

Raphael Narbaez, Jr., Jehovah's Witness Minister, USA (part 1 of 2)



A forty-two-year-old Latino, Raphael, is a Los Angeles-based comic and lecturer. He was born in Texas where he attended his first Jehovah's Witness meeting at age six. He gave his first Bible sermon [soon after the age of thirteen], tended his own congregation at twenty, and was headed for a position of leadership among the 904,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in the United States. But he traded in his Bible for a Quran after having braved a visit to a local mosque.

On November 1, 1991, he embraced Islam, bringing to the Muslim community the organizational and speaking skills he developed among Jehovah's Witnesses. He speaks with the urgency of a new convert, but one who can make immigrant Muslims laugh at themselves.

He told his story mimicking a cast of characters.

I remember vividly being in a discussion where we were all sitting in my parents' living room and there were some other Jehovah's Witnesses there. They were talking about : "It's Armageddon! The time of the end! And Christ is coming! And you know the hailstones are going to be out here as big as cars! God is going to use all kinds of things to destroy this wicked system and remove the governments! And the Bible talks about the earth opening up! It's going to swallow whole city blocks!"

I'm scared to death! And then my mother turned around: "See what's going to happen to you if you don't get baptized, and if you don't do God's will? The earth is going to swallow you up, or one of these huge hailstones is going to hit you on the head [klonk], knock you out, and you will not exist ever again. I'll have to make another child."

I wasn't going to take a chance of being hit by one of those big hailstones. So I got baptized. And of course Jehovah's Witnesses don't believe in the sprinkling of the water. They submerge you completely, hold you there for a second, and then bring you back up.

I did that at the age of thirteen, September 7, 1963, in Pasadena, California, at the Rose Bowl. It was a big international assembly. We had 100,000 people. We drove all the way from Lubbock, Texas.

Eventually I started giving bigger talks - ten minutes in front of the congregation. A circuit servant recommended me to give the hour lectures that are done on Sunday when they invite the general public. They usually reserved those [sermons] for the elders of the congregation.

[In an authoritarian voice:] “Sure he’s young. But he can handle it. He’s a good Christian boy. He has no vices, and he’s obedient to his parents and seems to have pretty good Bible knowledge.”

So at the age of sixteen I started giving hour lectures in front of whole congregations. I was assigned first to a group in Sweetwater, Texas, and then, eventually, in Brownfield, Texas, I got my first congregation. At age twenty, I had become what they call a pioneer minister.

Jehovah’s Witnesses have a very sophisticated training program, and they also have kind of a quota system. You have to devote ten to twelve hours a month to door-to-door preaching. It’s like sales management. IBM has nothing on these guys.

So when I became a pioneer minister, I devoted most of my full time to doing the door-to-door ministry. I had to do like 100 hours a month, and I had to have seven Bible studies. I started lecturing other congregations. I began to get a lot of responsibility, and I was accepted at a school in Brooklyn, New York, a very elite school that Jehovah’s Witnesses have for the crème de la crème, the top one percent. But I didn’t go.

A few things no longer made sense to me. For example, the quota system. It seemed like every time I wanted to turn a corner and get into another position of responsibility, I had to do these secular material things to prove my godliness. It’s like if you meet your quotas this month, God loves you. If you don’t meet your quotas next month, God doesn’t love you. That didn’t make very much sense. One month God loves me and one month He doesn’t?

We criticized the Catholic Church because they had a man, a priest, to whom they had to confess. And we’d say, “You shouldn’t have to go to a man to confess your sins! Your sin is against God!” And yet we went to a Body of Elders. You confessed your sins to them, and they put you on hold, and said [Elder as telephone operator:] “Hold on just a minute . . . What do you think, Lord? No? . . . Okay, I’m sorry, we tried our best but you’re not repentant enough. Your sin is too big, so you either lose your fellowship in the church or you’re going to be on probation.”

If the sin is against God, shouldn’t I directly go to God and beg for mercy?

Probably the nail that hit the coffin was that I noticed that they started reading their Bible less. Jehovah's Witnesses have books for everything that is put out by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. The only people on the entire planet who know how to interpret Bible Scripture correctly are that group of men, that committee in Brooklyn, who tell Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide how to dress, how to talk, what to say, what not to say, how to apply Scripture and what the future is going to be like. God told them, so they can tell us. I appreciated the books. But if the Bible is the book of knowledge, and if it's God's instructions, well, shouldn't we get our answers out of the Bible? Paul himself said to find out for yourself what is a true and acceptable word of God. Don't let men tickle your ears.

I started saying, "Don't worry so much about what the Watchtower says - read the Bible for yourself." Ears started to prick up.

[Old Southerner's drawl:] "I think we got us an apostate here, Judge. Yup. I think this old boy's one taco short of something."

Even my father said, "You better watch it, young man, that's the demons talking right there. That's the demons trying to get in and cause division."

I said, "Dad, it's not the demons. People don't need to read so much of these other publications. They can find their answers with prayer and in the Bible."

Spiritually I no longer felt at ease. So in 1979, knowing that I could not make headway, I left, disgruntled and with a bad taste in my mouth, because all my life I had put my soul, my heart, my mind into the church. That was the problem. I didn't put it in God. I put it in a man-made organization.

I can't go to other religions. As a Jehovah's Witness, I had been trained, through the Scriptures, to show that they are all wrong. That idolatry is bad. The Trinity doesn't exist.

I'm like a man without a religion. I was not a man without a God. But where could I go?

In 1985, I decided to come to Los Angeles and get on the Johnny Carson show and make my mark as a great comedian and actor. I have always felt like I was born for something. I didn't know whether it was going to be finding the cure to cancer or becoming an actor. I kept praying and it got frustrating after a while.

So I just went to the Catholic Church close to my house, and I tried it. I remember on Ash Wednesday, I had that ash cross on my forehead. I was trying anything I could. I went for about two or three months, and I just couldn't do it anymore, man. It was:

Stand up. Sit down.

Stand up. Sit down.

Okay, stick your tongue out.

You got a lot of exercise. I think I lost about five pounds. But that's about it. So now I'm more lost than ever.

But it never passed through my mind that there is not a Creator. I have His phone number, but the line's always busy. I'm doing my little movie shots. A film called *Deadly Intent*. A telephone commercial in Chicago. An Exxon commercial. A couple of bank commercials. In the meantime I'm doing construction work on the side.

(part 2 of 2)

We're working on this mall. It's the holiday season, and they put these extra booths in the hallways. There was a gal at one, and we had to pass right in front of her. I'd say, "Good morning, how are you?" If she said anything, it was "Hi." And that was it.

Finally, I said, "Miss, you never say anything. I just wanted to apologize if there was something I said wrong."

She said, "No, you see, I'm a Muslim."

"You're what?"

"I'm a Muslim, and Muslim women, we don't talk to men unless we have something specific to talk about; otherwise we don't have anything to do with men."

"Ohhhhh. Muslim."

She said, "Yes, we practice the religion of Islam."

"Islam - how do you spell that?"

"I-s-l-a-m."

At the time, I knew that Muslims were all terrorists. She doesn't even have a beard. How could she possibly be Muslim?

"How did this religion get started?"

"Well, there was a prophet."

"A prophet?"

"Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him."

I started some research. But I just came from one religion. I had no intention of becoming Muslim.

The holidays are over. The booth moves. She's gone.

I continued to pray, and asked why my prayers weren't being answered. In November of 1991, I was going to bring my uncle Rockie home from the hospital. I started to empty his drawers to pack his stuff and there was a Gideon Bible. I said, God has answered my prayers. This Gideon Bible. (Of course, they put it in every hotel room.) This is a sign from God that He's ready to teach me. So I stole the Bible.

I went home and I started praying: O God, teach me to be a Christian. Don't teach me the Jehovah's Witness way. Don't teach me the Catholic way. Teach me Your way! You would not have made this Bible so hard that ordinary people sincere in prayer could not understand it.

I got all the way through the New Testament. I started the Old Testament. Well, eventually there's a part in the Bible about the prophets.

Bing!

I said, Wait a minute, that Muslim lady said they had a prophet. How come he's not in here?

I started thinking, Muslims - one billion in the world. Man, one out of every five people on the street theoretically could be a Muslim. And I thought: One billion people! C'mon now, Satan is good. But he's not that good.

So then I said, I'll read their book, the Quran, and I'll see what kind of pack of lies this thing is. It probably has an illustration on how to disassemble an AK-47. So I went to an Arabic bookstore.

They asked, "What can I help you with?"

"I'm looking for a Quran."

"Okay, we have some over here."

They had some very nice ones - thirty dollars, forty dollars."

"Look, I just want to read it, I don't want to become one, okay?"

"Okay, we have this little five-dollar paperback edition."

I went home, and started reading my Quran from the beginning, with Al-Fatihah. And I could not get my eyes off of it.

Hey, look at this. It talks about a Noah in here. We have Noah in our Bible too. Hey, it talks about Lot and Abraham. I can't believe it. I never knew Satan's name was Iblees. Hey, how about that.

When you get that picture on your TV set and it's got a little bit of static and you push that button [klop] - fine tune. That's exactly what happened with the Quran.

I went through the whole thing. So I said, Okay, I've done this, now what's the next thing you got to do? Well, you gotta go to their meeting place. I

looked in the yellow pages, and I finally found it: Islamic Center of Southern California, on Vermont. I called and they said, "Come on Friday."

Now I really start getting nervous, 'cause now I know I'm going to have to confront Habib and his AK-47.

I want people to understand what it's like for an American Christian coming into Islam. I'm kidding about the AK-47, but I don't know if these guys have daggers under their coats, you know. So I come up to the front, and sure enough, there's this six-foot-three, 240-pound brother, beard and everything, and I'm just in awe.

I walked up and said, "Excuse me, sir."

[Arabic accent:] "Go to the back!"

He thought I was already a brother.

I said, "Yessir, yessir" [meekly].

I didn't know what I was going back for, but I went back anyway. They had the tent and the rugs were out. I'm standing there, kind of shy, and people are sitting down listening to the lecture. And people are saying, Go ahead, brother, sit down. And I'm going, No, thanks, no, thanks, I'm just visiting.

So finally the lecture's over. They're all lined up for prayer and they go into sajdah. I was really taken aback.

It started making sense intellectually, in my muscles, in my bones, in my heart and my soul.

So prayers are over. I say, hey, who's going to recognize me? So I start to mingle like I'm one of the brothers, and I'm walking into the mosque and a brother says, "Assalaamu alaikum." And I thought, Did he say "salt and bacon"?

"Assalaamu alaikum."

There's another guy who said "salt and bacon" to me.

I didn't know what in the world they were saying, but they all smiled.

Before one of these guys noticed that I was not supposed to be there and took me to the torture chamber, or beheaded me, I wanted to see as much as I could. So eventually I went to the library, and there was a young Egyptian brother; his name was Omar. God sent him to me.

Omar comes up to me, and he says, "Excuse me. This is your first time here?" He has a real strong accent.

And I said, Yeah, it is.

"Oh, very good. You are Muslim?"

"No, I'm just reading a little."

“Oh, you are studying? This is your first visit to a mosque?”

“Yes.”

“Come, let me show you around.” And he grabs me by the hand, and I’m walking with another man - holding hands. I said, these Muslims are friendly.

So he shows me around.

“First of all, this is our prayer hall, and you take your shoes off right here.”

“What are these things?”

“These are little cubicles. That’s where you put your shoes.”

“Why?”

“Well, because you’re approaching the prayer area, and it’s very holy. You don’t go in there with your shoes on; it’s kept real clean.”

So he takes me to the men’s room.

“And right here, this is where we do wudoo.”

“Voodoo! I didn’t read anything about voodoo!”

“No, not voodoo. Wudoo!”

“Okay, because I saw that stuff with the dolls and the pins, and I’m just not ready for that kind of commitment yet.”

He says, “No, wudoo, that’s when we clean ourselves.”

“Why do you do that?”

“Well, when you pray to God, you have to be clean, so we wash our hands and feet.”

So I learned all these things. He let me go, and said, “Come back again.”

I went back and asked the librarian for a booklet on prayer, and I went home and practiced. I felt that if I was trying to do it right, God would accept it. I just continued to read and read and visit the mosque.

I had a commitment to go on a tour of the Midwest on a comedy circuit. Well, I took a prayer rug with me. I knew that I was supposed to pray at certain times, but there are certain places where you are not supposed to pray, one of which is in the bathroom. I went into a men’s room on a tourist stop and I laid out my carpet and I started doing my prayers.

I came back, and when Ramadan was over, I started getting calls from different parts of the country to go and lecture as a Jehovah’s Witness minister who embraced Islam. People find me a novelty.