taken for granted that it was true anyway. I could not explain to myself, nor could anyone else explain to me, how God could be a single God and yet have three independent parts or forms. I could not understand why the death of a sinless individual was necessary for forgiveness of sins. Is not God all-powerful?

Many Christians say that God is beyond our comprehension. He does not have to make

sense. I ultimately decided that I couldn't accept that, because then religion becomes purely a matter of faith without any room for reason. A book claiming to be the Word of God could say absolutely anything about Him, and no matter how ludicrous it was we could not reject it if God doesn't have to make sense. No, I realized, in order for us to be able to tell right guidance from falsehood, God must make sense in terms of human reason.

I approached my Bible study leader to talk about my questions. I had learned that he had worked as a missionary to Muslims in Algeria. So, I figured he would be able to help me understand the Qur'an, the Bible and the fate of my Muslim friend. When I questioned him, he told me straight away that my friend would go to hell. He told me that the Qur'an was similar to the Bible because it was Satan's trickery, and something which appears close to the Bible is a better trick! Then, when I tried to ask him a specific question about what the Qur'an said about Jesus (as), he told me he had never read the Qur'an because when he tried it made him ill. When he said that last thing, I was astounded, in tears, and got out of that room as fast as I could.

How could he sit there and tell me the Qur'an was Satan's trickery when he himself had not read it? What kind of person does missionary work to Muslims and does not bother to read the book of the Muslims? A voice in my head screamed "He could not know! He cannot be trusted!" I believed that God would not deceive those who read the book of another religion, as long as they were seeking Truth. But he apparently believed differently than me. My Bible study leader was only repeating what he had been told, or else he was making it up as he went along. I was so angry then, at him, and at all the church leaders who had treated Islam as an absolute evil and yet they were more ignorant of Islam than a college girl who'd picked up a Qur'an translation at the corner bookstore.

And now I was deathly afraid. I was afraid because I could not trust those people anymore. It was up to me, and only me, to decide what I found to be true and what I found to be falsehood. No one could help me. I felt a tremendous burden on my shoulders. And I was terrified of making the wrong choice and spending eternity in hell because of it. I pleaded with God to be a God who does not misguide one who seeks the Truth, to be a God who could forgive one who has doubts and looks around for the answers, and to be a God who would protect me from making the wrong choice.

I didn't know where to begin, so I began with the Bible and Qur'an, and a few books of early Christian history. I learned much in reading the early Christian history books and wondered why I'd never heard any of it before. The beginnings of the religion were anything but unified and clear. Some early Christians believed Jesus (as) was God, others did not. Their practices and beliefs varied much more greatly than those of Christians today.

The New Testament was not written until at least a generation after Jesus' (as) apparent death, and was written by many people. Their stories often conflicted with each other, and there were hundreds of gospels out there. It was only at the Council of Nicaea, more than three centuries after the time of Christ that the New Testament as we know it today began to take shape. The Council picked four out of the hundreds of gospels that coincided with the Roman Emperor's belief and made them the official belief. The others were burned and destroyed, and those who were found in possession of them were killed. Since then, most of the other gospels have disappeared and the four official gospels have modestly changed from time to time. Some versions of the gospels contain verses that others do not, and of course some Bibles have entire books that others do not. There is no "original" Bible in order to verify there have not been changes. There are old manuscripts, but no definitive

“real” Bible.

To some people that is not a problem, but for me it was fast becoming a problem. The modern Christian belief seemed to me to be comprised of something of God’s message but also a lot of conjecture or interpretation of phrases that are not totally clear. And it seemed to be the conjecture parts that determined whether or not one went to hell! Where does clearly Jesus (as) say that he will die for our sins and that belief in that is compulsory? It is mere conjecture that the phrase “Son of God” that is used so often in the Bible attests to Jesus’ (as) divinity. In fact, the people who lived at the time of Jesus (as) did not take it to mean that at all. According to leading Biblical historians, the phrase “Son of God” did not mean something divine to the writers of the Bible or those who witnessed Jesus (as). It indicated a fully human being and was regularly used as a title for Jewish holy men.

King David is referred to as a son of God in 2 Samuel 7:14:

“I [God] will be his father and he [David] will be my son.”

Job 1:6 and 2:7 in the NIV version of the Bible mention angels, with a footnote that the Hebrew word translated as angels actually means “sons of God”.

“One day the angels [sons of God in footnote] came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan [accuser in footnote] also came with them.”

“On another day the angels [sons of God] came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them to present himself before him.”

In Hosea 11:1, God calls all of Israel His son

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”

The use of capitals when calling Jesus (as) by that title is a choice of the translators and is not indicated in the original Greek or Hebrew.

It is also conjecture that Jesus (as) was the only Messiah, or that the title “Messiah” has something to do with a return at the end time or status as a savior. Messiah and Christ both mean, “anointed one”. Anointed ones were the leaders of Israel, anointed in an ancient version of an inauguration ceremony. In 1 Samuel 10:1 it says,

“Then Samuel took a flask of oil and kissed him, saying, “Has not the Lord anointed your leader over his inheritance?”

The Hebrew root for anointed here is the very same that is translated as Christ and Messiah in the New Testament.

In truth, Jesus (as) never asked or commanded people to pray to him or to worship him. He told people to pray to God and to worship God. Yet, how many Christians today pray to and worship God by name? It is far more common that their prayer begins, “Dear Jesus” than “Dear God”. A sincere Christian would do well to obey Jesus (as) and change his/her prayers to be directed at “God” rather than “Jesus”.

Some things that are commonplace in Christian belief and practice today do not have their

origins in Jesus' (as) teachings, but rather in a vote by church authorities or papal decree. This of course includes the celebrations of Christmas and Easter, as well as definition of the Trinity, and permission to pray to the Mother of Jesus, Mary. The word "trinity" does not exist in the Bible and yet it is an essential belief of Christians. The trinity concept was invented by church leaders to explain their beliefs; and even today the church leaders have votes and decrees over the natures and functions of the different parts of their Godhead. The faithful Christians trust that their leaders are God-inspired and that the authors of the Bible were as well.

Most of the faithful believe that if they find the Bible unclear it is because they, being human, possess limited understanding. God, they say again, does not need to make sense. Or, if they find an apparent contradiction in the Bible, it is because it is not the details that matter, but the overall message of what is written. There are thousands of examples of apparent contradiction within the Bible. Many of those involve records of how many people were at a place or who exactly was there. If one account of an event says that there were 100 men there, and another says that there was 1000, the faithful Christians say that this does not change the overall meaning of the passage. That may be true, but why do the passages not agree? God surely knows what happened, so why couldn't the Bible get it right if it is indeed His book? Maybe a monk or priest when transcribing the Bible made a mistake that stuck. Or maybe he thought he was correcting a mistake that a previous transcriber had made. Or maybe he thought a larger number made a better story.

In my experience, many Christians believe that either these errors are not errors but only seem to be to our limited faculties, or else they are errors but are very minor and that God has protected the "important" part of His message in the Bible. However, I contend that any contradiction or error is important because it indicates the work of men rather than the work of God. When one mistake is found, how can we be confident that another mistake that does indeed change the meaning of the text has not occurred? For Christians, that is simply a matter of faith. But should it be?

As an example of what I've been talking about, I provide the NIV translation of the story of Mary Magdalene at the tomb of Jesus (as), as it is recorded in three of the gospels:

Matthew 28:1-7

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up,

they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as I told you.'"

Luke 24:1-12

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee. 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" Then they remembered his words. When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

These are three accounts of the same event, obviously. This event is very important to the belief that Jesus (as) was crucified and raised to life after having died for the sins of all mankind. It establishes witnesses to the absence of Jesus' (as) body after an appointed time, and holds testimony that he had come back to life as promised. But these accounts differ considerably in the details as to what actually happened. Take a minute to examine the three passages and try to answer the following questions: Who went to the tomb with Mary Magdalene? How many went altogether? Were the guards there or not? How many beings did the women encounter at the tomb, and were they men or angels? Did Peter go to the tomb or not? What did the being(s) say to the women? Did the women prostrate themselves before the being(s) or not? Where were the being(s), and did they come as the women watched or were they already there? Was the stone rolled away as they watched, or was it already rolled away when they arrived?

If these were from the unaltered Word of God, there should be no contradictions between these three accounts. One might leave out a detail that another has included, but there should be no disagreement as to who was there, what they saw, or what they heard. Eyewitness accounts can have conflicting results, as can stories told over and over and not written down until a generation or two later -- but not the Word of God. If we cannot accurately establish what happened, then what must one believe? It is not unlikely that something did happen that led to the existence of this story, but we simply do not have the means to determine what really happened. One of these accounts may be true while the others are false, or all may be false, and that is the full extent of what we can say about it.

I have given but one example of the difficulties in the Bible, but there are many, many more. The Bible is simply unclear and self-contradictory, and further it is in contradiction with established science. I do not wish to spend too much time on the Bible's problems with

science because they are rather commonly known and readily apparent even to a casual reader. For example it is well known that using evidence in the Bible, the Earth is less than 6000 years old. Staunch believers of the Bible hold this to be true even today and claim that scientific evidence dating human remains back at least ten thousand years and dating rock back at least 4.5 billion years is a deception of Satan.

For years, I had believed I could not understand the Bible because something was wrong with me or because it had just not been made understandable by God's will. But after comparing it to the Qur'an, I understood that it is okay to expect logic and clarity in the Word of God. I realized that the Bible itself is flawed.

I could not satisfy myself with believing in something that relied on a flawed book. If I wanted to find God's Truth from the Bible, how could I do it? How could I know which, if any, of the three accounts I related earlier are factual? If I could not determine which of those to trust, how could I decide about the rest of what those three authors wrote? How could I trust anything in the Bible at all when I could not determine what was man-made and what was God-made? And, now the big question, without the Bible to rely on, where does Christianity find itself?

But that is only half the story. I had concluded that Christianity was flawed, but I had not determined that Islam was not flawed also. I had to examine the Qur'an with the same scrutiny that I had applied to the Bible.

So, I asked, "Where does the Qur'an contradict itself? Where does it contradict known science?" After months of searching, I realized the answer to both questions is that it simply does not. It is superior to the Bible in this regard and thus presents itself as more trustworthy. Further, it contains scientific data that were completely unknown to man when it was revealed. The fact that bees' honey comes from their stomachs is a modern scientific discovery, yet it is in the Qur'an (16:49) that was revealed in the 7th century CE. The manner in which a baby forms in the womb is a discovery of this century, and yet it is explained accurately in the Qur'an in several places (22:05, 23:14, 40:67, 75:38, and 96:02). I found in Qur'an the original, true religion that God sent to mankind and am to this day still wonderstruck at the Mercy and guidance of Allah (swt).

"Abraham was not a Jew nor yet a Christian; but he was true in faith, and bowed his will to God's (which is Islam), and he joined not gods with God." Qur'an 3:67

What objection could I have to following the religion of Abraham, the religion of submitting to the will of the One God - the God of the Jews, Christians, Muslims and Creator of the universe? I am certainly not the only Christian to have reached this conclusion. The Qur'an itself talks about Christians converting Islam with tears in their eyes upon recognizing its truth:

"And nearest among them in love to the Believers wilt thou find those who say, 'We are Christians' because amongst these are men devoted to learning and priests and monks, and they are not arrogant. And when they listen to the revelation received by the Apostle [Muhammad], thou wilt see their eyes overflowing with tears, for they recognize the truth. They pray, 'Our Lord! We believe; write us down among the witnesses.'" (Qur'an, 5:82-83)

There are many verses in Qur'an about Jesus (as):

Birth of Mary – (3:34-40, 19:2-15)

Status of Mary in Islam – (3:41-46)

Who Was Jesus – (2:87, 6:85-87, 3:83, 33:7-8, 42:13, 5:46)

Birth of Jesus – (19:16-36)

Miracles of Jesus – (5:110-115)

Teachings of Jesus – (3:49-52, 43:57-59, 57:27, 42:63-64, 5:111)

Jesus sent for children of Israel – (3:48, 5:72, 61:6)

Is Jesus Son of God? – (3:58, 2:116-117, 21:26-29)

Is Jesus God? – (5:117, 5:72-75)

Was Jesus Crucified? – (4:157-158, 3:54-56)

Dialogue between God and Jesus – (5:116-118)

His Last Message – (61:6)

Message to Believers – (61:14)

This is what the Qur'an has to say on the matter of Jesus' (as) crucifixion (4:157-158):

And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger – They slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! Those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain: But Allah took him up unto Himself. Allah is ever Mighty, Wise."

This saying does not deny that something happened that led to those stories we find in the Bible. It claims, however, that Christians were not given any proof that Jesus (as) was crucified, but rather made the conjecture that it had happened. In other words, Christians have based their religion upon something that is not fact, but is merely supposed.

The people who supposed it might have been well-intentioned individuals, but that is beside the point. Obviously, a Christian will be irked on reading that verse of Qur'an. My reaction on reading it the first time was to want to throw the book down. It did not agree with what I had been taught. If I believed what the Qur'an was saying, I would have to believe that my mother, my father, my teachers, my preachers, my neighbors, my political leaders, my friends, indeed, everyone I had ever known, had gotten it wrong. How could it be possible that so many people who were so sure in their belief and who seemed so favored by God living in the world's most prosperous country, were wrong?

But then I had to ask myself, would not a girl living on the other side of the world immersed in another religion have a similar question? For one of us, at least, the answer indeed had

to be that all that we had known was wrong. Truly, this was a terrifying concept. My whole world was crashing down around me and I was left with nothing that I could trust. I had no choice but to build my world up again, to examine everything I had ever believed all over again and create a new framework from which to view the world. In the end, the Qur'an convinced me. And the Bible convinced me, too, because I did not find in it the perfection I demanded from the Word of God. Although it is flawed, some truth remains in it and some good can be gained from reading the Bible if it is read with a critical eye. In fact, I benefited from discovering that the Bible contains likely prophecies of Muhammad's (saw) prophethood, Deuteronomy 18:18 being among the more noted possibilities:

"I will raise up for them a prophet like you [Moses] from among their brothers; I will put My words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him."

Christians generally presume this verse refers to Jesus (as), but Muslims find it more likely that it refers to the Prophet Muhammad (saw). First, Muhammad (saw) is more like Moses (as) than Jesus (as). Like Moses, Muhammad (saw) married and had a divinely appointed successor in terms of leadership of the people (Aaron for Moses and 'Ali for Muhammad (sa)). Moses and Muhammad (saw) were both born of both mother and father and came with new religious law. On the other hand, Jesus (sa) was apparently unmarried, was born of mother only and did not bring new law. Secondly, the verse says that the prophet will come from "their brothers", which in context refers to the brothers of the Israelites. Jesus (as) is directly descended from Abraham's second-born son, Isaac (sa), just like the Israelites, and thus is an Israelite himself and not the brother of the Israelites. Muhammad (saw) is the only one with a valid claim to prophethood who is descended from Abraham's first-born son, Ishmael (sa), making him a brother of the Israelites and not an Israelite himself. Finally, Muhammad (saw) fits the final portion of this verse exactly, and certainly better than Jesus (sa), as testified to in the Qur'an:

"Nor doth he speak of (his own) desire. It is naught save an inspiration that is inspired...." (53:3-4)

Muhammad (saw) is the only prophet with a scriptural record that he speaks only that which Allah (swt) has commanded or inspired, matching the prophecy in Deuteronomy 18:18.

So, that is a small sample of my study before I converted to Islam. The Qur'an stands as a true testament to what it is and what it contains. All evidence indicated that it is what it claims to be:

"This is the Scripture whereof there is no doubt, a guidance unto those who ward off (evil)...." (2:1)

"And this Qur'an is not such as could ever be invented despite of Allah [swt]; but it is a confirmation of that which was before it and an exposition of that which is decreed for mankind - Therein is no doubt - from the Lord of the Worlds." (10:37)

Is It Good To Be A Muslim?

A philosopher may debate whether there is such thing as absolute truth, or truth with a capital T. Another may say that all paths lead to God, i.e., that all religions or philosophies are equal. If that were the case, then it would not matter if I were Christian, or Muslim, or Atheist, or even if I were an Adolf Hitler, a Karl Marx or Mother Teresa. Each religion would have its own truths, and each person's deeds within the context of their own philosophies would be equally valid. There then becomes no agreeable standard for determining right and wrong.

A Muslim scholar once said that we are given the capacity within ourselves to determine right and wrong. That is plausible, because even from when we are very little, scientists report that we have ideas about fairness that are very unlikely to have been taught to us by our parents. However, I personally believe that the God-given ability to determine right and wrong can become impaired, or diseased, if we are not careful. Once it is diseased, as I imagine it is for most of us to some extent, it becomes difficult to make it well again. Thus, it is difficult for someone, as an example, raised in the West and surrounded by Western ideals, to see all the impairments in the judgment of their society concerning right and wrong. What a person is used to seeing, hearing, and believing seems fair to them.

“He [Satan or Iblis] said: My Lord! Because Thou hast put me in the wrong, I will make (wrong) fair-seeming to them on the earth....” Qu’ran 15:039

If we wish to examine our belief systems, the determining factor for right and wrong can only come from the source of absolute truth. In turn, I contend that absolute truth can only come from the One who created all things. To an Atheist, perhaps that would mean that absolute truth is an inherent characteristic of the Universe. But then where did the matter of the Universe come from, and who endowed it with that characteristic? Are these questions unanswerable because science does not have the means to prove from whence the universe came?

Scientists used to be called natural philosophers and they tried to logically prove the existence of God. My favorite of their arguments is thus: Imagine that you are walking along and find a watch. Upon examining it you find that it has intricate parts which all work together to serve a common purpose of telling time. It has hands that must be placed just so upon a face that must be numbered just so and inside are a multitude of gears and cogs which all must be placed in just such a way and be of just such a size. It has to be made from certain materials and not others. Now imagine that you had never before seen a watch until that very instant. What would be your natural conclusion, that the watch was created by someone to serve a purpose, or that it had come together on its own through a random accumulation of atoms and molecules as physics and geology permitted over time?

When it is put that way, it may seem very silly to imagine that the watch did not have a creator with a purpose in mind. Well, then, what of the universe? It, too, has numerous intricate parts which all work together in such a way as to perform certain functions. For our existence to take place, we require that the universe expanded in uneven clumps that led to distinct galaxies.

The matter has to have arranged in such a way that stars could form, and then lots of stars had to live out their life spans so that we could have the heavier chemical elements. And those have to have traveled through space and massed themselves together into a roughly spherical thing called Earth that then has to have formed around a class-M star within a very narrow range of distances to allow for a proper environment for life.

This Earth had to rotate at just such a rate so that temperature did not get too cold or hot one side or the other. It had to be tilted for proper weather. Water has to have found itself on this planet in abundance and then, some not-yet-understood circumstances have to have taken place to allow for the beginning of life. Next, this life has to have somehow found the way to sustain itself, and has to have found a food supply and shelter. And then it figured out how to reproduce itself, and to adapt to other environments, and then some of it became man and acquired the power of reason....

Look at all the pieces (and I know I am missing quite a few) that had to come together in order for us to exist. And we would imagine that it was all by chance? It only makes sense that there is a Creator of the Universe and of us, just like it only makes sense that there is a creator for the watch. The Universe is a sign of its Creator, and you also are a sign of your Creator. This is the argument for God as put forward by some of history's best natural philosophers. It is not impossible to find logical flaws in such a method depending on your point of view, but at the least it is something to ponder.

I believe it is possible to see that God exists through these many signs of His creation. When I was in junior high, lots of people were telling me that the Universe just happened randomly on its own, as did life, and I heard it so much that it seemed almost plausible.

The Qur'an tells us that there are signs of God's existence all around us:

"We have sent down to thee manifest signs, and none reject them but those who are perverse." (2:99)

I concluded from the evidence at hand that God indeed existed, that the Qur'an was a sign from God as per my previously mentioned investigations, and that therefore, as stated in Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad (saw) was sent by God. The criterion for right and wrong, I decided, was in Islam. That left me with a choice: convert or be a hypocrite, living what I did not believe.

So, I converted. I was relieved that I was on the path I had been looking for, but I still knew very little about Islam. And, I knew I had just done something that would cause more pain to my parents than anything else I had ever even thought of doing.

I dreaded telling my family. I knew there would be yelling and screaming and crying and a long time of anger, hurt, and shock. Well, I was right. They thought I was being foolish, that I could not possibly be in a right state of mind. I had been brainwashed. They would have to lock me up in my house or something. I was going to burn in hellfire. I was doing it to please that Muslim guy because I could not actually believe in it. I would be beaten, oppressed and treated like property. The evil Muslim clerics would come and take me away and treat me horribly. I would change my mind soon.

I learned that when your child converts to another religion, it often feels as if you have lost him or her. There is anger, denial, mourning, and, eventually, acceptance. Some accept it by accepting that they have lost the child and having nothing to do with it. Others accept it by ignoring it as much as possible, or overlooking it, in order to have a relationship with the child. My parents try to ignore it and sort of pretend it didn't happen. But of course you can't always do that and so time and again there is pain and conflict.

When I decided to wear *hijab* (Islamic modest dress), I was called a traitor to my family and

a wannabe Arab who was abandoning her culture. I was told I was slapping my parents in the face. My mother cried non-stop for a week. And when I wanted to go for *Hajj*, it was repeated. When I fast in the month of Ramadhan, they are unhappy and uncomfortable. I am a fanatic because I eat only *halal* (similar to kosher) meat. I have to pray secretly to avoid their reaction. My mother insists on displaying pictures of me without proper Islamic dress throughout the house where non-related guests might see them, because it is the way that she prefers to remember me.

It hurts knowing your own mother doesn't like you the way you are and cannot accept it, and it hurts to do something knowing how much pain it causes her and how much strife it causes at home. That probably was the hardest thing for me about converting. It is strange to be doing what you believe to be the right thing and yet your family hates it.

“We have enjoined on man kindness to parents, but if they strive to make thee join with Me that of which thou hast no knowledge, then obey them not. Unto Me is your return and I shall tell you what ye used to do.” (29:8)

My dilemma has always been how to be kind and yet disobey when what they want is contrary to my religious belief? The answer is not always clear, but I pray to Allah (swt) for guidance.

My family has been and continues to be one of my greatest trials. I want to do right by them and also do my best in following God's commands. I do not really talk to them about religion, and fear I am failing them in that regard. But, they can't stand to hear it because it is still a very painful issue. I often find myself frustrated with the daily obstacles they put up for me in following my religion, and I must struggle to be patient and kind at all times.

To anyone thinking of converting but worried about a family's reaction, you cannot let that stop you if you find Islam to be true. I cannot tell you it will be easy, but I can say that the house cannot be in turmoil all the time. Families react differently, and often they react better than expected in the long run. Almost every convert I have known has reported that their families reacted better than they expected. There are a lot of good times, and there are times when it is almost as if nothing has changed, but your relationship with your family will never be quite the same - you will not belong to them like you once did. So, when I am troubled by anything in this life, including my family, I try to remember this:

“And as for those who believe in Allah, and hold fast unto Him, them He will cause to enter into His mercy and grace, and will guide them unto Him by a straight road.” (4:176)

The purpose of life is not to be happy all the time and have it easy. Our trials are there for a reason and if we bear them patiently then we may be one of the successful. It is good to be Muslim, even if it is sometimes unpopular or misunderstood. It is good to be Muslim even though others oppose you. It is good to be Muslim because you have a clear purpose in life.

“I have created Jinns [spirit-beings living on Earth and created of fire] and humankind only that they might worship Me” Qur'an 51:56

You have detailed guidelines on how to live life and worship God so you don't have to doubt yourself. When you become Muslim, instead of finding a confusing, winding, many-forked road in front of you, you are confronted with a blessedly straight path. From the day I

became Muslim, I have never looked back or doubted that I made the right choice.

What Happens Next?

This is the big question once you have undone your life and started anew as a Muslim. There are quite a few resources and people out there to help those who want to study Islam, or are thinking of converting. Initially, they are hard to find, but when one door is found, it tends to lead to another door and yet another. Muslims seem to like to help people interested in their religion, even though most of the work must be done by the potential convert alone. But for those who have already converted, the situation is sometimes different.

Some Muslims act as if their job is completed and seem to think that because the person has converted he/she no longer needs any help. They do not have the personal experiences in their lives to understand the needs of a convert. The converts may complain that they find themselves forgotten, and again on their own with their struggles to remain on the right path. So you may have to be proactive and persistent in your initial searches for help and information.

In my experience and study, the state of the new converts is truly a state of limbo. They no longer fit into the world from whence they came, and they do not yet fit in to the New World that they have elected to join. Some converts have access to a mosque, but many do not. Either way, their situations are often quite the same.

In my case, that Muslim man that had inspired me to learn about Islam had moved away, and I didn't really know any other Muslims. I saw some men on the university campus who were obviously Muslim, but I didn't dare approach them. They were a group of men with long beards who stood in the engineering building speaking Arabic. And if ever they looked at me as I passed in the halls, it was certainly not a warm, welcoming look. That look they gave was one of judgment. I imagined I could read their minds, thinking that I was an evil American woman.

I felt very bad because here I was a Muslim and I didn't know the first thing about what I needed to do. I only knew that I believed. I tried hard to find out how to pray, but without success. It was months after I converted before a man, who had been a friend of the guy that initially sparked my curiosity in Islam, approached me and taught me how to pray. He was about the only Muslim man on campus that I had met other than my friend. Later, he invited me a few times to eat at his house with his wife during the month of Ramadhan when we were all fasting. When the month was over I didn't see them again for a long time. Eventually, I found that a group of Muslims would get together every week, sometimes more often than that. And then I was invited by the wife of the man who had taught me to pray. I went, very excited and eager for Muslim companionship.

When I came to her house, no one greeted me except the one who had invited me. I wore *hijab* (Islamic modest dress) and they all knew I was Muslim, and still no one talked to me. They all could speak some English, but it was too burdensome for them, and so they spoke only in Arabic. At times, it seemed as if they were talking about me, but I couldn't tell for sure. Once, one of the ladies who was more talkative and a little better in English spoke to me. She asked if I was married or had children, then she relayed the answer in Arabic to the

rest of the group. And that was all. Another time when I was invited, the ladies had removed their *hijab* and so I did likewise, and the same one spoke to me again to tell me that my hair was too dry and I should use conditioner. Again, that was about the sum of their conversations with me. They met every week, yet I was invited maybe once in four months, and never spoken to by anyone except the wife of the man who had taught me to pray. In retrospect, the ladies probably would've talked to me more if I had been more outgoing, but I was rather shy in this strange, new foreign environment.

Another time I was fortunate enough that the man and his wife invited to take me with them to the nearest large city, about an hours' drive, to go to the mosque. There, the women stayed in a small overhang above the mosque floor. It had one-way glass so that supposedly we could see down to the floor and the men couldn't see us. But the glass was so dark that really we couldn't see; the only people who could see were those few who were closest to the glass and could put their foreheads on it to look down.

Whatever happened at the mosque that night was in Arabic, but that didn't matter because I couldn't hear it anyway. It was hard to hear from the overhang, and the ladies up there made it worse because all they did was talk and play with the children. Later, we moved to a basement room and had dinner. This time several ladies greeted me after I had been introduced, and one of them asked me if I would be interested in marrying her brother so he could come to the United States. During dinner, some of the Muslim boys were reciting something but again I could not hear. I wondered why the women bothered coming if all they were going to do was talk. I was pretty disappointed because I had expected more a religious rather than social experience at the mosque.

One day, it came back to me that many ladies felt I had converted so that I could marry one of "their" men. It was then that I realized that not only was it hard for a lot of non-Muslims to understand my conversion, but it was also hard for some of the Muslims. They apparently doubted that anyone would convert to their religion because of its Truth. They preferred to think that people converted for the men, or to associate themselves with the Muslim people and get benefits from them. Even my own husband's family could not believe that any American woman could be a suitable Muslim woman.

This is a strong statement, but perhaps they lack confidence in their religion if they cannot see how others would find the Truth in it. If they knew how much mental turmoil was involved in conversion, or if they realized how much converts give up (their family relationships, their previous way of life, friends, status among their non-Muslim associates, etc.), then maybe they would realize those negative ideas about converts generally have no basis. Out of the many converts I have met, I have never known one who found conversion easy or took it lightly, nor have I ever known one who converted for any other reason except true belief in the religion.

Many Muslims, on the other hand, act as if they love converts. They tell us, "We so much admire you." Maybe that is true, but these same people also tend not to build strong associations with the converts. Some Muslims consistently do not invite us into their circle of friends. Someone once told me that this was because the presence of the converts reminds them of their own shortcomings, or because they do not know how to relate to the converts.

My eyes and skin are light. I can speak only English. I am not from their country or culture. My parents are not Muslim. Islam has no place for bigotry, but sometimes Muslims (usually

unintentionally) find a place for it anyway. I am sure that frequently they are unaware of what they are doing, but I also know that we are responsible for our actions whether we are aware of their results or not. Often a convert finds it very difficult to understand the apparent cold-heartedness of some Muslims when the religion itself is so contradictory to that behavior. I think it takes converts by surprise to find that the Muslims are mostly just like everyone else, except for those who are truly steadfast in the religion. The Muslims know, however, better than any other group, that their religion is the right one, and so they tend to be confident in their superiority over the non-Muslims. I believe this is a serious shortcoming because it leads to arrogance.

Among Muslims exist some of the most arrogant, judgmental, and tight-fisted people, yet among them also exist the best people of the Earth. I have been fortunate enough to meet some of these, as are most converts eventually.

Many converts are first inspired to study Islam upon encountering a Muslim. This is only true because of the behavior of that Muslim. They see peace of mind, unmatched generosity, uncommon patience, amazing steadfastness, and genuine humbleness before God. These stellar qualities often exude even in the Muslim who is only mildly practicing his faith. And it is these that make the non-Muslims take another look. Perhaps more than in any other religion, Islam is judged by the behavior of its adherents.

When a Christian in a foreign country commits a murder that has nothing to do with his religion, his religion is unlikely to be mentioned. But, if a Muslim does the same, it is very likely that he will be identified as a Muslim and the act will be associated with his faith. I do not know why this occurs, other than the fact that Islam itself does not differentiate between politics and religion. Thus, it becomes confusing for outsiders when Muslims themselves often do differentiate between the two and are capable of committing acts without it having directly to do with Islam.

Many Muslims tend to isolate themselves from the non-Muslims due to lack of commonality and because of Qu'ranic verses which say to not choose non-believers as friends over believers. I think this is often taken to the extreme, leading them to neglect their duties of neighborliness.

“Allah forbiddeth you not, those who warred not against you on account of religion and drove you not out from your homes, that ye should show them kindness and deal justly with them. Lo! Allah loveth the just dealers.” (60:8)

An average Christian in my country would not think twice of giving charity to a Muslim, but many Muslims would not offer major help to a Christian even if he were his next-door neighbor. They seem to think that there is no reward with God for helping a non-Muslim, or that if they are going to be charitable, there is only enough room in their pocket or time for the Muslims. However, I believe that in Islam it is a duty to help any living thing regardless of its faith, unless doing so would be helping to commit an act against the Muslims.

I firmly believe that those Muslims who are open to appropriate interaction with non-Muslims and treat them with kindness are helping to spread the faith. But before rushing out into the non-Muslim world, the Muslim needs to be sure and strong in his faith and practice. On the other hand, those Muslims who shun non-Muslims and treat them poorly are helping to spread the negative stereotypes of Islam. Those evil stares from the Muslim men in the engineering building made me think their hearts were filled with hate and

darkness. And if I had not already found Islam I would have associated that strong negativity with Islam itself.

The One Who Sticks Around is a Blessing

Islam is truly a social religion, and an isolated Muslim is an incomplete Muslim. Someone who is born to a Muslim family and community may not realize the effect of isolation. An unmarried convert lives in a place where no one else rises for prayer in the morning, no one else pays attention to the approach of the next prayer, no one else fasts, no one else is concerned with Islamic behavior, no one else avoids pork or alcohol. When this persists for a long time, it takes its toll. I am sure those who were born to a Muslim family can relate if they have tried to be the only one in their family who prays on time or wears *hijab*, etc. Initially, they are able to keep their focus on the right path, but when surrounded with people who aren't doing that, they lose strength in time, or what the others are doing again starts to become more fair-seeming.

It is only when faced with a Muslim who is better in faith that they are able to see where they have started to slip and find the strength and inspiration to work harder. To me, this is an example of why the Qur'an says,

"...so strive as in a race in all virtues." (5:48)

Just as a pious Muslim is an inspiration and a help to a non-Muslim, he or she is also an inspiration and a help to other Muslims.

My advice to a new convert or a struggling Muslim, other than simply to pray constantly for help and be patient, would be to seek out the inspiring Muslims until they are found, and then make them your friends, and do not let go of them.

To this day, I do not know what would have happened to my faith if Allah (swt) had not blessed me by leading some of these people to me. When I was at my lowest and did not know where to turn for help, it came. Through the Internet, I found a new wellspring of information and a new source for Muslim companionship. The information helped me to improve my faith and increase my knowledge. It is the people who stick around who make all the difference. A lot of us like to help other people, but in the busyness of our lives, we do it and then move on. We like to send some books and then we forget or lose touch with the recipient; we answer a question and then leave. But, the companionship of a steady friend, one who does not disappear in a day or a week or a month, is the best support.

Truly, I think this companionship is not only the best help, but it is essential. The one who sticks around serves as an unfading link to knowledge, advice, and good example. Further, he/she serves as an access to the Muslim community; becomes the means through which the convert or struggling Muslim establishes a network of other friends, and, finally, a place where they are welcome and where they want to belong. For the convert, these individuals may serve as the Muslim foster-family where their natural family is unsupportive.

What did these people do that made the difference to me? They kept writing back. They were patient. They went out of their way to figure out what I needed and help me get it. If they didn't know an answer, they admitted it and asked around for it. They opened up their

hearts and their homes and made me feel like a member of their families. They shared their meals, their thoughts, and the happenings in their lives. They overlooked my shortcomings. They encouraged me. They didn't judge me. They did not hesitate to spend time or money, and they did not make me feel bad when they did so. They kept confidences. When they couldn't help, they still listened. They made me feel as if I was not just taking from them but giving them something in return. They taught me.

These are the inspiring Muslims. They are the blessings to the rest of mankind, although they do not know it. Although none of them are perfect, their efforts make a world of difference.

Too many people think they cannot help when they can. They think they can do little so they do nothing. Allah (swt) has effectively said that He is more pleased with one who has two dollars and gives one than the one who has more but gives a smaller proportion of what he has. One dollar or one minute may make a difference for the person you seek to help, and it certainly makes a difference for you in the Hereafter. We are so neglectful of our duties to others. There is enough food in this world that everyone should be able to eat five meals a day, and yet millions of people are starving. We look in our own communities and say, "No one is truly needy here." Isn't that just an outrageous lie?

There are people in every community in need of mentoring, education, companionship, prayers, transportation, employment, interest-free loans, encouragement, or other gifts. How many youth are there who are confused and in danger of being lost?

How many elderly in your community are sitting alone? How many could use assistance in obtaining forgiveness and worldly needs through your prayer? How many need a ride to the store, to a friend's house, or to the masjid? How many are struggling to do right and need a hand up? How many are worried about how to send their child to college, or pay their bills or fix their car?

The Muslims and non-Muslims should extend their sight and see the countless opportunities for doing good. Remember that doing good does not cost a thing but rather at least doubles what you have. That is a promise of Allah (swt). In truth, the most reliable investment of all is charity, because it has a God-guaranteed 100% profit margin:

"If ye lend unto Allah a goodly loan, He will double it for you and will forgive you, for Allah is Responsive, Clement...." (64:17)

Our time and money are not really ours. They are Allah's (swt), just as everything is His.

Therefore, we should spend it in goodness rather than waste. When we give, we should give something that we ourselves would like to receive if we were in the other person's shoes.

Did you realize that when you give what you do not want for yourself, you are doing yourself a favor by getting rid of that thing more than helping the other person? Islam teaches that when you give, never mention it again, do not allow yourself to desire something in return, and do not act as if it is difficult or a burden for you even if it is. If you do any of those things, you make the recipient feel bad for needing and accepting your help, and you have lost any reward that you had earned. The inspiring Muslims vie with one another in helping others because they realize that it does not cost them but rather increases what they have; they believe Allah's Word.

Sometimes we forget Allah (swt), and we allow ourselves to be confused by this world and its distractions. We think, for example, that we should not wear a beard or *hijab* because we will not be able to earn as much money. However, if we pause to reflect on Allah's (swt) Word, we would realize this is nonsense because the money comes from Him. If you obey Him, you will be rewarded; it is not the other way around. If you are disobedient to Allah (swt) and find yourself with abundant wealth, this may be a curse, not a blessing.

“So let not their riches nor their children astonish thee. Allah thereby intendeth but to punish them in the life of the world and that their souls shall pass away while they are disbelievers.” (9:55)

Since whatever we have is not ours but God's anyway, we should not despair if we have less than others do and should give it freely. A fancy car will do us no good in the Hereafter; neither will a large bank account or hours in front of the television. Whatever passes through our hands may be a test from Allah (swt) to see if we forget that it is His.

God knows, I do not always remember that it is all His. And I know I fail in my duty to those around me. So writing this is a reminder and help to me -- one that I am led to reflect on the selflessness and tirelessness of those that I have called the inspiring Muslims. I leave them nameless here for their sake, and lest I forget to name one, but they do not remain nameless in my prayers and Allah (swt) surely knows who they are.

In summary, the path after converting is not always smooth and a convert may find trials both from Muslims and non-Muslims alike, but he or she will also find a lot of support and in time should find him/herself as a welcome member of a Muslim community, and able to make a positive contribution to it. Allah (swt) is the best supporter.

How Can You Believe In That?

My audience for this book are both the Muslim and non-Muslim. The non-Muslim are likely to come across this book because of a desire to know more about Islam. From what I have written thus far, they may have learned a little about the life and path of a convert. However, they are probably seeking more than this. Islam contains many things that are controversial in the Western world and sometimes even within the Muslim community.

These things affect how Islam and Muslims are perceived by non-Muslims and, with the pervasion of Western ideas throughout the world, cause doubts to creep into the minds of some Muslims. Converts have to address these things early in their new life because they find them troubling and in need of explanation. I have accepted Islam as God's truth, so when I find something in Islam that seems oppressive, I have a problem. I know that God is not oppressive, so either I have an incorrect understanding of that thing and it is not truly oppressive, or else it is oppressive but it is not truly part of Islam. Now it is my job to determine which of those two possibilities is the case, with an open mind, reflection and study from numerous sources. I stress the need for numerous sources, and I also stress finding original sources. If you want to know about what Muslims believe, ask Muslims.

This is not the work of a religious scholar and what follows is not intended to be used as if it were. In the spirit of the title of this book, these are merely my reflections on these issues, presented so that the reader may understand how a Muslim convert has dealt with and come to understand some of the more controversial aspects of Islam. These are presented in no particular order and you may of course feel free to skip over any that are not of interest to you. If you find that you do not agree with what I have written on any topic, I hope it will not deter you from enjoying and benefiting from the rest of the book.

Marriage

Women in Marriage

Being a woman, as I thought of converting to Islam, I was greatly concerned about the status of woman in Islam. Especially after I converted, my ears were full with people telling me what a horrible mistake I had made and how I had relegated myself to a life of oppression. I had in my mind an image of what a Muslim woman was supposed to be like and I tried to make myself fit that role. I thought the Muslim woman was supposed to be submissive, quiet, unopinionated, and filling her time cooking and cleaning. I tried to be that way for awhile but it just wasn't me and I was very unhappy.

In time, I realized that no one was demanding this behavior of me except myself. As I gained exposure to other Muslim women, it dawned on me that I had it all wrong. I was trying to be the Western stereotype of a Muslim woman, but the stereotype was wrong.

Muslim men and women observe modest behavior in each other's presence so that generally neither of them are loud and boisterous in public. But, in private, Muslim women are comfortably themselves. They have their opinions and they share them with their husbands and families, who in turn listen and respect what is said. A Muslim husband takes counsel with his wife. They work together to complete the household work. It is true that a Muslim woman defers to her husband when they cannot agree, but only if doing so does not cause her to violate her religion or rights. The Qur'an is very clear that the marriage relationship is not supposed to be one of fear or abuse, but one of comfort and love:

“And among His signs is that He created spouses from among yourselves so that you may live in tranquility with them; And He has created love and mercy between you.” (30:21)

This is a vision of the Islamic ideal, and in reality the Muslim family is much closer to this than to the stereotypical view of a wife-beating man and a woman who has no say in what happens in her life. Sadly, abusive and overbearing husbands exist among the Muslims just as they do among the Christians, Jews and everyone else. And, just as the abusive men of other faiths, they often believe they are religiously in the right.

I feel that in this century the abused Muslim woman is at a disadvantage in comparison to her Christian counterpart living in the West. In the past, any woman had little practical recourse from abuse. In this century, Western women increasingly have opportunities for help and escape without being ostracized. But the Muslim woman is likely to live in a world

where it is still taboo for people to become involved in the family affairs of others in order to help the abused woman. The abused Muslim woman who leaves becomes the subject of gossip and judgment while the man often has a much easier time in maintaining his dignity and even in remarrying.

Despite this problem, I can say through comparison of every married Muslim and non-Muslim couple I have ever met that the Muslim marriages tend to be happier, more equal, and longer lasting. Since many Muslim marriages are arranged without the couple knowing each other too well before marriage, they both enter the marriage with a spirit of compromise. There does not exist the delusion of the one right man or right woman in the world. Rather, Muslims believe they can be compatible and have a successful loving marriage with a variety of different types of people.

All marriages take work. In my mind, one of the great failings of the typical Western non-Muslim marriage is that it is expected to be easy. When difficulties arise, the couple decides they must have not really found their one right mate, and so they part; and very rarely is the parting kind and equitable.

Finding a Mate

Muslim youth in the West today are enticed by the romantic images on TV. They wonder where the room is for romance in an arranged marriage. Having experienced a small bit of dating life as a non-Muslim, and then having married a Muslim, I feel I can offer perspective. Dating is not romantic, it is not fun, and it does not help in later married life. There is such great peer pressure to date that it occurs among the very young, and people only get hurt. A relationship begins, the youth may do things they regret, and a short time later they leave each other. Then, they talk about each other, spreading gossip and damaging each other's reputations. Most of the time the relationship is largely physical and even basic friendship is missing between the two, although they can't see that through the veil of their strong physical desires. This is true even for those who try to remain chaste. As people get older, relationships last a little longer, but the problems don't change all that much.

Finally, the "training" is over and a couple gets married. They feel they have prepared themselves to know what kind of person is good for them through years of dating. However, they find that in marriage, their spouse is not the same person as he/she was while dating. And they find that both they and their spouses have jealousy over those previous dating relationships. The romance and true love that these people are looking for does not come automatically like on TV.

True romance comes from the commitment of the people involved and from friendship and not from magic instant sparks. They've been spending years looking for the ideal mate when in truth any couple who both approach a marriage with the right state of mind and have some basic compatible qualities can be ideal for each other.

Romance comes through friendship and compromise and accepting the other person with their faults included, and does not come from pre-marital sex, discarding partners for others, and expecting a near-perfect match. Dating actually diminishes romance because it desensitizes the couple to the special-ness of the husband-wife relationship. The effort spent on dating should be spent on developing yourself as the ideal Islamic spouse. You will

find with patience that there are others out there doing the same as you and God willing one of them may become your life mate.

Dating, or visiting each other without escort, is not the solution. But, it is not unreasonable for someone to want to know his/her potential spouse before agreeing to marriage. Often the characteristics that a parent looks for in a potential spouse for their son or daughter do not match with the characteristics that are most important to the child. The child certainly knows something about what he or she wants and that needs to be respected. Likewise, the wisdom of the parent due to life experience is of value and should also be considered.

Especially in the West, where Muslim communities are often small and far from one another, it is unreasonable to expect the search for a spouse who possesses those certain characteristics that you require to be an easy or quick search. This is a life-decision being made, so it should be done with effort. Muslim communities have a duty to their children to open their minds and invest their time and money in developing any method of finding suitable spouses that does not violate Islamic principles. In turn, the youth have a responsibility invest their own time and effort into the process and to avoid any method that involves violation of Islamic guidelines. After all, if you want a happy and successful marriage, you must pursue it in a manner that is pleasing to Allah.

I cannot leave the topic of marriage without addressing the two most controversial topics: polygamy and temporary marriage. Polygamy as used here refers specifically to polygyny, that is, the act of a man having more than one wife, and temporary marriage is the act of taking a spouse for a fixed, finite term rather than “until death do you part.”

Polygamy

Islam makes allowance for a man to have up to four wives at a time. This is an appalling concept for many people today. The Western world holds fast to the idea that for each man there is one ideal woman and for each woman there is one ideal man. And, it comes natural for one raised in the West to view a polygamous relationship as an uneven one in which the women are treated unfairly.

Other cultures have very different views that might be worth noting here. In many cultures, in particular those stemming from Africa, a polygamous marriage is something greatly desired. Having more than one wife for a given man provides security to the women because the man, already having a spouse, has demonstrated his ability to be a good husband.

Further, the women enjoy each other’s companionship and help in child-rearing and other duties. In many war-torn societies, the women greatly outnumber the men and those who desire companionship and help in life turn to polygamous relationships because the only other choices are to remain alone or commit sin.

The polygamous relationship meets a need that could not be met otherwise. If it were regarded with less taboo it could satisfactorily meet the needs of many people who now do not even consider it.

In practice, it is not exceedingly common for a Muslim man to have more than one wife.

That is because doing so is not about his pleasure but is rather about responsibility to society. One verse in Qur'an which attests to this is as follows:

“And if ye fear that ye will not deal fairly by the orphans, marry of the women who seem good to you, two or three or four; and if ye fear that ye cannot do justice to so many then one only.... Thus it is more likely that ye will not do injustice.” (4.3)

Polygamy is presented as a means of serving the needs of orphans in this verse, not as a means of serving the needs of lustful men. The Qur'an emphasizes the need for justness in any marriage. This is a heavier burden for a man with more than one wife because he is required to meet the needs of each and treat them fairly. Each is entitled to her own home according to his means, and each is entitled to equitable possessions and time. It is not permitted that a man should ignore or neglect one wife and prefer another in treatment.

It is good to keep in mind that a Muslim woman has the right to full choice in her spouse and if she marries a man who is already married then she does it knowingly and of her own volition. If ever the case is otherwise and the woman is coerced into marriage, that marriage is void according to Islam and she has no responsibility to persist in it. The one who does not have as much choice is the first wife, for she may not be able to prohibit her husband from taking another spouse.

However, she can put into her marriage contract that if he takes another spouse she is entitled to divorce. Many women are discouraged from putting the clause in their contract because it might imply that the girl does not trust her future husband. But, if a young lady knows full well that she could not be happy in a polygamous relationship than she should see to it that such a clause appears in her contract, no matter how unlikely she considers that it would be needed.

It takes an exceptional man and woman to build a truly Islamic, happy, successful marriage and that is only compounded in the case of a polygamous marriage. There is no room in the heart of a Muslim woman in a successful polygamous relationship for jealousy. Her time with her husband is shared with other women, but if she has a good husband she has nothing to fear because he observes all his duties to her, and is kind and loving. In turn, she does and is the same for him. Many people are well served by such a relationship and it should not be looked on with such distaste. Our distaste stems from Western, rather than Islamic, views, and also from fear of oppression. However, a polygamous marriage is not in itself oppressive any more than a monogamous one.

Injustice within a marriage can be oppressive, and it is indeed not a simple matter for a polygamous man to be just to multiple wives, and that is why the Qur'an advises that the man who cannot do it justly simply should not do it.

I tried to imagine if I myself could exist happily and successfully in a polygamous relationship. I think I could if I had confidence in my spouse. If a man has an inclination toward taking another wife it is wrong to assume a bad motive. Not only in this case but in any case, a woman must not assume bad intention on the part of her husband but instead should assume good intentions unless there is proof otherwise (and the husband should do likewise for her).

The question may be asked, though, why cannot the woman take more than one husband?

At first glance, it may seem unfair that it is not permitted. But, in light of what has been explained above, that taking more than one spouse is not about pleasure but is a matter of meeting social needs and taking on enormous responsibility, that question loses considerable force.

Further, if a woman has more than one husband, paternity becomes an issue, as does family authority. The most wealthy and sophisticated societies now have the technology to scientifically determine paternity, but this is not available to everyone. And while successful marriages all over the world tend to involve cooperation and counsel between husband and wife, it is also natural nearly everywhere that ultimately the husband is the final authority in the household.

When there is more than one husband, there is no longer a natural or clear household leader and discord results. And if there is more than one husband, inheritance becomes an issue as well because virtually all societies determine inheritance based on paternity.

More importantly, one must ask, what societal needs would be served in a woman having multiple husbands? While the opposite case can be seen to meet real societal needs, it is difficult to come up with a genuine need for polyandry (marriage of a woman with multiple men.)

Temporary Marriage

My last topic in marriage is perhaps the most controversial within the Muslim community, and this is the temporary marriage. Among the Muslims are some who believe that the temporary marriage is unlawful and others who believe that it is lawful and even very important.

Those who believe it is unlawful believe that the Prophet of Islam (saw), through God's command, allowed it for a very short period and then disallowed it. Those who believe it is lawful believe that the Prophet of Islam (saw) never disallowed it but rather it was a Caliph, after the death of the Prophet (saw) at which time Islam cannot be changed, who made it illegal.

Further, those who find it lawful turn to a verse in the Qur'an in which they believe it (temporary marriage) is mentioned. They say that something which is lawful in Qur'an and not made unlawful somewhere else in the Qur'an must be permissible. The matter of dispute is in 4:24, here presented as in the Puya/Ali translation and *tafsir* (explanatory notes) of the Holy Qur'an:

“As to those whom you married for a fixed time (*Mut'a*), give them their agreed dowries; and there is no sin for you in what you mutually agree together after what has been settled.”

The corresponding explanatory note follows:

“*Famastamta-tum bihi* [the Arabic in the text which refers to the marriage] provides for a temporary marriage, known as *Mut'a*. It has been specifically made lawful by the Qur'an and the Holy Prophet, therefore this provision subsists as unrescinded.

One day, for no reason at all, and having no authority to amend a law given and practiced by the Holy Prophet, the second caliph declared from the pulpit:

'Two *Mut'as* (temporary marriage and combining hajj with umra) were in force during the time of the Holy Prophet, but now I decree both of them as unlawful; and I will punish those who practice them.' (*Tafsir Kabir, Durr al Manthur, Kashshaf, Mustadrak* and others).

According to Tirmidhi even his [the second caliph's] son, Ibne Umar, refused to agree with his father's action because it was made lawful by Allah and His Prophet, whose pronouncements could never be revoked by anyone after him.

Therefore the Shia school of thought holds both *Mut'as* lawful. Ali ibn abi Talib reversed the uncalled-for innovation of the second caliph, and thereafter it was never again prohibited."

Now if we look at a different translation, we find that there is no clear mention of the marriage referred to as being temporary in nature:

"And those of whom ye seek content (by marrying them), give unto them their portions as a duty. And there is no sin for you in what you do by mutual agreement after the duty (hath been done)." (*Pickthall*)

Thus, for one who is not an expert in Qur'anic Arabic, it is difficult to determine whether "*famastamta-tum bihi*" refers to a temporary marriage. It may be easier, then, to adhere by the law according to the Islamic school that you choose to follow, but this is not a truly satisfactory answer for the convert who may have not yet chosen a school. However, it is possible to study the works of those who are more knowledgeable in Qur'anic Arabic or you can try to determine the matter using the information on which nearly all Muslims agree.

That on which nearly all Muslims agree, both Sunni and Shia, is that the temporary marriage was made lawful by the Prophet (saw) of Islam and was not made unlawful until after Allah (swt) had completed and perfected Islam and the Prophet (saw) had died.

It is also largely agreed upon that anyone after the Prophet (saw) cannot make anything that was lawful, unlawful, or anything that was prohibited, allowed, except on a temporary basis stemming from urgent political need. As an example of a temporary change stemming from urgent political need, it would be acceptable for an Islamic scholar to prohibit the use of birth control temporarily to counteract an oppressor's rule that all Muslims must not procreate. Normally, many methods of birth control are permissible for Muslims, but in an emergency when the future of the Muslim society is at stake, the scholar can rule that they should not use birth control until the situation is alleviated.

Therefore it would seem that the second caliph's ruling cannot have any effect on the permissibility of temporary marriage today and as such the conclusion I make is that it is permissible. There are a minority of Sunnis who turn to different traditions that indicate that the Prophet (saw) himself forbade *Mut'a*, but those traditions contradict each other and do not stand up to close scrutiny and we are left with the same conclusion that temporary marriage is permitted. But, to address that opinion, the following is quoted from the *Shia Encyclopedia* (available online):

"Sabra al-Juhanni reported on the authority of his father that while he was with Allah's

Messenger (may peace be upon him), he said: *O' people, I had permitted you to contract temporary marriage with women, but Allah has forbidden it (now) until the Day of Resurrection. So he who has any (woman with this type of marriage contract) he should let her off, and do not take back anything you have given to them (as dower).*

Sunni references:

Sahih Muslim, English version, v2, chapter DXLI (titled: Temporary Marriage), Tradition #3255

Sahih Muslim, Arabic version, 1980 Edition Pub. in Saudi Arabia, v2, p1025, Tradition #21, "Kitab al-Nikah, Bab Nikah al-Mut'a"

'A side comment here is that again the word "Istimta'a" has been used in this tradition for temporary marriage which is exactly what Quran has used.'

'In the next tradition after the above tradition in Sahih Muslim, the same narrator (Sabra) has narrated the same tradition with addition that:

"I saw Allah's Messenger standing between the pillar and gate of Ka'ba when speaking the Hadith."

Sunni references:

Sahih Muslim, English version, v2, chapter DXLI (titled: Temporary Marriage), Tradition #3256

Sahih Muslim, Arabic version, 1980 Edition Pub. in Saudi Arabia, v2, p1025, Tradition #21, "Kitab al-Nikah, Bab Nikah al-Mut'a"

"The following tradition, however, indicates that the Prophet allowed Temporary marriage after the battle of Hunain (after 10/8 AH) which was after the conquest of Mecca:

Narrated Iyas Ibn Salama on the authority of his father that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) gave sanction for contracting temporary marriage for three nights in the year of Autas (this was after the Battle of Hunain in 8H), and then forbade it.

{Note: The sentence inside parentheses is the Saudi translator's footnote, and is not mine.}

Sunni references:

Sahih Muslim, English version, v2, chapter DXLI (titled: Temporary Marriage), Tradition #3251

Sahih Muslim, Arabic version, 1980 Edition Pub. in Saudi Arabia, v2, p1023, Tradition #18, "Kitab al-Nikah, Bab Nikah al-Mut'a"

"Now, let us see what the problems are: ...

If the Prophet has forbidden the temporary marriage FOREVER on the Day of Khaibar (1/7 AH), why was it practiced even after the battle of Hunain (after 10/8 AH) with the direct

order of the Prophet? (See the reference above) In other words:

How is that possible that one is forbidden FOREVER and in two different points of time, on the Day of Khaibar (1/7 AH) and on the victory Mecca (9/8 AH) FOREVER, and people were practicing it between these two instants of time and after these two instances with the order of the Prophet?

In the mentioned tradition about the battle of Hunain, it is said that the messenger of Allah (sa) permitted *Mut'a* after the battle of Hunain. So we cannot say people did it because they did not know it was forbidden forever. The traditions confirms that *Mut'a* was done with the direct order of the Prophet. So how can we justify these few alleged traditions that the Prophet forbade it forever before that? ...

Two Sunni scholars: al-Qurtubi (in his commentary of Quran) and al-Nawawi (in his commentary of Sahih Muslim) are of the opinion that different traditions concerning the ban of *Mut'a* specify seven different dates!!!

What will be wrong if we take the opinion of Imam Ali (as), the most knowledgeable one among the companions who said:

"Mut'a is a mercy from Allah to his servants. If it were not for Umar forbidding it, no one would commit (the sin) of fornication except the wretched (Shaqi)..."

But why would anyone want to be in a temporary marriage? What purpose does it serve? Temporary marriage is not intended as an alternative to permanent marriage, but rather, is an option for those who have needs that permanent marriage cannot meet. To claim that permanent marriage meets all needs is foolish upon close examination of society. Imam Ali (as), the 4th caliph of Islam according to the Sunnis and the first Imam (one appointed by God to succeed in leadership after the Prophet (saw) and to uphold the religion) according to the Shias, is quoted on this issue as saying,

"It [temporary marriage] is permitted and absolutely allowed for the one whom Allah has not provided with the means of permanent marriage so that he may be chaste by performing Mut'a [temporary marriage]." Wasail, vol. 14 pp.449-450.

In modern society, the temporary marriage may meet the needs of someone who is travelling for a long time and is in need of companionship, or someone who cannot find a permanent spouse. Additionally it may serve the needs of someone without the financial means to have a wedding and then to support his wife financially. (The requirement that he maintain his spouse according to his means and according to what she is accustomed to do not have to apply in temporary marriage.)

The elderly widows who have little realistic chance of finding another permanent spouse can more easily find temporary spouses to serve the need of companionship. Similarly, youth who are too young for the responsibilities of permanent marriage but in danger of committing sin may lawfully meet in a *Mut'a* marriage.

This last case does not give freedom for youth to freely mingle with the opposite sex and have intercourse. A condition mitigating against this abuse is the requirement that a virgin female have permission of her father to enter any marriage relationship, including *Mut'a*, unless the father is found to be one who is unreasonable in that regard. It is further

commonly required that a condition of the marriage be that sex shall not take place.

Mut'a is the way to avoid sin when permanent marriage is not possible. Some Muslims today commit sin prior to their marriage with the person that they are engaged to. Islam is clear that, between men and women, touching, viewing parts of each other's bodies that should be covered, and visiting while unescorted are sins unless they are closely related or married.

Engagement is not marriage, yet couples involve themselves in this behavior that should take place only in marriage. The logical alternative to avoid sin is simply to have a temporary marriage prior to the permanent marriage so that the couple can make sure they are suited to each other.

Mut'a is often referred to as a pleasure marriage and is compared to prostitution. The man pays the woman a dowry and they enjoy each other and then move on. But, in truth, *Mut'a* probably more often occurs without any sex than it does solely for the purpose of sexual gratification. *Mut'a*, unlike permanent marriage, may have conditions put on it, including the most common one, which is that no sex shall take place.

Thus, its purpose is companionship and getting to know the other person and not just sexual pleasure. *Mut'a* is different than prostitution in that it is a union before God, and any children resulting will be legitimate. It is in all senses of the word a marriage. Just as in permanent marriage, the woman has a waiting period after the end of the marriage before she can take another spouse. The waiting period serves many purposes including making sure of any paternity, avoiding running into another relationship too soon, and giving the couple time to reconcile.

A woman is unlikely to be able to make a living from *Mut'a*, because she could legally have less than half a dozen partners in a year. In this way, it is clearly unlike prostitution. Payment of a dowry does take place in *Mut'a*, but it is unlike prostitution because the payment is not for sex, but rather it is identical in purpose to the dowry given in permanent marriage. It is further unlike prostitution because a man is not supposed to marry one with loose morals and, according to Ayatollah Sistani, is forbidden to marry any non-Muslim woman in temporary marriage if he is already married to a Muslim woman. In Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi's book *Marriage and Morals in Islam*, the temporary and need-only aspects of *Mut'a* are strongly emphasized:

"I cannot overemphasize the temporary nature of *Mut'a*. The message of Islam is quite clear: marry on a permanent basis; if that is not possible, then adopt temporary abstinence; if that is not possible, only then use the *Mut'a* marriage.

The temporary nature of *Mut'a* can also be seen from the following saying of the Imams: Once 'Ali bin Yaqtin, a prominent Shi'ah who held a high post in Abbasid government, came to Imam 'Ali ar-Riza to ask about *Mut'a*. The Imam said, "*What have you to do with it because Allah has made you free from its need.*" (Wasa'il, vol. 14, p. 449) He has also said, "*It is permitted and absolutely allowed for the one whom Allah has not provided with the means of permanent marriage so that he may be chaste by performing Mut'a.*" (Wasa'il, vol. 14, p. 449-450)"

Personally, I have known a handful of women involved in temporary marriage, all of whom were converts. The rumors of blatant misuse of the marriage are not to be found with those

I have known, but there were problems. I think, in each case these marriages were too long. What I mean is that temporary marriage is supposed to be just that --temporary. But in all cases that I have personal knowledge of, they extended for years, often in a series of repeated temporary marriages.

Two-thirds of the time the wife was kept secret from family, friends, and/or community because of the stigma and judgment that would result. Thus, when someone unexpectedly came to the door, the wife had to hide in a back room or closet silently until the guest could be taken care of. The longer the relationship persisted, the more the woman became attached to the man and secretly hoped for permanent marriage, and some resented having to hide if they were one of the ones kept secret.

Often the men provided just enough hope of a permanent marriage that the women stuck around, but years passed and no long term commitment was made, no permanent marriage plans arose -- but another temporary marriage was offered. In public, the women frequently had to say they were unmarried because the temporary marriage was unknown. For some, the end result was a happy permanent marriage or a happy parting but that was not always the case. Ultimately, being temporary rather than permanent spouses seemed to these women to indicate a partial rejection by their husbands even if there was no other reason to believe that to be the case. The women just wanted more.

I do not wish to paint the men who choose temporary marriage even for prolonged periods in a bad light. In nearly all cases they are trying to do right and love their wives. Their dilemma often stems from the rejection they find or anticipate from their family and society because of the race or nationality of their spouse, or because they found each other without the traditional arrangement done by the family. Or often, they were initially only able to pursue a temporary marriage and not a permanent one and had to hide their marriage because of the very negative reactions and rejection they would receive from people, especially family, if it were made public. I sympathize with the desire to want both your family and your wife. In the end, these men often have to choose one or the other.

Rightfully, they should not have to choose. People should accept a man's choice in spouse regardless of her race or nationality, especially if she is a pious woman. And people should not allow stigma to exist upon those who find the need for temporary marriage. This stigma has no place on something that was made lawful by God and the Prophet (saw) and even encouraged or mandated when sin is the likely alternative. *Mut'a* has a place in society and the need for it is not altogether uncommon. It is a gross error to accept fornication and adultery more easily than *Mut'a*.

People suffer because of the stigmas that others hold. Just as in a monogamous permanent marriage, polygamous and temporary marriages can contain abuse and bad outcomes. It is the abuse that should be stigmatized, and not the marriages themselves. In fact, stigmatizing the marriages causes abuse within them to be more likely because it makes it more likely that the marriages will be done in secret. Therefore, if you are concerned about misuse of the temporary and polygamous marriages, then let them out of the closet and into the realm of the public. One can only remove a stigma through conscious and deliberate effort within oneself. Although past damage cannot be fully repaired, future damage can be prevented if more people, perhaps starting with the reader him/herself, would be active and audible in their support of polygamous and temporary marriage and those individuals who pursue them lawfully.

The Sexes

Just the other day I saw a promo for a TV show called “Battle of the Sexes”. It caught my attention because it was filled with images of the Muslim world. Pictures of women wearing black garments that showed only their eyes went along with images of a woman being placed in a chastity belt, which also went along with images of Arab men shooting large guns. The accompanying words lead the viewer to imagine the large guns as phallic symbols. Having been Muslim for a few years now, I was disturbed by these images because they portrayed the relationship between Muslim men and Muslim women very negatively, and in my opinion, very incorrectly. Later, I watched the show to see exactly what it had to say about Islam and the sexes. As it turned out, ninety percent of the show was about the Modern West or Medieval Europe and only a small portion was about the Muslim world, although the promo certainly lead the viewer to expect otherwise.

Why was the promo so skewed? A likely answer is that those stereotype images of Islam are attractive to viewers and thus serve as ratings-boosters. People remember those images and the associations made with them and tend to believe them. Many people who see these images are led to believe they know a lot more about the Muslim world than they do.

For example, if Saudi Arabia comes up in discussion, you can find someone who will say, “Oh, I know all about that place and how they hate Americans. Did you know that the women there have to walk ten feet behind the men?” And when you tell them that there is absolutely no truth to that claim, they do not want to believe you because you are not as authoritative as the media is. “No, I am right, I saw it on Nightline or CNN.” “I read it in the New York Times.”

It is no wonder that so few Americans ever think to pick up a translation of the Qur’an when the religion looks so bad to them. Yet, everyday, more men and women in America choose Islam. These men and women have concluded that the stereotype view of how Islam regards the sexes is inaccurate.

Islamic Modest Dress

When you picture a Muslim, you are likely to picture an Arab. You may see a long-bearded man with a white robe and a checkered headdress and a woman covered from head to toe in black so that only her eyes, if that, are visible. The prospect of dressing like that is often quite frightening to the convert. Is that what Islam really requires? And if so, why is it required?

To the person investigating Islam, the answer is initially not that easy to find. When a convert reads a translation of Qur’an, he/she finds the verses on dress hard to understand. Further, the convert finds *hadith* and proponents of those *hadith* which say a multitude of different things on the subject. Personally, I think a reliable *hadith* is one in which the Prophet (saw) indicated that women should cover all but their hands and face. And I think the most telling Qur’anic verses are 24:30-31.

“And tell the believing men to lower their gaze and be modest. That is purer for

them. Lo! Allah is Aware of what they do. And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands....”

It is important that the men are first directed to lower their gaze and be modest. Men have a large responsibility in maintaining proper respect and treatment of women and to prevent wrongdoing. Women have a similar role, but they are further directed to display only certain parts of their bodies. Technically, even Muslim men have certain parts of their bodies they are supposed to cover, but those aren't mentioned in these verses.

It is not totally clear to the average reader what part of a woman's adornment is "apparent" but a logical argument could be made that those are the parts that she has reason to uncover. It is logical to have her hands uncovered because she is always using her hands to hold things and carry things. It is possible to argue the same about the face because she uses it to talk, eat and see. But for any other body part there is not much reason that it would need to be uncovered.

The next phrase gives us further indication as to what is "apparent". It tells the women to draw their veils over their chests. So the reader must ask, what is the veil? It is something that begins above the chest area because it would otherwise not make sense to use the word "draw". The word "draw" in that phrase indicates that something beginning at least at her shoulders if not higher is to be closed over the chest so that the chest itself does not show.

If this verse were only requiring that the chest be covered, the mention of a specific garment to cover it is unnecessary because ordinary clothes could be adequate. Since a specific garment is mentioned, we are led to believe that that garment itself covers more than just the chest.

Thus we conclude that the word translated as "veil" means what we typically take the word "veil" to mean: Something which covers the head. Thus, this phrase of the verse is directing the women to take their head covers and make sure their neck and chest area is also covered.

This makes even greater sense when we consider the word "adornment". A woman's adornment clearly would indicate her bosom, but it even more likely indicates her hair. Without a doubt, a woman's hair is one of her greatest adornments. Women take pride and great effort in styling their hair and making it look appealing. This, along with the fact that there is no logical reason why she needs to have her hair uncovered, serves as a great indication that it is part of her adornment to be covered according to this verse.

What about the face? Numerous traditions can be found which indicate the face is to be covered, but numerous can be found to the contrary. Many of the modern scholars do not seem to think it is required, but many also say it is not a bad idea if the woman finds herself in a place where it is customary to do so or if not doing so would cause a hardship to her.

The question is "Why all this covering anyway?" The Bible makes reference to women covering their hair in church or in public and clearly indicates that the veiling is a mark of status for her. In the Bible, women cover as a sign of the male's superiority. But in Islam, this is absolutely not the case.

Women cover simply to help ensure that they receive the respectful treatment they deserve and it has nothing to do with superiority or inferiority. Islam considers men and women as equal before God but acknowledges that being equal does not mean being the same. Men and women are different and to ignore those differences is oppressive to women. Although it is not often thought of this way, the modern world is oppressive to women in making them compete in the working world with men by acting just like men and neglecting their differences. Or, by acknowledging the differences, but using them to treat women as decorations and trophies in the workplace instead of equally deserving and capable employees.

Women in Islamic modest dress, (loose clothing that covers all but hand and face in any cultural style), are recognized as pious, business-minded women on sight. When I decided to wear the Islamic modest dress I was very surprised at what I experienced. I found people opening doors for me more than ever before, offering to help me carry parcels, and cleaning up their language around me. I realized that men talked to me differently. I never realized that even “good” guys had been looking at my body while talking to me until I put on the *hijab* and they suddenly were no longer doing it. They talked to me as if I were more intelligent, too.

More importantly, I felt better about myself. I had been very worried about how people would react and I found that instead of being treated worse I was being treated better than before. Up to that point, I did not fully understand the reasons for *hijab*, but seeing the positive results first hand, I was instantly and utterly convinced that it truly is a good thing and not oppressive at all. I knew I was safer in *hijab*.

If I were to walk down the worst street in New York with a friend wearing a T-shirt and jeans, my friend would be whistled at and harassed, even groped at and called names. But me, I get called “sister”, and the men lower their gazes instead of staring, and step out of my way. Many women fret over dressing a little different than their non-Muslim counterparts, but they shouldn't. The negative reactions they anticipate are largely exaggerated and in fact, they will find increased respect from their counterparts when they are practicing as they believe.

A woman may find it unfair that she is asked to cover because some men can't control themselves, but this is analogous to saying that it is unfair that she has to lock her house and car because some thieves can't control themselves. *Hijab* in practice is not burdensome in my experience, but is rather a remover of burdens.

All Muslim scholars are unanimous that these verses refer to a covering that includes covering of hair. But if you want to find a verse that says “Women must cover the hair” you won't find it, perhaps because the covering of hair was something already in practice among some women so that when the word translated as “veils” was used, the meaning was obvious.

The *hadith* are more explicit and go into more detail by stating that a woman should cover all but hands and face. And if we look into the *hadith* referring to the Lady Fatimah (as), the daughter of the Prophet (saw) we find that she also covered all but hands and face, and may have on occasion covered her face also but did not all the time. She is certainly our best example of how to live and dress and act as women in this world.

Other verses in Qur'an about the woman's Islamic modest dress are 24:60 and 33:59.

“Such elderly women as are past the prospect of marriage, there is no blame on them if they lay aside their outer garments, provided they make not a wanton display of their beauty; but it is best for them to be modest and God is One who sees and knows all things.”

“O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters and the believing women that they should cast their outer garments over their persons when abroad that is convenient that they should be known and as such not molested. And God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.”

So the believing women are being advised to wear an outer covering beyond what they would wear in the home when they go out, and this is the *hijab*.

Based on 24:60, the covering of those parts mandated to be covered in 24:30-31 is not to be relaxed except in age past possibility of marriage, and then it is still better not to do so.

Mixing of the Sexes

A very close cousin to the subject of Islamic modest dress is the subject of casual mixing of the sexes. According to Islam, men and women should not interact socially, especially one-on-one. This concept seems very strict and extreme to many in the West. When I grew up, all my best friends were boys and I never had many girl friends. And now I am not supposed to have male friends? That is not entirely true. But interaction with males should be business-like.

We’ve all seen the consequences of unbusiness-like behavior with friends of the opposite sex. Attraction at some level is a common result, and this leads to trouble in marriages. Maybe it will not always cause your spouse to be jealous or result in a fight, but it always does affect how you view your spouse or future mate. You find things in your friends that you like better than the way your spouse is. You imagine yourself with someone other than your spouse, and that is damaging even if you do not take it seriously. “Falling out of love” with your spouse is absolute nonsense. It only happens if you let it happen. Thus, if you have a class or job with members of the opposite sex, fine. You can greet them and participate in the appropriate work-related discussions or small talk but should avoid deep personal conversations.

The issue of mixing at the mosque is one that regularly comes up in the Muslim communities. Some of the men and women want to sit together rather than in different rooms or one in front of the other. In my opinion, if they want to have everyone in the same room with women on one side and men on the other, fine, but then someone should be at the door handing out Islamic dress so that everyone is properly attired.

The mosque is a place for worship and not a place for absentmindedly admiring the opposite sex. And it is impossible to say truthfully that you can have men and women together in a place, without concern for proper dress, and not have at least some thoughts about the other sex result. Therefore, let them sit side-by-side if they must, but only if they all put on proper Islamic attire before entering the room. Then, when they leave the mosque, if they take it off and choose to mingle and interact, it is their own responsibility.

I do not see any oppression or unfairness in separating sexes at the mosque. However, I do have a problem with the many mosques that provide substandard facilities for women as if they were an afterthought. This usually results when the facilities are being converted from some previous structure such as a church or home. Women should be able to easily hear what is going on, and it is preferable that they can see, too.

I have seen some communities install audiovisual systems so that the prayers and sermons were on speakers that all could hear; and they used closed circuit TV so that the women could also see the speakers. In question-and-answer sessions, properly attired women with questions could enter the back of the men's area so that they could be called on, or another reasonable system could be devised.

Too many mosques have horrible or non-existent facilities for women and then wonder why some of their women are not knowledgeable or interested in the religion or are being misguided. Communities like the one I mentioned earlier in which the women couldn't see or hear and many could not understand the language being used are the ones which find their next generations rejecting practice of Islam and moving away.

Most Muslim communities struggle to even have a mosque let alone have good facilities for women, but I maintain that they should not build a mosque that does not serve their women well. Similarly, Muslim communities ideally should provide facilities for both the men and women to participate in community activities such as sports. It is not fair to the Muslim girl in the West who takes swimming lessons and gymnastics lessons every year from when she is three or four to be told on her ninth birthday that she can't do those things anymore.

It is like punishing the girl for becoming *baligh* (Islamically of age to be responsible for dress, prayer, etc.), when instead it should be something she can be happy about. How nice it would be if more Muslim communities that are able should rent or build facilities and hire single-sex staff so that their men and women can enjoy swimming and other sports. Communities could develop single-sex sports leagues along with training for the many who did not have opportunities to learn the sports earlier. I cannot stress enough the need for the Muslim women and Muslim children to be an active part of their community and to have full access to learning and recreation. It is essential to the well being and survival of Islam in the West.

Treating Women Differently in the Law

The last things I wish to discuss with regard to women in Islam are instances in which women are treated differently in Islamic law. Many of these may seem unfair at first glance but most really are not. Probably all of us have heard stories of women being punished for crimes differently than men or inheriting less and so on. There are cases when women and men alike are not treated fairly according to Islam even in countries with a predominantly Muslim population and whose laws are supposed to be based on Islam. The rest of the Muslim world owes it to the oppressed brothers and sisters and to themselves to combat these injustices when they become known.

Thankfully, most Muslim women do not face such oppression and experience an Islamic society closer to the ideal. All Muslim societies believe in the Holy Qur'an, and thus believe

in the verses which talk about women inheriting less than men, not serving as equal witness with men, and being punished by their husbands. The Western reader finds these verses or hears about them and instantly thinks of oppression. But again, those men and women who choose Islam find the matters differently.

In the case of inheritance, it is actually a complex issue and there are cases in which women inherit more than men. As a general rule, the men do inherit more, but only because their financial burden is far greater than women's are. To not give men more would actually be oppressive to them because their duties with their money are more severe. Muslim men are required to financially provide for their wives, children, elderly parents and so on.

This is regardless of whether the wife works or not. In addition he must provide his spouse with a marriage dowry. On the other hand, whatever money the wife has she can spend in any way she likes. She could spend it entirely on herself if she wanted and has no duty to spend it on anyone else. In comparison to Judeo-Christian law on inheritance and ownership of women, Islam is extremely generous.

As for women serving as witnesses, again the issue is more complex than it first seems. In some cases when witnesses are needed, either one man or two women is required. But in other cases, only the witness of a single woman will do. Since men are required to work and women are not, cases that involve business are more likely to require two women witnesses.

This could be a matter of protection for the women, because in matters of money there is the temptation of coercing the witness. Having two female witnesses helps protect either woman from coercion. Men can be coerced, too, but it is undoubtedly, in most cases, easier for a man to threaten and intimidate a woman than another man.

On the other hand, many times only a woman's witness is accepted, as may be the case when giving testimony about female anatomy. Or it may even override a man's testimony, as is the case when a man accuses a woman of lewd behavior and she denies it according to Qur'an 24:6-11.

Islam is a religion designed to serve all people in all times. Thus, many of its laws are built upon what is best for most people. Thus, it does not deny that some women may earn more than their husbands, or that some men may be coerced easier than some women. The laws still apply even in these cases, because applying them in these cases hurts no one. On the other hand, failure to apply the laws for those women who do not earn money or who might be coerced would be harmful.

A third case that is presented as oppressive to women is in 4:34 of the Holy Qur'an:

“Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because God has given the one more strength than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore, the righteous women are devoutly obedient and guard in their husband's absence what God would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them first, next refuse to share their beds, and last beat them lightly; but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means of annoyance.”

This translation, by Yusuf Ali, is more clear than many in getting across that the man is not given free reign to abuse his wife. This verse actually tells a lot about the Islamic family arrangement. Men are duty-bound to protect and maintain their spouses. This duty falls on them because they are generally stronger and more suited to such work. Further, they do not have the circumstances of menstruation, pregnancy, birth, and breast-feeding that many women experience.

In return for protection and maintenance, women are not required to bear children or cook or clean. They have not a single duty required of them in return, except two -- and those are simply to obey the husband in all that is reasonable and not contrary to Islam and to guard the husband's property and their own chastity when their husband is not present. That really is not a lot to ask and it is likely that the women have got the better deal.

But, what of the last part of the verse that talks about beating women? Many translations of this verse do not convey its full meaning, and so it appears to the reader that a husband who is displeased with his wife is permitted to beat her. Truly, he cannot touch her in anger, ever. If she has done something wrong, he is to simply tell her so and let her know that he is displeased. If she persists, then he may sleep in a different bed, and if she still persists, then he may lightly hit her.

What does it mean to lightly hit? To answer that, see the answer of the Prophet (saw) who was asked the very same question. His reply indicated that she cannot be hit on the face at all and not even redness is to result. The "hitting" is supposed to be more symbolic than actually painful, and done with a feather or *miswak* (kind of toothbrush). The husband has to take several steps over a period of days because he must first try the other two before coming to the third. Thus, it must be a problem of a serious and recurring nature. And, if he is upset with his wife because of her adherence to Islam, he can do nothing.

For example, he can do nothing if she wears *hijab* and he doesn't like it. This verse is revealed for the case of severely wrong behavior on the part of the wife and nothing else. Ayatollah Sistani has indicated that this beating can be done only related to severe problems concerning sexual intimacy or her travel without his permission after all other steps have been faithfully fulfilled, and he further says that a man cannot beat his wife in a way that physically harms her or he has to pay "blood money".

When such problems in a marriage exist, it is possible that divorce will result. Contrary to popular belief among non-Muslims, a Muslim man cannot divorce his wife simply by saying so three times in immediate succession. He says it once and then the couple must go through a considerable period in which they may separate and try to reconcile. During this time, he is still required to provide for her just as he always has. Actually, there are some circumstances in which he is not permitted to pronounce divorce at all, one of them being while his wife is menstruating.

The woman also has the right to divorce if she is facing any mistreatment by her husband by going to a legal representative. In that way, the woman pursuing divorce is nearly exactly like it is in many American states. The person wanting the divorce must file a case giving a reason for wanting the divorce, and then the case is examined by the law to determine if grounds for divorce do indeed exist. For the men, it is easier to begin the process of divorce in Islam. And, if he initiates it, a no-fault divorce is possible after efforts to reconcile fail. If a divorce results, he cannot lay any claim to his wife's property, even that which he had given her, no matter how wealthy she may be.

In practice, it is sometimes made too difficult for the woman to obtain a divorce and too easy for the man. It is difficult for some women to obtain access to truly Islamic legal representation. When the Muslim divorce system fails, the religion is blamed. Actually, if the divorce system were managed the way Islam directs, it would never fail. There are reliable *hadith* that the Prophet (saw) granted divorces for reasons as simple as the wife not finding the husband physically attractive. There is no question that a divorce should be granted in cases of abuse.

Finally, I will briefly mention male and female circumcision. Circumcision for Muslim males is enjoined for cleanliness and for the same reasons it is enjoined among Christians and Jews. Some Muslims also practice female circumcision in a variety of forms. There is a lot of debate as to whether this is an Islamic or cultural practice. There is no reference to the Prophet (saw) advising circumcision of women or of its practice among his family.

There is a *hadith* of the Prophet (saw) that mentions female circumcision, but I am not qualified to judge its authenticity and reports I have read cast serious doubt on its authenticity. Assuming it is authentic, for the sake of argument, this *hadith* tells believers that if they do practice female circumcision they must only remove a very small amount of foreskin. In any case, it is clear that removal of sexual organs, sewing up the woman to ensure virginity, and performing the procedure with unsterile equipment and lack of medical training are all not approved of in Islam and rather are considered as evil practices.

Regrettably, it is not too hard to find room for improvement in the practice of Islam the world over. This includes treatment of women. However, to maintain that Islam is oppressive to women is to maintain an absolute fallacy. It is similarly erroneous to maintain that most Muslims propagate oppressive beliefs and behavior. Upon careful examination, Islam reveals itself as the most just system of living available to mankind. Further, most Muslims are sincere in seeking proper implementation of Islam rather than twisting it to satisfy personal gain.

Division Among Muslims

The topic of division within Islam is a sore spot for the world of Muslims. It is easy to find Muslims polarized on this issue and acting with great emotion and vigor trying to prove their views. In the minds of these Muslims, those who adhere to a different group are in gross error and have purposely twisted the meanings of true Islam to their own ends.

It is disappointing to converts when they find that Islam is not the unified religion it first appears to be. For me, a sense of dread enveloped me when I began to encounter religious factions within Islam. It was dread, because I was still mentally exhausted from the process of conversion to Islam, and yet here I was faced with different versions of Islam to sort out. I would again have to engage myself in serious study, prayer for guidance and self-evaluation to try and determine which of the factions, if any, were truthful. The discovery of division did not raise any doubt in me about Islam itself, but it raised doubt that any one group was in possession of true Islam. I had to consider the possibility of being a Muslim without a school just as I had had to consider being a Christian without a church.

The various schools of Islam sometimes harbor bad blood toward each other. And thus, it is

not unusual to find books written by a scholar from one faction viciously defaming another faction to the point of calling it non-Muslim. Similarly, members from one faction will chastise members of another faction for causing disunity, when in truth neither group seeks disunity. After all, you cannot blame someone for pursuing what he/she finds to be true, even if it is different than what you find true.

I advise all Truth-seekers to stay away from those who speak viciously of other groups and accuse them of all sorts of misguidance and wrongdoing. Avoid their interpretations of the writings from the questionable “other” group. Instead, read their writings about their own beliefs.

As I have alluded to earlier, those who would find the Truth need to investigate all groups with an open mind and fairness. They should read works about a group written by numerous scholars and members of that group. They should judge a group by its own writings and teachings rather than other groups’ interpretations of such. They should not neglect study of a group because of its reputation or small numbers. They should not hesitate to ask questions of members of each group but should not take the answer of one person as representative of all members of the group.

It is each person’s duty, Muslim or not, no matter into what religion or school they were born, to determine for themselves where truth lies. They should not be satisfied that their own religion, culture, nation, or school holds the truth without extensive verification.

“...They say, ‘We follow that wherein we found our fathers.’ What! Even though their fathers were wholly unintelligent and had no guidance?” 2:170

Personally, I found a good place to start a study of all that is within Islam to be the Internet. Although it takes some effort to find it, it is possible to find good-quality information presented by each group that explains what they believe and why they believe it. You can also find lots of information about what they believe to be wrong with the other groups, but that type of information has to be regarded very carefully.

In my own study, I began first with the largest group, the Sunnis, and ultimately was not fully satisfied with any of the Sunni schools for the same reason that I was not satisfied with Christianity. For Sunnis, after the death of the Prophet (saw), religion came to the hands of ordinary, even if well-intentioned, men and thus the major sources of Sunni law come from such men. I also was unsatisfied that four schools within Sunni Islam should be considered as equally acceptable.

As a believer in a single Absolute truth and in a God who provides the means to that Truth, I strongly hold that minor differences in law do matter and that one way must be preferable to others. I could not accept using fallible collections of traditions of the Holy Prophet (saw), each of which contain numerous contradictory traditions and traditions which come from unreliable sources, as a primary source of the religion. Just like the Bible, the numerous errors and contradictions of the Sunni *hadith* (tradition) collections make them unreliable as a determiner of Truth. They are not from Allah (swt), but from men.

“If it had been from other than Allah they would have found therein much incongruity.” (4:82)

I do believe that traditions have a very important place in Islam but I feel that no collection

of traditions should be regarded as *sahih* (error-free). And I also believe that traditions from those who demonstrate themselves to be the best Muslims should be preferred over those narrated by any other individuals.

The Sunnis largely consider *ijtihad* or the means of determining right and wrong in any new cases, to be dead. The scholars rely on centuries-old books for *ijtihad* and, as such, do not truly have access to modern rulings about modern situations. Thus, the Sunni Muslims are left to make their own decisions on new matters that arise. So, once again, there is no way for them to satisfactorily determine right or wrong on any new problem. The quest for Absolute truth has failed.

As for other groups, I found many of them also to be unacceptable but I shall avoid discussing them in detail for the sake of brevity. The reader may wish to engage in his/her own study of Ismailis, Ahmadis, Nation of Islam, Qadanis, Fatimids, Bohras, Wahabis and Ja'faris.

After a detailed study, I chose the Ja'fari school of Islam because I found that it alone met my criteria. I shall briefly discuss some of the information and factors, which led to my choice, but I do not intend thereby to provide enough information to convince anyone of its correctness (that would take more pages than this entire book). Each person has a duty to conduct their own bias-free (or as near to that as possible) and detailed study of where Truth lies.

During the lifetime of the Prophet (saw), Allah (swt) appointed twelve successors after the prophet who would uphold the religion and prevent its corruption. The first of these successors was publicly appointed at Ghadeer Khum, a short time before the death of the Prophet (saw), in front of 90,000 to 140,000 witnesses. Two Qur'anic verses were revealed on that day and the event of that day has been recorded more times and by more sources than any other.

“O Messenger! Make known that which hath been revealed unto thee from thy Lord, for if thou do not, thou will not have conveyed His message.” (5:67)

“This day have I perfected your religion for you and completed My favor unto you, and have chosen for you as religion Al-Islam [submission to the One God].” (5:3)

The first verse is a command to announce what the Prophet (saw) had to announce at Ghadeer Khum, and the second is a statement that upon the finishing of this announcement Islam has been completed and perfected. What the Prophet (saw) said, according to the scholars of all schools of Islam, is as follows:

“O men and women! Allah is my master. I am the master of the faithfuls. I have a clear authority over their souls, and of whoever I am the master, Ali [his cousin whose hand he was upholding while speaking] is master. O Allah! Love him who loves Ali, hate him who hates Ali.” Muslim, vol.2, p.325 and many others

Further in verse 5:55, Allah says in meaning:

“Your mawla (master) can be only Allah; and His messenger and those who believe, who establish worship and pay the poor due while bowing down in

prayer.”

It is virtually unanimous among all leading scholars of any school of thought that this verse refers to Allah, the Prophet (saw), and Ali. Ali (as) is the one for whom it has been recorded in the traditions that he gave charity (in the form of a ring he was wearing) while bowing in prayer.

The disagreement arises over the definition of the word “mawla” because it can mean master or friend. But, in the context of Ghadeer Khum, it is clear that it means master, because it is clear that when the Prophet (saw) is speaking of Allah (swt) and himself he means the master sense of the word. Otherwise the phrase “*I have a clear authority over their souls...*” would be out of place.

And it also makes no sense to stop thousands of people in the middle of a hot desert to announce that Ali (as) is a friend. After saying this at Ghadeer Khum, the Qur’anic verse came which announced that Islam had been completed and perfected. This also would not make any sense if he had merely said that Ali was a friend. But, it makes perfect sense if he had just announced that Ali (as) had authority over the people equal to his own authority.

Nearly all Muslim scholars believe in the concept of Imamate, i.e., the successor of the Prophet (saw) that upholds and protects the religion from corruption. The Sunnis generally hold that the first four Imams were the first four Caliphs and do not know who the remainder are. But clearly this is unacceptable, as the Prophet Muhammad (saw) said: “*The person who dies and has not known the Imam of his time has died the same as one who died during the Age of Ignorance.*” (Sahih Bukhari vol. 5, p. 13; Sahih Muslim vol. 6, p. 21 No. 1849; and others) This *hadith* clearly indicates that all people in all times, including our time, should know our Imam.

The view that the first caliphs were imams is questionable since God did not appoint the caliphs into their positions. The first caliph was chosen in a small private election that took place while the family of the Prophet (saw) was busy with the Prophet’s burial. Others took power by being appointed by their predecessor. There is no evidence in any Qur’anic verse or *hadith* that the successors of the Prophet (saw) should be chosen by election or personal appointment. Rather, the evidence is to the contrary that Allah (swt) has chosen and appointed those who would lead mankind, just as He has done throughout history.

“You will never find a change in the practice of Allah.” (35:43)

The Prophet first presented the message of Islam to his near relatives and even at that early date he introduced Ali as “*my brother, my successor, and my caliph.*” The Prophet again introduced Ali to the people (as successor) on numerous occasions concluding with Ghadeer Khum. The appointment of Ali was therefore no secret.

This is only a very small portion of my study concerning Ali (as) that led me to believe that he was appointed successor of the Prophet (saw) and that obeying him was made compulsory. For one who demands more proof, there are many books dedicated solely to establishing that God did indeed establish Imams or guides on earth including twelve after the death of the Prophet (saw), the first of which was Imam Ali (as).

Among the leaders of Sunni schools and among the Imams of the Ismailis and so on, it is possible to find examples of sin and teachings contradicting the Qur’an. This is to be

expected from ordinary men, but not from those appointed by Allah (swt) to uphold the religion. One set of Imams, those twelve followed by the Ja'fari school, are singular in their adherence to Qur'an and lack of sin.

There are reliable *hadith* (records of the Prophet's (saw) words and actions) in the Sunni books that the Imams will be twelve in number. Further there are some which name them all, and they are named in accordance with the Ja'fari (Shia) belief. A few of these traditions are quoted here from Peshawar Nights:

(1) Sheikh Sulayman Balkhi Hanafi in his *Yanabiu'l-Mawadda*, ch.76, reports from *Fara'idu's-Simtain* of Hamwaini, who reports from Mujahid, who reports from Ibn Abbas, that a Jew named Na'thal came to the Holy Prophet and asked him questions about Tawhid (Unity of Allah). The Holy Prophet answered his questions and the Jew embraced Islam. Then he said: "O Holy Prophet, every prophet had a wasi (vicegerent). Our Prophet, Moses Bin Imran, made a will for Yusha Bin Nun. Please tell me who is your wasi?" The Holy Prophet said:

"My vicegerent is Ali Bin Abi Talib; after him are Hasan, and Husain and after them are nine Imams, who are the successive descendants of Husain."

Na'thal asked the Holy Prophet the names of those Imams. The Holy Prophet said: *"After Husain, his son, Ali, will be the Imam; after him his son, Muhammad; after him his son, Ja'far; after him his son Musa; after him his son, Ali; after him his son, Muhammad; after him his son, Hasan; after him his son, Muhammad Mahdi will be the last Imam. There will be twelve Imams."*

In addition to the names of the nine Imams, this *hadith* further states that each would succeed as Imam after his father. Na'thal made further inquiries, and the Holy Prophet described the manner of death of each Imam.

Then Na'thal said, "I bear witness that there is no god but Allah and that you are His Holy Prophet. I bear witness that these twelve holy Imams are your vicegerents after you. What you have said is exactly what is recorded in our books and in the will of Moses."

Then the Holy Prophet said: *"Paradise is for him who loves them and obeys them, and Hell is for him who is hostile to them and opposes them."*

Na'thal then recited some couplets to the effect that "May Allah, the Exalted, shower His blessings upon you, chosen Prophet and pride of the Bani Hashim. Allah has guided us by means of you and the twelve holy men whom you have named. Certainly Allah has purified them and preserved them from impurity. He who loves them is successful. He who hates them is the loser.

The last of the Imams will quench the thirst of the thirsty. He is the one the people will wait for. Prophet of Allah, your progeny is a blessing for me and for all the believers. Those who turn away from them will soon be thrown into Hell."

(2) The great scholar, Sheikh Sulayman Balkhi, in his *Yanabiu'l-Mawadda*, ch. 76 reports from *Manaqib* of Khawarizmi, who reports from Wathila Bin Asqa' Bin Qarkhab, who reports Jabir Bin Abdullah Ansari; and also Abu'l-Fazl Shaibani and he from Muhammad Bin Abdullah Bin Ibrahim Shafi'i, who reports Jabir Ansari (one of the chief companions of the Prophet) as

saying: "Jundal Bin Junadab Bin Jubair, a Jew, came to the Holy Prophet and asked him about Tawhid. After hearing his reply, the man became a Muslim. He said that on the previous night he had seen Moses in a dream telling him: 'Embrace Islam at the hands of the last of the prophets, Muhammad, and attach yourself to the vicegerents after him.' He thanked Allah for the blessing of Islam. He then asked the Holy Prophet to tell him the names of his vicegerents. The Holy Prophet began by saying: *'My vicegerents are twelve in number.'*

The man said that he had seen this fact in the Torah. He asked the Prophet to tell him their names, and the Prophet said: *'The first of them is the chief of the vicegerents, the father of the Imams, Ali. Then follow his two sons - Hasan and Husain. You shall see these three. When you reach the last stage of your life, Imam Zainu'l-Abidin will be born, and the last thing that you have of this world shall be milk. So cling to them so that ignorance may not mislead you.'*

The man said that he had seen in the Torah and in other scriptures the names of Ali, Hasan, and Husain in their various forms. He asked the Holy Prophet to tell him the names of the other Imams.

Then the Holy Prophet named the remaining nine Imams with their epithets and added: *'The last of them, Muhammad Mahdi, will live, but disappear. He will appear later and will fill the world with justice and equity, since it will have degenerated into injustice and tyranny. Verily, Paradise is for those who show patience during the time of his occultation. Paradise is for those who are firm in their love for him. These are they whom Allah Almighty has praised in the Holy Qur'an and for whom the Holy Qur'an is a 'guide for those who guard (against evil). Those who believe in the unseen.'* Also He says, ***'These are Allah's party: now surely the party of Allah are the successful ones.'*** (58:22)"

Still among the Muslims are those who do not believe in the sinlessness of God's messengers and guides. They say that those messengers and guides do not commit any sin or mistake in delivering the message or guidance but in other ways may commit fault. They also interpret passages in the Qur'an to indicate sins on the part of some prophets. There are numerous evidences contrary to that view, but such a belief is also contrary to reason.

First of all, God is perfectly capable of providing messengers and guides that do not commit fault. Secondly, if ever a messenger or guide did commit fault, even outside the normal realm of his religious work, it would affect his credibility and it would corrupt his purpose. Every waking deed of the messengers and guides is watched and is under scrutiny. If one of them did commit a sin, the followers would be likely to see it. It then becomes a question of how the followers are supposed to be able to tell which of the actions and sayings of that messenger or guide they are to follow. Which actions are from God and which aren't? "Do what I say and not what I do" is inadequate for the deliverance and protection of God's message, and God does not do inadequate work.

The Ja'fari school alone met my standards of possessing one absolute Truth derived from a God-protected source. Those who ultimately come to a different conclusion are entitled to do so. Tolerance of those who reach varied conclusions is the only action that agrees with the behavior of the Holy Prophet (saw). Among all groups and schools of Muslims are those who behave with very poor manners toward members of other groups. They allow hate and ill will to cultivate in themselves and justify their behavior by making a large list of grievances about the other party. I would ask those people to find any example in the

demeanor of the Prophet of Islam (saw) or any prophet (sa) that matches theirs. Even those who were the outright enemies of Islam, and rejected it although its truth was apparent to them, were never treated disrespectfully or cruelly, neither were they made the victims of aggression, neither were they abused in any way, be it with physical force or with words.

“... And let not hatred of any people seduce you that ye deal not justly. Deal justly, that is nearer to your duty.” (5:8)

Jihad

More than any other religion, Islam has the reputation of being a violent religion. Typically when some people think of Islam, they think of terrorism. News reporters have commented on events in the Middle East claiming that Muslims were acting out in a form of Holy War, or *jihad*. And there are people out there who believe it is their duty to fight in the name of Islam. However, news reporters are notorious for telling only part of the story. There are several instances that I can personally remember in which the news discussed how a certain group of Muslims attacked another group of people. What they forgot to mention was that group of people had attacked the Muslims a week ago. Since the Oklahoma bombing, the press has become more careful about how it reports incidents involving Muslims, but they still do not always get the story right.

I think we first need to know what *jihad* means. The word *jihad* actually refers to striving for the sake of religion and does not translate as Holy War. For example, it is a personal *jihad* to struggle against temptation to sin. The personal *jihad* is referred to as the greater *jihad* and is given major importance in Islam. When *jihad* is carried out as war, it is a struggle against those oppressing or aggressing against Muslims and is referred to as the lesser *jihad*.

Lending to Islam's violent reputation, many textbooks over the years have claimed that Islam was spread by the sword. In truth, it is not permitted to wage war in Islam except against those who have aggressed against you or are oppressing you. In those cases, it becomes a duty for able men to fight until the Muslims are again free. Unlike Christianity, Islam does not always support turning the other cheek. When your lives and well being are in danger, Islam says you should courageously defend yourselves even if you would rather fearfully ignore that some of your community members are being murdered or imprisoned or losing their jobs. Turning the other cheek in such cases is to turn your eyes away from suffering and wrongdoing and excuse it.

Most of the Muslim world consists of very peaceful people. But, throughout history there have been Muslims who were active fighters. We are quick to say these Muslims are wrong, but it is helpful to see things from their perspective to understand why they feel they are justified in their actions. Many people in the Middle East believe that the West is oppressing them. Undoubtedly, the West looks out for its own interests first and has done many questionable things to Third-World countries. When it is convenient, the West takes (or borrows and then wastes) land, takes or controls money, sides with immoral countries in disputes, prevents medicine and food from reaching needy people, and kills. The West controls trade and hastens to spread its culture, at the loss of other cultures, throughout the world.

Some peoples are subject to the effect of the West's mingling in world affairs more than others and some feel they are being treated wrongly to the point of oppression. And some of them are right. No matter what the reasons, is it not oppressive that Iraqi children under sanction have been denied nutritious food and basic medicine? Is it not oppressive that the Palestinians who had been living in their land for centuries were kicked out and not recompensed in any way? Surely if your children were dying or your home was taken from you, there would be no question that you were a subject of oppression and you would very likely want to fight.

What are these people to do? First of all, Islam is against the use of suicide tactics or cruel means such as biological warfare. Further, it forbids attacking women and children. Further, those who feel they are being oppressed may fail to see those that they have grievances against are generally societies of mostly non-aggressive individuals. The oppressors end up being a vague concept and an unclear body. For example, the West and America are both vague terms made up of a huge diversity of peoples. As a result of this problem of identifying the enemy, the terrorists have made the mistake of hating and attacking innocent people who have personally done nothing against the Muslims. That being said, it should be realized that many distant or vague reports of terrorism are more properly classified as legitimate warfare.

Actually, in the absence of the Prophet (saw) or Imam (as) sent by God, many Muslims are of the opinion that no one has the authority to declare a *jihad* as an act of war, anyway. There is no truly Islamic government on Earth, and thus there is no Islamic leader who clearly has the authority to declare a war. Leaders of nations can declare war against other nations, but not religious wars. Americans who hear of a religious leader ordering attacks against the United States should understand that most Muslims desire only peace and justice and are not swayed by any old call by any old religious leader.

Ritualism

The last topic I wish to discuss in this section is that of the many rituals in Islam. Why do Muslims pray a certain way, wash before prayer, fast for a whole month, face one way in prayer, and slaughter their meat in a particular way, etc.? To non-Muslims, being so concerned about minor details may seem silly. Why should God care if I wash my feet or just wipe them in preparation for prayer?

No one can deny that good habits are useful. Islamic ritual in part is designed to aid in the formation of good habits and in remembering God throughout our day-to-day lives. Following Islamic ritualistic practices leads to good hygiene and diet and balance between spiritual, physical and social aspects. The minute details may seem nit-picky, but taking care in the details of ritual shows respect for the importance of religion in all parts of life. Further, in many cases logical reasons for the details exist. In particular, careful adherence to the forms of the ritual often helps in understanding the purpose or meaning of the ritual itself.

Modern Muslims are guilty of practicing their religion too often on a purely ritualistic level. Performance of prayer without careful thought to its meaning and purpose is very nearly meaningless and purposeless. It is just an empty form of true prayer. Allah (swt) did not prescribe rituals as a means to take up time but rather as a means of perfecting our faith

and attaining nearness to Him. A lifetime can be spent in education and effort toward engaging oneself completely and properly in all acts of worship.

However, a good place to start is conscious attention to the acts being performed and their aims. For example, washing before prayer can be seen as symbolically cleansing ourselves to face the Almighty. If one learns the supplications that accompany the washing, it may add increased meaning to the act and enable the performer to concentrate more on the task at hand. If you don't know the purpose behind a ritual it doesn't hurt to ask someone you regard as more pious or more knowledgeable than yourself.

Concentration toward the spiritual aspects of prayer and other rituals is difficult because our thoughts of worldly affairs tend to intrude. But if we are persistent in our efforts, in time the task becomes easier and we not only enjoy the activities more but benefit from them more as well. If you don't enjoy praying to God, this is an indication that your attention to its true meanings and purpose are lacking.

Is not our ultimate goal in Muslim life to attain nearness to God or submission to His will? In this life, prayer is an opportunity to speak with Him Whom We Are Seeking, so it should be something we look forward to and not just a duty to be completed. If the heart is tired and your attention is not prepared for the ritual, then find steps to help you become prepared and if necessary, some recommend delaying the ritual awhile (so far as that does not mean committing a sin) until you can perform it better. Hopefully, continual use of this practice will cause the tiredness of the heart to decrease and you will be more easily prepared.

Conclusion

I hope that you have found something in this work to be of use. I have attempted it purely for the sake of Allah (swt), and I do welcome your feedback. I know that it is not really a complete work or of an adequately scholarly nature due to my own personal limitations. I have attempted herein to outline my own path to Islam including a bit of personal history, a modest portion of study in the field of comparative religion, and a brief expounding on topical subjects in Islam that were of particular interest to me as a female American convert to the religion. All errors within the text are of course solely mine.

I owe thanks to a great many people who have helped me along my path and who continue to do so.

A Brief Prayer

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

Peace be upon Muhammad and the family of Muhammad.

I offer thanks to the Almighty Allah (swt) Who guided me while no one else around me was guided and Who is the source of every magnificent bounty I have enjoyed in my life. Allah

(swt) is indeed the Beneficent, the Merciful, and to Him belongs all praise.

May Allah (swt) grant all readers of this work good health of body, mind and spirit and aid them in their daily struggles.

May Allah (swt) guide us all on the straight path and prevent us from departing it. May He protect us from misguidance and evil temptation, decreasing the number of our sins and increasing the number of our good deeds. May He purify for us our intentions, increase our wisdom and knowledge, and grant us the good from His endless bounty both in this life and the hereafter. May our remembrance of the One God be constant and perfect.

Peace be upon Muhammad and the family of Muhammad, who have performed their duties perfectly and preserved the Truth.

Diana (Masooma) Beatty

masoomadeb@earthlink.net [14]

A Short Reading List

A Restatement of the History of Islam and Muslims, by Sayed Ali Asghar Razwy

An Enlightening Commentary into the Light of the Holy Qur'an, by A Group of Muslim Scholars.

Marriage and Morals in Islam, by Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi

Self Building, by Ayatullah Ibrahim Amini

The Bible, The Qur'an and Science, by Maurice Bucaille

The Choice, by Ahmed Deedat

The Holy Bible, NIV or King James

The Holy Qur'an, translations by Pickthall or Yusuf Ali

Then I Was Guided, by Muhammad al-Tijani al-Samawi

The New Testament - A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings, by Bart D. Ehrman

<http://www.al-islam.org/> [15] *contains many of these and other high-quality works, including access to a glossary of Islamic terms.*

Jazakallah to all those who helped with this work in any way, and to all those who helped me in my struggle. Alhumdolillaah.

Appendix: If You Decide To Convert

Although this is an appendix, this section should not be regarded as an afterthought. It is merely serving a different purpose than the rest of the book. You may regard this section as a brief technical manual on what to do and the basics of what you need to know if you decide to become Muslim. This section contains some information on web sites and mailing addresses that are accurate at the time of writing but I can't guarantee their accuracy for all future dates.

If you decide to be Muslim, this means that you believe that there is only one, indivisible God, and you believe in all the prophets sent by Him, including Prophet Muhammad (saw). You must state this belief to God. This is called Shahada and is stated as follows:

Ash hadoo an laa ilaahaa ilallaah [I bear witness that there is no god but Allah (one god)]

Ash hadoo anna Muhammadan Rasoolallah (I bear witness that Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah). If you state those two things with belief and conviction, you are Muslim.

The following may be added if you wish to declare that you have consciously decided to accept the Ja'fari school of thought with Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (as) as the divinely appointed guide and ruler after the Holy Prophet.

Ash hadoo anna Alioon Wallioollah Wasiyo Rasoolillaah, Wa Khalifatahoo Bilaa Fasl [I bear witness that Ali is the successor appointed by Allah, inheritor of the Prophet, and the rightful ruler or Caliph (immediately after the Prophet)]

It is tradition to state your belief in the presence of a few Muslim witnesses, often in a mosque, but this is not required for your conversion to be valid before God. So, what's next?

The information and instructions I will provide now are based on the Shia (Ja'fari) school of thought in Islam and may have slight variations from other schools. It is intended to be general to get you started and is not meant to be an authoritative set of instructions, as I am not at all qualified to be authoritative.

There are five roots of religion (Usool e deen) that are considered the major components of Shia Islamic belief. These are monotheism, justice of God, prophethood, imamat, and resurrection.

Monotheism - This is the belief in a single, indivisible God.

Justice of God - This is the belief that God is by nature just and fair.

Prophethood - This is the belief in all the prophets sent by God and their uniform message of guidance.

Imamat - This is the belief in maintainers and protectors of religion appointed by God, particularly the twelve appointed after the death of Prophet Muhammad (saw), including

the Imam of our time. (as)

Resurrection – This is the belief in a life after death, including a Judgment Day and punishment or reward in hell or heaven.

Similarly, there are ten branches of religion (Furoo e deen) that are considered the major components of Islamic practice. These are *salaat* (the daily prayer), *sawm* (fasting), *hajj* (pilgrimage), *zakat* (tax on wealth), *khums* (tax on money),

Jihad (struggle), *amr bil ma'ruf* (enjoining good), *nahi 'anil munkar* (forbidding evil), *tawalla* [loving the Prophet and his family (as)], and *tabarra* [disassociating with the enemies of the Prophet and his family (as)].

Prayer

The first major obligation once you become Muslim is the daily prayer. Most converts are very eager and stressed about knowing how to perform it correctly immediately. Following are some basic instructions to get you started with the daily prayer. You can hold this if necessary for awhile until you start to memorize things. When you get the chance, meet with someone who already knows the prayer and they can help you with the Arabic and little details, God willing. In the meantime, try to pray with concentration and when you prostrate place your forehead on soil, rock, wood, or blank paper.

The five daily prayers are as follows:

Morning prayer is two *rakaats* (cycles) performed approximately 70 minutes prior to sunrise.

Noon-ish prayer is 4 *rakaats* performed just after true noon (when the sun reaches the highest point in its path across the sky, or passes from the eastern half into the western half of the sky.)

Afternoon prayer is 4 *rakaats* performed anytime between the noon prayer and the evening prayer, with its ideal time when an object's afternoon shadow just becomes longer than the object itself.

Evening prayer is 3 *rakaats* performed roughly 15 minutes to half an hour after sunset, when redness has left the western half of the sky.

And the night prayer is 4 *rakaats* performed after the evening prayer ideally when twilight is over, which is usually about one and a half hours after sunset.

Prior to praying you should perform *wudhu*, the ritual ablution. This is done by washing your hands with water, then covering the face with water from the top down. Then using your left hand, cover your right arm from the elbow to the finger tips with poured water, then using your right hand do the same to your left. Next, without getting new water, wipe the top of your head with the wetness on your right hand fingers (usually done in a parting in your hair), and finally, similarly wipe the top of your right foot with your wet right hand from toes to ankle, and likewise wipe your left foot with your left hand.

If you are a female just finishing your monthly cycle, or if you have had intercourse or a wet dream since your last prayer, or in a few other less likely cases, instead of performing *wudhu*, you should perform *ghusl*, which is a shower, prior to your prayer. This is usually performed by rinsing your head and neck area, then your right front all the way to your toes, then your right back, left front and left back so that your whole body is touched by running water. It is best to overlap your coverage area (do a little of the left front while washing your right front and vice versa) to guarantee coverage.

Also, whenever you use the toilet, you should rinse the affected area with water three times and make sure no more urine or feces are present. Men should learn how to perform *istibra*, which is a process of pushing out any left over urine from the urethra. Detailed instructions on *wudhu*, *ghusl*, *istibra* and so on may be found in books of Islamic laws such as "*Islamic Laws*" published by The World Federation and available online from .

Finally, before beginning, if you are a male you should make sure your privates are covered, or preferably from the navel to the knee (more is better). And if you are female everything should be covered but hands, face and feet.

Prayer is performed facing a house of worship to God built by Prophet Ibrahim (as) in Mecca. Look at a globe and find the shortest curve from your location to Mecca (a great circle) and that will show you which way to face in prayer. For North Americans, that is Northeast.

Prayer begins with *Niyyat* (You make an intention in your mind that you are praying so and so prayer for seeking nearness to Allah). Then recite *takbir* (saying *Allahoo Akbar* (*God is greater than description*, roughly, with hands held up by your ears). Then lower your arms to your sides.

1st cycle (*rakat*)

STANDING:

1) Recite *Surah Fateha*:

Bismillaahir Rahmaanir Rahim (In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful)

Alhumdoollellaahi Rabbil Aalameen (Praise be to Allah, Lord of the worlds).

arrahmaan irraheem (the Compassionate, the Merciful)

maaliki yowm ideen (Owner/master of the day of Judgment)

iyaaka na' boodoo wa iyyaaka nas taeen (Thee alone we worship and Thee alone we ask for help.)

ihdinas siraatal moostaqeem (Show us the straight path)

siraatal ladheena anamta alayhim (The path of those whom Thou hast favored)

ghayril maghdoobi alayhim waladhaalleen (Not the path of those who have earned Thine

anger nor of those who have gone astray.)

2) Then recite any other *surah* of Qur'an. Probably the shortest and easiest, and one that is also highly recommended to recite, is *Surah Ikhlas*:

Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem (In the name of Allah, the Compassionate the Merciful)

Qul hoo wallahoo ahad (Say: He is Allah, the One!)

Allaahus samad (Allah, the eternally besought of All!)

Lam yalid walam yoolad (He begetteth not nor was begotten)

walam yakool lahoo koofoo wan ahad (And there is none comparable to Him.)

3) Say *Allaahoo Akbar* again

BOWING (Bend forward with your hands on your knees, males keeping the knees unbent and ladies bending their knees slightly):

1) Say: *Soobhaana rabbi al adheemi wabihamdih* (Roughly, Glory be to my High Sustainer and I praise Him)

2) While going back to standing position: *Sami' Allahu liman hamidah* (Allah hears and accepts the praise of one who praises)

3) While standing again briefly: *Allaahoo Akbar*

PROSTRATING/SITTING:

1) After that *Allaahoo Akbar*, go to the ground and put head, knees, toes, and palms on the ground (elbows usually recommended for women as well).

Say: *Soobhana Rabbi al Aa'laa wa bihamdih* (Glory be to my Great Sustainer, Most High, and I praise Him)

2) Go to sitting position, say *Allaahoo Akbar*, then say *Astaghfirullaahaa Rabbi wa atooboo ilayh* [I seek forgiveness from Allah my Sustainer and I turn to Him (repent)] then *Allaahoo Akbar* again

3) Repeat #1 (*Soobhana Rabbi al Aa'laa wa bihamdih*)

4) Sit up, say *Allaahoo Akbar*, and return to standing position while saying *Bi haw lillaahi wa qoowwathi aqoomoo wa aqa'ood* (I stand and sit with the help and strength of Allah.)

THAT IS END OF RAKAT #1.

RAKAT #2

Perform like rakat #1, except for the addition of *qunoot* and the following modification to step#4 in

PROSTRATING/SITTING: (new parts are marked with asterix*)

**Qunoot*: In the second *rakat*, after reciting the two *surahs* and before bowing, place your hands palms up, together at about chest level and say:

La ilaaha illallaahool halimool kareem (There is none worshipping but Allah, the Forbearing and Generous.) There are many other things you could say here, but that is a simple one to learn for starters. After *qunoot*, continue with the prayer as in the first *rakat*, with bowing.

Then in step 4) take note of these modifications:

Sit up, say *Allahoo Akbar*,

*Then say *Al hamdoo lillaah, Ash hadoo an laa ilaha il Allahoo wah dahoo laa sharika lah* (All praise is for Allah, and I testify that there is none worth worshipping except Allah, who is one and has no partner.)

*Then say: *Wa Ash hadoo anna Muhammadan 'abdoohoo wa Rasooloh* (And I testify that Muhammad is His servant and messenger)

*Then say: *Allah hoomma salli'ala Muhammadin wa aali Muhammad* (O Allah, send your blessings on Muhammad and his progeny).

IF THIS IS NOT THE LAST RAKAT,

Then say: *Bi haw lillaahi wa qoowwatihi aqoomoo wa aqa' ood* while standing up.

**IF THIS IS THE LAST RAKAT, SAY THE FOLLOWING TO END THE PRAYER, WHILE STILL IN SITTING POSITION:

**Assalaamoo alayka ayyoohan Nabiyyoo wa rahmatullaahi wa barakaatoh* (O Prophet, Allah's peace, blessings and grace be upon you!)

Assalamoo 'alayna wa 'ala ibaadillaahis saaliheen (Allah's peace be on us, and all pious servants of Allah)

Assalaamoo 'alaykoom wa rahmatoollaahi wa barakaatoh (Allah's peace, blessings and grace be on you.)

IF IT IS NOT THE LAST RAKAT CONTINUE AS FOLLOWS:

3RD & 4TH RAKAT:

Just like 1st *rakat* except for the Standing part:

STANDING:

1) While standing say either *Surah Fateha* or the following, which is most recommended:

Subhaanallaahi wal hamdoo lillaahi wa laa ilaahaa illallahoo wallaahoo akbar (Glory be to

Allah, and praise be to Allah, there is no God but Allah and He is greater than description)

You may say this once, or three times.

IF THIS IS THE LAST RAKAT, SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN RAKAT #2 MARKED WITH THE ** SIGN TO END SALAAT.

There are online prayer and *wudhu* instructions at
<<http://www.playandlearn.org/Fiqh/index.htm> [16]>.

Also, you can purchase video instructions from Idara e Jaferia in Maryland. Their tape is distributed by Khatoons Inc., 6650 Autumn Wind Circle, Clarksville MD 21029 USA and online at <http://www.khatoons.com> [17].

You can usually obtain a prayer timetable to get the most accurate local times for prayer from a mosque in your area, or download computer software that calculates prayer time and direction from this site: <<http://www.ais.org/~islam/subject/praytime.html> [18]>.

Now, continuing with the Branches of Religion:

Fasting

During the month of Ramadhan Muslims are required to fast from about a half-hour prior to the morning prayer until the time for the evening prayer. The month of Ramadhan on the Islamic calendar cycles throughout the seasons with a nice result that no matter where you live you will get to experience long days and short days of fasting over the years. For those living in extreme northern or southern locales so that they may not experience any sunrise or sunset in a 24-hour period, they follow the timings of another, less extreme location. Fasting means no eating, drinking, intercourse, immoral behavior, etc. People who have medical reasons for not fasting are exempted but should donate the equivalent of a meal to charity for days when they miss a required fast. Also, menstruating women do not fast but make up missed fasts at a later date.

The month of Ramadhan is a time of spiritual renewal and there are many special prayers during this time. If you need to know when the month of Ramadhan is likely to begin, please visit the following website: .

Pilgrimage

Every individual with the physical and financial means is obliged to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his/her lifetime. It is a very spiritual and exciting event that happens once a year. Its rituals are generally related to events involving the Prophet Ibrahim (as), and are designed for spiritual reflection and renewal. If you plan to go you should read up on it first and make your arrangements through an established *hajj* travel organization that is based on the particular school of Islam that you follow.

Zakat and Khums

Muslims who possess certain things like amounts of gold, grain or livestock are required to give a percentage of their wealth, usually 5 or 10% to the needy. Since most people don't have the wealth to have to pay this, I won't go into a lot of detail. However, all Muslims are likely to have to pay *Khums*, the other kind of charity tax. *Khums* is a tax of 20% on your surplus earnings. Let's say that at the end of this month after paying all your expenses you have \$500 in unused goods and/or money in the bank. Next year, you should take new account of your surplus earnings. If it is less or the same, you do not have to pay *khums*, and you record the new amount of surplus for comparison with the following year. If you have more, then you pay *khums* on the difference. For example, if you have \$600, the difference is \$100 and 20% of that is \$20, so you owe *khums* of \$20 dollars. This money should be sent to people and organizations who have been given authority to accept and/or distribute *khums* money.

Jihad

This is the struggle for Allah (swt), discussed in the main portion of the book.

Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil

These are the practices of encouraging each other to do good deeds and avoid sin.

Tawalla and Tabarra

These are the practices conforming your heart and behavior to standards that demonstrate your love and devotion to the Prophet and his family (as). And conforming your heart and behavior to standards that demonstrate that you are not like and do not associate with those who act as enemies of the Prophet and his family (as).

Those are all the branches of religion, but, there are some other acts that are compulsory, such as observing the Islamic modest dress and avoiding consumption of certain foods/drinks. For women, as mentioned in the main portion of the book, this standard of dress requires covering all but hands and face in loose clothing.

Muslims do not allow any intoxicating substances into their bodies, do not eat pork, and otherwise only eat meat that is permissible according to the Qur'an and has been slaughtered in an Islamic manner. This meat is obtained from special stores and is called *halal* meat. There is a directory of Islamic clothing retailers (for men, children and women) at:

and a directory of *halal* meat grocers/restaurants at

< <http://www.geocities.com/~iaba/res.html> [19]>.

For the sake of not becoming overwhelming, God willing, I will conclude the appendix at this point. If you are ready for more information, refer to the suggested reading list, contact Muslims in your area, or examine the following recommendations:

The Islamic Correspondence Course

Contact: Islamic Education and Information Center 5359 Timberlea Blvd., Unit 52
Mississauga, Ontario L4W 4N5
Canada

Phone 905-212-9676 Fax 905 212-9690

This is a 50 lesson postal mail course that is very nice. The first six lessons are free so that you can see if you are interested. After that, there is a one-time fee to help cover the postage costs.

The World Islamic Network book club

Contact: World Islamic Network
67/69 H. Abbas (as) Street
Dongri, Mumbai 400 009 India
e-mail: win@bom4.vsnl.net.in [20]

This is an organization that distributes Islamic literature for free to anyone who asks. In order to receive more literature after the first shipment, you need to write a summary/commentary of what you read and send it back to them by post.

May Allah (swt) guide us all on the straight path and grant us the good of this world and the hereafter.

A Brief Glossary

I have tried to include all terms used in this text plus other common ones and have included the most common variant spellings.

A

Abadat or *Ibadat* -Worshiping, praising Allah

Adel or *Adil* -just

Ahl-House, family

Asr- The afternoon, and the prayer of the afternoon.

Adan or *Adhan* - the call for prayer

Ayah or *Ayat* -sign, verse of quran

Ayaat-plural of *ayah*

B

Batel or *Batil* -void, not accepted

D

Deen- religion

Dua- supplication

E

Eed or *Eid* -holiday

Eid-ul Fitr-A holy day following the month of *Ramadan*

Eeman or *Iman* - deep belief, faith

Ehtiyat or *Ihtiyat* - precaution

Ehram or *Ihram* -State of worship, by the entering of which the worshipper makes certain things *haram* for himself. Associated with *hajj*. Also, the type of dress worn during *hajj*.

Eqamah or *Iqamah* -second call for prayer

Esha or *Isha* -the commencement of darkness, and the prayer of that time

Estebra or *Istibra*-purification, especially of animals and of the male organ

F

Fajr-dawn

Fatwa-verdict, especially of a mujtahed

Fiqh-science of religious jurisprudence

G

Ghadeer-name of a place near Mecca, and the great holiday named after the event there of announcing Imam Ali's (as) successorship.

Ghusl-ritual bath

H

Hajj-form of worship performed in Mecca, required once in a lifetime for all Muslims able to perform it.

Halal-legal

Haram-illegal

Hejab or *Hijab* -the screening between non-related men and women, the Islamic modest dress

I

Iddah - A woman's waiting period after the end of a marriage.

Iftar-the breaking of the Fast

Ijtehad or *Ijtihad* - struggle to fathom divine law

Imam-Divine vicegerent

Imam-jamaat -leader of congregational prayer

J

Jafari, Ja'afari - Shia school of thought believing in the 12 Imams (as)

Jamaat -group, congregation, and prayer of,

Jehad or *Jihad* -struggle against self or against oppression

jinn-a type of creature having like man, free-will

Jomah or *Jumu'ah* -Friday, or the Friday congregational prayer

K

Kaba or *Ka'aba* -the Holy House in Mecca, the *qibla* of Muslims

Kafan-shroud a corpse must be wrapped in

Khoms or *Khums* -a fifth, obligatory tax-like charity

M

Maghreb or *Maghrib* -sunset, also the prayer shortly after sunset

Mahram-haram to marry, usually due to close blood relation

Mamoom-person praying in group-prayer

Masjid- Islamic Center or building for prayer and other gatherings

Mecca-holy city in Arabia where the Ka'aba is located

Mehrab-place in the mosque where the Imam *jamaat* stands to pray

Moadden or *Muazzin* -caller of the *adhan*

Muta, Mut'a, Mutah-temporary marriage

Mujtahed or *Mujtahid* -person capable of acting according to his own religious knowledge and not needing to refer to the verdict of another scholar

Makrooh-abominable act, one is rewarded for not performing it

Mustahab-thing done in desire of (divine) love, one is rewarded for performing it

N

Nafelah or *Nafilah* -defined desirable prayers in addition to the required daily prayers

Najes or *Najis* -dirty and impure

Najasat -impurity

Niyyat -intention, as in the intention to perform an act

O

Olama or *Ulama*- the learned scholars of Islam

Omrah or *Umrah* - a worship performed in Mecca like *hajj* not but mandatory

Q

Qada, Qaza, Qadha -performance of a duty that was not performed in its proper time, as in prayers performed late

Qasr-four-*rakat* prayers, which become two-*rakat* prayer for those ruled as travelers

Qibla-direction faced in prayer

Qiyam-standing, rise, as in the standing prayer position

Qonoot or *Qunoot* -part of the prayer with hands palms up

Qorbat or *Qurbat* -the *niyyat* of nearness to Allah

R

Rakaat or *Rakat* - a unit or cycle of prayer

Ramadan, Ramadhan, Ramazan -the month of fasting

Roku, Ruku, Rukoo -a bow; part of the prayer

S

Sajda-prostration; part of the prayer

Salaam, Salam -invocation and greeting, part of the prayer

Salawat-invocation of blessings, particularly on Muhammad (saw) and his family

Shahada - declaration, particularly the declaration of belief in Islam

Sharia, Shareea, Sharia'ah - the Divine Law

Shaytan, Shaitan -the enemy of man, Satan

Shia-follower of the twelve Imams, commonly the Ja'fari school of thought

Sojood, Sujood -prostrating (Plural of *Sajdah*)

Sunni- "orthodox" or majority type of Muslim

Sayyed, Sayyid, Sayed - descendent of the Holy Prophet

T

Taher or *Tahir* -clean, not impure

Takbeer or *Takbir*- the saying of *Allaahoo Akbar*, (God is great)

Taqleed or *Taqlid*- the following of a *mujtahed* for Islamic jurisprudence

Tashahhod or *Tashahud*- declaration recited in the second and last *rakat* of all prayers

Tayammom or *Tayammum*- Ritual cleansing (with sand/mud etc.) which is a substitute for *wudhu* and/or *ghusl*

Tawheed- Divine Unity (Oneness of God)

W

Wajeb or *Wajib* - obligatory

Wudoo, Wudoo, Wudhu, Wuzu - ritual wash performed for prayer, etc.

Z

Zakat- an obligatory charity

Ziyarat- pilgrimage to the holy shrines

Zohr, Dhuhr- noon, the name of the first afternoon prayer

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