

Diane Charles Breslin, Ex-Catholic, USA

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When I am asked how I became a Muslim I always reply that I always felt myself to be a believer in the ONE AND ONLY, yet I first realized what that meant when I heard about a religion called Islam, and a book called Quran.

But let me first start with a brief synopsis of my American overwhelmingly traditional Irish Catholic background.

Catholic I was Indeed

My dad left the seminary after a three-year stint to train as a missionary. He was the oldest of thirteen children, all born and raised in the Boston area. Two of his sisters became nuns, as was his aunt on his mother's side. My dad's younger brother was also in the seminary and quit after 9 years, just before taking his final vows. My grandmother would wake at dawn to dress and climb the hill to the local church for early morning mass while the rest of the house was sleeping. I remember her as being a very stern, kind, fair, and strong woman, and rather deep - unusual for those days. I'm certain she never heard mention of Islam, and may God judge her as to the beliefs she held in her heart. Many who never heard of Islam pray to the One by instinct, although they have inherited labels of various denominations from their ancestors.

I was enrolled in a Catholic nursery school at the age of four and spent the next 12 years of my life surrounded by heavy doses of trinity indoctrination. Crosses were everywhere, all day long - on the nuns themselves, on the walls of the classroom, in church which we attended almost daily, and in almost every room of my house. Not to mention the statues and holy pictures - everywhere you looked there was baby Jesus and his mother Mary - sometimes happy, sometimes sad, yet always classically white and Anglo featured. Various

and sundry angels and saints pictures would make their appearances, depending on the holyday approaching.

I have vivid memories picking lilacs and lilies of the valley from our yard to make bouquets which I placed in the vase at the base of the largest Mother Mary statue in the upstairs hallway next to my bedroom. There I would kneel and pray, enjoying the pleasant scent of the freshly picked flowers and serenely contemplating on how lovely was Mary's long flowing chestnut hair. I can unequivocally state that I never once prayed TO HER or felt that she had any powers to help me. The same was true when I would hold my rosary beads at night in bed. I repeated the ritual supplications of the Our Father and the Hail Mary and the Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, all the while looking upward and saying with my true heart—I know its only You, one almighty You—I'm just saying this stuff because it's all I ever learned.

On my twelfth birthday, my mom gave me a Bible. As Catholics we were not encouraged to read anything except our Baltimore Catechism, sanctioned by the Vatican. Any comparative introspection was denied and disparaged. Yet I fervently read, seeking to know what I hoped would be a story from and about my creator. I got even more confused. This book was obviously the work of men, convoluted and difficult to grasp. Yet, once again, that's all that was available.

My prior faithful church attendance dropped off in my mid teens, as was the norm for my generation, and by the time I reached my twenties, I had basically no formal religion. I read a lot on Buddhism, Hinduism and even tried out the local Baptist church for a few months. They were not enough to hold my attention, the former too exotic and the latter too provincial. Yet all through the years of not formally practicing, a day never passed when I didn't "talk to god" especially as I fell asleep I would always say thanks for all my blessings and seek help for any problems I was experiencing. It was always the same certain ONE AND ONLY whom I was addressing, sure He was listening and confident of His love and care. No one ever taught me anything about this; it was pure instinct.

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The Others

It was in my preparation for my master's degree that I first heard of the Quran. Up until then, as most Americans, I knew only of "the Arabs" as mysterious, dark predators out to plunder our civilization. Islam was never mentioned – only the surly, dirty Arabs, camels and tents in the desert. As a child in religion class, I often wondered who were the other people? Jesus walked in Caana and Galilee and Nazareth, but he had blue eyes — who were the other people? I had a sense that there was a missing link somewhere. In 1967 during

the Arab-Israeli war, we all got our first glimpse of the other people, and they were clearly viewed by most as the enemy. But for me, I liked them, and for no apparent reason. I cannot to this day explain it, except to now realize that they were my Muslim brothers.

I was about 35 when I read my first page of Quran. I opened it with the intention of a casual browse to get acquainted with the religion of the inhabitants of the region I was majoring in for my Master's Degree. God caused the book to fall open to Surat al-Mu'minun (The Believers) verses 52-54:

“Verily, this your nation is one nation and I am your Lord so keep your duty to Me. But they broke up their command into sects, each one rejoicing in its belief. So leave them in their error until a time.” (Quran 23:52-54)

From the first reading, I knew that this was certain truth- clear and forceful, revealing the essence of all humanity and verifying all I had studied as a History major. Humanity's pathetic rejection of the truth, their unceasing vain competition to be special and their neglectfulness of the purpose for their very existence all set forward in a few words. Nation states, nationalities, cultures, languages – all feeling superior, when in fact, all these identities mask the only reality which we ought to rejoice in sharing- that is to serve one master, THE ONE Who created everything and Who owns everything.

I Still Love Jesus and Mary

As a child I used to say the phrase “Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen,” found in the prayer “Hail Mary”. I now see how much Mary has been maligned by the misrepresentation of her as the mother of the godhead. It is quite enough to view her as chosen above all women to bear the great prophet Jesus by the Virgin Birth. My mom would often defend her constant pleas for Mary's help by explaining that she too was a mother and understood a mother's sorrows. It would be far more useful for my mom and all others to contemplate how the most pure Mary was slandered by the Jews of her time and accused of a most despicable sin, that of fornication. Mary bore all of this, knowing that she would be vindicated by the Almighty, and that she would be given the strength to bear all of their calumnies.

This recognition of Mary's faith and trust in God's mercy will allow one to recognize her most exalted position among women, and at the same time remove the slander of calling her the mother of God, which is an even worse accusation than that of the Jews of her time. As a Muslim you may love Mary and Jesus, but to love God more will gain you the Paradise, as He is the One whose rules you must obey. He will judge you on a day when no one else can help you. He

created you, and Jesus, and his blessed mother Mary, as He created Muhammad. All died or will die – God never dies.

Jesus (ʿIsa in Arabic) never once claimed to be the godhead. Rather, he repeatedly referred to himself as being sent. As I look back on the confusion I experienced in my youth, its root lay in the church’s claim that Jesus was more than he himself admitted. The church fathers formulated a doctrine to invent the concept of Trinity. It is this confused rendering of the original Torah and Injil [Gospel] (scriptures given to Moses and Jesus) which is at the core of the issue of Trinity.

In honest fact, it is enough to simply state that Jesus was a prophet, yes, a messenger who came with the word of the One Who sent him. If we view Jesus, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, in this correct light, it’s easy to then accept Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, as his younger brother who came with the very same mission – to call all to the worship of the Almighty ONE, Who created everything and to whom we shall all return. It is of no consequence whatsoever to debate their physical features. Arab, Jew, Caucasian, blue or brown eyes, long or short hair – all totally irrelevant as to their importance as bearers of the message. Whenever I think of Jesus now, after knowing about Islam, I feel that connectedness which one feels in a happy family – a family of believers. You see Jesus was a “Muslim”, one who submits to his Lord above.

The first of the “Ten Commandments” state:

1. I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt not have false gods before me.
2. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy god in vain.

Anyone who knows the correct meaning of “la ilaha ill-Allah” (there is no god but God) will immediately recognize the similarity in this testimony. Then we can really start to bring together the real story of all the prophets and put an end to the distortions.

“And they said the Most Merciful has taken a son. Indeed you have brought forth a terrible evil thing. Whereby the heavens are almost torn, and the earth split asunder, and the mountains fall in ruins.” (Quran 19:88-90)

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My Journey to Islam

It took three full years of my searching and studying Quran before I was ready to proclaim that I wanted to be a Muslim. Of course I feared the changes in

clothing and habits, such as dating and drinking to which I had become accustomed. Music and dancing were a big part of my life, and bikinis and mini skirts were my claim to fame. All the while I had no chance to encounter any Muslims, as there were none in my area except a few immigrants who could barely speak English an hour's drive away at the only mosque in the state at that time. When I would go to Friday Prayer to try and check out what I was considering, I would receive furtive glances as I was perhaps suspected of being a spy as was the case, and still is, in most Islamic gatherings. There was not a single Muslim American available to help me and, as I said, all the immigrant population were rather chilly to say the least.

In the midst of this phase of my life, my dad died of cancer. I was at his bedside and literally witnessed the angel of death remove his soul. He was gripped by fear as tears rolled down his cheeks. A life of luxury, yachts, country clubs, expensive cars ... for both him and mom, all a result of interest income, and now it's all over.

I felt a sudden desire to enter Islam quickly, while there was still time, and to change my ways and not to continue blindly seeking what I had been raised to believe to be the good life. Shortly thereafter I came to Egypt, and involved a long slow journey through the miracle of the Arabic language and the discovery of the clear truth – God is One, the Everlasting Eternal; Who never was born or gave birth and there is nothing at all like Him.

It is also the resulting equality between humans that attracted me most to that religion. The Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said that people are like teeth of a comb – all equal, the best being the most pious. In the Quran, we are told that the best are the pious ones. Piety involves love of and fear of God alone. Yet before you can really be pious, you must learn who God is. And to know Him is to love Him. I started learning Arabic to read the word of Allah in Arabic as it was revealed.

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

A Prayer For America

I pray to Almighty God to allow each and every American the opportunity to receive the message of the Oneness of God in a simple, straightforward fashion... Americans are, for the most part, grossly uninformed in regards to correct Islamic theology. The stress is almost always on politics, which focuses on the deeds of men. It's high time we concentrated on the deeds of the prophets who all came to lead us out of the darkness and into the light. There is no doubt that darkness is prevailing in the malaise affecting America now. The light of truth will serve us all, and whether or not one chooses to follow the Islamic path, there is no doubt that the blocking of it or the hindering of others from following it will surely lead to further misery. I care very much for the healthy future of my country, and I'm quite certain that learning more about Islam will enhance the chances of my hopes being fulfilled.