

Tarik Preston, Ex-Christian, USA



My name is Tarik Preston. I embraced the religion of Islam in 1988 at the age of 19.

The story of how I came to embrace Islam is not a very long story, and in many respects, I think that the story of how Allah (God) continued to guide me after I entered Islam is more of an inspiring story.

Nevertheless, this story begins with my name. I was given the name Tarik at birth. In the 60s, the 70s, and even the 80s, it wasn't all that unusual for some Americans to give their children African names. Many times, the names they chose from Africa were actually Islamic names, which is what happened with my name.

Throughout my life before Islam I periodically met other people named Tarik, or someone who knew the significance of my name and they would ask me, "Do you know what your name means?" I would reply proudly as I had been taught: "It means 'star of piercing brightness.'"

Sometimes I would add the story of the famous Tariq ibn Ziyad who conquered Spain in the year 711 A.D.

Ironically, despite knowing those important facts about the meaning of my name, I did not know the Islamic significance of my name until later, when I was a student in college.

I started college at the age of 16 majoring in pre-med/biology with the intent, at that time, of becoming a doctor. I knew that if I was going to have such an important responsibility, I would need a good methodology to follow in my life.

During my freshman year, I attempted to read the Bible, but Christianity had begun not to make sense to me.

While studying the marvelous complexity of cell biology that year, several of my classmates and I reaffirmed our belief in the Creator and that creation was not an accident as some scientists speculated.

During spring break, I had a theological discussion with my grandmother, with whom I was very close. And she, despite being a Christian, made a remarkable statement that I paid close attention to.

She said: “I worship God and I don’t worship Jesus, because I feel safer worshipping God!” She advised me not to pray in the name of Jesus anymore and to just pray to God!

When I returned to college after that conversation, I continued to pray every night before sleeping as I had been taught. But I decided that I would no longer pray in the name of Jesus, and to direct my prayers only to God.

Once I made that decision, I started to feel guilty about praying lying down in bed. So I began to pray kneeling at the side of my bed, which felt better to me.

Still searching for something that would guide me safely through life, one day I asked God to guide me while walking across campus.

During my junior year in college, a fellow student who I knew embraced Islam saw me walking across campus and he greeted me with “*as-salamu alaykum*” (peace be upon you)! Having grown up in the 1970s in Chicago, I had heard this greeting many times, so I replied: “*Wa alaikum us salaam!*”

He then asked me if I was a Muslim, to which I replied (at that time), “No. I am United Methodist.” He replied: “Oh! I thought you were a Muslim because your name is Tarik!”

Not long after that encounter, he came to a study session that I and a few classmates were having, and he attempted to inform us about Islam. He was very young and very new to Islam himself, so he didn’t know very much. But he did warn us about the dangers of worshipping Jesus, the son of Mary.

Of course that was a familiar statement, but I still didn’t know much about Islam, but I did learn what Muslims looked like because my friend had a very distinct appearance and demeanor after his conversion.

When I returned home that summer, I took a summer job as a telemarketer where I met a Muslim named Ahmed. Despite being a Puerto Rican convert to Islam, he had the same distinct look and demeanor as my friend from college, so I asked him, “Are you a Muslim?”

He smiled and replied: “Yes Tarik. Are you?”

I answered, “No. I am a United Methodist.”

He smiled and said wryly: “With a name like Tarik you should be a Muslim.”

He began talking to me about *tawheed* (the oneness of God). I was impressed with the concept of Islamic monotheism.

Eventually, he invited me over to his house and showed me a copy of the English translation of the Quran. I was very impressed by the respect that he had for this Book, and I asked him if I could borrow it in order to read it. He reluctantly agreed, saying that it was his only copy of the Quran, and he sternly advised me to respect the Book and keep it clean and in a place of respect in my home.

I couldn't wait to read it!

Two weeks later, I invited Ahmed to my house and we sat and talked again about Islam. I informed him that I believed the Quran was the truth and that I wanted to become a Muslim.

The very next day we went together to the Islamic Center in Washington D.C. and I embraced Islam.

A few years after my conversion, Allah blessed me to be able to study Islam at the Islamic University of Medina where I earned an Associate's degree in Arabic language and a Bachelor's degree in Hadith Sciences.

I hope the story of how I came to Islam encourages others to embrace Islam. I also hope that my story encourages my fellow Muslim brothers and sisters to share the true message of Islam with those around them in word and deed.