

Ibn Kathir noted in his exegesis of the Qur'an: Al Dahak ibn Muzahim said, "[This verse] annuls any treaty between the Prophet—blessings and salvation be upon him—and any infidel, along with any contract or any accord." Al 'Ufi said about the verse, according to Ibn 'Abbas: "No contract, no defense pact with an infidel was recognized after this dissolution of obligations fixed by treaty was revealed."

The exegete Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Juzayy al Kalbi said: "The abrogation of the order to be at peace with the infidels, to pardon them, to be passively in contact with them, and to endure their insults came before the order to fight them. That makes it superfluous to repeat the abrogation of the order to live at peace with the infidels in every passage of the Qur'an. This order to live at peace with them is given in 114 verses spread among 54 surahs. All of those verses are abrogated by 9:5 and 2:216 (you are prescribed to fight)"<sup>67</sup>

The theory—and it is a *theory*—that underlies this discussion of Faraj is that certain verses of the Qur'an revoke for all time and place certain other verses. But as I see it, the theory of abrogation, although widely accepted by Muslim scholars, has several weak points.

To begin with, there is no explicit authenticated saying of Muhammad that either states that this theory or asserts that one verse has annulled another verse permanently. All of the *hadith* (reports of sayings of the Prophet) concerning abrogation are considered weak by Muslim experts.<sup>68</sup> If a Companion of the Prophet felt that one verse cancelled another permanently, that was his or her *personal interpretation*. For Muslims, only a statement of Muhammad that a verse had been abrogated should be authoritative. There are no reliable reports of this nature.

Verses 2:106 and 16:101 are often cited in support of the theory of abrogation, although the context indicates that the annulled revelations referred to are those received by prophets that came before Prophet

<sup>67</sup> Mohammad Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam*, trans. by Robert D. Lee (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).

<sup>68</sup> Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, 28-30.

Muhammad. At the very least, this would be a very natural and plausible interpretation.<sup>69</sup>

Another weakness in the theory is that among those Muslim scholars who accept it, there is wide disagreement on exactly which verses are abrogated and to what extent. In almost all cases where abrogation has been upheld by one writer, there are other writers who argue against the alleged abrogation. Ali shows that even with the Companions of Muhammad we find that:

In most cases where a report is traceable to one Companion who held a certain verse to have been abrogated, there is another report traceable to another Companion to the effect that the verse was not abrogated.<sup>70</sup>

It is true that when Muhammad and his Companions met new or altered situations, verses were often revealed that addressed the new circumstances. After this, the Muslims would make the appropriate modifications or alterations in their behavior. But there is no reason to conclude from this that one passage of the Qur'an annulled another *permanently*. Sometimes, a particular revelation simply would elaborate on or extend a previously revealed ordinance, as in the case of the verses that prohibit drinking wine. In such cases, the earlier injunction and the new one complement each other. On other occasions, the Qur'an would revise prior instructions in light of *changed* circumstances—as in the case of the revelation of 9:5—but here again, since the different injunctions deal with different situations, there is no reason to surmise a conflict between them.

There is, in fact, no need for the theory of abrogation.<sup>71</sup> It was used to resolve what Muslim scholars felt were certain contradictory Qur'anic injunctions, but if close attention is paid to the context of the Qur'an's precepts, one finds that they do not contradict each other. The Qur'an itself points to the absence of such internal discrepancies as proof of its divine origins (4:82). Cases where some Muslim scholars sensed a contradiction invariably deal with very different situations. Thus, when interpreting the Qur'an's ordinances, the situational context must not be ignored, for then it

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 28-34; John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'an* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 237-40.

<sup>70</sup> Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, 30.

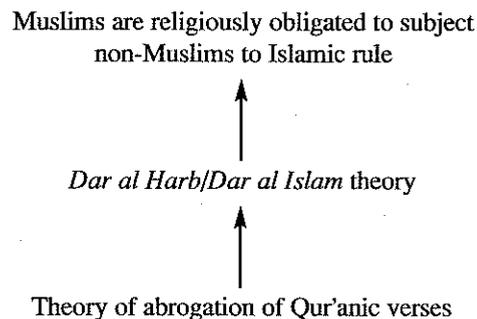
<sup>71</sup> For a discussion in favor of the theory of abrogation by one of the great masters of Islamic law, see Imam Shafi'i, *Risalah*, trans. by Majid Khadduri (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1961), 123-46.

becomes easy to mistake an exception for a general rule and vice versa, or to perceive a conflict between passages where none exists.

Finally, the theory of abrogation appears to claim that God placed superfluous information in the last revelation to mankind and that He had to correct Himself frequently during the process of revelation. This perception is very hard to square with the Qur'an's depiction of God. Not surprisingly, quite a number of converts to Islam informed me that they were shocked and had their faith severely shaken when they first discovered this theory.

Therefore, I feel that there is no real need or justification for the classical theory of abrogation. Yet without this theory, the Qur'an cannot be used to support waging war other than in self-defense or against oppression. This is proved by the fact that such a massive application of the theory of abrogation is needed to justify the type of military expansion advocated by the *dar al Islam/dar al harb* formula. Clearly, Qur'anic passages dealing with warfare weigh heavily against such unprovoked aggression.

So far I have criticized only one line of argument often used by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars to show that Islam encourages offensive military action. This argument may be diagrammed as follows.



There are other lines of argument that support the thesis that Islam obliges Muslims to bring non-Muslims under Islamic rule, but I began with this one because, for Muslims, the Qur'an is their principle source of moral and ethical guidance. For Islam's faithful, the authority of the Qur'an is supreme and takes precedence over all other sources from which the principles and practices of their religion are drawn.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 117.

Virtually all other attempts to prove that Muslims must subject non-Muslims to Islamic rule intersect at the second stage in the above diagram. That is, the conclusion that Islam encourages the subjugation of non-Muslims is a consequence of—or is at least strongly influenced by—the *DIH* concept. The examples of Muhammad and Umar ibn al Khattab are often cited to support this formulation. But here again, a careful and thorough examination of their political decisions and actions does not lead inevitably to it. Let us begin by considering the Prophet's military career.

Years of severe oppression at the hands of the pagan Quraysh had forced the nascent Muslim community to seek asylum outside of Makkah. At first, Muhammad sent a group of his followers to settle in Abyssinia, where its ruler, the Negus, had guaranteed them religious freedom. Perhaps these emigrants were to prepare for the arrival of the rest of the Muslims if their existence in Makkah became intolerable. The Quraysh responded to this first emigration by stepping up their persecution of those Muslims who remained. Just when it seemed that Muhammad and his followers would all have to obtain asylum somewhere, an unexpected opportunity arose: The people of the north Arabian city of Yathrib, many of whom had come to believe in Muhammad's prophethood, invited the Prophet to come and govern their town, which had been torn by feuds of rival Arab tribes. The city was soon renamed Madinah (short for *madinah al nabi* (city of the Prophet)). This migration is known in Arabic as the *hijrah*.

Muslim historians record that both the pagans of Makkah and the fleeing Muslims apprehended the grave implications of the *hijrah*. Both sides knew that this would not be the end of their differences, but that the Muslim exodus to Madinah was equivalent, in their day and environment, to a declaration of war. The records show that warlike threats were exchanged between the Makkan pagans and followers of the Prophet as the latter were departing for Madinah.

When Muhammad remained in Makkah a few more days after the departure of nearly all of his followers, the Quraysh twice attempted to strike a first and decisive blow against the Muslims. First, their plot to murder the Prophet in his sleep failed. Then, on their way to Madinah, Muhammad and Abu Bakr managed to elude the Qurayshi cavalry sent to intercept and kill them. When the Prophet arrived in Madinah, therefore, the Muslims understood full well that they were now at war with the Quraysh and that they would have to defend themselves in battle. The earliest permission from the Qur'an to repel attack and oppression responded to this most tense situation:

To them against whom war is made wrongfully, permission [to fight] is given—and truly, God has indeed the power to defend them—: those who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying, “Our Lord is God!” For if God had not enabled people to defend themselves against one another, all monasteries and churches and synagogues and mosques—in all of which God’s name is abundantly extolled—would surely have been destroyed. (22:39-40)

As this verse shows, Muhammad’s military struggle with the Quraysh was from the very start defensive and retaliatory. The Quraysh had already demonstrated by their words and actions their aggressive intentions. It now would be time to fight back. Eight years later, after a handful of battles with the Quraysh, a great deal of the Prophet’s renowned diplomacy and his continuous and tireless efforts to preach Islam, the Prophet subdued the Quraysh. The details of Muhammad’s military campaigns against the Quraysh and their allies are readily and easily obtained, so I will not recount them here. I only wish to draw the reader’s attention to one crucial fact: Muslim chronicles report not a single case in which Muhammad led an aggressive attack. Historical records show that each tribe with which the Muslims fought had either attacked the Muslims first or else had aided and abetted such an aggressor. In particular, there is absolutely no evidence that Muhammad ever offered a peaceful neighboring tribe the choice between accepting his rule or war. Yet this fact has not deterred Muslim and non-Muslim writers from scouring the *hadith* collections and the Prophet’s biographies in search of support for the *DIH* concept.

Muhammad’s last expedition, in which he led an army of thirty thousand on a very long and difficult journey to Tabuk, the border region between Byzantium and Arabia, is sometimes cited as evidence of the Prophet’s imperialistic plans. However, the expedition was a reaction to reports of Byzantine plans to invade Arabia. Such rumors had been circulating in northern Arabia for some time.<sup>73</sup> When Muhammad reached the

<sup>73</sup> A year earlier, Muhammad had sent out an expeditionary force to investigate rumors of a Byzantine invasion of Arabia. At Mu’tah, the Muslims engaged in battle an extremely large Byzantine army and several prominent Companions of the Prophet were killed. As it turns out, the target of the Byzantine incursion into Arabia at this time may not have been the Muslims, but rather certain northern Arab tribes who had been Byzantine allies but who were now defying Byzantine authority. It may be that the Byzantines at first mistook the Muslim contingent for their recalcitrant allies.

frontier and found that the Romans did not contemplate an offensive, he returned without attacking them. His actions on this occasion demonstrate “that the permission to fight against the Christians contained in 9:29 was also subject to the condition laid down in 2:190: that Muslims shall not be aggressive in war.”<sup>74</sup>

Similarly, some writers believe that the accounts of Muhammad sending letters to the rulers around him, inviting them to accept Islam, show that something close to the *DIH* concept was implicit in his mind.<sup>75</sup> Yet the letters contain no threats of warfare if the invitations are not accepted. What they do show is that the Prophet was determined to use every available peaceful means of communicating the divine message he had received.

A number of traditions of the Prophet have been used to argue for the *DIH* concept. Typically, these arguments ignore the context of the traditions or draw unobvious or unnecessary implications from them. An important example of the first type of error involves a saying from the collection of al Bukhari, in which the Prophet states: “I have been commanded to fight people until they bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God and keep up prayers and pay the zakah.”<sup>76</sup> No Muslim jurist applies this saying literally, for such an interpretation would advocate conversion of all non-Muslims—even Christians and Jews—by the sword, which Islamic law does not allow. The statement quite obviously refers to the ninth *surah* of the Qur’an, where, as already mentioned, Muhammad was instructed to fight the tribes that violated the treaty of Hudaibiyyah, but with the added proviso stated in verse 9:11:

But if they repent and keep up prayer and pay the zakah, then they become your brethren in faith: and We make the communications clear for a people who know. (9:11)<sup>77</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, 416.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 417-418.

<sup>76</sup> From the collections of al Bukhari and Muslim. See *An Nawawi’s Forty Hadith*, trans. by I. Ezzedin and D. Johnson-Davies (Beirut: The Holy Koran Publishing House, 1979), 46.

<sup>77</sup> For the sake of completeness, I will quote the two verses that come after 9:11. They read: “But if they break their oaths after their agreement and openly revile your religion, then fight the leaders of unbelief—for their oaths are nothing—so that they may desist. What! will you not fight a people who broke their oaths and aimed at the expulsion of the Prophet, and they attacked you first; do you fear them?” (9:12-13)

This verse and the above *hadith* reiterate a well-established Islamic principle: If a people at war with Muslims accept Islam, they become protected members of the Muslim community and all combat against them must cease. In several prophetic traditions, various Companions questioned the practicality of this rule, since an enemy could exploit it to their advantage. Yet Muhammad nevertheless insisted on it.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, the Prophet's example does not suggest that Muslims are required to impose Islamic rule on all non-Muslims. His military and political decisions were always in accord with the Qur'an's general prohibition of unprovoked aggression. The same can be said of Muhammad's second political successor, Umar ibn al Khattab.

Muslim jurists recognize four main sources from which all principles and practices of Islam are drawn. Listed in descending order of authority, these sources are the Qur'an, the *hadith* collections (which record the Prophet's life example), *ijma'* (the unanimous agreement of the Muslim community), and *qiyas* (analogical reasoning based on the Qur'an and the Prophet's *Sunnah*).<sup>79</sup> Although the personal opinions and statements of the Prophet's Companions on religious questions are not by themselves a source of Islamic law, Muslims still take them very seriously, especially the decisions and viewpoints of Muhammad's first four political successors: Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali. Their relationships with the Prophet were so close, and their self-sacrifice in the cause of Islam so great, that Muslims assume that their judgments on religious matters could not be opposed to Muhammad's teachings.

The great conquests that took place during the reign of Umar present for many Muslims a strong precedent for the *dar al Islam/dar al harb* conception. However, the wars fought between the Muslims and the Persians and Byzantines did not begin during Umar's rule, but during the reign of his political predecessor, Abu Bakr. In addition, Abu Bakr did not fight these empires because they refused to submit to Muslim rule, but in response to their support of certain rebellious Arab tribes.

After the Prophet's death, a number of Arab tribes rebelled and militarily challenged the political authority of the Muslim state. The insurrections, for the most part, occurred on the western border with Syria and in the east in Bahrain and were supported with equipment and men in the west

<sup>78</sup> An Nawawi, *Riyadh Us Saleheen*, trans. by S. M. N. Abbasi, 1:234-38.

<sup>79</sup> Here I am speaking of the Sunni Muslim jurists, which are often referred to as "orthodox" jurists by orientalist. For the sources of Shi'ite scholars: S. M. H. Tabatabai, *Shi'a*, trans. by S. H. Nasr (Qom: Iran: Ansariyan Publ., 1981), 89-122.

and in the east by the Roman and Persian empires, respectively.<sup>80</sup> The newly emerging Muslim nation thus found itself threatened by the two empires, and Abu Bakr's battle with the rebellious tribes was now extended into a full-scale war with Byzantium and Persia.

When Umar came to power, the wars with Rome and Persia were well under way. Under his leadership vast territories quickly fell to the Muslims. Two hundred years of fighting each other had exhausted the Persians and Byzantines, and this, in part, explains the great success of the Arab armies. Another factor contributing greatly to the Muslim conquest was that large numbers of people living in the two empires desired the fall of the government. Most of the population in the conquered territories saw the Arabs as liberators, and many assisted and fought with the Muslim armies.<sup>81</sup>

A few modern Muslim authors claim that both Abu Bakr and Umar directed a purely self-defensive struggle against the two empires. They point out that the Persians and Byzantines were initially the aggressors and that Umar had ordered a halt to Muslim advancement into enemy territories on several occasions. They conjecture that Umar relieved Khalid ibn al Walid of his command of the Muslim armies because he felt that the latter was overly aggressive. They also point out that the Muslim invasion of Egypt had begun against Umar's will.

I do not disagree with these historical facts, but I am not convinced that the Muslims' wars with the two empires were entirely self-defensive. Perhaps during Abu Bakr's reign this was so, and to a degree it may be true of Umar's war with Persia. Even Muir, well known for his animosity toward Islam, concedes in his *History of the Caliphate*: "The truth began to dawn on Umar that necessity was laid upon him to withdraw the ban against advance. In self-defense, nothing was left but to crush the Chosroes and take entire possession of his realm."<sup>82</sup> Yet classical Muslim accounts of the conquest, in particular al Tabari's *History of the Prophets and Kings*,<sup>83</sup> do not show Umar to be a hesitant conqueror. Although a good deal of the material in these accounts of the conquests is not historic, the overall picture of Umar's role seems trustworthy. In the accounts,

<sup>80</sup> Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, 416-17; M. A. Rauf, *A Brief History of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 1964), 19-20.

<sup>81</sup> Gregory C. Kozlowski, *The Concise History of Islam* (Acton, MA: Copley Publ., 1991), 29-30.

<sup>82</sup> W. Muir, *History of the Caliphate*, 172.

<sup>83</sup> *The History of al Tabari*, vol. 12 and 13, trans. by Yohannes Freidman and Gautier H. A. Juynboll, 1992 and 1989, respectively.

Umar very deliberately directs the conquests: dispatching armies from Madinah, communicating frequently with his generals at the front, exhorting the Muslim troops, dismissing and appointing officers, and negotiating terms of the enemies' surrender. My own impression is that Umar perceived an opportunity to turn what were originally defensive actions into decisive and perhaps final victories. I also believe that he felt fully justified. After all, in his eyes the Romans and the Persians were originally guilty of aggression, the populations in the conquered territories received the Muslim soldiers warmly as rescuers, the loss of civilian life brought about by the conquest was for the most part very little, and the enemy never sued for peace.

Although I do not see Umar's example as speaking strongly against the *DIH* concept, at the same time I do not see his actions during this period speaking in favor of the concept either. It is one thing to defeat a tyrannous aggressor; it is quite another to declare war on a peaceful neighbor for not submitting to Muslim rule.

We have considered three of the main arguments used by Muslims to justify the *dar al Islam/dar al harb* formulation.<sup>84</sup> The argument based on the Qur'an seems to be extremely problematic, for it requires the acceptance of the very questionable and unnecessary *theory of abrogation* together with a radical application of this theory. A more natural reading of the Qur'an would lead to the conclusion that the scripture is opposed to military aggression. Prophet Muhammad's example also does not support the formulation, for he never led an attack against a peaceful neighbor who refused to accept Muslim rule. We may also note that Muslim historians record that there were pagan tribes who never fought the Prophet, but rather were allies of the Muslims. Moreover, the Muslims fought on their behalf.<sup>85</sup> Finally, the conquests during the caliphate of Umar—and for that matter Abu Bakr—do not fit the scenario assumed by the *DIH* theory and cannot be used to justify it.

<sup>84</sup> *Ijma'* is often invoked to support the *dar al Islam/dar al harb* theory. The claim is frequently made that all Muslim scholars accept it. This assertion is untrue, since there are a number of modern Muslim scholars who disagree with the theory. This fact is sometimes gotten around by restricting *ijma'* to a certain period of history or to persons possessing certain qualifications, so as to exclude dissenting scholars. Many rational problems are created by imposing such limitations. For example, in early Islamic history all Muslim scholars were convinced that the world was flat, and, until very recently, Muslim scholars believed that the earth was the center of our solar system. Even though there was a consensus among Muslims on these notions for many centuries, they were nonetheless wrong.

<sup>85</sup> Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, 423.

I do not believe that the *DIH* concept is essential to Islam. The textual sources of Islam do not lead Muslims inevitably to this foreign policy. It may seem that I have gone back on my earlier assertion that I would not attempt to determine whether or not this classical formulation was right. But the key word here is "was," for I believe that there may have been extenuating circumstances long ago that justified this division. Did Muslim scholars in the classical period correctly see their non-Muslim neighbors as enemies waiting for the first signs of weakness in order to attack? Was the Muslim nation in those days in a conquer-or-be-conquered political environment? Was the theory only developed in order to justify future Muslim conquests? Was it constructed in an effort to explain and make sense of past conquests? I believe these are important questions, but they require more extensive investigation than we have time and space for here. My purpose in this section has been only to argue against the position that this formulation is fundamental to Islam.

This brings us to the second question: Is the *dar al Islam/dar al harb* concept appropriate for today's Muslims? To the average non-Muslim reader, the answer may seem obvious. To them, the idea that Muslims would be religiously obligated to attack such non-aggressive countries as Switzerland, Luxembourg, Ecuador or Brazil if they were to refuse to submit to Islamic rule is unacceptable. Muslims who do not believe that this classical political division is fundamental to Islam would probably agree. Even more conservative Muslims who uphold the *DIH* formula would most likely hesitate—at least for a moment—to apply it to these hypothetical cases.

Many things have changed since the classical period of Islamic law and most Muslims—liberal, moderate and conservative—acknowledge the need to adapt the Shari'ah to modern times. In particular, there are many elements of the Shari'ah's code of warfare that seem impractical today. For example, the strict limitations it imposes on the destruction of enemy property and the injury of civilians are difficult to uphold in a war fought with today's weapons of mass destruction, as Iranian religious leaders discovered in the recent Iran-Iraq war. In order to succeed against an enemy in modern warfare, it may be necessary to go beyond the restrictions set by classical Islamic law.

Yet if Muslims allow themselves to amend certain aspects of the Shari'ah's theory of politics and warfare, then it seems to me that they should reconsider the *DIH* concept. Since I do not believe it to be essential to Islam, I feel that we Muslims need not insist that it is valid for our time.

However, even if the convert does not accept the *DIH* concept, he has not gotten past the dilemma of community loyalties. Can he be a good citizen of a western government and, at the same time, a sincere Muslim? The objection may be raised that I just stated that I do not recommend the *DIH* concept to modern Muslims. That is true, but even if a premise upon which an argument is based is rejected, the conclusion of the argument may still be valid.

When leaders of Muslim movements around the world invoke the *DIH* concept today, it is almost always in response to what are perceived as very immediate and real threats to Muslims. That is, the governments that Muslim activists actually apply the *dar al harb* concept to in their political propaganda are ones that they view as real enemies, not only because these governments will not submit to some form of Islamic rule, but also because they are seen to inflict injustice and suffering on Muslim people. Thus, regardless of the theoretical or ethical dilemmas posed by the theory today, the conclusions of the religious leaders who invoke it are, for almost all Muslims, patently correct: These enemies of Muslims should be brought down.

First on the Muslim activists' lists of malevolent "anti-Islamic" governments are the brutal and totalitarian political systems under which most of the world's Muslims currently live. Next are those governments of non-Muslim countries that are now either attacking or actively oppressing Muslims, such as Serbia with respect to Bosnia, the Russian Republic with respect to Chechnia, Israel with respect to the Palestinians, and India with respect to Kashmir. Finally, there are those governments that are believed to be supporting the above political systems in their persecution and suppression of Muslims. Chief among the countries, in the opinion of many Muslims, are the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany and once again, the Russian Republic.

Militant Muslim leaders who plead for the overthrow of these political systems very frequently tie their appeals to the *DIH* concept. However, they would have a stronger case if they focused their arguments solely on the injustice and suffering being inflicted upon the Muslim masses, for, without a doubt, all Islamic textual sources, especially the Qur'an, exhort Muslims to unite in the fight against aggression and tyranny whenever possible.

Of course, it is the third category of anti-Muslim governments that presents the biggest problem for Muslims living in the West. Many Muslims are convinced that the secular West is leagued against them, as

evidenced by the fact that secular democracies appear to lower their standards of human rights and justice when dealing with Muslims. For example, the U.N. resolutions against Israel are ignored routinely by western governments, while resolutions against Iraq led quickly to the Gulf War and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi casualties. During the Gulf War, a middle-eastern reporter asked a White House's cabinet member during a press briefing if the United States was not guilty of having a double standard for dealing with Muslim and non-Muslim countries. The reply was a candid, although probably unintentional, admission that the American government has no set standards and has, in fact, a different policy for dealing with each country. To Muslims, this was a frank admission that in international relations the American government—and the same is felt about her western allies—has no moral standards whatsoever when it comes to them.

That the secular governments of the West are united in an effort to destroy Islam or Muslims is probably an exaggeration, but it is true that these governments fear and are opposed to the many Islamic movements that they feel threaten their economic and military interests in the Middle East. It is also a fact that, all too frequently, their political policies have brought great suffering to Muslims. On these grounds alone, are not Muslim citizens of these countries obliged to consider themselves enemies of their governments?

A small minority of Muslims living in the West definitely would say so, while the great majority would prefer not to think about it. But a third alternative is available: Muslim citizens of secular democracies have the ability, and perhaps the obligation, to communicate their community's positions on religious and political issues. Muslims living in the West are often the first to admit that they enjoy greater religious and political freedom than do citizens of Muslim countries. This provides them, as compared to other Muslims around the world, with an unique and important opportunity to influence the societies in which they live. If they unite socially and organize politically—two things that right now they seem reluctant to do—they can greatly affect their society's viewpoints and the future of Muslims everywhere. And this is by far the most practical and effective way they can help their fellow Muslims in distress. To squander this opportunity would be a terrible loss.

The current situation of Muslims living in the West is not, in all respects, similar to that of the Muslims in either the Makkan or Madinan phase of the Prophet's mission. It is true that, at times, Muslim citizens

encounter prejudice in western countries, but it is nothing like the persecution that the first Muslims suffered in Makkah. It is also true that western Muslims have many political rights and religious freedom, but they are not politically autonomous, as was the early community in Madinah. Yet as long as this freedom remains, I believe that they should—as every other citizen should—strive to influence their societies according to their conscience. It should not be forgotten that before the Qur'an permitted believers to emigrate to Madinah and retaliate against their oppressors, Muhammad and his Companions exhausted all possible peaceful means of persuading the Quraysh to grant Muslims the freedom to practice and preach Islam in Makkah and that they endured terrible persecution for many years. It seems that a few of the Muslims residing in the West advocate or dream of bypassing the lesson set by Muhammad and his followers in Makkah in order to move immediately to what should be a last resort.

### Making a Hard Choice Harder

It is never easy to depart from the traditions of your society. Those you love and care for will often feel threatened and rejected, because our customs are so much a part of our communal identity. We expect strangers to question our ways because they come from outside our group experience. But when one of our own discards them, there must be something gravely wrong somewhere.

For nearly fourteen hundred years, Islam has contended with occidental culture for world dominance. To this day, the mention of no other religion so easily excites antipathy in the minds of Westerners. Although many Europeans and Americans can be quite objective and somewhat sympathetic toward other religions, very few are able to be so toward Islam or its believers. Many converts to the faith recall long periods of indecision and procrastination before joining the Muslim community due to the fear of being associated with a despised religion and people.

Above we considered what I feel are the three most prevalent western perceptions of Islam: Islam is an Arab, middle-eastern, or foreign religion incompatible with western culture; Islam demeans women; and Islam encourages violence and aggression. The three assumptions about Islam are not new to the West; they go back at least to the Middle Ages.<sup>86</sup> They may have been based on and meant different things to the West at different times, but they have remained fairly constant as overall perceptions. These

<sup>86</sup> Daniel, *Islam and the West*.

three notions are so firmly rooted in western culture that most sincere seekers of faith in God in Europe and America would never think of Islam as a religious option.

Almost all Muslims reject these characterizations of their faith. They argue that they are the result of centuries of distortions and misinformation propagated by western orientalists, litterateurs, politicians, and Christian missionaries. They also often blame the modern media, which they claim is under Zionist control.

This defense is oversimplified and unconvincing to anyone possessing some knowledge of past Islamic scholarship or modern Muslim society, for it fails to consider what Muslims may have done to encourage these perceptions. I have tried to argue that by idealizing past Muslim scholarly opinion and culturally influenced adaptations to and interpretations of Islam, Muslims may not only have contributed to the West's negative attitudes toward their faith, but, what is more important, they may have constructed unnecessary burdens and obstacles to persons searching for God. An American Muslim leader recently remarked to me: "With all the baggage our community has added to this religion over the years, and with all the tensions and hardships that these accretions create for us today, it is a wonder that anyone in the West converts to Islam!" Yet they do so in ever greater numbers.

Islam is now the fastest growing religion in the West. It is also the fastest growing religion in history, for even though it is the youngest of the great world religions, it may now have the largest number of adherents. How can a religious community in such a state of culture shock and disarray continue to obtain converts? What is it about this faith that causes so many converts to remain deeply committed to it although the Muslim community suffers from so much internal discord? Why do persons continue to join a community so different from and uncomfortable with the larger western society to which they belong?

### The Qur'an

I believe the modern West has experienced a tremendous loss of trust. Faith in government, traditional values, education, human relationships, scriptures, religion, and in God has greatly diminished—forefeited it seems—in the struggle for material progress. This loss has left a great vacuum of meaning and purpose and has produced many individuals who are not committed strongly to any system of thought and who are curious about and ready to listen to alternative perspectives. Of the many other religions and ideologies from which to choose, it seems

that Islam has attracted much more than its statistical share of such persons. Perhaps this is due to the excessive attention the media gives to Islam, the recent arrival of large numbers of immigrants from Muslim societies, and the great increase in interaction between Western and Middle-Eastern countries these days. All of these factors have certainly aroused Western interest in Islam.

As mentioned earlier, converts give many reasons for choosing Islam and describe many diverse paths to this religion. Regardless of what initially spurred their interest or enticed them to finally make the choice to become Muslim, these proselytes almost always complain of the terrible frustration they endure as they struggle to adjust to their new religious community. The most important question we should be investigating concerning western converts to Islam is not how they came to Islam, but rather, why do so many of them remain committed? The answer obtained to the latter question is usually: the Qur'an.

Virtually all committed converts to Islam ascribe their faith to an unwavering conviction that the Qur'an, in its entirety, is no less than pure revelation from God. They may point to certain features of the Qur'an to support this belief, but, very often, these were learned after this conviction about the scripture already had developed. Typically, there is no easily definable or explicable aspect of the Qur'an that a convert could refer to as the cause of his or her faith in it. One very often discovers, after some probing, that this certainty is based on more than a convert's objective study of the Muslim scripture, but more so on his or her experience of it or, perhaps one should say, on his or her conversation with the Qur'an. Many converts, and indeed many Muslims, recall the wondrous sensation of being in communion with the divine word when reading the Qur'an. They recount occasions when the Qur'an seemed to respond to their emotional and psychological states or even to their reactions to certain of its passages, as if the scripture was being revealed to them personally, immediately, page by page, with each subsequent passage anticipating how the previous one would affect them. They found themselves slipping into and becoming immersed in a veritable dialogue with the scripture, a dialogue that occurs at the deepest, truest, and purest level of being, where a communication of attributes transpires and mercy, compassion, kindness, knowledge, love—divine and human, perfect and imperfect, infinite and finite, creating and created, of God and of man—embrace.

As many converts know, one does not have to be a Muslim to feel this intrinsic power of the Qur'an, for many of them chose Islam after and because of such moments. Also, many a non-Muslim scholar of Islam has reported it. The British scholar of Arabic, Arthur J. Arberry, recalled how the Qur'an supported him through a difficult time in his life. He stated that listening to the Qur'an chanted in Arabic was, for him, like listening to the beat of his own heart.<sup>87</sup> Fredrick Denny, a non-Muslim writer, recalls the "wonderfully disturbing experience" one sometimes has when reading the Qur'an, when the reader starts feeling "an uncanny, sometimes frightening presence." Instead of reading the Qur'an, the reader begins feeling the Qur'an is "reading" the reader!<sup>88</sup>

Yet not every reading of the Qur'an leads to such an experience. Muslims believe that it requires a certain state of mind and spirit, of humility and sincerity, of willingness and readiness. They say that if the reader is aware of his own helplessness before God, if he is prepared to see himself for what he really is, if he is willing to discard the many false images he has made of and for himself, if he comes to know the reality of "there is no power nor might but in God,"<sup>89</sup> then he is ready, by the grace of God, to be transformed by this sacred scripture.

Each generation of Muslims has felt that the Qur'an was suited ideally to the mental outlook of their time. The articles and books that have appeared recently by western converts to Islam show that they are no exception. I cannot explain fully why past generations of Muslims felt this way, or why Muslims in other parts of the world currently have this perception, but I shall attempt to share a western convert's point of view.

As pointed out in the previous chapter, when a western reader first opens the Qur'an, he soon finds himself confronted, in a dramatic way, with one of the great questions that has caused so many in modern times to doubt the existence of God; for the Qur'an has the angelic hosts ask, "Why create this creature who will shed blood and spread corruption on earth?" (2:30). The Qur'an then begins an explanation, but it only provides enough of an answer to catch and hold the reader's attention. The reader will have to read on if he wishes to obtain more clues.

Having just read about Adam, whose story in the Qur'an differs in key respects from the parallel account in the Bible, the western reader

<sup>87</sup> *The Koran*, interpreted by Arthur J. Arberry (Oxford: Oxford University Press), introduction.

<sup>88</sup> Fredrick Denny, *Islam* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 88.

<sup>89</sup> A phrase frequently recited by Muslims.

wonders where, exactly, does Islam locate itself in relation to the Judeo-Christian tradition? The Qur'an puts this into perspective, first with the story of the Children of Israel (2:40-86) and then with a discussion of the attitudes and beliefs of the People of the Book (Jews and Christians). This is followed by an account of Abraham and Ishmael's building of the Ka'bah that links Islam to the great Patriarch of all three religions (2:122-41). Islam, the Qur'an informs us, is the restoration of the pure faith of Abraham (2:142-67).

The reader naturally turns his attention to more practical matters: What about the Muslim practices we hear so much about in the news: dietary laws, fasting, *jihad*, the pilgrimage, the status of women in Islam? These issues are taken up next (2:168-283). Interspersed throughout these expositions are reminders of the existence and oneness of God, of the many signs of God's wisdom, mercy and power, and of man's desperate need to turn to Him. The Qur'an will implant these essential truths in the reader's mind continually and repeatedly as it works to penetrate the inner reaches of his soul and reawaken him to the reality by which he lives and breathes.

The second *surah* ends with a prayer, which it teaches to the reader. It reminds him that God only reveals His guidance not to burden man but to aid him. It then instructs him to ask God to help him with his many difficulties and to turn to His infinite forgiveness, mercy, and protection. The third *surah* opens with an answer to this plea: Our only real hope and refuge is in

God! There is no god but He,—the Living, the Self-Subsisting, the Eternal. It is He Who sent down to you, in truth, the Book, confirming what went before it. (3:1-6)

When the reader finishes *Surat al Baqarah* (the second *surah*), he has already acquired a summary knowledge of Islam. In the remaining 113 *surahs*, the Qur'an will develop, reinforce, and elaborate further on the themes introduced in *al Baqarah*. As mentioned in chapter one, the reader will find these themes interwoven throughout the text, for the Qur'an does not let the reader consider them in isolation, but rather wants the reader to see their interconnectedness. Nevertheless, each remaining *surah* will emphasize, for the most part, one or two principle themes. The third *surah*, *Ali 'Imran*, outlines the religious history of mankind, with special reference to the People of the Book, and reminds Muslims of their duty to fight tyranny and injustice. The fourth *surah*, *al Nisa'*, returns to the topic of women's rights and family obligations. The fifth *surah*, *al Ma'idah*,

deals mainly with Judaism and Christianity and again emphasizes the corruption of the earlier religions of God, whose pure teachings are reclaimed and perfected with Islam.

As we move through the Qur'an, the *surahs* gradually shorten and their emphasis and style changes as well. In the middle *surahs*, we discover fewer rules and regulations, for the main emphasis has shifted to more parables and stories of past prophets, more frequent and more dramatic references to the many natural signs of God's wisdom and beneficence, and greater and greater stress on man's relationship and return to God. In addition, the literary style of the Qur'an, which can only be truly appreciated in Arabic, becomes ever more rhapsodic as we continue.

As we near the end of the Qur'an, the discourse focuses almost entirely on the reader and his relationship to God and on the organic relationship between one's deeds and one's state in the Hereafter. These *surahs* continually pound out these themes in short ecstatic bursts. Heaven and Hell, the Last Hour and the Last Judgment, the here and now and the hereafter, the obliteration of the universe and our return to Almighty God all converge to an apocalyptic climax.

The Qur'an has led the reader from his immediate and practical concerns, by means of a world of prophets, patriarchs, wonders and signs, to that ultimate moment when it will seem to him that there is only himself standing before his Lord and Creator. Many of those who make this journey experience something of the terror and the power of that meeting as they come to the end of the Qur'an. Self-doubt, fear, and pressure surround them as they near the choice that the Qur'an inevitably demands. Many fear society's backlash, question their own sanity, their ability to turn their lives around and submit to the requirements of Islam, or feel that it is too late for them—that they are far beyond the point where God could love them. Yet throughout the Qur'an, God assures the reader continually that he or she must never yield to this type of doubt and despair.

And if my servants call on Me, tell them that I am near. That I heed the call of every caller. So let them with a will call unto me. And believe in Me, that they may walk in the right way. (2:186)

“Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female. You are members one of another. Those who have left their homes, or were driven out there from, or suffered harm in My cause, or fought or were

slain—truly, I will blot out from them their iniquities, and admit them into gardens with rivers flowing underneath; A reward from the presence of God, and from His presence is the best of rewards. (3:195)

O My servants who have sinned against yourselves, never despair of the mercy of God: for God forgives all sins: for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (39:53)

You are not, by the grace of your Lord, mad or possessed. (68:2)

By the glorious morning light, and the night when it is still and dark, your Guardian-Lord has not forsaken you, nor is He displeased. And the promise of the hereafter is greater than the promise of the present. And soon your Guardian Lord will give you (that with which) you will be well pleased. Did He not find you like an orphan and shelter you? And He found you lost and He guided you? And He found you in need and nurtured you? (93:1-8)

Have We not expanded for you your breast? And removed from you your burden that did gall your back? And raise high your esteem? So, truly with every hardship there is relief. Truly, with every hardship there is relief. (94:1-6)

As the ultimate choice closes in on him, the Qur'an puts before the reader the words his soul so desperately wants and needs to say, commanding him:

"Say, He is God, the One, the Eternally Sought by All!" (112:1)

"Say, I seek refuge in the Lord of every new day's dawn!" (113:1)

"Say, I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind!" (114:1)

It is as if God through the Qur'an is exhorting the reader: "Just say it and I will come to you; just say it and I will protect and comfort you; just turn to me and I will love you and your heart will finally know peace."

Many of us, after reading the Qur'an, stood paralyzed on the bridge of indecision, which stretches between faith and rejection, our material dreams and our hopes for the hereafter, our worldly desires and our spiritual needs. There were sleepless nights, seemingly endless pacings, haunting visions of our families' and friends' reactions, verses of the scripture that echoed in our minds, worries about our careers and our futures, and, worst of all, the emptiness of separation from the One who touched us and spoke to us through His revelation. Of those who knew this agony, some turned and fled, never to return. Yet there are also those who gave up resistance and ran with outstretched arms into the merciful embrace of their Lord, who surrendered themselves to their deepest needs and fell into an ocean of kindness and love.

Those who choose Islam soon discover that, for the rest of their lives, they will have to face the following question repeatedly: "How did you become a Muslim?" They will formulate various partial explanations at different times according to the context in which it is asked. However, all of us who made that decision know that even we cannot fully comprehend it, for the wisdom and workings of God are often subtle and unfathomable. Perhaps the simplest and truest statement we can offer is this: At one special moment of our lives—a moment that we could never have foreseen when we were younger—God, in His infinite knowledge and kindness, had mercy on us. Maybe He saw in us a need so great, a pain so deep, or an emptiness so vast. And maybe, He also saw in us a readiness. However He made it come to be, to Him we are eternally thankful. Truly, all praise and thanks belong to God.

## CHAPTER 4

# NOURISHING FAITH

Once the decision to accept Islam is made, the first thing almost every convert wants to know is, what do I do now? This is because conversion seeks fulfillment; it needs a way or a program to perpetuate the experience of self-surrender. The traditions of the Prophet report many a new Muslim asking Muhammad what deeds Islam requires of them. Very often he would begin by telling them that Islam is built upon five pillars: the *shahadah* (the witnessing of faith), *salah* (ritual prayer), *sawm* (fasting) during the Arabic lunar month of Ramadan, *zakah* (the annual charity tax), and *hajj* (the annual pilgrimage).<sup>90</sup> It is through these *five pillars of Islam* that the proselyte begins to build his faith. They present his first test of commitment and they are at the center of Islam's system of moral and spiritual growth. This chapter shares a few of this author's personal impressions and experiences of the five pillars. Each ritual will be discussed individually, but first let me make a few general comments.

Together, the five pillars of Islam touch many areas of a believer's earthly existence: his spirituality, ethics, personal hygiene, social relations, sexual relations, politics, finances, time management, eating habits, dress, travel plans and many others as well. In this way they remind and help the Muslim to direct all of his efforts towards God and to make the totality of his life on earth an act of worship. They also strengthen the believer's character, for they require considerable determination and self-restraint, and the Muslim must repeatedly and periodically interrupt his worldly pursuits to perform them.

Time plays a key role in Islam's rituals. Voluntary acts of worship are strongly encouraged and may be offered for the most part whenever one wishes, but the five pillars are obligatory and must be performed at specified times. Those who practice the pillars steadfastly and correctly soon dis-

<sup>90</sup> From the collections of al Bukhari and Muslim. See, *An Nawawi's Forty Hadith*, 34.

cover that they come to regulate their lives. They become an inner clock by which the believer sets and organizes his life. Like the different hands on a stop watch, each ritual is associated with a different measure of earthly duration.

The *shahadah*, which takes only seconds to pronounce, is in one sense Islam's briefest ritual. For those who wish to convert to Islam, its recital, witnessed by two Muslims, is required in order to join the Muslim community officially.<sup>91</sup> Muslims must also recite quietly the *shahadah* while in the sitting posture during ritual prayer. While these may be the only times the statement of the *shahadah* is compulsory, the *shahadah* is really a permanent requirement, for the instant someone genuinely rejects it, that person is outside the pale of Islam. In this sense, then, the *shahadah* is a continuous ritual, a moment-by-moment commitment to the oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad.

The salah (ritual prayer) is mandatory for Muslims five times daily: before sunrise (the *fajr* prayer), around noon (the *zuhr* prayer), in the afternoon (the *asr* prayer), at sunset (the *maghrib* prayer), and before sleeping (the *'isha'* prayer). The time needed to perform the ritual prayer is rather short—as little as a few minutes—so that the compulsory Islamic prayers are just long enough and frequent enough to keep the believer focused throughout the day on the real purpose of life, without imposing too great an interruption of his necessary worldly pursuits.

The fast of Ramadan takes place during the ninth lunar month of the Islamic calendar. For this entire month, Muslims deny themselves food, drink, and sex between sunrise and sunset and also make special efforts to engage themselves in extra acts of worship. While it would be much too difficult to fast the whole year through, the fast of Ramadan signifies to Muslims that they should dedicate each month of their earthly lives to serving God.

Zakah is an annual charity-tax that follows specific rates that are applied to one's accumulated wealth. By paying zakah, believers aspire to purify the previous year's worldly gains. The *hajj* is the annual pilgrimage to Makkah, which Muslims are required to make once in a lifetime if they have the means to do so. For the faithful, to make the pilgrimage is one of their greatest goals in life, a chance to journey to the sanctuary toward which they have always prayed and to glorify God with their Muslim brothers and sisters from every corner of the earth.

<sup>91</sup> A Muslim relative will recite the *shahadah* for an infant at birth.

Thus through these five pillars, Muslims consecrate their time on earth: with the *shahadah* they commit to God their every moment; with salah, their days; with the fast of Ramadan, their months; with the payment of zakah, their years; and with the pilgrimage to Makkah, their lifetimes.

Although time has such an important place in these rituals, the five pillars, in several ways, also reach beyond time. For one thing, they persistently remind Muslims that they are moving, moment by moment, closer to their last days on earth and then to the next life, to a very different order of creation, where earthly time will seem to them strange and illusory.<sup>92</sup> The rituals, both in form and content, help to keep the worshiper alert to this. Indeed, many Qur'anic verses and the traditional invocations that Muslims recite during the rituals recall the themes of the afterlife and our return to God. In addition, many of the postures Muslims assume, hardships they endure, and ceremonies they perform in the rituals also parallel descriptions from the Qur'an and the sayings of Muhammad of the Day of Judgment. In this way, the rituals become for Muslims both a preparation and a kind of rehearsal for that Day, a vehicle by which the worshiper is allowed to almost experience in advance that decisive meeting with his Lord.

The Islamic rituals traverse the past as well by bringing the believer back to the days of the Prophet and his Companions. Muslims have always been extremely meticulous about performing the five pillars exactly as Muhammad instructed his followers to perform them. Therefore, the ritual of each disciple of Muhammad is the same as every other throughout history, which makes the five pillars of Islam a great leveler and unifier of the Muslim community that transcend time, place, race, and language.

Muslims realize that the rituals they practice were not introduced by Muhammad; rather, they date back to the very beginnings of humanity's worship of God. The Qur'an tells us that all of the prophets insisted on the oneness of God and that the divine guidance revealed through them must be heeded. They often established ritual prayer and enjoined upon their followers charity and fasting. Moreover, the Qur'an states that prophet Abraham first called for the *hajj* and, together with his son Ishmael, rebuilt the Ka'bah, the first house established on Earth for the worship of the one God. Therefore, when Muslims perform their rituals, they understand that they are not only practicing the religion taught by the Prophet Muhammad, but that they are returning to and restoring the pure and timeless religion revealed by God to all of his prophets: the religion of self-surrender to God—*Islam*.

<sup>92</sup> See the discussion on time and predestination on pages 70-73.

Self-surrender to God is what Islam is all about, and it is through these rituals that Muslims come to experience it most personally and directly. The five pillars of Islam are at the core of Muslim piety, as each worshipper brings into them all of his or her pains, efforts, and longings. The rituals form a nexus between a believer's relationships with his fellow man and his relationship with God, because his good deeds and his love of God are joined through them. Through the five pillars, Muslims have been able to know profoundly and intimately God's infinitely merciful power. This also helps explain why Muslims are so strict about preserving the original forms of their rituals, because they are convinced that the slightest modification inevitably would diminish their experience of the divine.

### Calling to Faith

*Of my three daughters, I have the clearest recollection of Fattin's birth. The fact that she is the youngest of my children, and hence the most recently born, has a lot to do with it. The experience I gained from my wife's two previous pregnancies definitely helped me to be more collected during her third. Even though her birth came rather unexpectedly—which, by the way, is typically Fattin—I was cool-headed enough this time to play my part correctly and to observe much of what was taking place around us in the delivery room. (During my first daughter's delivery, I almost fainted and my relatives had to take over the role I was supposed to have learned in prenatal classes.)*

*As we drove to Lawrence Memorial hospital that bright summer morning, my wife and I both felt that the mild contractions she had been having were a false alarm. We told her mother that we would probably be coming right back home. I joked to the doctor examining my wife that if the baby was coming today then she needed to hurry, because I had a class to teach in an hour.*

*"I think you might just make it," she informed me, "because your baby is coming now!"*

*Soon my wife's labor pains became extremely intense, and within forty-five minutes of our arrival at the hospital, Fattin was shouting her arrival into this world.*

*Fattin lay exhausted in her mother's arms while the doctor and nurses were finishing up. Then one of the nurses gently took her from my wife, wrapped her snugly in a blanket, and put a cap on her head that covered her ears. She then carried her over to me.*

*"Would you like to hold her?" she asked.*

*"Yes, of course," I answered.*

*It is amazing how you can already see so much personality in those tiny faces. The first time I gazed at Jameelah, I saw her brightness and inquisitiveness; with Sarah, I saw her gentleness and kindness. When I looked at Fattin's face, I could see so clearly her independence and fierce determination.*

*I walked a few steps with Fattin to a corner of the room so that we would not be in any one's way. I raised her in my arms very carefully and bent my head so that my lips were just touching her right ear. Then, like millions of Muslim fathers before me, I whispered to her,*

*Allahu Akbar (God is greater).*

*Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah (I bear witness that there is no god but God).*

*Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah (I bear witness that there is no god but God).*

*Ashhadu anna Muhammadan rasulu Allah (I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God).*

*Ashhadu anna Muhammadan rasulu Allah (I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God).*

*Hayya 'alas salaah (Hasten to prayer).*

*Hayya 'alas salaah (Hasten to prayer).*

*Hayya 'alal falaah (Hasten to success).*

*Hayya 'alal falaah (Hasten to success).*

*Allahu Akbar (God is greater).*

*Allahu Akbar (God is greater).*

*La ilaha illa Allah (There is no god but God).*

The pronouncement that I whispered in Fattin's ear that morning is the Islamic call to prayer, termed *adhan* in Arabic. They are among the first words spoken to every child born into a Muslim family.<sup>93</sup> When parents

<sup>93</sup> After reciting the *adhan* in the right ear of the newborn, the parent or relative will then recite the *iqamah*, the second call to prayer, in the child's left ear. The *iqamah* reads: *Allahu Akbar. Allahu Akbar. Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah. Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah. Ashhadu anna Muhammadan rasulu Allah. Ashhadu anna Muhammadan rasulu Allah. Hayya 'alas salaah. Hayya 'alal falaah. Qad qamat as salah. Qad qamat as salah. Allahu Akbar. Allahu Akbar. La ilaha illa Allah.*

make this summons to their infant, they do so with their fervent prayers that he or she will grow to be a righteous, God-conscious believer. It signifies a recalling of the child to his or her true nature, to the spirit which God breathed into him or her, and to that primordial bond to which every soul bore witness: "Am I not your Lord?" (7:172). While Muslim parents know that their son or daughter may make mistakes in life, that he or she may even come to neglect the requirements of faith at times, this *adhan* also signifies the parents' deepest hope that if this should happen, then their child will always come back to this first calling.

The *adhan* is typical of Islam in the way it uses the call to prayer to remind believers of Islam's broader objectives. Certainly, something like a bell or a horn could signal the times for the obligatory prayers; Islam chooses a method that offers the greatest possible meaning, for the *adhan* succinctly summarizes and interconnects Islam's attitudes toward God, the Prophet, worship, and life. For this reason, it seems appropriate that in this section and the next, we let the *adhan* introduce us to the first two pillars of Islam.

## Bearing Witness

*"Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!"*

*Allahu Akbar!* (God is Greater!) It is the supreme affirmation of Islam, the great axiom upon which all else depends. It qualifies all other statements about God and His creation and is the key Muslim perception of God. It is the reason for his or her worship, total trust in, and self-surrender to Him as well as the foundation of Muslim piety and spirituality.

God is greater than what or whom? The statement seems to beg the question. Its openedness is at first perplexing. Why is it left incomplete? But as we insert various objects at the end of this assertion, we soon come to understand. The statement invites—indeed, it demands—our attempts at completing it. But all such efforts are ultimately futile, for God's infinite greatness cannot be encompassed by our comparisons. As the Qur'an itself says: "nothing can be compared to Him" (112:4).

We may ask: Is God greater than all creation? Is He greater in mercy, compassion, knowledge, wisdom, love, and justice than the most merciful, compassionate, wise, loving and just among His creatures? Is he greater than the greatest power we can imagine? *Allahu Akbar* repeatedly affirms that He is incomparably greater. He is greater than any likening we may use to complete this declaration, greater than anything and everything that we

could ever conceive of, greater than the speculations of theologians or the assertions of dogmatists or the formulations of philosophers, and greater than human words could describe.

*Allahu Akbar!* This seemingly unfinished comparative is all-inclusive, for it allows for all our praises and glorification. Its openedness invites us to imagine, but at the same time proclaims our inability to truly conceive of God's greatness. All other beings from the perspective of *Allahu Akbar* stand on the same level ground as infinitely inferior to God. Therefore, the second declaration of the *adhan*, which is also the first of the two testimonies of the *shahadah*, follows as a natural consequence of *Allahu Akbar*.

*"Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah! Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah!"* (I bear witness that there is no god but God!)

For how could it be otherwise? If God is infinitely greater, infinitely more merciful, infinitely more compassionate, infinitely more powerful, infinitely kinder, infinitely more just, infinitely nearer to us, infinitely more loving, infinitely wiser, infinitely more knowing, than how could there be and why should one seek, another god, another ultimate protector, another ultimate goal? Why should one seek other deities or intermediaries between oneself and God, or other persons, alive or dead, to whom to direct one's prayers? Are God's goodness and power somehow insufficient, that we should invent for Him partners? For Muslims, the answer to these questions is obvious: there is no *ilah* (deity) but God, and hence, worship is due to God alone.

The Islamic term for worship is *'ibadah*. It is derived from the same root as *'abd*, the Arabic word for "slave," and Muslims quite proudly refer to themselves as "slaves of Allah." At first, this seems like a rather severe description of the believer's relationship to God, for we normally think of a slave as someone exploited and debased. However, our initial discomfort with this term may reveal something about ourselves that is quite in tune with Islam's conception of worship.

We instinctively resent that a human being should choose to be the slave of another creation, whether it be to a tyrant, greed, drug addiction, power, or to his or her lust. Something within us rejects this as sick and humiliating. We feel how vulnerable such a person is—how very precarious his existence—because his happiness depends on masters who are themselves fickle and weak, perhaps even illusory. Even an atheist could

appreciate the refusal to worship—in the sense of to enslave oneself to and to show complete obedience to—a being other than God.

Yet it seems that we all need to have faith in someone or something. A life without meaning or direction is wretched. Whether it be a political cause, a person, career, nation, a dream, an idea, money, power, prestige, family, fame, or revenge, it appears that we must have something for which to live and appreciate, for which to die. In short, I believe that it is human nature to venerate, that we are destined for servitude. Very often, however, the objects of our desires remain unattainable. But even when they are attainable, the reality cannot equal our expectations. They become, in the end, like mirages in a desert, nothing more than figments of our false imaginings (29:39).

As Muslims see it, life is a continual choice between masters, between those you create for yourself and the One who created you. When you make your own gods, you create your own oppression and debasement, but when you surrender yourself to the one God, you are shielded from the types of fears and insecurities that lead persons to idol worship.

In fact, from the point of view of Islam, all creatures, whether or not they are aware of it, are already slaves of God in the sense that they all serve His ultimate purposes and can accomplish only what He allows them to accomplish. God not only wants us to realize this truth, but to benefit as much as we can from it, by using the gifts and guidance He gives to us so that we may grow ever closer to Him. When we become true servants of God, we become servants of the divine attributes as well, of His Mercy, Love, Justice, and Truth. To worship a creation is, to the Muslim, utterly irrational and self-abasing, but to be the slave of God is a Muslim's highest honor and lifelong goal.

This is a goal that, at times, could be difficult to pursue. The Qur'an certainly does not paint a rosy picture of most of humanity in this regard. Misdirected worship, idolatry, comes all too easily to human beings, and thus the Qur'an refers to faith as an "uphill climb" (90:4-17). Islam (i.e., self surrender) requires hard work, self-discipline, determination, and, above all, following God's guidance. This brings us to the next statement of the *adhan*, the second and concluding statement of the *shahadah*.

*Ashhadu anna Muhammadan rasulu Allah! Ashhadu anna Muhammadan rasulu Allah (I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of God!)*

The first testimony of the *shahadah*, that there is no god but God, is an independent statement of fact. It bears witness to a universal truth that applies to all of us, regardless of whether or not we acknowledge it. Before humanity came into being, before the creation of Earth, before the birth of the universe we live in, there was but one God—and there will never be another.

The second testimony of the *shahadah*, that Muhammad is the messenger of God, depends on the first. It too is a statement of a truth, but it is also a statement of commitment to the first and to the community of disciples of Muhammad. The first half of the *shahadah* declares the oneness of God; the second half informs us of God's great concern for man. The first proclaims God's incomparable being; the second tells us how to come to know Him. The first states the goal; the second shows the way. God willed to be known and, by His mercy, commissioned Muhammad to help guide us to Him.

From the moment someone joins the Muslim community, whether by birth or conversion, the *shahadah* will be an ever-present feature of that person's life. It will be chanted aloud during the call to prayer, invoked at the beginning of all major events, recited at least nine times a day during the five ritual prayers, exclaimed spontaneously by believers during moments of excitement or wonder, and sighed quietly by Muslims when they reflect on the greatness and glory of God. Moreover, it will become a statement of a lifestyle based on the Qur'an and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. For Muslims, the Qur'an is God's word revealed, and the Prophet's *Sunnah* (literally, "way") is God's word most perfectly applied. When 'Aishah, Muhammad's wife, was asked about the Prophet's conduct during his life, she simply responded, "It was the Qur'an."<sup>94</sup> Her answer best expresses how Muslims view the relationship between their scripture and the Messenger of God.

The *shahadah* is where Muslim life begins, both literally and figuratively. It is the cornerstone upon which the community of believers rests and is their source of unity and strength. It is the boundary that protects them and the line of demarcation that must be crossed if one is to join them.

Like all converts, I will never forget my first *shahadah*. It was the single most difficult, yet liberating and powerful, moment of my life. Gradually, I came to better understand its many implications, but I especially came to see that it proclaims not only the oneness of God but also the

<sup>94</sup> Kazi, *Guidance from the Messenger*, preface.

unity and equality of humankind.<sup>95</sup> Of course, my discovery of this was in no way original. This egalitarian principle is so salient a theme in the teachings of Islam that it is impossible to miss. This is not to say that every Muslim would so readily articulate it, but rather, it is so clearly observable in the community's religious interactions and traditions. It is not at all surprising that this is one of the first things that struck Malcolm X on his pilgrimage to Makkah. He wrote,

For the last week, I have been utterly speechless and spell-bound by the graciousness I see displayed all around me by people of *all colors* . . . You may be shocked by these words coming from me. But on this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to rearrange much of my thought patterns previously held, and to toss aside some of my previous conclusions . . . Perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept in *reality* the Oneness of Man—and cease to measure and hinder and harm others in terms of their “differences” in color . . . Each hour in the Holy Land enables me to have greater spiritual insights into what is happening in America between black and white.<sup>96</sup>

I am not claiming here that Islam eradicates racial and color prejudices. That would be like claiming that Islam eradicates evil. Rather, I am asserting that Islam does not tolerate such prejudices and that when Muslims display them, they know full well that they are violating a fundamental precept of their faith and committing a serious wrong. Of all of the great world religions, I believe none has been more successful in fighting racial prejudice than Islam. I received a very personal and poignant demonstration of Islam's power in this regard several weeks after I became a Muslim.

*It was at a lecture organized by the Muslim students of the University of San Francisco. The speaker that night was Abdul Aleem Musa, who at that time was the imam (leader) of Masjid al Nur in Oakland, California. He recounted his journey to Islam, which began with his joining the Nation of Islam in the sixties and his later transition to authentic Islam in*

<sup>95</sup> See the discussion on pages 78–85.

<sup>96</sup> Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

*the seventies. The African American Muslims that accompanied him from Oak-land showed by their reactions to his speech that their paths to Islam were very similar to his.*

*Physically, Abdul Aleem is a very imposing figure. He looks as if he could play tight end for the San Francisco Forty-Niners. He is extremely clever and intelligent, certainly not one to be taken lightly. On the way to the lecture, some of the students told me that Abdul Aleem had been a member of the Black Panthers long ago and that he was an ex-convict. I usually am suspicious of such rumors, but from his lecture I gathered that, at the very least, he had had a very tumultuous past. Nonetheless, the wisdom of his words and the serenity he now projected made me feel that he had discovered inner peace through his faith.*

*As I listened to Abdul Aleem, I kept recalling my teenage years and the terrible brutality of the race wars my neighborhood fought with young black men like him from the nearby slums. I pictured what a dangerous adversary he must have been—the type of enemy whom everyone would try their best not to notice when he entered your territory. I felt simultaneously inspired and intimidated, moved and yet confused. All my old reflexes and fears which I thought I had left far behind in Bridgeport, Connecticut, were now coming back to me.*

*The first question Abdul Aleem was asked when he had finished his speech came from one of the Arab students: “Do you feel that Islam has changed you; has it really changed your life?”*

*The question may have been entirely innocent, but it seemed to allude to his turbulent past. At least that is how I interpreted it and, apparently, so did Abdul Aleem.*

*“You don't know how many times I've been asked that,” he sighed, shaking his head in near disbelief. “People just don't think that it can really happen, that you can turn your life around.”*

*He was speaking slowly, measuring his words, working hard to contain his hurt pride. Then, in a low tone that betrayed mounting frustration, he stated, “People just can't believe in the power of Islam.”*

*The audience tensed and held its breath, anticipating an eruption at any moment. Abdul Aleem's eyes scanned the room, as if he was looking for someone who might understand or some way to prove his point. Suddenly, I found his stare fixed on Grant, another white American convert sitting on my left, and me. The next thing I knew he was pointing right at the two of us.*

Almost shouting he exclaimed: "The very fact that you have white Americans like these, sitting here with black Americans like us, as brothers—BROTHERS!!!—when ten years ago we were killing each other in the streets, shows you how much Islam can change lives!"

It was as if he was reading my own thoughts. Grant and I are of the same generation as Abdul Aleem, and the look on Grant's face told me that he too could relate immediately to what Abdul Aleem said. After the program, Abdul Aleem walked over to the two of us and greeted us both with a warm smile and with what I have come to call an "Islamic triple hug." That was the start of an immensely important relationship for me. Abdul Aleem became a close friend and mentor and helped me to deal with the many pitfalls and roadblocks that threaten the sincerity of a newcomer to Islam.

When I met Abdul Aleem I was only a recent convert to Islam, and it takes time for Islam's many lessons to sink in. But on that evening, I learned much about Islam's egalitarianism. I would learn much more from Abdul Aleem in the months and years ahead.

Can Muslims be bigoted and prejudiced? Of course they can, and most are at various times and in various circumstances. Human beings generalize and prejudge based on experience. To a large degree, our survival depends on it. Sometimes we hurt others and ourselves when we misuse our intellectual abilities, but we can and should correct and learn from our mistakes. Time and time again I witnessed the corrective power that the *shahadah* has over Muslims. I have watched cultural, political, economic, and racial differences drive them apart and I have seen the *shahadah* bring them back together as brothers and sisters in faith. The next incident occurred about a year after my conversion.

Mosques and Islamic centers in Europe and America bring together a vast array of peoples from all over the Muslim world. Very often a masjid will contain many small cultural clusters with no one of them in the majority. This is especially true of the masjids run by Muslim student groups at western universities. Such a diverse assemblage of cultures will produce many differences of opinions, which can evolve quite easily into bitter arguments and community rifts.

Such a quarrel arose one night in the mosque at the University of San Francisco. I do not remember the precise cause of the fray; it had something to do with a pile of anti-Shiite tracts that someone left in the mosque. This happened at the height of the Iran-Iraq war, and a great deal of

politico-religious propaganda was being disseminated by both sides of the conflict and by their allies. I recall vividly how explosive the scene became.

The Saudis raged against the Kuwaitis and Iranians, the Pakistani students allied themselves with the Saudis, the white Americans defended the Iranians, the African Americans were against the white Americans, the North African and Palestinian students seemed to be fighting each other and everyone else, the Malaysian students looked terrified. All sorts of bitter, malicious, racial and personal attacks flew back and forth.

"You Shiahs are Kaffirs!"

"You Saudis worship your king!"

"What do Americans know about Islam?!"

"Pakistanis are nothing but the lackeys of the Saudis!"

"Our people were Muslims long before you white boys ever were!"

"You're proud of following Elijah Muhammad?!"

"Palestinians got what they deserved!"

Faces were red with rage. Shouts became threatening roars. The American students were clenching their fists and tensing their arms, readying themselves for a fight. This was definitely going to be the end of our community.

From over in the corner of the room a desperate cry rang out:

"La ilaha illa Allah! Muhamadan rasulu Allah!"

It was Ilyas, the always quiet, skinny, short student from Indonesia. He hardly ever spoke a word. The room quieted.

"What did he say?" Several persons asked each other.

Ilyas shouted again at the top of his lungs:

"La ilaha illa Allah! Muhamadan rasulu Allah!"

"Say it!" Ilyas yelled, "Say it!"

Most of us murmured confusedly: "La ilaha illa Allah—Muhamadan rasulu Allah?"

"What does he want?" Someone whispered.

"Say it like you mean it!" Ilyas screamed.

Maybe it was because he said it with so much authority or with so much passion, but for some reason we now felt the need to obey this normally meek and inconspicuous member of our mosque. Our voices rose in unison with Ilyas leading us:

"La ilaha illa Allah! Muhamadan rasulu Allah!"

You could feel the hate and anger dissipating. All eyes were fixed on Ilyas. The faces of the brothers looked mesmerized. Some of them showed

sadness, some remorse, and others excitement. The whole company now needed Ilyas to lead them again.

'Again!' Ilyas bellowed. 'Again!'

This time we all rang out in one passionate, thundering cry:

'La ilaha illa Allah! Muhamadan rasulu Allah!'

Then again we cried out, following Ilyas's lead:

'La ilaha illa Allah! Muhamadan rasulu Allah!'

Ilyas stopped, froze there for a moment with tears in his eyes. He looked at us in the way a child looks at his parents when he wants them to stop fighting.

'That's what it is all about, brothers!' Ilyas pleaded, his voice cracking. 'That's what binds us!'

'Just look at us!' He shouted, stretching out his arms.

At that, the brothers began to slowly approach one another with looks of great embarrassment on their faces. What easily could have exploded into a spectacle of complete pandemonium, was now a scene of handshakes, brotherly hugs, and sincere apologies. The next day, the mosque was back to normal, and I never heard anyone discuss the argument again.

## Experiencing Intimacy

And when we pray and put our nose to the ground, we feel a joy, a rest, a strength, that is outside this world and no words could ever describe. You have to experience it to know.

—Ghassan Zarrah, former imam of the masjid at USF<sup>97</sup>

Hayya 'alas salaah! Hayya 'alas salaah!

Hayya 'alal falaah! Hayya 'alal falaah!

(Hasten to prayer! Hasten to Success!)

On the day I converted to Islam, the imam of the masjid gave me a manual on how to perform salah, the Islamic prayer ritual.

'Take it easy,' the Muslim students urged me, 'Don't push yourself too hard!' 'It's better to take your time.' 'You know: slowly, slowly.'

I was surprised by their concern.

How hard could it be to pray? I wondered.

That night, ignoring their advice, I decided to start performing the five prayers at their appointed times. I sat for a long time on the couch in my

small, dimly lit, living room, studying and rehearsing the prayer postures, the verses of the Qur'an that I needed to recite, and the supplications that I would have to make. Much of what I would be saying was in Arabic, so I had to memorize the Arabic transliterations and the English interpretations that the manual provided. I pored over the manual for a couple of hours before I felt confident enough to attempt my first prayer. It was close to midnight, so I decided to perform the 'isha' prayer.

I walked into the bathroom and placed the manual on the sink counter with it opened to the section describing how to perform wudu' (ritual ablution). Like a cook trying a recipe for the first time, I followed the step by step instructions slowly and meticulously. When I finished washing, I shut off the faucet and returned to the living room with water still dripping from various parts of my body, for the instructions stated that it is preferable not to dry oneself with a towel after wudu'.

Standing in the center of the room, I aimed myself in what I hoped was the direction of Makkah. I glanced back over my shoulder to make sure I had locked the door to my apartment. Finding that it was, I then looked straight ahead, straightened my stance, took a deep breath, raised my hands to the sides of my face with my palms opened and my thumbs touching my ear lobes, and then, in a hushed voice, I pronounced, 'Allahu Akbar.'

I hoped no one heard me. I felt a little bit anxious. I couldn't rid myself of the feeling that someone might be spying on me. Then I suddenly realized that I had left open the curtains of the living room window. What if a neighbor should look in and see me? I thought.

I stopped what I was doing and went to the window. I glanced around outside to make sure no one was there. To my relief, the back yard was empty. I then carefully pulled the curtains closed and returned to the middle of the room.

Once again, I approximated the direction of Makkah, stood straight, raised my hands to where my thumbs were touching my ear lobes, and whispered, 'Allahu Akbar.'

In a barely audible tone, I slowly and clumsily recited the first surah of the Qur'an and another short surah in Arabic, although I doubt that my pronunciation that night would have been intelligible to an Arab. I then quietly said another, 'Allahu Akbar,' and bowed with my back perpendicular to my legs and with my hands grasping my knees. I had never bowed to anyone before and I felt embarrassed. I was glad that I was alone. While still in the bowing position, I repeated several times the phrase, 'Subhana-rabbi-l 'Azeem', which means, Glory to my Lord the Great.

<sup>97</sup> A quote from *Struggling to Surrender*, 13.

I then stood up and recited, 'Samī'a Allahu liman hamidah' (God hears those who praise Him), and then, 'Rabbana wa laka-l hamd' (Our Lord and to you belongs all praise).

I felt my heart pounding and anxiety mounting as I meekly called out another 'Allahu Akbar'. I had arrived at the moment when I had to perform a sajdah, a prostration. Petrified, I stared at the area of the floor in front of me, where I was supposed to be down on all fours with my face to the ground.

I couldn't do it! I could not get myself to lower myself to the floor, to humble myself with my nose to the ground, like a slave groveling before his master. It was as if my legs had braces on them that would not let me bend. I felt too ashamed and humiliated. I could imagine the snickers and cackles of friends and acquaintances watching me make a fool of myself. I envisioned how ridiculous and pitiable I would look. 'Poor Jeff,' I could hear them saying, 'he really went Arab crazy in San Francisco, didn't he!'

Please! Please help me do this! I prayed.

I took a deep breath and then forced myself to the floor. Now on my hands and knees, I hesitated for a brief moment, and then I pushed my face to the carpet. Ridding my mind of all other thoughts, I mechanically pronounced three times, 'Subhana rabbi-l a'la (Glory to my Lord the highest!).

'Allahu Akbar,' I called and sat back on my heels. I kept my mind blank, refusing to allow any distractions to enter it. 'Allahu Akbar,' I pronounced and put my face again to the carpet.

With my nose touching the ground I called out mechanically, 'Subhana rabbi-l a'la, Subhana rabbi-l a'la, Subhana rabbi-l a'la.' I was determined to finish this, no matter what.

'Allahu Akbar.' I called and lifted myself from the floor and stood up straight. Three cycles to go, I told myself.

I had to wrestle with my emotions and pride the rest of the prayer, but it did get easier with each cycle. I was even almost calm during the last prostration. While in the final sitting posture, I recited the tashashhud and then ended the prayer by calling, 'Assalamu 'alaikum wa rahmatullah' with my head turned to the right, and again, 'Assalamu 'alaikum wa rahmatullah,' with my head turned to the left.

Spent, I remained on the floor and reviewed the battle I had just been through. I felt embarrassed that I had to struggle so hard to get through the prayer. With my head lowered in shame I prayed: please forgive me my

arrogance and stupidity. I have come from very far and I have so very far to go.

At that moment, I experienced something that I had never felt before and which is therefore difficult for me to put into words. A wave of what I can only describe as coldness swept through me, which seemed to radiate from some point within my chest. It was rather intense, and initially I was startled; I remember shuddering. However, it was much more than a physical sensation, for it affected my emotions as well in a strange way. It was as if mercy had taken on an objective form and was now penetrating and enveloping me. I cannot say exactly why, but I began to cry. Tears began to run down my face, and I found myself weeping uncontrollably. The harder I cried, the more I felt the embrace of a powerful kindness and compassion. I was not crying out of guilt—although I probably should have—or shame or joy; it was as if a dam had been unblocked and a great reservoir of fear and anger within me was being released. As I write these words, I can not help wondering if God's forgiveness involves much more than His absolution of our sins, if His forgiveness is not also curative and assuaging?

I remained on my knees, crouched to the floor with my head in my hands, sobbing, for some time. When I finally stopped crying, I was completely exhausted. The experience I had just had was for me too unfamiliar and overwhelming to try to rationalize at that moment, and I thought that it was definitely too strange to tell anyone about right away.<sup>28</sup> I did realize this much, however: I needed God and prayer desperately.

Before getting up from my knees, I made one last supplication:

Oh God, if I ever gravitate towards disbelief again, then please, kill me first—rid me of this life. It is hard enough living with my imperfections and weaknesses, but I cannot live another day denying You.

"Hasten to (salaah) prayer—Hasten to (falaah) success!" the adhan urges. If our main purpose in life is to grow ever nearer to God, then toward this end prayer is indeed essential. For Muslims, salah is one of the most important ways to pursue and experience this goal. It is a Muslim's spiritual compass by which he repeatedly checks his progress and direction in life, and it is his lifeline to paradise in the hereafter. Through the experience of salah, a Muslim tries to stay alert to the fluctuations of his

<sup>28</sup> In the months ahead, however, I had several, what for me were, intense spiritual experiences during salah, and I slowly became aware through conversations with other Muslims that mine were not at all abnormal or unusual.

faith. A Muslim will ask himself: Am I becoming lazy about my prayers, lately?; Am I rushing through them, without feeling any benefit?; Are my experiences of prayer weaker or stronger than they used to be?; Do I feel closer or farther from God in my prayers these days? Although each of the five pillars helps a Muslim gauge his growth in faith, the salah is the principle day to day measure of a believer's submission to God.

To perform the Islamic ritual prayer five times every day at the appointed times requires a considerable commitment to Islam. A single salah (ritual prayer) is not very taxing, but just to rise out of bed before dawn, every day of the year, workday or holiday, for the rest of one's life, to make the *fajr* prayer on time already demands great determination. All of Islam's rituals test and challenge a Muslim's will-power and self-control in various ways and, in so doing, help to build these qualities in him. The *shahadah* tests a person's allegiances; the fast of Ramadan tests his control of his physical needs; the zakah tests his ability to discipline his material desires; and the pilgrimage to Makkah in some ways tests all three. The salah may not be as emotionally demanding as one's first *shahadah*, or as physically or materially demanding as the other three pillars of Islam, but the ritual prayer, more than any of the other rituals, tests constancy and perseverance. I have known many Muslims who fast every Ramadan, who pay zakah every year, and who have made the *hajj*, yet who are unable to remain constant in their prayers.

Most of us are capable of great moments of virtue or religiosity and can rise to the occasion on rare occasions. However, too many of us are incapable of being even moderately virtuous or religious consistently. In terms of our spiritual and moral growth, we are too often like the person who suddenly decides he will get in shape one weekend by going out and running a marathon. But to really become physically fit, he needs to begin and follow a regular program of exercise. The Qur'an repeatedly exhorts the believer to develop *sabr*, the Arabic word that connotes patience, perseverance, and fortitude—qualities that are essential to spiritual development. Very often these exhortations are combined with exhortations to establish regular salah, as the two obviously complement each other.

Yet the rewards of salah far outweigh the demands. A Muslim student once informed me that the power of salah is indescribable. He said, "When we pray and put our nose to the ground, we feel a joy, a rest, a strength, that is outside this world and no words could ever describe. You have to experience it to know." The day he told me this was the day I became a Muslim, and it was not long before I began to understand what he meant.

There are moments during salah—moments of truth—of true honesty, sincerity, and humility—when a Muslim perceives the omnipresence of God's most merciful and compassionate light. These are not moments that can be anticipated, for they almost always come unexpectedly. But when they do come, he or she feels the caress of the most tender and most overpowering kindness. It is an utterly humbling experience, because a Muslim knows it is too infinitely beautiful to be deserved. It is a tremendously intoxicating experience, for with your hands, feet, and face placed firmly on the ground, you feel as if you are suddenly lifted into heaven and you could breathe its air, smell its soil, and feel its gentle breezes. It feels as if you are about to be raised off the ground and placed in the arms of the most benevolent and affectionate love. These moments of divine intimacy create in the worshipper an overpowering longing to be near to God, and the hereafter becomes the focus of his living and striving.

This helps us understand why devout Muslims are so zealous about their prayers, why they would seemingly prefer death to missing one of them. Thus they can be seen at airports or on sidewalks, in city parks or public buildings, alone or in congregation, standing, bowing, sitting and prostrating, paying no attention to the activity around them, seemingly in their own world. This is because they have come to need salah so desperately; it has become their main source of spiritual sustenance and their most personal and powerful means of relating to God. A devout Muslim cannot risk missing a salah, for he knows that his spiritual center, what people refer to symbolically as one's heart, is real and that it grows in its ability to receive and experience the divine with the continual and steadfast performance of the ritual prayer. This is a conviction born of experience. A Muslim comes to know firsthand that his spirituality and spiritual receptivity increase with and depend on the persistent exercise of prayer.

As stated earlier, a Muslim also knows that his growth is tied to his deeds and his relationship with others, a fact that is reinforced by the form of the congregational prayer. Muslims pray in tight formation, shoulder to shoulder, foot to foot, as they stand, bow, sit, and make the prostrations in unison. The visual beauty and gracefulness of Muslims in prayer depend on the unity of movement of the congregation.

A Muslim student once informed me that he could not understand why the Prophet ordered his Companions to pray in such close contact with each other, when they should be focusing all of their attention on God. I told him that perhaps he had confirmed with his question an important theme of

Islam: Even in our most intense worship, we should not forget that our relationship to God is tied to our relationships with others.

There is a well known saying of the Prophet in which he insists that a Muslim should not leave a gap between himself and his neighbor during the prayer, otherwise they will leave an opening for Satan. Another Muslim student told me how silly that sounded. So I asked him if he had ever prayed next to someone whom he felt was purposely trying to keep his distance and how that made him feel. He responded that he had known that experience and it made him suspicious of the motives of the person next to him. 'Exactly!' I told him, 'You see, a door to temptation was opened.'

As time passed, I grew more and more to appreciate the student Imam's statement that the beauty of the experience of salah cannot be truly described. Its beauty seems to have no upper bound, and it increases over time with the steadfast performance of the five daily prayers. As it does so, the believer comes to see with ever greater clarity just how much is at stake in this life—how much there is to gain and how great and terrible the potential loss. A pious Muslim parent certainly can understand the urgency behind prophet Abraham's prayer: "O my Lord! make me one who establishes regular salah and also among my descendants Our Lord!" (16:40).

*My daughter, Jameelah, once asked me just after we finished the noon prayer together: "Daddy, why do we pray?"*

*Her question caught me off guard. I didn't expect it from an eight year old. I knew of course the most obvious answer—that as Muslims we are obligated to—but I did not want to waste the opportunity to share with her the experience and benefits of salah. Nevertheless, as I tried to put together a reply in my mind, I bought a little time by beginning with, 'We pray because God wants us to!'*

*'But why, daddy, what does praying do?' she asked.*

*'It is hard to explain to a young person, honey. Someday, if you do the five prayers every day, I'm sure you'll understand, but I'll do my best to answer your question'*

*'You see, sweetheart. God is the source of all the love, mercy, kindness, and wisdom—of all the beauty—that we experience and feel. Like the sun is the source of the light we see in the daytime, God is the source of all of these and much more. Thus, the love I feel for you, your sisters, and mommy is given to me by God. We know that God is kind and merciful by all the things He has given us in this life. But when we pray, we can feel God's love, kindness, and mercy in a very special way, in the most powerful way.*

*For example, you know that mommy and I love you by the way we take care of you. But when we hug you and kiss you, you can really feel how much we love you. In a similar way, we know that God loves and is kind to us by the way He takes care of us. But when we pray, we can feel His love in a very real and special way.'*

*'Does praying make you a better daddy?' She asked me.*

*'I hope so and I would like to think so, because once you are touched by God's love and kindness in the prayer, it is so beautiful and powerful, that you need to share it with those around you, especially your family. Sometimes, after a hard day at work, I feel so exhausted that I just want to be alone. But if I feel God's kindness and mercy in the prayer, I look at my family and remember what a great gift you are to me, and all the love and happiness I get from being your daddy and mommy's husband. I'm not saying that I am the perfect father, but I believe I would not be as good a father without the prayers. Am I making any sense at all?'*

*'I kind of understand what you mean,' Jameelah answered.*

*Then she hugged me and said, 'And I love you, Daddy!'*

*'I love you too, sweetie pie. I love you too.'*

## Ramadan

O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that you may learn God-consciousness. (2:183)

*"Dr. Lang! Congratulations!" A beaming, middle-eastern student called to me, as I stood by the math department post boxes checking the morning mail.*

*"And you too!" I called back to him while he hurried down the hall toward his class.*

*"What was that for?" A colleague asked me, looking up from his letters.*

*"That student is a Muslim," I explained. "He just congratulated me on the start of Ramadan, our month of fasting."*

*"He congratulated you on having to suffer a month of hunger?" He said with a laugh. "I could understand him congratulating you at the end of the month, but not at the beginning."*

*"We have a different perspective," I told him, "we view the fast of Ramadan as a great opportunity for personal and spiritual growth."*

*"I thought it was an act of penance," said another professor who was listening in on our conversation.*

"No, not really. We believe that God is very forgiving and that we are especially receptive to His forgiveness during the month of fasting. But we think of the fast of Ramadan more as a spiritual benefit—a chance to review and reorient our lives and to grow closer to God. Muslims look forward to Ramadan with great anticipation and optimism."

"That may be," he remarked, "but I know for sure that I could never survive an entire month of fasting!"

Each day during the Arabic lunar month of Ramadan, Muslims abstain from food, drink, and sex between sunrise and sunset. They must also restrain their temper and avoid backbiting. One obvious objective of this month-long fast is to teach the believer self-control and to prepare him for the challenges that life may offer. Non-Muslims often mistakenly assume that the aim of the fast is self-mortification—to weaken the body so as to free the soul—as is the case in some other religious traditions. The fact that Muslims are encouraged to replenish themselves between sunset and dawn, and not to fast if they are ill or traveling, shows that the fast is intended to cause discomfort but not any physical debilitation.<sup>99</sup>

Most non-Muslims view the fast of Ramadan as Islam's severest ritual. When I describe this pillar of Islam to non-Muslim friends, I often get reactions like, "How can you do that to yourself?" or, "I could never do that!" I must admit that I held similar feelings before becoming a Muslim. In addition, when I was considering converting to Islam, I had very serious doubts as to whether I would be able to observe the fast completely and correctly. However, my first Ramadan, which occurred during the summer, turned out not to be as difficult as I imagined. Within a day or two, my body adjusted to the changes in eating and drinking habits and I was fine as long as I followed the well-known instructions on fasting contained in the traditions of the Prophet. By the end of Ramadan, I had gained a new confidence in myself. I found that I had greater endurance than I thought I had and that with some patience, determination, and God's help, a seemingly very difficult task could become quite achievable.

Islam definitely encourages such a positive attitude; it is one of the Qur'an's major themes, and the rituals seem to be designed to strengthen this conviction. Perhaps this is one of the principle reasons why Islam

<sup>99</sup> Nursing mothers and menstruating women are also not supposed to fast. If a Muslim is unable to fast part of Ramadan, at a later time he or she can make up for the missed days either by fasting the same number of days missed or by performing certain prescribed acts of charity.

discourages severe asceticism, because so few of us are capable of it. Although Islamic rituals challenge the believer, they are not so difficult so as to habituate him or her to failure. Thus we have the statement of Prophet Muhammad that the best act of worship in the eyes of God is the one that is practiced consistently.<sup>100</sup>

Each of the pillars of Islam promotes community solidarity, although this may not be at first obvious with the fast of Ramadan. Yet with the possible exception of the *hajj*, there is no other time of the year when fraternal feeling among Muslims is so strong and so evident. During this month, mosques throughout the Islamic world are packed with worshippers throughout the night, charitable work and donations increase dramatically in the community, and Muslims make special efforts to visit friends and family, especially those whom they have not seen in some time. Muslims consider it a great blessing to share *iftar* (the meal taken just after sunset) with others. A Muslim household will hardly ever break the fast alone during Ramadan, but will invite friends and neighbors, including non-Muslims, to join them for *iftar*. In the West, communal feeling among Muslims is also heightened during Ramadan, because their lifestyle becomes even more distinguished from the non-Muslim majority.

Ramadan is a very spiritual time for Muslims, who often refer to it as the *Month of Peace* and the *Month of Mercy*. It is the month in which the revelation of the Qur'an to Prophet Muhammad began (2:185), the revelation that brought and still brings God's serenity and security to so many Muslims. Muslims believe that they are especially receptive to God's boundless grace and forgiveness during this period. The experience of fasting, together with the many voluntary acts of worship they perform, helps them to better focus on their relationships with God. Of the five pillars of Islam, the fast of Ramadan is perhaps the most personal expression of self-surrender to God; we can observe a Muslim performing the other four pillars, but, in addition to himself, only God knows if he is staying with the fast. Due to this, the fast is not something a person can perform to be seen and respected by others. We can tell people that we are fasting, but they have no practical way of verifying it. The Prophet explained it best when he stated that God says, "The fast is for Me [alone]."<sup>101</sup>

<sup>100</sup> An-Nawawi's *Riyadh-Us-Saleheen*, trans. by S. M. N. Abbasi, 1:95-106.

<sup>101</sup> *Sahih al Bukhari*, trans. by Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Dar Al Arabia): Vol. 3, *The Book of Fasting*, p. 65.

Ramadan is also the month of sharing God's mercy with others, a time of community healing and renewal. Many broken friendships are restored and hatchets are buried during this month. One Muslim friend told me: "If hurt feelings between Muslims can not be mended during Ramadan, then there is no hope of them ever being mended."

The ritual fast especially should increase empathy among Muslims for the poor and deprived, because for an entire month the faithful must do without even some of the simplest daytime pleasures. Yet, even while fasting, it is sometimes all too easy to forget our responsibilities as God's vicegerents.

One Ramadan, I was so preoccupied with problems at work that I began to feel somewhat sorry for myself and irritated that I had to fast during such a trying episode in my life. On a particularly hard day, while I was just starting *iftar*, a news flash came on TV describing the mass starvation gripping Ethiopia and Somalia. I still remember the face of one starving Somali father as he helplessly watched his naked infant son, whose stomach was severely bloated, tossing in agony in the dirt. The father, who had already lost the rest of his family, sat on the ground by his child, waiting, patiently and pathetically, for the relief that death would soon bring his little boy, while I sat watching from my couch, eating a sumptuous meal. The child, who seemed not yet resigned to death, screamed furiously and defiantly, as if at the obvious injustice of it all, at the callous and cruel neglect of people like me who did not want to be disturbed but only entertained by the television.

I had known of this tragedy in Somalia and Ethiopia for months, but I had done nothing—not even allowed myself to care. The statement of Prophet Muhammad, that when you see an injustice, you should change it with your hands, and if you cannot do that, then you should change it with your tongue, and if you are still unable to do that, then at least you should change it in your heart, and this last alternative is the lowest level of faith,<sup>102</sup> tore into me while I stared, with a plate of food before me, at the television screen. I had fasted for almost an entire month and never once considered the much greater suffering that others were enduring right before my eyes. It was as if God had chosen that moment to put me in my place, to show me all the things I had, and how thankless I was being.

<sup>102</sup> From Sahih Muslim. See *An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith*, trans. by Ibrahim and Johnson-Davies, 110.

When Ramadan ends, Muslims hold a three day celebration, called *eid* in Arabic. It is a very joyful holiday, a festival of gift giving and family get-togethers. It compares to the Christmas celebration in the West. It is also a time when Muslims feel especially grateful to God, because the experience of fasting reminds them of the many gifts God has given them. Every Muslim has had the experience of getting ready to take a drink or a bite of food during the *eid* when they suddenly are seized by the alarming impulse to rid themselves of the snack they are about to enjoy. A fraction of a second later, they breath a sigh of relief as they realize that their minds momentarily had slipped back into the fasting mode it had gotten so used to and that it is now all right to indulge their thirst or hunger. It may seem strange, but Muslims will say how utterly wonderful these occurrences are, because, for a brief moment, that drink or morsel of food seems like one of life's great pleasures, as enjoyable as any luxury this Earth may offer. As they delight in that moment, they are filled with feelings of thanksgiving to God, for they know that His mercy and bounty are truly great.

## Zakah and Spiritual Cleansing

Every Muslim, male or female, who, at the end of the year, is in possession of approximately fifteen dollars or more, in cash or articles of trade, must give zakah at the minimum rate of two and one-half percent.<sup>103</sup>

The collection of this tax is administered by the state, and it is incumbent on all liquid, visible, movable, and immovable properties belonging to Muslims. Three principles govern its levying.

First, no zakah is due on property intended for consumption, such as houses, gardens, clothing and furniture. Jewelry of gold, silver and precious gems is excepted because it may serve as a channel for hoarding wealth, which Islam condemns. Taxable property is that which is intended for production, whether industrial, agricultural, or commercial. Second, zakah is not an indiscriminate tax on all properties. Assessment of zakah must take into consideration the net income produced by the property in question. In a year of a losing operation, no zakah is levied on the property concerned. Third, a reasonable

<sup>103</sup> Hammudah Abdalati, *Islam in Focus* (Indianapolis: American Trust, 1975), 96.

amount necessary for the owner and his dependents' subsistence must be deducted from the assessment.<sup>104</sup>

Islamic Law elaborates many more technicalities concerning the payment of zakah, but already it can be seen that the classical description does not take into consideration the vast majority of today's Muslims, who are citizens of secular states. While most believers living under secular governments wish to observe this important pillar of Islam, there are no generally agreed upon standards for determining precisely who must pay zakah, exactly how much should be paid, and to whom it should be given. In the seventh century C.E., a person who owned no property intended for production was probably not someone of means; today many people own no such property and yet have substantial incomes. How much zakah should such individuals pay? Various formulas for calculating one's zakatable wealth have been suggested recently but I know of none that is widely applied. (I recall that The Islamic Society of North America ISNA, published one in 1995 based on one's federal income tax calculation.) Certain Islamic organizations in the United States and Canada, like ISNA, the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) and others, have recommended that zakah payments be sent to them, but it seems that most Muslims living in the United States simply pay what they think they should owe to their Islamic centers or directly to the poor in their local communities.

When to pay zakah is another problem. Traditionally, payment is made annually, usually at the end of Ramadan. Muslims who receive a weekly or monthly salary often find it difficult to put aside and save what they estimate they should contribute from their paychecks. Typically, they find that the money they save to pay zakah eventually gets spent. I know quite a few Muslim Americans who avoid this problem by contributing a fixed amount, usually at least 2.5 percent, of each paycheck to a Muslim charitable organization. In this way, they pay zakah in advance (weekly or monthly), depending on when they receive their salaries.

Many non-Muslims view this ritual as mundane and prosaic, as the least spiritual of the five pillars of Islam, for it appears to remove the charity involved in giving if it is compulsory and subject to many computational technicalities. To many outside the faith, it seems to have about the same spiritual content as preparing an income tax return.

<sup>104</sup> Isma'il R. Al Faruqi, *Islam*, (Beltsville, MD: amana publications, 1995), 24-27.

Even the most objective study of another culture can produce only limited understanding of its perceptions. Membership in a culture is often needed in order to appreciate many of its points of view. The next best source of understanding, which is a distant second, is the personal reports of its members. The Muslim experience of zakah is far-removed from the characterizations listed in the preceding paragraph. For them, the facts that the payment of zakah is obligatory and, under ideal circumstances, levied by the state does not detract from its spirituality or humaneness. A line between law and religion has never been drawn by Muslim religious scholars; classical and modern Shari'ah texts discuss not only civil law but also Islamic rituals, family relations, proper hygiene, and many other matters that western culture considers outside the purview of law. It should also be kept in mind that Muslims feel obligated, both religiously and legally, to perform all of the *five pillars* of Islam. From the Muslim viewpoint, laws must be in conformity with God's will. Hence, a perceived legal obligation becomes a duty owed to God and a moral obligation (and *vice versa*).

Muslims recognize that not everyone will benefit equally from observing the rituals, for there are always those who will lack sincerity while doing so. The benefit of any ritual, and for that matter of doing any good deed, corresponds to the intention with which it is done. If an act is done out of a sincere love of God and concern for others, then the highest spiritual reward may be gained; if it is done to gain the respect of others or to avoid condemnation, then that much (and little else) will probably be obtained by the doer. A statement of the Prophet summarizes this concept:

"Your deeds will be judged according to your intentions, and unto every person is due what he intended. Therefore, whoever migrates (joins the Muslim community) for the sake of this world or to get married, his migration is [accounted] for that which he migrated."<sup>105</sup>

The five pillars represent the minimum ritual requirements that Islam imposes on its believers. Supererogatory worship, termed *nawaafil* (plural of *naflah*) in Arabic, is, however, strongly encouraged. Many observant Muslims recite the *shahadah*, perform salah, fast, give in charity, and make pilgrimage to Makkah much more often than the five pillars require. Although by paying zakah a Muslim fulfills a ritual obligation, his or her

<sup>105</sup> *Sahih al Bukhari: The Early Years*, translated and explained by M. Asad, 3.

charitable obligations may be much greater. The Qur'an imposes a high moral standard in this regard on the believers:

They ask you how much they should spend [in charity];  
Say: "Whatever is beyond your needs." Thus does God  
make clear to you His signs so that you may consider  
[their bearings] on this life and the hereafter. (2:219-20).

There are many sayings of the Prophet in the same vein. On one occasion, he is reported to have startled his Companions by telling them that believers were obliged to perform as many acts of charity each day as there were bones in their bodies. When the poorer ones mentioned that they did not have the financial means to meet this obligation, he insisted on it nonetheless and informed them that a smile, an act of kindness, and a helping hand are all acts of charity.<sup>106</sup> He is also said to have told his followers that no one can call himself a believer while he eats his fill and his neighbor goes hungry.<sup>107</sup>

That Islam includes the annual payment of zakah in its ritual pillars is a reflection of the duty it imposes on believers to act as God's emissaries (*khalifah*) on earth. The year-long effort to set aside a fixed portion of one's earnings to give to the poor should serve as a constant reminder to a Muslim of this office that he or she has accepted and of his or her greater charitable obligations.

The importance Islam assigns to zakah is also indicative of the emphasis it places on charity in our spiritual development. There are two qualities that hasten a person's spiritual growth more than any others and two that impede it more than any others: benevolence and humility, and arrogance and greed, respectively. Both humility and charity, as well as their above-mentioned opposites, correlate with our expectations of others. Humility relates to what we expect from others, and charity relates to what we believe others should expect from us. The Muslim ideal is to have low expectations with regard to the first and to accept the high expectations of others with regard to the second.

The effects of benevolence and acts of humility on a believer's spirituality are usually not immediately discernible. There is often a delayed reaction, like when a person takes an antibiotic for an infection.

<sup>106</sup> *An-Nawawi's Riyadh-Ul-Saleheen*, trans. by S. M. N. Abbasi, Dar Al Arabia, Beirut, 1:85-95.

<sup>107</sup> Asad, *The Road to Mecca*, 297.

For example, he or she starts to notice that his or her prayers begin to increase in beauty and power and that the moments of divine intimacy both inside and outside the rituals seem stronger and more frequent. He or she comes to feel a type of freedom or lightness of spirit, as if his or her soul has been cleansed. A great sense of peace and security comes over such individuals, material possessions become less and less important, and their need to help and give to others grows. The Arabic word *zakah* is an apt description of this experience, for it is derived from the Arabic verb *zaka*, the two primary meanings of which are "to purify" and "to grow."

Of course philanthropy can sometimes work against humility, as it is easy to slip into self-admiration and become self-congratulatory. This is why Islam discourages testimonials and making a show of one's charitable deeds. According to Islam, the best acts of charity are those done in secret. If that is not possible, at least one should refuse praise (Qur'an 2:261-74). When a Muslim gives something as charity, he or she should do so with the profound sense of obligation that the office of God's *khalifah* imposes. A story my wife told me typifies this attitude.

*My wife's grandfather was one of those austere and fiercely independent self-made men that the Arabian Peninsula was once famous for, especially before it became a kingdom. He was known by everyone from the Najd to the Hijaz and was greatly feared and respected—not only because of his esteemed lineage or the wealth he had accumulated (both of which wield great influence in Arabia), but much more so because of his strong and unyielding character. Of course he had his faults, but there was one thing you could always count on when it came to Abdul Qadir: when he gave you his word he kept it, regardless of the consequences.*

*The day he died of a heart attack, the members of his large family felt as if the earth had given out beneath them. Although his three wives, many children, and grandchildren were well provided for materially, there was no replacing the feelings of security and protection that his mere presence provided them. Their mourning of his passing was long and hard.*

*Several weeks after his death, poor families began showing up at the door of his home. Widows, disabled men, and orphans, all told the same story: Abdul Qadir had been providing them with free housing and a regular allowance all these years. When he did not appear for his usual*

monthly visit, they became concerned for his and their welfare and so came to his home.

*Abdul Qadir was remembered by many as a hard but good man, but almost no one knew that he took care of so many impoverished families. I feel sure he would have preferred that it remain that way, and I hope someday he will forgive me for disclosing this. May Allah, the Kind and Merciful, reward him and grant him peace.*

## Pilgrimage

"*Mon ami*, do you think the hadj begins in Makkah? No, no. It starts the moment you decide to go."<sup>108</sup>

In 1991, several months after the end of the Gulf War, I took a leave of absence from the University of Kansas to teach at the University of Petroleum and Minerals (UPM) in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. As the Saudi Airlines 747 that would carry us to Jeddah rose above the runway at JFK, I felt like an emigrant on my way to a new homeland. I was tired of life in America; tired of being a stranger (by choice, of course) in my own land; and tired of living in a country where my religion was despised, or at best, grudgingly tolerated, and where my wife was often harassed and threatened because of her middle-eastern dress and looks. I was also relieved for my three young daughters, who would have faced many difficult choices between their religion and the surrounding culture if we had remained in America. I thought of how it would have been to their material and social disadvantage to practice Islam in my country and how much easier it would be for them to grow up in a Muslim land.

I also reflected on how I would finally complete my own *hijrah*—my personal flight to religious freedom. It was an emigration that I had begun emotionally and intellectually eight years earlier in a small mosque in San Francisco. On that day when I said my first *shahadah*, I consciously forsook my culture and committed myself to an outlook that defied the American mainstream. I mentally alienated myself from people who I believed could never comprehend the choice I had made and the life I now lived. As we soared into the starlit sky, I was filled with feelings of hope, excitement, defiance, and deliverance.

<sup>108</sup> A quotation from Michael Wolfe, *The Hadj: A Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Seeker and Warburg, 1994).

At last! I told myself. At last! To the land of the Prophet!

As optimistic as I was, I did not expect to find Utopia there. Eight years in the Muslim community of America showed me that although there were many differences between Americans and Muslims from the Middle East, neither had a clear advantage in virtue. Each community has its vices and its virtues, and I could not see how one was definitely superior to the other in conduct or morals. Unlike many American converts, I was not drawn to Islam by the example set by Muslim friends. My only Muslim contacts for many years were drug users, adulterers, and gamblers. I am not judging them, for we were birds of a feather and they played an indirect but important role in my coming to Islam. However, I certainly did not see them as particularly high-minded persons. I had also spent the eight years since my conversion observing how petty, jealous, slanderous, and unjust so-called religious Muslims could be toward one another and how they could prostitute their religion for worldly gain. I may have been happy to be leaving the United States behind, but I entertained no romantic visions of emigrating to a nobler Middle Eastern society.

My quest was not for the perfect society, but rather for peace and for a place where my religion and practice of it were respected. I wanted to live among fellow Muslims and to observe with my friends, neighbors, and co-workers the Friday prayer, the fast of Ramadan, and the Islamic holidays. I wanted to know in my everyday life the comfort and security I had found in our tiny Islamic center in Lawrence, Kansas—although we are as human as anyone else, we Muslims are committed to the same goal and source of guidance, and when we relate sincerely to each other on the level of faith, a wonderful communion occurs. This fellowship of purpose is impossible for us to experience outside our community, and this realization weighed heavily in my decision to make my *hijrah* to Saudi Arabia.

Nevertheless, a year later, I was on another Saudi Airlines plane on my way back to the United States. Exhausted and burdened with a terrible sense of failure, I returned to my position at the University of Kansas. My dreams of finding a religious refuge for my family and making a contribution to Muslim society by teaching Saudi students died and shriveled in Dhahran. Since my wife was very happy in her homeland and my young children were slowly adjusting to the new environment, I have only myself to blame; I was the sole member of my family who could not adapt. In spite of my strong sentiments about having made a personal *hijrah*—of having forsaken western culture to become a Muslim—I returned to the

United States having learned that for me, at least, there was no escape from being an American.

It is true that I was involved in some unfortunate incidents during my brief tenure at UPM, but I prefer not to defend myself by lambasting Saudi society. The culture to which I could not adapt is not mine and not for me, as a foreigner, to change. I will offer only one excuse, because I believe it was my primary motivation for returning to the United States: for reasons I do not fully comprehend, I felt I was spiritually suffocating in Saudi Arabia. In the land that saw the birth of the mission of Prophet Muhammad, that contains the two holiest cities of Islam and the Ka'bah toward which I pray, a land dominated by Muslims and home to a culture imbued with religion, I felt hopelessly spiritually stagnated. In Saudi Arabia, Islam ceased to be a force for personal change, and my faith was soon drained of its vitality. Not that the country was deficient in good and religious people—on the contrary, I met many sincere and devout Muslims there—but to me the religious movements in the kingdom were directed toward an idealized past that I could never be a part of and were based on an interpretation of Islam in which I was quickly losing confidence.

This is what I mean when I say that there was no escape from being an American. My whole approach to religion—my way of investigating and studying it and the kinds of religious issues and questions that are important to me—is influenced strongly by my cultural background and very often is discomfiting to Muslims from traditional cultures. I never realized it before I went to the kingdom, but my conversion to Islam and my living as a Muslim in the United States are in some ways very American. What brought me to Islam, the kind of search I conducted and the struggles I fought within myself and against my upbringing, are not unusual in America.

Many Americans have changed religions or broken away from family traditions, for the country itself was built upon uprooted lives that had to adapt quickly to radical change. Americans have a certain admiration for the individualist, the underdog, and the maverick who defies convention and blazes his or her own trail. But I believe it would be almost impossible for a young Saudi Arabian to confront his or her society's values and traditions as directly as I did. Indeed, the message I frequently received from my Saudi friends was that the critical approach I once took toward religion was fine—as long as it led me to Islam. Now that I was a Muslim, however, I should learn to accept things as they are and to rely on the knowledge and sound judgment of Muslim religious scholars. A few times I was told that

the questions I ask and methods of investigation I employ are dangerous, for they could lead to innovation and heresy. I have also heard this from Muslims in America, but I believe that the American Muslim community allows much greater intellectual freedom and diversity than the one I found in Saudi Arabia. I am not insisting that these traits make the American Islamic community a better living environment, but I know that I desperately missed that freedom during my stay in Dhahran.

My year in Saudi Arabia became more and more of a spiritual prison sentence. As the second semester began, I was counting how many days were left until my departure. Yet as unhappy as I was, I always consoled myself that my journey to the Arabian peninsula could never be a total failure. After all, it provided me with a chance of a lifetime: a chance to make the *hajj* and to accomplish the fifth pillar of Islam. However, as the year progressed, I became so worn out and eager to return to the United States, that even this opportunity's consolatory effect began to diminish. When I first came to Saudi Arabia, I could think of almost nothing but the pilgrimage; by the time the month of *hajj* arrived, my initial ebullience had deflated to a very sober, dutiful attitude toward performing this ritual.

I performed the pilgrimage with a faculty group from UPM. It was the year after the Gulf War, and the number of pilgrims was extremely large—over two million—so large that thousands were refused admittance (due to overcrowding) at Mount Arafat on the Day of Standing and so unable to complete one of the essential rites. Modern transportation and technology have helped to make the journey less arduous and less physically hazardous than it once was, but it has also contributed to a dramatic increase in the number of pilgrims each year. With so many people packed into so tiny an area, the pilgrimage still presents a significant health risk and physical discomfort.

I came down with a bad case of influenza a few days before we left for Makkah *al Mukarramah* (Makkah the Blessed). Unfortunately, it grew worse during the *hajj*. It was July, a time when the peninsula is normally very hot. To make conditions a little worse, the Hijaz was in the grip of a severe heat wave. Veteran pilgrims in our group kept informing us that this was the most difficult *hajj* they had ever experienced, the crowds were usually not so large, the delays in getting from one place to another never so long (it would take us many hours just to travel several miles by bus), and the heat was normally not so intense. One traveler told me that the hardness of the conditions was a sign of God's mercy: He was granting Muslims an opportunity to shed the many sins accumulated during the Gulf War.

Before entering Makkah, pilgrims must remove their normal clothes and ornaments, perform a purifying ablution, and declare to God their intention to perform the pilgrimage. Each pilgrim puts on two pieces of unsewn white linen or cotton: one piece covers the body from the waist down, and the other from the waste up (the head is left bare). For the next few days, until the Day of Sacrifice, pilgrims must not shave, cut their hair, clip their fingernails, or wear anything that might differentiate them from other pilgrims. In this way, all pilgrims are equal in appearance, which is symbolic of the fact that all individuals are equal before God.

When we arrived in Makkah, we went immediately to the Holy Mosque, which is located in the heart of the city. It was evening, and the mosque's lavish lighting made it glow like a gigantic lamp illuminating the city. Its courtyard is uncovered, and the sky above it this night made a beautiful star-studded canopy. I was hoping to get close to the Ka'bah, which is located in the center of the courtyard, but crowd of tens of thousands of pilgrims made it impossible for me to do so. I went over to one of the two recently constructed tiers that contain walkways situated above the courtyard's outer rim and designed to accommodate overflow crowds wishing to circumambulate the Ka'bah. There was no room on the second tier, and barely any on the third.

I thought that from the third tier I should be able to get a great view of the Ka'bah. However, I did not want to fight my way through the dense crowd to get to the inner wall of the walkway. I then discovered a small ledge from which I could get an excellent view. I gazed wonderstruck at the scene below—a huge vortex drawing humanity in to the Ka'bah, a massive whirlpool of people from every corner of the earth, above which rose a steady drone of supplications in a multitude of languages. There were thousands and thousands of white-clad pilgrims circumambulating the Ka'bah and petitioning and glorifying God. It reminded me of the descriptions in the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions of the angels going around God's throne on the Day of Judgment. I felt an overwhelming need to go back to the main floor so that I could enter that current of humanity and experience firsthand its power and pull. I made my way down one of the staircases to ground level and squeezed through the crowd until I reached the courtyard's outer rim.

I quickly slipped into a tiny space that momentarily opened in the outer edge of the mass of pilgrims. Squeezed from all sides, I stood as straight I could, trying to make myself as narrow as possible. A strong push from behind sent me surging forward with the crowd. Then the

throng shifted to the left, and I was propelled along with it. The more I tried to secure my footing, the more I was pushed and turned about. I quickly realized that the best thing to do was to relax and let the motion of the multitude carry me.

All pilgrims hope to touch the Black Stone, which is lodged in one of the walls of the Ka'bah. There are many stories and traditions associated with it. For example, it is reported that the Prophet would kiss it upon finishing *tawaf* (walking around the Ka'bah seven times). As I circled the Ka'bah, I found that I, like everyone else, was moving ever-closer to it along a decreasing spiral. I was being pulled nearer and nearer to an irresistible singularity. I was only one tiny molecule in an ocean of humanity and, although we were traveling different paths, we were all drawn to the same great power. On the seventh circuit, I had come within only a few feet of the Ka'bah. As I approached the Black Stone, I slipped forward and was able to touch it with my left hand. As I bent to kiss it, I was bumped hard in my head by someone to my left and knocked away.

"Let him!" someone shouted in Arabic, "Let him!"

A handful of pilgrims held back the crowd for a second. I quickly touched my lips to the Black Stone and was then pushed away.

I prayed two *rak'ahs* (cycles) of prayer far behind the station of Abraham and then picked my way through the throng until I reached Safa and Marwah, two hillocks about a mile apart and within the mosque. Pilgrims are supposed to cover the distance between the hills seven times at a trotting pace, but that was impossible on this night, since the conditions were more cramped here than in the courtyard. Many times the multitude surrounding me came to a dead stop, unable to advance, and a few times we were forced backward. At one point, I dropped my prayer booklet and, as a reflex, bent down to retrieve it. I felt a great push from the crowd, and a man standing next to me grabbed me by the arm just as I started to lose my balance. He forced me back up.

In English he said: "Forget it. You could easily end up trampled to death."

He was right of course, and I thanked him.

It was extremely hot and damp in that mass of human beings. People were sweating profusely, and the smell of body odor hung in the air. I saw a few people panicking and crying, but most were very sedate. Holding yourself up against the constant press of the crowd could be quite fatiguing, but I personally found the tightness of our conditions the most trying part

of the pilgrimage rites. I am somewhat claustrophobic and a few times became anxious and faint, but I held on and was all right.

I saw many tender scenes as I inched my way through the seven circuits between the two hills: children carried on their father's shoulders, parents and grandparents supported by their children, spouses locked arm in arm, all fulfilling the same dream. There were a few frustrated and angry faces in the crowd, but most of the expressions around me were peaceful and happy. I reflected on how if this were any other place on earth in which such a large mass of people were this tightly packed, there would certainly be many violent outbreaks. Yet during the eight days I spent in the *haram* (the area encompassing Makkah, the plain of Arafat, and other pilgrimage sites), I did not see a single physical altercation.

I had made *'umrah* (the minor pilgrimage, which consists of walking around the Ka'bah seven times and trotting between Safa and Marwah seven times) many times before, and the longest it took me to finish was forty-five minutes. On this night, it took me over two hours to complete the rites. When I got back to our bus, I had to wait a little over an hour for the rest of our group to finish. Then we discovered that one of the older ladies in our group was missing; it took us another hour to find her. By the time we reached our campsite in Mina, it was almost 3:00 A.M.

We used the next day to rest, since the pilgrimage proper would not begin until the following day.<sup>109</sup> After breakfast, I decided to go for a walk and look around.

Our campsite was located several hundred yards from the three pillars of stone that symbolize Satan and at which pilgrims throw pebbles on the Day of Sacrifice. Nearly the entire tiny valley of Mina, which is surrounded by steep, rocky cliffs, is paved with asphalt. Above the three pillars is a wide, concrete bridge about a half-mile long. The bridge has three holes in it, approximately ten feet in radius, through which the pillars rise. This gives pilgrims the option to stone the pillars from either ground level or from on top of the bridge, which reduces congestion on the Day of Sacrifice.

The first thing that struck me as I stepped into the main thoroughfare was the thousands of pilgrims camped underneath the bridge. These were clearly the poorest group of pilgrims, those who came with little more than a change of clothes. They had no tents, no running water, no refrigeration

<sup>109</sup> Our group performed what is known as *hajj al tamattu*, which consists of performing *'umrah* (the lesser pilgrimage) and then *hajj* (the major pilgrimage).

for the food they carried, no air-conditioning, and access to only a few public toilets with very long lines of users. Some had blankets or sleeping bags, but many slept on cardboard or on the bare asphalt. At least they had plenty of shade from the searing rays of the sun.

The next class of pilgrims were those camped in tents. Their conditions varied, but most seemed to have it only slightly better than those who settled under the bridge. Their tents were everywhere, taking up every inch of available ground. They covered the roadside, the cliff tops, and even the small ledges jutting out from the cliffs. I thought it would probably be cooler under the bridge, but of course tents afford more privacy.

Some groups of pilgrims are fortunate enough to stay in hangers constructed specifically for the pilgrimage and used only at that time. The word is that UPM always rents one of the best. This was easy to believe, for our hanger had wall-to-wall carpeting, toilets, sinks with mirrors, showers, ceiling fans, air conditioning and a large kitchen containing several ovens and a big barbecue. I heard that the rent for the hanger—it accommodated approximately one hundred of us—was more than one hundred thousand dollars for the eight days we stayed in Mina.

A few pilgrims stay in hotels. I only noticed two rather small ones in Mina and a number of very luxurious hotels in Makkah. Certainly this would be the most comfortable way to spend the pilgrimage, but only a relative handful of pilgrims can afford it.

When I returned from my stroll, I looked around for a pay-phone to call my family, who were staying with relatives in Jeddah. While I was waiting in line, I overheard some young men speaking about me in Arabic.

"Maybe he's German," one of them said.

"No," said another, "he's definitely American."

"Ask him," said a third.

"I'm American," I responded in English, and they all smiled.

It turns out that one of them, who was from Dubai, spoke English. "Can I ask you something?" He said politely.

"Go ahead," I told him, although I knew what it would be.

With a big and excited grin he asked: "How did you become a Muslim?"

I began to tell him my story and he acted as translator for my steadily growing audience. They were laughing and sighing and nodding their approval. Some of the eyes that were fixed on me were swimming in tears. It took me about twenty minutes to finish, and then I fielded questions through my translator for another half hour. I finally reached the front of

the phone queue and dialed my wife. When I finished the phone call, I turned to the assembly and waved good-bye.

"*As-salaamu-alaikum!*" I called out to them, feeling like a dignitary. "*Wa alaikum salaam!*" they shouted back.

I then hurried off to my campsite with a few of my listeners running to catch up with me to get my address and phone number.

The same scene occurred repeatedly during the next several days. It seemed that no matter where I was or what I was doing, a group of curious pilgrims would approach me with the same two questions: "Are you American?" and "How did you become Muslim?"

I do not know what made them assume that I must be American rather than European, but something about my manner or appearance clued them in.

At first, I rather enjoyed the instant celebrity. I would crack little jokes and be quite animated as I told the story of my conversion to Islam. I seldom had so responsive an audience. But in no time at all I began to feel like an exhibit in a museum and got tired of repeating the same stale tale over and over again. There was nothing special or heroic about my becoming a Muslim. I began to wonder if it was not my white Anglo-Saxon Americanness that made my story so inspirational to my listeners. I started to long for anonymity and privacy. Of course, in so crowded a place the latter is probably too much to hope for, but it felt like I was under constant examination. It was not long before I only wanted to sit quietly somewhere without having to pretend to be asleep so that others would leave me alone.

I think if I had not become so ill so quickly, I would have enjoyed my prominence a little longer. However, by dinner time that night I was very sick with a high fever and pounding headache that stayed with me and grew progressively worse almost for the entire *hajj*. I was burning up one moment and shaking from chills the next. Each morning I awoke in a pool of sweat, despite the fact that the air conditioning kept our hanger very cool. I was so nauseous that I ate hardly any of the appetizing and plentiful food that we were so often served. Nevertheless, I never entertained the thought of quitting the pilgrimage. As far as I knew, this might be my only chance; I was determined to complete it no matter what.

Early the next day, we set out by bus for Makkah in order to begin the formal rites of *hajj*. We reached the holy mosque that afternoon and again performed *tawaf* (circumambulating the Ka'bah seven times) and *sa'y* (hastening between the hills of Safa and Marwah seven times). Not only was the masjid even more crowded than it had been two nights before, but it was

much hotter outside. The wail of ambulances running back and forth with the heat-exhausted to one of the local hospitals was nearly constant. The sun's rays baked the marble flooring of the Holy Mosque's courtyard to such a high temperature that the bottom of my feet became badly blistered. Apparently, most pilgrims had much tougher soles than I, for their feet did not appear to bother them. Perhaps this was because they were more accustomed to going barefoot than I was.

After a light snack, we were off to Arafat. We pulled into traffic and moved along slowly but steadily for about a mile. Then we came to a full stop, and our bus remained where it was for a couple of hours. Many in our entourage started getting nervous, for we had to make Arafat before sunset or our pilgrimage would not be valid.

If we had stayed in line, we probably would never have gotten to Arafat on time, but our driver was very experienced and knew the back roads of the *haram* well. After turning the bus around, he drove against the flow of traffic a short distance on the shoulder of the highway and then turned on to an empty two-lane service road. For the next hour or so, he drove us through a maze of vacant desert roads. Amazingly, he got us to Arafat shortly after noon.

This day, the heat wave we had been under reached its peak. There was no air conditioning at Arafat, and my fever was still on the rise. I had never felt so hot at any other time in my life. Too weak and nauseous to sit or stand, I spent most of the time before *'asr* lying on my back on my sleeping bag.

I awoke around three in the afternoon. Kneeling, I lifted my sleeping bag so that the large puddle of water that had accumulated on it could run off. Glancing around, I noticed that everyone around me was now either sitting or standing, facing the Ka'bah with their hands raised and making quiet and earnest supplications. A Bangladeshi janitor from UPM, who understood neither English nor Arabic and who had hardly uttered a sound the entire trip, was sobbing mournfully behind me. It was an eerie scene; I felt as if I had suddenly awakened into a great and terrible human crisis.

The Day of Arafat is also called the Day of Standing; because from the noon to the sunset salah, pilgrims will stand for long periods and make private prayers to their Lord. From about three o'clock until just before sunset, I stood with around two million Muslims on that scorched and dusty plain, petitioning and thanking God. During this time, I completely forgot the terrible heat, my illness, and the difficult year I had been through; I

could only think of the Day of Judgment, which this phase of the pilgrimage ritual made seem quite near.

Just after the sunset prayer, we boarded the buses to go to Muzdalifah, a small gravel-covered plane on which we would spend the night during our return trip to Mina. A fire that had broken out in a large, densely packed campground along the road to Muzdalifah stalled traffic for several hours, so that we did not get there until two in the morning.

We had to be careful not to step on anyone as we walked about Muzdalifah's stony surface in search of a place where we could sleep. As far as the eye could see, the ground was blanketed by sleeping pilgrims; I was reminded of pictures I had seen of the 1972 Woodstock festival at night. It was obvious that we would not find a space large enough to accommodate more than a few of our group at a time. I finally saw a small space of bare ground where one of my traveling companions and I could fit our sleeping bags.

The pebbles beneath my bag pinched my back as I lay staring at the stars. I thought about how I never took to camping while growing up in the city and that I could never fall asleep in such a place with no tent to cover me and with people snoring loudly all around me. That was the last thought I had that night. The next thing I knew, someone's hand was on my shoulder, shaking me. I had slept so deeply I had forgotten where I was. For a few seconds, I thought I was at my mom's house in Connecticut and that I had to get up for school.

"Brother, wake up, it's *fajr*," a young man from our group told me.

I was still groggy while standing for the morning prayer. I felt as if I had slept for days.

To our surprise, it did not take us too long to reach Mina. After dropping off my sleeping bag at our campsite, I immediately went to throw at the three pillars the pebbles I had collected at Muzdalifah. The air in Mina was gay with celebration. A myriad of bright bold colors filled the streets. For the last few days everyone had been in pilgrim clothes, but now Mina looked like a huge international fair with pilgrims proudly arrayed in their native clothing. People were beaming big, happy smiles, children were playing and darting about, and crowds were gathered around the many street vendors selling cheaply priced religious mementos of the pilgrimage. Others flocked to the many government trucks where free water, ice, milk, and food were being distributed as gifts to pilgrims by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques.<sup>110</sup> Others gaped at

<sup>110</sup> A title used by the King of Saudi Arabia.

the crippled beggars scattered all over the streets and pleading for charity while presenting their deformities as grotesque exhibits.

In all the commotion, I could not make out the pillars, so I simply headed for the largest mob of people underneath the bridge. The first pillar was surrounded by a large swarm of pilgrims that began about twenty-five feet from the pillar.

"*Allahu Akbar!*" They shouted as they fired pebbles at their target.

I wanted to get closer to the pillar to have a better shot at it, for my eyesight is not that good and I was afraid I might hit someone inadvertently. I made my way through the crowd until I reached the circular wall surrounding the pillar. A deluge of pebbles, tossed by pilgrims who chose to perform the stoning while standing on the bridge, rained down from above like sand in an hour glass and formed a large, growing conical pile of stones at the base of the pillar. At the same time, hundreds of pebbles thrown by pilgrims at ground level were whizzing by my head. I felt a few mild stings in my back where I was hit by pebbles, so I ducked down a little when I tossed mine.

Most of the pilgrims around me were calmly performing this rite, but a few were extremely agitated. Even though the pillars only represent Satan and throwing stones at them symbolizes the pilgrims' resolution to resist temptation, some pilgrims behaved as if the pillars were the Devil himself. They furiously fired their pebbles as they angrily cursed the columns of stone. Some of them threw shoes, sticks, and other objects at these targets of their revenge.

"Curse you! You made me lose my wife!" One enraged man screamed in Arabic.

When I finished the stoning, I had only one major rite left to perform: the sacrifice of a sheep or goat. In times past, pilgrims used to either bring their sacrifices with them or buy them in Mina, where they would slaughter them themselves, keep a little of the meat for their own consumption, and give the rest to the poor. As the number of pilgrims grew, the traditional way of sacrifice became less and less practical and sanitary. Hundreds of tons of meat rotted in the sun until it could be plowed underground, as there were many more sacrifices being performed than there were poor people in the *haram* to feed.

Today, a few pilgrims still make the sacrifice in Mina in the traditional way, but most simply pay to have a sacrifice performed on their behalf in a nearby slaughtering facility. The meat is then frozen and shipped to various Muslim charities throughout the world. I stepped up to

the window of a booth where such payments are made, and the clerk asked what type of animal I wanted to sacrifice and to what Muslim country I wanted it sent. I answered him, he quoted a price, I paid him the amount, he handed me a voucher on which was written the information I had given him, and with that I was done with the essential parts of the pilgrimage.

When I returned to camp, I trimmed my hair, shaved, took a hot shower, and then put on a pair of pants, a T-shirt, and a pair of sneakers. What a luxury it was to be wearing my usual clothes again!

We spent the next few days in Mina, celebrating *Eid al Adha* (the feast of sacrifice), mainly resting, relaxing, and listening to talks by Muslim scholars that were arranged by the leaders of our group. A frequent topic of discussion in the question-and-answer periods after the lectures was the roles of men and women in Islam. I found the Saudi Arabian perspective on this issue fascinating and extremely conservative.

When I got tired of staying in the camp, I would step outside to stretch my legs. I noticed that as time progressed, Mina became increasingly filthy. The Saudi government hires extra janitorial crews to keep the *haram* clean during the pilgrimage. Those assigned to the Holy Mosque did a superb job—each time we visited the Ka'bah the Masjid al Haram was immaculate—but those assigned to Mina were clearly undermanned. Hour by hour the garbage continued to pile up in the streets. If the refuse had consisted only of paper products, bottles, and cans, it would not have been so bad, but food, raw meat, and human waste were among the things dumped in the road. In the evening, Mina was so jammed with pilgrims that they could not always see or chose where they walked, which meant that the waste matter would get trampled, pressed, and kneaded together throughout the night. The next day, the sun would cook the feculent mixture, producing a terrible stench that hung over the valley. One member of our group quipped that the government should hire the people who run Disney World to organize the pilgrimage, since they handle as many as two million visitors a day and still keep the park clean and orderly. Another member retorted that the pilgrimage is not supposed to be a picnic, which led a third to reply that that does not mean it should be so unclean either, especially since Islam puts so much emphasis on hygiene and cleanliness.

All told, we spent eight days in the *haram* during the pilgrimage, including the day we arrived in and the day we departed from Mina. Most of us decided to make the traditional farewell visit to the Ka'bah the day

before departure, since we were intending to leave for Jeddah early next morning.

About mid-morning, I, together with three more members of our group, left for Makkah. I got separated from the others in the commotion at the bus stop, so I ended up going alone.

I was feeling slightly better this morning, although I was physically exhausted from a week of battling the worst attack of flu I had ever had. I made the seven rounds around the Ka'bah and performed the rite of *sa'y* at a very slow pace. A few minutes after I finished, the call to prayer was announced. Right after the prayer, an announcement rang over the loud-speaker asking those present to stand for *salah al janazah*, the funeral prayer; most probably a pilgrim had died in the last twenty-four hours. With the completion of that funeral prayer, another announcement asked the worshippers to stand for yet another funeral prayer. This continued until we had prayed a total of four consecutive funeral prayers.

The funeral prayer is different from the daily *salah*, for there is no bowing or prostration. The congregation remains quietly standing throughout, like soldiers bidding farewell to a fallen comrade. There is also no *adhan* to announce the funeral prayer. Some Muslim scholars say that the first *adhan* whispered in a Muslim child's ear at birth is an announcement of his or her funeral prayer, since death must be expected at any time from the moment of birth and often comes suddenly and unexpectedly. Of course, this interpretation does not account for the case of a convert to Islam, but I have heard it said that when a nonbeliever converts to Islam, angels announce the *adhan* for him or her in heaven. When the fourth funeral prayer ended, I slowly made my way through the crowded mosque to King Abd al Aziz gate. I walked over to the street corner where the busses to Mina stopped and sat down by the curb.

Although I was now technically done with the pilgrimage, I had an uneasy feeling that I had left something undone or that something was missing. I knew I had performed each rite meticulously and with due solemnity, but I still felt somehow frustrated and unfulfilled.

My thoughts then shifted to the idea of returning to America. I thought of how I could not wait to be on board the plane that would bring me home again. I joked to myself that I would get out and kiss the runway when we landed in JFK. I recalled what a terrible year it had been and how it would all be over in just a few weeks. I imagined how great it would be to be around my fellow Americans again, to be among people whom I understood and who understood me, to watch American TV, to go to American

restaurants, to have a picnic in an American park, to go to an American library or bookstore, to see my parents and brothers and their families again!

A bus pulled up to the curb.

"To Mina?" I asked the driver.

He nodded his head.

I paid the driver ten riyals and then scanned the bus for a place where I could sit by myself undisturbed. It seemed like I had been asked about my citizenship and conversion to Islam a couple of hundred times in the last week, and I was ready to punch out the next inquirer. To my relief, the last three rows of seats were completely empty. I avoided making eye contact with anyone as I walked down the aisle. Choosing the middle seat in the last row, I sat down, stretched out my body, crossed my legs with one ankle over the other, folded my arms, leaned my head back, shut my eyes, and hoped that no one would bother me.

As the bus pulled away from the curb, I opened my eyes slightly to make sure that I had excited no one's curiosity. Sure enough, a man in the second row on the left in the aisle seat was staring and smiling right at me. Please stay where you are! I thought to myself. Then I closed my eyes completely and turned my head to the right.

A few seconds later, I felt someone take the seat to my left.

"Excuse me, but could I ask you something?" He said in a very polite and apologetic tone.

I slowly turned my head straight while keeping my eyes shut.

"Go ahead," I said with a deep sigh.

"Are you American?" he asked, sounding astonished.

"Yes." I sighed wearily, knowing what to expect next.

He then leaned a little closer to me and asked, almost in a whisper, "Can you tell me how you became a Muslim?"

During the last seven days, my answer to that question became progressively shorter each time it was put to me. The first time, it took me about a half hour to tell my story but by now I had reduced it to a half-minute blurb. Without altering my posture nor opening my eyes, I gave him the following dry summary: I was born a Christian. I became an atheist at eighteen because of certain rational objections I had to the idea of God. I remained an atheist for the next ten years. I read an interpretation of the Qur'an when I was twenty eight. Not only did I find in the Qur'an coherent replies to my objections but I came to believe in God again through reading it. And so, I became a Muslim.

When I finished my synopsis, I peeked to my left to see if he was put off by my curt reply to his question. To my surprise, I saw tears running down the man's cheeks. And was I ever embarrassed!

At that moment, I asked God to forgive me for being so insensitive and arrogant and begged Him to help me to become more like this humble brother of mine, whose strong love of faith could move him to tears so easily and who could still perceive the mercy and greatness of God in such an uninspired story. I sat up straight and turned towards him.

"What's your name and where are you from?" I asked.

"My name is Ahmed and I'm from Bangladesh," he answered with a smile, as he wiped away his tears.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Ahmed. My name is Jeffrey. I'm from the state of Kansas in the U.S."

After we exchanged a little more information about ourselves, Ahmed suddenly asked joyously, "Wasn't this a wonderful *haji*, brother Jeffrey?"

I offered no response.

"Remember on the day we arrived," he continued, "how all around you could hear the pilgrims calling, '*Labbayka Allahumma Labbayk! Labbayka Allahumma Labbayk!*'"<sup>11</sup> Do you know what "*labbayk*" means in my country?" he asked.

"I'm sorry to say that I know almost nothing about Bangladesh," I replied.

He looked at me very intensely and said: "In my country, when a teacher calls on a student in class, the student will at once stand at attention and call out '*Labbayk, teacher, Labbayk!*' as if to say: 'I am ready, teacher—I am at your service!' This is the way we Muslims are supposed to be towards Allah—this is the way the prophets were. Like when Allah ordered Prophet Ibrahim, *alayhi salaam*, to call for the *haji*, there was almost no one else in Makkah with him at that time—at most his family and a few shepherds may have been in the area. If that were you or me, we almost certainly would have hesitated and said, 'Why make a call to the *haji* when there is no one around to hear it?' But Prophet Ibrahim's faith and trust in Allah were so great that he did not wait for a single moment. Instead, he stood up in that empty place and immediately called the *adhan!* O, brother Jeffrey, if only Prophet Ibrahim, *alayhi salaam*, could see the millions of worshippers here today responding to that call, if

<sup>11</sup> In English, this roughly translates as, "I am at your service, Oh God! Oh God, I am at your service!"

only he could see the two of us—you from America and me from Bangladesh—sitting here together—as brothers—on a bus back to Mina!”

It was now my turn to feel a rush of emotion. I felt so ashamed of myself. I felt like crying—and I almost did—but I successfully fought the impulse.

I knew now what my pilgrimage lacked: it was deficient of any feelings of unity, brotherhood, and love that Islam enjoins upon its followers.

As a result of a few unfortunate incidents in which I was involved during the past year and a little bit of culture shock, I had allowed myself to slip into cultural chauvinism and racism. I let myself feel superior to and distant from the Muslims all around me, so that in the end, even my pilgrimage became a private ritual (it is supposed to be just the opposite). It was Ahmed's words of inspiration that showed me the error of my ways. I now knew that I could have gained so much from this year in the Middle East and so much from this pilgrimage, but once again I had let pride get in the way. I felt as if I needed to make the *hajj* all over again, for one of its most essential ingredients—love for my fellow Muslims—had been absent from my performance.

A few minutes later, our bus stopped where I had to get off.

“I'm lucky to have met you, Ahmed,” I told him while shaking his hand, “and may Allah bless you! *Assalamu alaykum*, brother Ahmed!”

“*Wa alaykum salaam*, brother Jeffrey!” he said with a big smile.

## CHAPTER 5

# THE BEST OF COMMUNITIES

There is no monasticism in Islam. A Muslim's submission to God carries with it obligations towards humanity. The office of God's *khalifah* (vicegerent) on Earth, which Islam assigns the believer, requires community involvement. “You are the best of peoples evolved for mankind, for you enjoin what is right and oppose what is wrong” Qur'an 3:10 informs Muslims. From the standpoint of Islam, faith is never solely a personal and spiritual matter; it must be applied and tested in society. The Qur'an and the Prophet's teachings supply Muslims with guidance, the five pillars provide spiritual support, and society furnishes testing, learning, and growing environments.

Obviously, the society in which we live strongly influences our religious development. Most of us acquire our outlook on religion in the following natural order, corresponding to our discovery of society: we inherit our parents religious beliefs, modify and develop them further through contact with the faith community into which we were born, and then challenge and test them as we meet those who follow a different religion (or denomination). Religious conversion to some extent involves reversing this normal sequence: through encounters with people of other faiths, a person comes to believe in a religion different from the one in which he or she was born into and brought up in, enters a new faith community, and very often later marries and raises children within it.

This reverse path could be much more difficult than the common one, for it is somewhat like swimming upstream. In *Struggling to Surrender*<sup>112</sup> and in chapter three of this book, I discussed problems that many western converts have with regard to some of the behavior and traditions of the *ummah* (Muslim community) and the difficulties they often have in trying to identify those Muslim beliefs and practices that are essential to Islam. In

<sup>112</sup> Lang, *Struggling to Surrender*, chapters 3-5.

this chapter, I will discuss some spiritual and emotional challenges that may face a new Muslim who is seeking to join the Muslim community. In the next chapter, I briefly look at the future of Muslims in America.

## A Wild Bunch

“What is it with American converts to Islam?” a Muslim immigrant to America asked me. “They are too extreme! They are either the staunchest and loudest conservatives in the community or else they have nothing to do with the community at all! And frequently they bounce back and forth between the two! Can’t we attract any normal, moderate Americans to Islam?”

His question hurt me deeply for several reasons. First, he did not exclude me from his criticism, and so I assumed he felt the same way about me. Second, so many close friends of mine seemed to fit his observation. Third, I must confess that what he said did in reality apply to me—at times I was one of the most radically conservative members of the mosque I attended, and other times I isolated myself from the community for months. His statement awoke many painful memories, so many and so hurtful that I could not handle his question right then. I shook my head and told him I was not sure why American Muslims might seem that way to him.

I had a hard time deciding how best to write about the emotional, psychological, and spiritual turmoil that some converts to Islam go through as they try to adapt to their new community. I first considered writing as an objective observer, but how can one evaluate or describe another person’s psychology and spirituality with any accuracy? Two persons may outwardly act the same but be motivated and affected inwardly in very different ways. Also, it would be nearly impossible for me to detach myself from something that I had experienced so profoundly. I thought about attempting an abstract, analytical approach, but faith experiences are too personal for that. Such an attempt reminds me of classical Muslim philosophers who tried to reduce faith in God to a series of syllogisms.

I finally decided to simply recall as best I could my own early involvement in the American Muslim community. After my first book appeared, many American converts informed me that their paths to the faith bore many similarities to mine and that it helped them to know that others went through some of the same difficulties. I hope that this chapter will perform a similar service to converts. I also hope that it will be useful to the many Muslims who were born into their religion and who are trying hard to assist and understand their new brothers and sisters in faith from America. I must

caution the reader, however, not to assume that just because an American convert appears to be extremely zealous or conservative that he or she must be on the verge of a crisis of faith, for there are many persons who are passionately conservative by nature.

## The Greater Jihad

After leading his troops back from a battle in which there were heavy casualties on both sides, a Muslim military commander turned toward his men and called out, “We go now from the lesser *jihad* to the greater *jihad*.” When they asked if a more difficult military assignment were intended, he explained that by the greater *jihad* he had meant the “*jihad an nafs*” (the struggle within oneself).<sup>113</sup>

For a long time after my conversion to Islam, I considered my greatest and most difficult *jihad* to be the struggle I fought within myself on the day I became a Muslim. On that day, I had to confront, combat, and overcome a multitude of fears and excuses before I was able to make my first *shahadah*. The better part of that battle went very badly for me, and I came close to fleeing the fight several times. But by the grace of God, I was finally able to obtain victory in surrender to Him.

As hard as that decision to become a Muslim was for me, I no longer see it as my greatest *jihad*. When I fought to make my first testimony of faith, my enemy was conspicuous and its weapons and tactics were obvious. I was aware that I was in a fight, that I needed God’s help to win it, and that to succeed, I only had to turn to Him. The hardest fights, however, are those in which the opponent is elusive or concealed, when you are not sure when or how it will come at you, or whether it has not already penetrated your lines. I would discover soon after becoming a Muslim that the latter is more often than not the case with temptation, and that the more you grow in faith, the more subtle, seductive, and destructive are the traps that lure you.

My conversion to Islam may have been a sudden impulse on my part, but it was definitely not a courageous act. I believe that I became a Muslim because that was what God willed, for, under normal circumstances, I would never have made such a radical decision—one that was bound to make my life in America more difficult both materially and socially. Yet for a brief moment, just when it felt as if the weight of the world was

<sup>113</sup> This statement is often attributed to the Prophet on the authority of Ibrahim ibn Aylah, but the *isnad* of this tradition has been judged weak by Muslim experts.

against me, when my head was spinning with a thousand reasons why I should avoid making the choice, when I had decided to turn tail and run, my mind suddenly cleared, my nerves calmed, and I was able to consider the matter rationally. It was at precisely that instant that to become a Muslim seemed the only logical thing to do.

One of the many things that deterred me for a long time from choosing Islam, even after I had become convinced of its calling, was that I considered myself unfit to be a Muslim. Over the years, I had accumulated so many sins and vices that I felt it would be impossible for me even to come close to living up to Islam's requirements. When I finally stated the *shahadah*, I committed myself to it in spite of my awareness of my own corruption. I reasoned that it is better to live and die acknowledging the truth—even if I might fall short of meeting its demands—than to live and die in silence or denial of it. When I embraced Islam, I knew I was probably the most wretched of all Muslims. However, I promised myself I would do the best I could to practice the faith.

It may seem strange, but I had some of the most intense spiritual moments of my life during those first few weeks after my conversion. It seemed that the weaker and lower I perceived myself to be, the more beautiful and moving would be my experiences of salah. The more I admitted my need for God's mercy and forgiveness, the more I felt them in my heart. In spite of all the weaknesses I had still to overcome, I felt the most tender and loving kindness when I turned to the only One Who really knew me.

I had never really known love before becoming a Muslim. I had always felt it too risky to trust anyone—even myself. As an atheist, I had come to believe that "love" was nothing more than a euphemism for a particular form of human insecurity and selfishness. I had given up on love a long time ago and now wanted never to know it, either as a giver or a recipient. I just wanted to live my life as comfortably as possible until I died and became long-forgotten soil underneath an unmarked grave. But as I read the Qur'an and prayed the Islamic prayers, a door to my heart was unsealed and I was immersed in an overwhelming tenderness. Love became more permanent and real than the earth beneath my feet; its power restored me and made it so that even I could feel love. I ask the reader to keep this in mind throughout the rest of this chapter. Know that it was deep, inner pain and emptiness that led me to Islam, and the irresistible love of God that kept me there. During those first several weeks as a Muslim, I received so much more than I ever could have imagined. I came to Islam with very modest expectations—I was happy enough to have

found faith in a sensible religion—but I never expected to be touched by such intoxicating mercy. I never knew that one could experience so tender and warm an embrace.

This love, this relationship with God, should have remained my only real goal; it should have stayed the focus of all of my religious endeavors. The love of God should have been sufficient for me; it should have made me secure, strong and independent. But I somehow allowed myself to get distracted and so strayed from the penitent and humble slave I had been when I was still a new Muslim.

## Big News

The day after my conversion, I began attending all five prayers at the University of San Francisco mosque. As I was a faculty staff member, it was easy for me while at work to attend the three middle prayers. In addition, since it was a short drive from my apartment to campus, I also had no problem getting to the two remaining prayers.

Much to my chagrin, my conversion to Islam was instantly big news on campus. I would have preferred that only those few Muslims who attended the prayers regularly know of it, but within a day or two it became the talk of the university. I suppose I should have expected as much; after all, the conversion of a faculty member of a well-known Catholic university is at least somewhat noteworthy.

Right from the start, I felt like an oddity as an American Muslim. The congregation in the mosque, except for me, consisted of foreign, undergraduate, male students, who kept staring at me in shock and wonder. During the sermons of the Friday congregational prayer, which were always delivered in Arabic, faces would keep turning in my direction. I found out later that this was because my conversion was the main topic of the *khutbah* (Friday prayer sermon) for several consecutive Fridays. Muslim students, male and female, frequently would stop me on campus to congratulate me or to ask me if I had really become a Muslim.

At the same time, many of my colleagues began to look at me worriedly. Some took the time to ask me if I was all right or if I was having trouble adjusting to life in San Francisco. A few professors seemed put off by my conversion, and a few others told me that what I did was very courageous. Very little of this made sense to me, for as nearly as I could tell, I was much the same person I had been only a couple of weeks earlier. I felt that everyone around me was definitely overreacting.

It was not long before I realized that the mosque was divided into several factions that were vying for control. These groups were connected to such international organizations as the Jama'at Tabligh (based in India and Pakistan), the Salafi movement (based in the Arabian Peninsula), and the Ikhwan al Muslimun (originated in Egypt). At times, I also felt as if they were vying for control of me. I was always being taken to the side and warned not to get too close to "those other brothers." Each group informed me that the others were straying from true Islam. Back then, I almost never had to cook for myself, because practically every night some member of the mosque would invite me to dinner (during which I would be questioned and corrected about things other Muslims were telling me). I soon got the impression that even though Islam severely condemns rumor-mongering and backbiting, Muslims were habitual gossips; it appeared to be a community preoccupation.

During the first few weeks after my conversion, I kept my feelings about the choice I had made to myself. I could sense that many members of the community were curious—some were clearly suspicious<sup>114</sup>—but belief in God—not to mention Islam—was all so new to me that I needed time to reflect on the implications of what I had done. I really needed time to simply get my feet back on the ground, because everything seemed to have happened and to be now happening so fast.

### Instant Angel

One night—I believe it was a Friday—some of the brothers asked me if I would like to go with them to a lecture being held that evening in Davis, California. I really did not want to, but I knew I could not refuse without disappointing them greatly. They were extremely pleased when I finally agreed to go.

The program began with dinner, which we ate with our fingers while sitting on the floor. I was quickly getting used to many foreign customs, but I never quite got the hang of eating rice with my fingers. While everyone else had finished their plates and had started desert, I had only managed to eat a few mouthfuls of my dinner. Nevertheless, dinning in this way was a new and fun experience.

After dinner, the president of the UC Davis Muslim Student Association announced over the loudspeaker that the lecture was about to

<sup>114</sup> Some members of the mosque later confessed that they had thought I was from the CIA. Several others asked me point blank if I became a Muslim in order to get married to a Muslim woman.

begin. We rearranged ourselves on the floor in rows facing the microphone. After a brief supplication, a reading from the Qur'an, and a number of announcements, the president told the audience that tonight's speaker was going to be none other than me. At first I thought I must have misheard him, but when I glanced around, I saw that everyone was looking and smiling at me. I sat there stunned and embarrassed. I had not the slightest inkling that I was going to be asked to give a speech that night.

I turned towards my good friend Rosli, a student from Malaysia who was sitting beside me, and pleaded: "I can't! I don't know what to say!"

"It will be O. K.," he nodded, "I will pray for you."

I looked at the president of the MSA.

"Please, I can't!" I begged him.

He smiled reassuringly and said calmly, "Please, come to the microphone."

The president briefly introduced me to the audience, which consisted of about three hundred Middle-Eastern young men, and told them that I was going to tell the story of how I became a Muslim. I began with an awkward apology. I said I had not prepared anything and that I was not sure exactly what led me to Islam, but that since they had come to hear an account of my conversion, I would do my best to recall some of the things that I felt may have played a role in that decision. The story I told them is essentially the first chapter of *Struggling to Surrender*.<sup>115</sup> Throughout my speech, I was very nervous and the audience was extremely hushed. When I finally finished, there arose from the audience several emotional and thunderous choruses of "Allahu Akbar!" (God is Greatest!). The president then asked the audience if there were any questions, and I remember being asked several times about how Muslims should present their religion to non-Muslim Americans. I advised that Muslims should try not to be pushy, for that will immediately turn most Americans off, and that they should be kind and compassionate towards non-Muslims, because that is the first thing an American will look for in a person who claims to be religious. The president then closed the meeting with a few words of encouragement, followed by a supplication.

I will never forget the reception I then received: the entire audience converged on me with greetings, hugs, handshakes, and kisses on my cheeks. Tears were flowing down faces all around me. A few brothers were close to sobbing. Everywhere I looked, hands were outstretched towards me; many brothers simply wanted to touch me for a moment or pat me on

<sup>115</sup> Lang, *Struggling to Surrender*, chapter 1.

the back. I was told how great I was, how much better a believer I was than the Muslims from foreign lands, how inspirational I was, how sinless I now was, how much God must have loved me! It took me over an hour to reach the door of the mosque, which could not have been more than forty feet from the microphone. By the time I got to the parking lot, the pockets of my pants were bulging with scraps of paper on which were written the addresses and phone numbers of members of the audience.

Some brothers whom I had not met before offered to drive me home to San Francisco. They talked excitedly about Islam and my conversion on the way. I mentioned to them that the reaction of the audience was very emotional.

"Brother Jeffrey, if you only knew what it means to them to see an American convert to Islam!" the brother next to me exclaimed. "The idea that a young, white, blonde-haired, blue-eyed American would become a Muslim is like a miracle to them! So many of them would cut their hands to be you! Oh, I wish I could take you to my country and put you on television! To the people back home, seeing you would be like watching an angel coming down from the clouds!"

"Why?" I asked him. "What does being an American have to do with it?"

The brother who was driving answered me, "Back home everyone worships America. There are Muslims who don't know a single *ayah* of Qur'an, who can sing all of Michael Jackson's songs! They can tell you more about the Dallas Cowboys than about Islam. When they see you—a white American—practicing Islam, it shocks and humiliates them. They start thinking: If this white *Amreekee* can love and follow Islam, then what is wrong with us?!"

## The Champion

I am not sure why, but before I gave the lecture in Davis, celebrity was never very important to me. At times I may have hoped that certain persons liked me, but I never worked hard to obtain people's admiration or friendship. I was always fairly confident and independent, unconcerned with obtaining the approval of my peers. And yet, the response I got from the audience in Davis aroused in me a weakness to which I thought I was immune. While I told my story, I was the same ashamed and repentant sinner who had thrown himself desperately on the mercy of God only a few weeks earlier; by the time I finally crossed the prayer room and reached the

door to the parking lot, I was inebriated with the veneration of that assembly and delirious with self-admiration.

I suppose I could offer the excuse that this sudden surge of vanity occurred during a period when I was acutely vulnerable. I certainly felt on the defensive among my own people, as I was constantly forced to explain and defend my conversion to friends and family. Before becoming a Muslim, I had always known the respect of others—perhaps this is why I had never felt the need to work for it—but now it seemed that everyone I knew and loved was doubting me. I also felt out of place and under scrutiny in the Muslim community. Moreover, I sensed strongly that most brothers in the mosque questioned whether I would remain a believer for very long. They would take on such a patronizing tone when speaking to me, as if I had not previously studied Islam or was totally immoral before becoming a Muslim. They also seemed to assume that "American" and "Muslim" are two mutually exclusive attributes and that I would never be able to completely purge myself of the first; hence, I would never be able to fully become the second. In a sense, I felt that I did not quite fit in anywhere anymore.

The night in Davis changed everything. I gave one speech and was instantly a hero among the Muslims. How I loved the adoration! I could not get enough of it, and apparently they could not get enough of me—at least at first. I was asked to make speeches at virtually every Muslim gathering to which I was invited. At first, I would simply repeat the story of my conversion, but after a while I began to prepare and memorize other speeches, which, when called upon, I would pretend to deliver off the cuff.

The various groups vying for control of the USF mosque now made an even greater effort to recruit me, and I felt it necessary to join one of the factions. First, I tried the Jama'at Tabligh, as I was initially very impressed with their strong mystical leanings, but I soon became tired of their somewhat ascetic practices. I briefly considered aligning myself with the Muslim Student Association, which was founded in America by student members of the Ikhwan al Muslimun, but I could not relate to their strong focus on Middle-Eastern politics. I finally fell in with the brothers from the Arabian peninsula, who seemed mostly to be Salafis.

As I went from one group to the next, I began to display an extremely bad habit: When brothers would deprecate members of other groups in our mosque, I would join in their derogation. Not only had I no excuse for doing this, since I had been a Muslim for too short a time to be passing judgment on other believers—not to mention the fact that Islam prohibits

this behavior—but the brothers whom I maligned behind their backs were the same ones who only recently had invited me to their homes and showed me the utmost kindness. After a while, however, even I could not stand my own hypocrisy, and eventually I was able to resist the urge to demean other members of our mosque behind their backs.

Yet I still needed to strike at someone, for how can you remain a hero without a cause or a fight? I am not saying that back then I consciously schemed in this way, but as I see it now, I think I was motivated by such a subconscious impulse. It was not enough for me to merely be accepted as a Muslim by the Muslims—I wanted them to look up to me. Naturally, I became a passionate denouncer of everything American and a staunch defender of Middle-Eastern culture. In speeches, I would magnify my country's vileness and repeat and embellish the many Western—usually Jewish—conspiracy theories I found to be so popular among Muslims.

I also became increasingly conservative in my approach to Islam. There is a certain guaranteed respect that comes with religious rigidity; when you are radically conservative, other believers may question your thinking but never your religiosity or commitment. Publicly, I upheld the literal interpretation and application of all statements in the Qur'an and *hadith* collections and refused to consider any historical or situational contexts. But no matter how hard I tried to convince others and myself of this approach, I was never totally comfortable with it. I became a vociferous advocate for traditional Muslim gender roles. In particular, I championed the seclusion of women in our community and their exclusion from positions of community leadership. I tried desperately to grow an "Islamic" beard, but apparently my genetic background does not produce much facial hair; the most I could grow was a five o'clock shadow interspersed with several bald spots. I would decry constantly the lack of faith and the impotence of "us" modern Muslims, whom I described as too weak to live up to the demands of our religion. Although I never stated it, I did not at that time consider myself one of the feckless Muslim majority.

I also began to attack my parent's religion with a vengeance. I studied all of the arguments currently used by Muslims against Christianity and watched every Muslim-Christian debate video on which I could get my hands. In interfaith dialogues, I would repeat the same arguments against Christianity almost word for word. The material I drew upon was hardly new; classical Muslim polemicists had made the same arguments as modern ones, only the classical scholars' research was more thorough and scholarly. Christian thought, however, has changed greatly over the last several

centuries, and many arguments used by modern Muslims are outmoded or apply only to certain extremists sects within Christianity. Actually, I was well aware of this when I participated in the dialogues, but I found that the majority of the Christian laity were as ignorant of the evolution of Christian scholarly thought as were the Muslims. Thus, to the unknowledgeable, my Christian opponents would appear to be on the defensive and evasive as I attacked various positions that they probably never held. My strategy was deceitful, albeit it did earn me a certain popularity with my coreligionists.

## Poison

Altogether, I lived in San Francisco for five years after my conversion. The first three were marked by steady progress in the direction of radical conservatism and intolerance of those points of view that differed from mine. The fourth year was one of disillusionment, when I seriously questioned the course I had been following. The fifth year began a time of recovery, a period when I sought to reconcile my true self with my faith. I believe that several key incidents and factors, which I will discuss below, affected this turn around.

As stated earlier, I promised myself that I would never participate again in my faith community's gossip. However, there was one group of Muslims who were excluded from our community and who were absolutely loathed by the brothers with whom I kept company. Members of the USF mosque, which had been established and run by Sunni Muslim students, made it clear that the local Shi'ah Muslims were quite unwelcome in the mosque. In fact, the two communities barely got along at all. Most Sunni brothers strongly disapproved of the Shi'ah, but those from the Arabian peninsula utterly despised them. The Iran-Iraq war was well underway, and a large amount of anti-Shi'ah literature was coming to the mosques of America from the Gulf states, who, at that time, supported Sadaam Hussein. (Shi'ah Islam is the predominant school of Islam in Iran.) These writings were obviously more propaganda than serious scholarship, but I studied them nonetheless and used the information they provided to denounce vehemently Shi'ah Islam whenever the opportunity presented itself.

One night while giving a lecture in the mosque on the dangers of Shi'ah Islam, I ended my diatribe by describing that school of Islam as "the greatest current threat to Islam" and "a virulent poison in the body of the Muslim *ummah*." As I was leaving the mosque later that evening, a Middle-Eastern student politely requested to speak privately with me for a moment. He told me that he was from Iran and that, although he had grown up in a Shi'ah

family, he had become a Sunni Muslim several years ago. He said that the speech I made hurt him deeply, because he could not stop thinking about his mother and father as I delineated all the ills and dangers to Islam posed by Shi'ah Islam. He said that even though he had lived in a predominantly Shi'ah society almost his entire life, he had never heard of most of what I had stated that the Shi'ah believe and practice. In a horrified voice he exclaimed, "You made my parents sound like enemies of Islam! Where, in God's name, did you get your information?!"

I was immediately seized by feelings of remorse, for I knew I had gathered my "facts" in a hasty and irresponsible way and that what the Iranian brother said was probably true. Toward the end of our conversation, I begged him to forgive me, promised that I would research Shi'ah Islam more thoroughly and objectively, and that I would correct publicly any false statements I might have made. It was not long before I discovered that my lecture that evening was full of misinformation, misinterpretation, and exaggeration. To this day, I still hear many of the same false claims I had made in my lecture and try to correct them whenever I do.

This conversation with the Iranian student did much more than make me improve my research methods; it frightened me. It was the first time I was confronted personally by a target of one of my verbal assaults. When I ridiculed the backboneless Muslims in our community, I never singled out anyone by name; when I attacked Christians in dialogues, they never responded so personally; but this time, with the Iranian, I could see and feel the harmfulness of my behavior. I began to deeply doubt my own religiosity and sincerity and to question my actions and motives. I wondered how I had come to be so angry and why I felt such a strong desire to deprecate others. I asked myself what had happened to me since I first converted to Islam? I entered this religion in peace, yet now I only showed severity and narrow-mindedness. I thought: Whom am I really fighting and why?

A few months after the incident with the Iranian student, something happened in our community that brought my discomfort to a critical point.

## Abandoned

Not long after I converted to Islam, Grant, a white American about my age, also became a Muslim. I was thrilled to see Grant join our community, for until then I had met only two American Muslims of European descent. However, they both lived far from San Francisco. Grant and I hit it off right from the start and became very close friends. During much of the time we spent together, we would discuss our experiences of and

feelings about Islam and would support each other through the many adjustments that come with entering the Muslim community. It was great to be able to talk to someone of the same generation and cultural background. I thanked God over and over again for guiding Grant to Islam, for his friendship was, for me, a valuable gift.

Sometime during my fourth year in San Francisco, Grant stopped attending the prayers at the mosque, including the Friday prayers. I called him many times to find out if he was alright, but never got an answer. I thought perhaps he had left town for a while, but he had never mentioned any future travel plans. I stopped by his apartment a number of times with some of the brothers from the mosque who were also worried about Grant, but no one answered when we rang the door bell.

One evening, several weeks after Grant's disappearance, I decided to go to his house alone. I waited a few minutes after knocking on his door, but, as usual, no one answered. As I was walking back to my car, I heard a door open behind me. I turned around and there was Grant, standing half hidden behind his partially opened front door.

"Grant! Wow! It's really good to see you! Where have you been? Are you OK? I've been trying to get in touch with you for weeks! Thank God your OK!"

I was not giving Grant a chance to respond as I hurried back toward him. My jubilation, however, quickly deflated, because the cheerless expression on his face told me that he was not glad to see me at all. When I reached his door, I asked him soberly, trying my best not to sound hurt: "What's wrong, Grant? What's going on?"

He halfheartedly invited me in, and we sat in chairs on opposite sides of his small, dark, sparsely furnished living room. I started by telling him how worried I had been about him, how I thought he must have been very sick or in some terrible accident. He told me that he should have called me, but that he did not know how I would react to what he was about to say. He then began a slow, dispassionate explanation of his recent absence from the Muslim community.

He said he had entered and left many religions over the years, that he tried on more faiths than pairs of socks. He stated that he had searched not only for a set of beliefs with which he could agree, but for a community that lived and represented those beliefs as well. He said he was originally attracted to Islam by what he first saw in some Muslims he had met, but in time had discovered that the Islamic community fell far short of the noble ideals which it preached and that the defects in its character far

overshadowed its virtues. He said he had finally found the faith community he had always been looking for, one that truly translated their religious beliefs into mutual respect and love; he had become a Buddhist.

I was stunned. I sat there silently, struggling to come up with an effective response. I could only think of how much I would have preferred that my fears about Grant having had a serious accident or illness were true.

Grant then drove the dagger a little deeper into my wound: "Jeff, I know that you just recently married a Muslim woman and that now you have a kind of vested interest in Islam, but I think you would really enjoy meeting these Buddhist friends of mine. They gave me this small book that describes the main beliefs of Buddhism—you can have it if you like!"

I took the book from Grant and leafed through it, staring down blankly at its pages. Unable to raise my gaze to look at Grant, I shook my head and told him, "Grant, unlike you, I did not try on Islam like a pair of socks; I really and truly surrendered to what I perceived to be the truth. I did not even *want* to be a Muslim or to belong to a religious community. For goodness sake, Grant, I was an *atheist* before becoming a Muslim! Whether or not the Muslims are good or bad people had no bearing at all on my choice to convert, or for that matter, on my decision to stay in this religion!"

"Then why *did* you convert?" he asked, sounding bewildered.

"Because of the Qur'an!" I blurted impatiently, as if he should have already known. "Because of the Qur'an!"

Grant was sensitive and intelligent, but I could see from the vacant look he gave me that my reply blew right past him. I thought I should elaborate on my answer.

"Grant, I read the Qur'an—fought and struggled with it—argued with it—and finally capitulated to it. I surrendered to the one God, whom I came to know and trust through reading it. I cannot simply walk away from all that."

"I didn't read very much of the Qur'an," Grant admitted.

## Turning Point

I did not go right home after I left Grant's flat. I was still in shock and needed some time to think. I parked my car on Geary Street, about ten blocks from my apartment, and got out and started walking in the opposite direction. Trudging along, I thought about how Grant's news could not have come at a worse time, for although I had not told him, I was going through my own crisis of faith. I was drowning in confusion and self-doubt,

which, under normal circumstances, I would have discussed with Grant. Since becoming a Muslim, I had reached an all-time spiritual low. I felt distant from God, isolated, and lost. My performance of the rituals had become spiritually lifeless. In my prayers, I begged God to touch me the way he did when I had been a new Muslim—to love me with the love I had experienced back then—back when I was a lowly, mistake-prone, bungling newcomer to Islam. I kept interrogating myself as I walked along: Was I not performing each of the five prayers every day in the mosque? Was I not practicing the pillars of the faith steadfastly? Was I not serving God through my involvement in the community? Did all the speeches I gave on Islam amount to nothing in His sight?

I could not figure out where I had gone wrong. Worst of all, I felt I had no where to turn. Discussing my faith crisis with Grant was now out of the question, the brothers in the mosque would certainly never understand, and I did not want to disappoint my wife, who had so much admiration for and confidence in me. All the while, Grant's words kept echoing in my mind: "Then why did you become a Muslim?"

I had not thought about my motivations for embracing Islam in some time, and yet I did not have to reflect on his question. My answer to him was simply a reflex that he provoked.

## "It was the Qur'an!"

I came to a stop. Staring down at the sidewalk, I focused on my response to Grant. It was as if a great light had suddenly illuminated my mind: "It was the Qur'an!"

I thought about how I had lost touch with this answer, and I started to remind myself of various aspects of my conversion. I recalled how I was not in the market for a religion when I first became interested in Islam; I was initially only curious about Muslim beliefs. I remembered that I did not become a Muslim to find the comfort and support of a faith community, or to someday obtain a wife and a family. I reminded myself how the Qur'an first captured my mind and then guided me to the knowledge I needed and the love of God; how it was to His infinite love and forgiveness that I surrendered; how my conversion was nothing but an acquiescence to a truth; how I had given myself over—heart, body, and soul and with all my failings—to an invincible power that I had tried to withstand for a while but was finally unable to resist.

I started walking again, briskly, with my head bowed in concentration, as answers began coming to me in flashes. I realized I had strayed far from

my original motives for embracing Islam: I had been serving myself more than anyone else with all my community involvement; I had become more concerned with obtaining the respect of the Muslim community than with my relationship with God; I had hurt others with my uncompromising severity in order to win the admiration of my coreligionists; I had acquired what I had always disliked most in religious types back when I was an atheist—hypocrisy and base conformism to prevailing sentiment; I had erected a false image of myself and tried to brainwash myself into believing in it; I had become like one of those half-crazed evangelists—a ranting and raving, fire and brimstone heaving, Muslim version of Elmer Gantry.

I turned around and headed back to my car. I knew now what I had to do: I had to return to my original purpose for becoming a Muslim; I had to give up making speeches; I had to learn to be myself again; I needed to be more honest and open with others and myself; I had to voice concerns when I had them, or, at the very least, I had to stop supporting ideas about which I had doubts or questions. Most of all, I needed to beg God for His forgiveness and guidance.

## Fresh Start

When I arrived home, I had a long talk with my wife. I told her about everything I had been through and apologized for keeping her in the dark so long. When she asked me why I had not shared my feelings with her sooner, I explained that, until recently, I was unable to make sense of them. I also confessed that I had not wanted to disappoint her. She replied that it was foolish of me to think that way and that I had greatly underestimated her love for me.

I needed some time to be alone, away from the community pressures that I had handled so poorly. I went into a state of semi-retreat and went to the mosque only for the Friday prayers, since its attendance is mandatory. I performed the other prayers at home or in my office at school. As expected, many Muslim students at the university were greatly disappointed in my sudden change of behavior, but as painful as it was for me to let them down, it was at the same time liberating not to be a hero anymore.

The ways and mercy of God are at times very difficult to understand. Although I would never recommend to another Muslim that he or she adopt a policy of self-isolation from the community, strangely enough, I did begin to feel spiritually alive again. My retreat lasted a few months, and I would have prolonged it a little longer if I had not become active in the mosque

once again through my dealings with several new American converts who entered our community that Spring semester.

All but one of the converts were young women, and I became drawn into their campaign to be allowed to attend the five daily prayers in the mosque. The textual sources of Islam assure women this right, but, over the centuries, various Muslim cultures have made the mosque an uncomfortable place for them in which to pray. Actually, many Muslim men in our community were quite sympathetic with the lady converts, but a few very loud and conservative Muslim students fought hard to keep the new female believers out of the mosque. One of them went so far as to threaten that if he found any ladies at the prayers, he would throw them out bodily. The female converts soon became tired of being at the center of what was fast becoming an extremely heated and divisive controversy and thus quit trying to attend the mosque. The community returned to normal. To the best of my knowledge, not one of these women is a Muslim today.

Toward the end of this dispute over the female converts, I met the male newcomer to Islam. Out of respect for his privacy, which I believe he may prefer to guard, I will refer to him as "Khalid," rather than use his birth name or the Arabic name he used temporarily.

I was thirty-three when I met Khalid, and he was in his mid-twenties. What I remember best about him was his likable personality and his great enthusiasm for Islam. He was bright, witty, cheerful, gentle, humble, and kind. He seemed to always have a smile on his face or a kind and encouraging word. He was very happy about his new faith and worked tirelessly for it. He was involved in all of the mosque's charitable activities and was always helping organize community get-togethers and programs.

Khalid was married to a devout Catholic, and they had a ten-year-old daughter and a two-year-old son. His conversion caused some tension in his marriage, and he asked me if I would be willing to talk to his wife about Islam. I warned him that I was unwilling to pressure her in any way, but he assured me that was not his intention; he only wanted her to have a better understanding of Islam, so as to alleviate some of her anxiety about his conversion. I agreed to his request, and this led to several get-togethers between our two families.

About two months after I first met Khalid, his daughter became a Muslim, followed by his wife a few weeks later. Their entry into Islam breathed fresh life into our community, for Khalid's family instantly became one of the most active and innovative in the USF mosque. Around

this time, my own family and I began making preparations to move to Lawrence, Kansas, as I had accepted a position at the university there. My wife and I lamented how much we would miss our new friends.

As the weeks passed, I became increasingly troubled that Khalid might be falling into some of the same traps from which I was now fighting to free myself. A few incidents made me feel that he may have been imposing unnecessary and burdensome practices upon himself and his family members out of a desire to become more religious.

I recall one afternoon when Khalid's daughter came with him to the mosque. After the prayer, while we all sat in a circle on the floor, a brother asked her what her name was. She kept silent and cringed slightly, and then looked to her father beseechingly, as if seeking a reprieve. The room quieted as the rest of those present turned curious, reassuring smiles toward Khalid's daughter. The brother gently repeated his question to her. Once more she directed an uncomfortable glance towards her dad.

"Answer him," Khalid anxiously urged her, trying to coax her with his eyes.

His daughter sighed deeply, paused a few more seconds, tightened her lips, took another deep breath, and then slowly and painstakingly uttered a timid and awkward: "Aaaa-ishshsh-aaaa?"

Relieved, Khalid smiled at her while nodding his approval.

A little later I asked Khalid about the incident, and he informed me that he was considering having the names of his family members legally changed to Arabic ones. I told him I did not think that was a religious requirement. I reminded him of Bilal and Salman al Farsi and that the Prophet only advocated changing one's name when his or her present name was offensive to Islam. I pointed out that his own birth name, which meant "a gift from God," was hardly offensive to Islamic principles. I also mentioned that in the *hadith* collections there are sayings that discourage Muslims from hiding their family backgrounds.

Khalid argued that the Muslim community would be much more comfortable with Arabic names. I agreed with him and said that as long as that was his motivation, then his choice might be a good one, as far as he and perhaps his wife were concerned. But I pointed out that he might reconsider changing his ten-year-old daughter's name, for a such a sudden change may be much more difficult to handle for a young girl who is just beginning to develop her self-image. I asked him to imagine the reactions

of her friends at school. Khalid finally just smiled and assured me that he knew his own daughter and that she would be just fine.

Khalid also instituted the separation of the sexes in his home. One evening when he invited my family and a few other families from the mosque to his flat for dinner, he surprised me by ushering me into a room reserved for the men, and my wife and daughters into a separate room for the women. (We had been to Khalid's home many times before and had always sat together as families) I was even more startled, however, when he brought our two families back together in the living room after the other guests departed. When I informed him of my perplexity, he explained that he had assumed his other guests, who were from the Middle-East, would have been uncomfortable if we had all dined together.

I was definitely perturbed. I complained that as eminent a scholar as Imam Malik saw nothing wrong with families dining together in mixed company and that there are many authenticated reports in the *hadith* compilations where Muslim men and women interacted in the presence of the Prophet. I protested that the seclusion of females is primarily a cultural tradition that could do much more damage than good in the American Muslim community. Although I thought it nice that he wanted to make his Middle-Eastern guests feel comfortable, I asked him why he did not consider the comfort of his American guests as well and, furthermore, whether or not our brothers and sisters from the Middle East felt a similar need to accommodate *our* culture when we go to their homes? I also remarked that we American converts are becoming like religious schizophrenics, displaying one personality in front of the Muslim community and another when we are outside it. With the last statement I had gone too far, for Khalid was visibly insulted. We parted that night on bad terms and our relationship was never quite the same.

Khalid also started getting and accepting invitations to lecture on Islam, and this, of course, only increased my apprehension. Sincerity is indispensable to one's spiritual growth, and it is put to its severest tests in front of audiences. In my eyes, my recent downfall was triggered by my public preaching. I would not encourage any Muslim to take up public speaking on Islam, but I would especially urge a new convert to avoid the podium.

On the other hand, when I thought about Khalid's situation more objectively, I realized that I was probably overreacting and may have been projecting my own recent bitter experience onto his. That Khalid had become rather conservative in his approach to the religion did not necessarily mean he was heading for a crisis; I knew several very conservative American

converts who were extremely happy and well adjusted. The few cultural practices that he and his family had adopted, which I felt Islam does not require, were really no cause for alarm. Some of them, such as the separation of the sexes, did deter licentiousness (its ostensible purpose). In any case, many people in the melting pot of America absorb various foreign customs. I also had to admit that Khalid's speeches on Islam were much more moderate than mine had been. His personality was much gentler and more balanced than mine, and I could never imagine him using the pulpit in a destructive way.

I finally decided to never bother Khalid again with my apprehension. Unfortunately, during my last several weeks in San Francisco, I could never get myself to apologize to him for interfering in his family life. I feel bad about that to this day.

## To Kansas

Grant helped me load the moving van the day before I left for Kansas. He was the last person I said good-bye to in San Francisco. Despite his apostasy from Islam, we had remained good friends.

Even though he was no longer a Muslim, I continued to find his unusual perspective on religion extremely thought-provoking. Our conversations had helped me to explore deeper and to strengthen my faith in Islam. I feel it quite ironic that Grant's defection from Islam was a catalyst for my own spiritual revivification, but as the Qur'an so frequently reminds us, God guides as He chooses.

Grant's attempt at Buddhism turned out to be short-lived, lasting only a few months. The day I departed San Francisco, he belonged to no official religion, although he still believed very much in God.

## Vanished

Ever since my graduate student days at Purdue University, I had wanted to live in the Midwest. Although I instantly took to Kansas, my heart was for some time, as the song says, still in San Francisco. It seemed that at least every other week my wife and I were in touch with friends from the USF Muslim community.

I had given Grant my new address and phone number the day he helped me move, but for some reason he never wrote or called. I tried calling him a number of times, but found that he had mysteriously and unexpectedly left his flat. I asked the brothers in San Francisco to try to locate him, but no one heard from or saw him again. He simply disappeared.

During the Spring semester following my departure from California, the USF mosque, which was located in a small room in the basement of St. Ignatius Church, was closed by the university. The Jesuits, who had lent the Muslim students the room so they could perform their five daily prayers there, needed the space for storage. It was in that little room that I had made my first *shahadah* and had performed almost all of my ritual prayers during the next five years. I thank God that it had been there for me when I needed it.

During the school year following our arrival in Kansas, Khalid's daughter began wearing full *hijab* (the traditional dress of Muslim women) to public school. The abuse she received from her schoolmates was apparently too much for her; she lost much weight and had to be hospitalized for a while. Khalid then moved his family close to one of the Bay Area's Islamic centers and enrolled Aishah in the Islamic school run by the center. A short time later, Khalid was elected to the center's board of directors. Several months passed, and then Khalid took Aishah out of the Islamic school and re-enrolled her in public school, which she now attended in typical American dress. He then resigned from the board of directors of the Islamic center, and he and his family relocated again, this time leaving no forwarding address or phone number with anyone in the Muslim community.

After much detective work, my wife somehow obtained Khalid's new phone number. She spoke to his wife, who informed her that the rest of her family had left Islam and that she had become very confused about the religion. She also mentioned that they were getting ready to move to somewhere in the southern United States. That is the last we heard from them.

## No Regrets

I felt bad for Khalid, but his apostasy did not affect me as Grant's had. I have seen many Americans enter and later leave Islam; about half of the converts I have met over the years eventually left the faith. I think Grant's apostasy was so disturbing to me because of our close friendship and because my faith had reached such a critical point at that time.

My experience of faith in Kansas has been much more serene than it was in San Francisco. The local Muslim community has received me warmly and seems to accept me as I am. I do not do much public speaking any more—at most one or two talks per year—and when I do lecture on Islam, I prefer small audiences, because I have learned that I do not handle the temptations of fame at all well.

I bear no ill-will toward the San Francisco Muslim community. I blame no one but myself for the tumultuous years I had there. The Muslims at USF were of course not perfect, but they were very good and dedicated believers and were extremely kind and generous toward me. The only mistake they made with respect to me was that they had too much admiration for and confidence in me.

I also have few regrets concerning San Francisco. The pain and inner turmoil I experienced during that phase were very valuable to me. I believe they caused me to learn a great deal about myself and about serving God. I see that part of my life as a necessarily difficult period of growing and learning. As I wrote earlier in this book, I came to Islam from the farthest corner of the spiritual spectrum, and so had to expect that there would be much to learn and suffer on my way to self-surrender to God. I hope that those whom I may have hurt or misled back then while I was swinging between radicalism and conservatism took what I did and said with a grain of salt. I also hope they can find it within themselves to forgive me.

## CHAPTER 6

# THE ROAD AHEAD

I have accompanied the reader about as far as I can on this journey to Islam in America. The future lies ahead, and only God knows what is in store for American Islam. Nevertheless, I feel certain that the road forward for Muslims in America will have many sharp turns and difficult climbs. I urge those who hope to keep on this journey to prepare themselves as best they can for the coming challenges.

It is not at all clear that Islam will grow into a significant indigenous social and spiritual force in North America during the next century. The approximately five million believers currently residing in the United States and Canada and the several thousand mosques scattered about the two countries are hopeful signs, but it is conceivable that the practicing Muslim American population could dwindle, especially if it ceases to be augmented by immigration. It is even possible that the many mosques in America might someday be converted to other uses, surviving as vestiges of a generation of Muslim Americans whose descendants were swept into the American mainstream. History has known such examples.

I believe that for Islam to prevail in North America, three things are necessary: (1) a substantial fraction of the present generation of American children of Muslim descent must emerge as adults who are strongly committed to Islam; (2) the Muslim community must remain united and not fracture into sects; and (3) the American Muslim community needs to produce its own religious scholars who can respond effectively to the unprecedented questions and problems that are bound to arise. These points are very briefly discussed in this last chapter.

### Newcomers

The North American Muslim community is very young, both in terms of the distribution of its members' ages and in terms of its noticeable

presence here. Three decades ago it was negligible; today, Muslims are about two percent of the North American population.

Anyone who attends a Friday prayer service or an Islamic conference in the United States or Canada cannot help noticing the scarcity of Muslim senior citizens in attendance. The fraction of Muslims over age sixty in the community is extremely small. This helps to explain why the leadership of such national Islamic organizations as ISNA, ICNA, and the Islamic Assembly of North America (IANA) is made up of men and women mostly in their forties and early fifties instead of older, more experienced persons.

The sudden rise of Islam in America sprang from two campaigns for equality that fermented during the 1960s: the fight for civil rights by African Americans in the United States and the struggle in the Middle East to achieve economic and technological parity with the West.

## African American Muslims

In the United States, the name of Martin Luther King, Jr., has come to symbolize the Civil Rights era. The most recollected images from this period are of Reverend King leading dignified, well-dressed, well-behaved, spiritual singing, black freedom marchers through the streets of southern state capitals, while indignant white crackers and police in riot gear, holding back high-strung German shepherds, look on, waiting for the slightest instigation to unleash their anger.

Yet in those turbulent times, not all African-American men and women shared the Reverend King's dream of a harmoniously integrated America. A few African-American leaders believed in the futility of Dr. King's vision and were convinced that it was against the very nature of the white man to treat other races justly. Elijah Muhammad, founder of the Nation of Islam, was one of the most important proponents of this viewpoint. Though he died in 1975, his teachings and the religion he built around them are winning converts from the African-American community to this day and are still strongly influencing America's perception of Islam.

The Nation of Islam, under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad, offered African-Americans a radical religious interpretation of world history that pitted black man, as the true elect of God, against white man, as the devil himself. The Nation also provided its members with a religious discipline that promoted self-respect and self-realization. Yet except for a few superficial borrowings from Muslim customs, there was little in Elijah Muhammad's teachings or the Nation's religious practices that was based on Islam; there was much that was opposed to it. The Bible was and has

remained the principle scripture of the Nation. Minister Louis Farrakan, the Nation's current leader, quotes from the Bible much more frequently and with much greater confidence than he does from the Qur'an and often makes assertions (that the Qur'an rejects) based on the Bible or the teachings of Elijah Muhammad.

A short time after Elijah Muhammad died, the Nation of Islam split into two factions: one led by his son, Warithdeen Muhammad, and another led by his chief spokesman, Minister Louis Farakhan. Muhammad led his followers to orthodox Islam, and their religious beliefs are now in line with those of Muslims worldwide. Minister Farakhan's group, which has retained the title "The Nation of Islam," adheres to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, a decision that causes Muslim scholars to doubt their orthodoxy. The overwhelming majority of the approximately one million African-Americans who today call themselves Muslims are followers of W. D. Muhammad. It should be noted, however, that most of the leadership of the current African-American Muslim community was at one time members of the Nation. Thus, in this way, The Nation of Islam paved the way for the emergence of orthodox Islam in Black America.

## Immigrant Muslims

Governments of Muslim countries, out of a desire to become technologically independent of the West, began in the 1960s to send large numbers of their young people to European and American universities. Many of these students returned to their countries imbued with notions of democracy and human rights. Many also went back to their homelands more committed to Islam than when they first began their education in the West. Both types of students posed a threat to the politically repressive regimes that funded their western education, which may account partially for the marked decline in recent years of Muslim foreign student enrollment at western universities.

A large number of the western-educated Muslims managed to immigrate to the United States and Canada. Together with their families, these immigrants account for about three-fourths of the North American Muslim community and have led the way in providing Islamic education and establishing mosques and Islamic schools in America. Their numerical dominance of the American Muslim community has assured that, for the present and the immediate future, the way American Muslims practice and understand Islam will be very similar to the way it is understood and practiced in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent.

## An Ignored Community

Even at this point in time, most Americans remain unaware of the sizeable Muslim community in North America. In part, this may be a result of how rapidly the Muslim community of North America has grown in the last thirty years. Also, the American population may have not had sufficient time to meet this new subculture. The fact that most Americans are uninformed about the religions practiced in other parts of the world may also help explain the public's unawareness of the arrival of Islam.

Another important reason why Americans tend to disregard Islam as an indigenous religion is that the Islamic communities of Canada and the United States exist on the fringes of these societies; even though there has been a steady trickle of non-African-American converts to Islam, African-American converts and foreign-born Muslims account for the vast majority of Muslims in America today. Even though this number has now surpassed the number of Jews, Americans continue to view Islam as a religion practiced by foreigners and/or African-Americans.

Devout American Muslims would like to see a change in the current public perception of Islam as a religion alien to America, for as long as this view prevails, it will be all the more difficult for their children to grow up as Muslims in America. Islam's perceived foreignness may cause some of these children to feel the need to distance themselves from the Muslim community or to downplay the role that religion plays in their lives. In addition, Muslims feel obligated to share their religious viewpoint, a task that would be greatly facilitated if Islam were to become an acknowledged and contributing part of American culture.

Unfortunately, the senior generation of American Muslims can only do so much to alter the public's image of Islam, for the simple reason that their physical appearance so strongly reinforces it. Time is also running out for this generation of Muslim Americans, as their children are fast approaching the age at which they should take up the baton and carry the faith forward. For better or for worse, and whether or not they are adequately prepared, the establishment of Islam in America depends much more on the next generation of American Muslims than it does on their predecessors.

## The Larger Society

A middle-aged, African-American woman asked me an interesting question during a program I participated in at an Islamic conference a

couple of years ago. After remarking that Islam is part of the Muslim immigrants' cultural background and that it came to Black America through the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960s and 1970s, she asked me if I thought it really possible that many white Americans would embrace the religion without some similar social impetus. Both of these groups, she said, were and are drawn to Islam in part because it answers certain social needs: immigrants are returning to their religious and cultural roots, and African-American Muslims are choosing Islam as an alternative to the religion and culture forced upon their ancestors.<sup>116</sup> What social incentive, she asked, is there for European-Americans to consider Islam as a religious option?

I responded that for most of the American public, no such incentive presently exists. Generally, Americans—and I am not referring here to only white Americans—are quite proud of the culture they live in and are disinclined to join what is widely perceived as a counterculture movement. The average non-Muslim American may not only be unimpressed by the observation that Islam seems to require a certain distinctive culture, but more than likely, this will be viewed as problematic.

Nevertheless, I do believe that Islam has the potential to attract many Americans who have no strong social motivation to look into it. Religions have to do, first and foremost, with human spiritual needs, and they thrive or perish according to their ability to fulfill them. Since the time of the Prophet, Islam has nourished these needs for billions of persons of every race, color, and culture; it seems to have lost little of its original appeal, as it is now gaining more converts around the world than any other faith. Islam's vitality, as stated earlier, comes primarily from the Qur'an, and I feel that there is nothing special about men and women of the West that they cannot be reached by its call.

Muslims complain that the western media is doing all it can to prevent the true message of their faith from reaching the public and that this is the biggest reason why so many Americans are not inclined toward Islam. While it is true that many individuals in the western press continue to demonize Islam, I also feel that Muslims themselves may be interfering with its call in another and perhaps more detrimental way.

Many years ago when I began to investigate Islam, one of the first things that impressed me about Muslims was how familiar they were with

<sup>116</sup> It should be noted here that many African-Americans have Muslim ancestry. Thus by accepting Islam, some may indeed be returning to their African religious origins.

their religious texts, especially the Qur'an and the various compilations of the prophetic traditions, and how frequently they would refer to these sources when explaining their beliefs and practices. I noticed they cited their sacred texts in conversations much more often than believers in other religions. It was not long, however, before I realized that all too often my Muslim friends were equating revelation with their explanations of it. This is often hard to avoid, and Muslims are no exception in this respect,<sup>117</sup> but the average believer in other faiths tends not to do this so often, mostly because he or she is usually not as familiar with the relevant scriptures.

Persons seeking guidance from scripture are forced to interpret it. Although there are many revealed statements that all believers will understand in more or less the same way, this is not always the case. If a scripture is supposed to be a source of guidance for all of humanity, then we must expect that many of its statements will have different, appropriate meanings for believers of different times, places, and circumstances.

The problem with confusing revelation with our interpretations of it is that the latter, even when justifiable, restricts and limits the divine communication to our level of human understanding. As a result, we may be placing an obstruction between the revelation and those who trust that our explanation of it is accurate and correct.

On a visit to the Middle East, I met a pious young Muslim who informed me that the Qur'an forbids Muslim women to drive cars. When I pushed him to explain how he arrived at that, he began by quoting several Qur'anic verses that exhort Muslims to obey the Prophet. He then went on to quote several *hadiths* that he felt argued against women being allowed to drive. Since I did not accept his interpretation of the *hadiths* he used, he saw he had no chance of convincing me. As it turned out, the young man did not mean by his original claim that the Qur'an contains an explicit prohibition against allowing women to drive automobiles; what he meant was that he could provide an argument for such a prohibition based on certain verses of the Qur'an, certain traditions of the Prophet, and his interpretations of these. If I had not some knowledge of Islam, I might have accepted his claim.

I admit that the case I just recalled is an extreme one. This is precisely why I used it, because practically all Muslims would likewise disagree with

the young man's comment. I have also been told that the Qur'an and sayings of Muhammad command female seclusion, forbid women to vote in political elections, order the execution of apostates from Islam, and condone the conquest of non-Muslim lands. I have discovered that many Muslims would agree with some or all of these statements, and yet I am convinced that each statement is an interpretation and not an explicit, revealed commandment.

Muslims should be extremely cautious before insisting that their responses to revelation are the only proper ones. I strongly urge Muslims to be very precise about the sources of their statements when they share their religious perspective with non-Muslims. They should be as accurate as possible concerning the bases of their assertions about Islam. In addition, they should be sure to point out that they are citing a verse from the Qur'an, a *hadith*, a judgment of a scholar, something they heard somewhere, or are merely stating their personal opinion. It may take a little extra effort to describe these sources and the authority they carry with Muslims, but this is essential knowledge if one is to convey an accurate picture of Islam. Moreover, it may help listeners remain above secondary or controversial issues and allow them to acquire a better and more comprehensive understanding of the message of Islam.

## Between Worlds

*A freshman came to my office this past summer for advising. His face looked very Middle-eastern, but he dressed, sounded, and acted like a typical American teenager. His registration form stated that his name was Darik, so I wondered if he was of Arabic descent. I was wearing a T-shirt that had the Arabic alphabet on its front, and when Darik saw it, he immediately asked me with a big, gleaming smile, "Do you speak Arabic?"*

*"Marhabah, Darik! Kayf haalik?" I answered him.*

*"I'm sorry, I don't know any Arabic," he apologized. "My father is from Egypt, but I never learned his language."*

*"Is your Dad a Muslim?" I asked him.*

*"Yes, but he's not religious and I know almost nothing about his religion. I think all religions are pretty much the same."*

As director of math placement at the university, I briefly interview several hundred incoming freshmen each year during our Summer orientation sessions. Only a handful of these new students have Muslim American parents. When I inform them that they might be interested to know that there

<sup>117</sup> For example, the Christian dogma of the Trinity is a theological conception and hence a theory based in part on the New Testament. However, many Christians claim that Jesus stated it explicitly in the Gospels.

is a mosque on campus, I almost always find that they, like Darik, have little or no interest in Islam or, for that matter, in any religion.

By *first-generation American Muslims*, I mean either American converts to Islam or Muslim immigrants to America. I will refer to their children as the *second generation*. I do not refer to their children as *second-generation Muslims*, for the simple reason that I have discovered that many of these young people do not believe in Islam. Not long ago, the vice-president of ISNA told me that the one statistic he keeps hearing from experts in his organization is that only approximately 10 percent of the second generation become committed to Islam. We should not conclude from this that the other 90 percent abandons the faith; the fact is that most who turn out not to believe in it had little or no exposure to Islam when they were growing up.

Over the years, I have learned that the majority of first-generation American Muslims regularly ignore Islam's ritual requirements, make hardly any effort to educate their families about Islam, and have practically no contact with their local mosque or Islamic center. This, I believe, is the biggest contributing factor to the widespread disbelief in Islam among the second generation. In America, children of Muslim parents are given plenty of arguments against Islam from the surrounding society, while their own families provide them with very few counterarguments.

Unlike the second generation, almost all first-generation Muslims I have met are indeed Muslims, in that they profess to believe in Islam even if they do not practice it or routinely violate its ordinances. I have received several typical explanations from these Muslims for their lack of contact with the mosque: it is out of touch with their needs and lives, its leadership is too conservative or traditional, Muslims who go to the mosque do not get along with each other, its leadership is autocratic, and there is not enough time to go to the mosque.

So far, it appears that the leadership of Muslim America has no set strategy for recruiting first-generation Muslims and those second-generation Muslims who have little or no contact with the mosque. Their focus seems to be on providing spiritual and intellectual support for already committed and active Muslims and their families. Due to limitations in resources and personnel, this is probably the most practical thing to do right now. The prevailing feeling among devout American Muslims is that if they do not concentrate on teaching themselves how to preserve, defend, and bear witness to their faith in the secular West, there may soon be no practicing Muslims in America.

For the previous two decades, devout Muslims in America have concentrated primarily on taking the message of Islam to the general population. With great enthusiasm, they pursued the conversion of America. With debates and dialogues, they tried to prove to American audiences the deficiencies of Christianity and the superiority of Islam. To their dismay, Muslims came to realize that most Americans were simply not interested. The only Americans who did seem to care were the minority of fundamentalist Christians who seized the opportunity to proselytize their own beliefs. Muslims did not understand that most Americans have become numb to religious questions and that their greatest adversary was not Christianity, but rather, the deep-seated and pervasive apathy of people who had lost confidence in almost everything. America had come to doubt its legal system, its institutions, its leaders, and religion. America had come to distrust beliefs and convictions and had resigned itself to a kind of nihilism, or what the political sociologist Frank Furedi describes as a relativist noncommittal liberalism.<sup>118</sup> Not only were Americans uninterested in what Muslims had to say, but they were uncomfortable with the way Muslims were saying it. Religion, most Americans believe, should be a private matter, not something to propagate, and certainly not a proper subject for debate.

In the twentieth century's last decade, the attention of devout Muslims has shifted toward their own children, for it is nearing the time when second-generation believers should take on leading roles in the American Muslim community. These parents are gravely concerned for the religious future of their children and are doing all they can to prepare their sons and daughters to live in America as practicing Muslims. There is cause for optimism, because just as nonpracticing first-generation Muslims tend to have agnostic or disbelieving children, sons and daughters of practicing Muslim parents usually adhere to Islam. However, as mentioned in the introduction, the intellectual and social fabric of American society can exert considerable pressure on even religious Muslim children to compromise their faith. I know of a fair number of cases of devout Muslim parents whose children have left Islam.<sup>119</sup>

Muslims who struggle to bring up their children in the faith must contend with exactly the same force they met when they attempted to take the

<sup>118</sup> "The Panic About Islam: An Interview with Professor Frank Furedi," *Iqra Magazine* (April 1996): 13 ff.

<sup>119</sup> Only a few weeks ago, I received a letter from a heartbroken father whose son had become an atheist.

message of Islam to non-Muslim America during the two previous decades: Their children are almost continuously taught outside the home not to believe and trust in anyone or anything, to be morally and religiously apathetic, and to accept that all systems of belief are equally valid and, hence, equally flawed.

Children who come from religious Muslim families are caught between very different worlds: that of their home and that of the larger society. They may be Muslims, but their experience is very different from their parents. Unlike their mothers and fathers, they are not immigrants, converts, or children of the Civil Rights struggle. Their situation is much more ambiguous. Their causes, goals, and identities are not defined so clearly. Unlike immigrants, America is the only culture they really know. Unlike converts, Islam was chosen for them as a religion. They may face discrimination and prejudice, but it is very different from what African-Americans faced in the past. The way they think about, discuss, and explore issues is identifiably American. Their religion does influence their morals and ethics, but these are also influenced by the mores of American society. My oldest daughter is only ten, and yet she has already become deeply concerned about the treatment of women in the Muslim community and the subject of religious tolerance in Islam.

Children of devout Muslim parents will often shock their parents by their "American" ways of thought and expression. A devout Muslim father recently complained to me that his daughter dresses, looks, and acts like a normal Muslim girl, but every now and then she will say or do things that are very American—things that a Muslim child from the Middle East would never dare do or say. When I asked him for an example, he mentioned that she asked questions about God that are considered *haram* (forbidden) back in Egypt.

I have discovered at the Muslim youth camps and conferences in which I have participated that the religious issues and questions that are important to Muslim American young people are much the same as those raised by non-Muslim Americans interested in Islam. The questions they ask are almost exclusively of two types: those that pertain to the separation of culture from religion—especially when it comes to gender roles—and those that relate to theodicy, the branch of theology that studies divine justice. One reason why these subjects are so important to young American Muslims is that they must frequently defend Islam on these grounds to non-Muslim friends and acquaintances. Yet I think that this is not the chief motive behind their concern, for the fact is that these issues are currently of

extreme interest to Americans in general, and as Americans—we must not lose sight of the fact that this is what these young Muslim men and women are—these topics are of vital importance to them.

Second-generation Muslims are faced with a very difficult task. Naturally, they are seeking to harmonize their Americanness and their religion, striving to be good Muslims while being good citizens. This endeavor is made harder by the fact that many Muslims and non-Muslims in America see this as impossible. Many participants in Muslim youth conferences tell me that they are often torn between their society and their faith, and that they are forced to live with many perceived irreconcilable differences. Quite a few have admitted to me that they have begun to become confused about or to have doubts about their religion.

It is a true that there are conflicts between the teachings of Islam and modern American mores and that Muslims can (and should) try to influence these mores by sharing their moral and ethical perspective with the larger society. But first-generation Muslims must be alert to the possibility that they may be placing unnecessary stumbling blocks before their children, thereby making it very difficult for them to thrive, both spiritually and vocationally, in America.

I believe that Muslim parents should present Islam to their children in much the same way as I have suggested that they should present it to non-Muslims: They should do their best to separate the essentials of Islam from the nonessential historical and cultural adaptations and interpretations and should try to communicate it in the language of rational thought. If Muslim parents find themselves unequal to this task, then they should search out those who can do this successfully, for this would be a great help to their children who want to live as practicing Muslims in America. In addition, it could help them communicate the message of Islam to others.

No group of Muslims in America is currently in a better social position to inform the larger public about Islam than the second-generation believers. Americans often have difficulties sympathizing with immigrants because of their foreign cultural backgrounds. Also, "immigrant" Islam will likely be seen as part of the person's previous culture—something that is either better off discarded or modified over time.

Americans are often intimidated by converts, since conversion seems like a radical and almost unnatural thing. Since a convert chose a perceived alien religion, he or she is frequently asked, or feels it necessary, to explain and sometimes defend that choice. As a result, conversations about religion between converts and non-Muslim Americans are frequently tense.

However, the Islam and the Americanness of second-generation Muslims is likely to be viewed as very normal and natural, for these young people were born into both of these. I find that my daughters' friends and teachers feel much more comfortable asking my children about their religious beliefs than they do my wife, who is Middle-Eastern, or me, a convert to Islam. I have also noticed that my children are less defensive in discussions with friends about Islam. Many Muslim parents have told me that the same is true of their children.

Second-generation Muslims could become the breakthrough generation—the communication bridge between the universal Muslim community and American society. They already understand and can communicate effectively with fellow Americans; yet the crucial element that may be missing is a coherent, rational, and cogent perception by these young people of what the message of Islam is. Muslim parents can help their children discover such a perception, but it will require great patience and courage on their part. Patience is needed, since discovery and growth is seldom a smooth and steady climb; courage is needed to allow their children the room to develop their own understanding of Islam.

## The Rope of Allah

*And hold fast, all of you together, to the rope of Allah, and do not separate. (Qur'an 3:103)*

Every now and then I am asked by moderate or liberal American Muslims to join or help organize a "new" Muslim community in America—one with its own mosques and approach to Islam. The underlying motive is usually frustration with the current, conservative leadership of the American Islamic community. The hope is to effect a more authentic and practical implementation of Islam in America, one unburdened of obsolete foreign cultural accretions, more in tune with the thinking and experiences of "most" Muslims in America, and one that welcomes the full participation of Muslim women.

Even though I share some of this frustration, I am very uncomfortable with such invitations (they seem to be increasing as of late). I would not be at all surprised if someday soon there are "orthodox" and "reformed" mosques in North America. There is a real threat that in the near future, the Muslim community in America will split into conservative and progressive sects. If this happens, both conservative and moderate Muslims will be equally to blame, for both groups are infected with intolerance.

Muslims in the United States and Canada applaud the level of freedom of expression in these countries and complain how difficult and often dangerous it is to speak out in modern Muslim countries. The freedom to speak carries with it the obligation to let others be heard. The right to express one's own opinion is easy to embrace, but the principle of free speech hinges more heavily on respecting and protecting everyone's freedom to do so. As a community, the Muslims of North America have been slow to grasp the latter half of this formulation, even though the principles of *shura* (mutual consultation) and *ijma'* (consensus) are recognized in Islamic law as two fundamental elements of Muslim communal decision making.

The existence of diverse viewpoints in the Islamic community could be of benefit to Muslims, for contending outlooks tend to check and balance each another. Such diversity helps the community keep to a middle course and prevents it from racing toward extremes. It forces individuals to consider alternative perspectives, which has a tempering effect. It insures slow and cautious transition, which could be frustrating for advocates for change but which may be for the general good of Muslims. It also offers non-Muslims who are interested in Islam a single, unified, moderate religious community, a community that allows a wide range of intellectual vision.

The institutionalization of viewpoints into distinct religious factions can only be to the overall detriment of Muslims. It promotes extremism, narrow-mindedness, and further division; saps the community of energy and resources as contending sects compete to win converts from one another; and presents to non-Muslims a complicated and confusing image of Islam—of a religion with many contradictory versions. For potential converts, they now have the added issue of which Islam to join.

If Muslims really hope to better themselves and their fellow believers, I strongly recommend that they get involved in their local mosques and Islamic centers and make sure to make their viewpoints known during community meetings. They should also be ready to listen to and consider carefully opinions contrary to their own. Most importantly, Muslims must learn to defer to the majority viewpoint. This does not mean that a Muslim must stop advancing an opinion when the majority disagrees with it, but he or she should abide by the decisions reached by consensus unless and until they are changed.

## Is There a Scholar in the House?

When speaking to non-Muslims, Muslim lecturers will often emphasize that there is no clergy in Islam. This is a reflection of the Islamic principle

that each of us is ultimately accountable for his or her deeds and that no one but God can unburden us of moral responsibility. Only God can judge another person saved, forgiven, or enlightened.

For Muslims, there is no ecclesiastical authority that can decide personal, moral and spiritual dilemmas. When such questions arise, a Muslim is encouraged to search the textual sources of Islam and to seek the advice of fellow believers respected for their knowledge of the faith. But in the end, and after much prayer and soul-searching, a believer accepts responsibility for his or her resolution of a personal problem and, thereafter, trusts in and relies upon the wisdom, forgiveness, and mercy of God. Within this system, the best one Muslim could offer another Muslim who is faced with a moral predicament is sound, knowledgeable counsel and his or her prayers.

In most faiths, religious scholars are not involved in the many day-to-day problems of believers. Their studies are usually too advanced and abstract for digestion by nonspecialists. In Islam, the common problems of Muslims are and always have been the focus of most scholarly investigation. The research of a Muslim religious scholar is much more practical than theoretical and is usually accessible to his or her coreligionists. A Muslim scholar feels that the main purpose of learning is to be able to better advise fellow believers on how to live properly. Although Muslim scholars have no official ceremonial or ritualistic duties, they serve as counselors to the faithful in much the same way that clergy do in other faiths.

The Muslims of North America are in need of religious scholars who can help them deal with the many new problems they are facing. In particular, there is an urgent need for scholars who can help young Muslims discover how to be true to their faith in America and who can help the Islamic community to remain unified. Unfortunately, there are currently very few Muslim scholars qualified to assist them. Throughout the Islamic world, there are many specialists in the various classical Islamic sciences, but not many of them live in North America. The latter qualification is most important; to give sound advice to American Muslims, a scholar must fully appreciate the special circumstances in which they live.

The issues raised by young believers and those that are disuniting the American Islamic community revolve around the vast legacy of Muslim scholarship that has come down to us. In order to address these issues responsibly and convincingly, scholars must possess a comprehensive knowledge of Islamic history and the evolution of Islamic thought. In addition, they must be prepared to scrutinize critically the works of some of the

most influential and respected Muslim scholars of the past. I am not sure that the world Islamic community, or even the American Islamic community, would be able to tolerate such self-examination just yet.

For the past century, Islam has been the target of a seemingly continuous barrage of criticism from the West, much of which has been nothing more than malicious, bigoted carping. Muslims in North America meet with misconceptions and misinformation about their beliefs almost daily and are forced to repeat, again and again, the usual counterarguments. Muslims have gotten so used to defending their faith against false and slanderous accusations (often presented as objective scholarship), that they react defensively to virtually any critical study of Islam, from whatever source. They tend to see another Muslim's criticism of the scholarly or cultural tradition as a concession to the disbelievers—a kind of defection to the enemy. In such an intellectual milieu, it is very difficult for a Muslim scholar to challenge long-established, prevailing viewpoints.

Perhaps this is why the same themes are rehashed each year at American Islamic conferences: How to establish an Islamic lifestyle in America, the need for American Muslim unity, *da'wah* (Muslim witness to non-Muslims) strategies, the rights of women in Islam, how to respond to the western media's misrepresentation of Islam, Islam vs. terrorism. I do not mean to trivialize these topics, for I obviously regard them as important. Rather, I wish to point out that the repetition of them, year after year, indicates that the community has not been able to address them satisfactorily and move forward. The Muslim community in America is stuck in the "newcomer" or "outsider" phase, unable to adapt to the new environment and unable to find in traditional Islamic thought viable solutions to many of its current problems.

The first step American Muslims can take toward creating an intellectual climate in the community that fosters original, critical research is to follow the recommendation I made earlier in this chapter: American Muslims need to become more open-minded and trusting of each other. As every convert to Islam discovers, today's Muslims are very suspicious of one another, exceedingly prone to spread rumors and gossip, and extremely quick to declare each other guilty of heresy. An American convert once remarked to me that backbiting and spreading rumors about one another seems to be the favorite entertainment of Muslims. Such widespread, impetuous backbiting and rumor-mongering create a climate of intimidation that thwarts free speech and critical inquiry. It also causes those who

think about such issues to refrain from airing viewpoints that challenge popular feeling and encourages scholars to keep away from sensitive or controversial topics—the very topics that need to be discussed.

In other faiths, the existence of a clerical order helps to curtail such behaviors among the lay people, who feel that it is not their place to pronounce religious judgments on other believers. In Islam, it is first and foremost up to each believer to suppress these malicious impulses. Since the Qur'an and Sayings of the Prophet rank rumor-mongering and backbiting among the greatest of sins, it is a wonder that this behavior is so prevalent among Muslims. Consider the following small sample of well-known admonitions from the Qur'an and Sayings of the Prophet quoted by Yusuf al Qaradawi:<sup>120</sup>

God does not like the public utterance of hurtful speech, except by one who has been wronged; and God is ever Hearing, Knowing (4:148)

Those who love that scandal should circulate respecting those who believe, for them is a grievous chastisement in this world and the hereafter. And God knows, while you do not know. (24:19)

O you who believe, avoid most of suspicion; for truly suspicion in some cases is sin; and do not spy nor allow some of you to backbite others. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would abhor it! So keep your duty to God, surely God is Oft-returning, Merciful. (49:12)

The one who spreads gossip which he has overheard will not enter the garden. (*Sahih al Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*)

Avoid suspicion, for airing suspicion is the most lying form of speech. (*Sahih al Bukhari*)

Do not be envious of each other, nor backbite nor hate one another, but be brethren in the service of God. (*Sahih al Bukhari*)

<sup>120</sup> Yusuf al Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*, trans. by K. El-Heibawy, M. M. Siddiqui, and S. Shukry (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications), 307-22.

He who listens surreptitiously to peoples' conversations against their wishes will have molten lead poured into their ears on the Day of Resurrection. (*Sahih al Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*)

It is not conceivable that the American Muslim community—or for that matter, any society—will someday entirely rid itself of intolerance, rumor-mongering and back-biting; but certainly societies, like individuals, can always improve themselves with regard to these socially destructive vices. Right now, these vices seem more common among Muslims than among most other religious communities in America. Reform, however, may be close at hand.

The so-called liberal sector of North American society, which presently dominates the media, the entertainment industry, and the education establishment, is intensely promoting the ideas of tolerance, freedom of expression and inquiry, and the acceptance of social and cultural diversity. Since American liberals tend to be more bigoted in their attitudes toward Islam than moderates or conservatives, Muslims doubt that their well-being figures into the liberal agenda. Nevertheless, the leadership of the American Muslim community generally has supported these ideas, since many Muslims in America believe that they are (or have been) victims of discrimination and bigotry. One can say that Muslims are calling on the rest of America to live up to its proclaimed ideals—a kind of “put your money where your mouth is” strategy.

Also, some Muslim apologists and proselytizers have attempted to demonstrate that many of the freedoms esteemed by the West, such as freedom of speech and religious tolerance, were established for the first time in history by Islam more than fourteen centuries ago during the rule of Prophet Muhammad. They also point out that, until recently, Islamic civilization offered greater religious and intellectual freedom than Christian lands.

Both of these trends indicate that the American Islamic community has come to appreciate and employ the concepts of tolerance and free expression in its dialogue with the larger society. But so far, American Muslims have been slow to embrace these notions with regard to community life. Many Muslims in America complain that their mosques, Islamic centers, and community organizations remind them of the totalitarian systems of the Middle East, where you simply are not allowed to challenge authority. I expect, however, that the American Islamic community is soon to enter a new era of openness; it cannot continue to

embrace tolerance, free inquiry and free speech, in general, without these ideals influencing the behavior of Muslims with respect to each other. In addition, the next generation of American Muslims, who will eventually lead the community, should be very comfortable with these notions.

The key factor in all of this chapter's discussion is time. Will the "soon" I just spoke of be soon enough to prevent a large number of American children of Muslim parents from leaving Islam and the community from fractionalizing? Perhaps not, but nevertheless, I do believe that Islam will survive and flourish in America even though there may initially be some set backs. I must admit that I am speaking now, as my Middle-Eastern friends often say, from the heart, or perhaps I should say, from my experience of conversion through reading the Qur'an, for this revelation has so captivated and compelled me that I cannot believe that it will not do the same for countless other Americans.

And God, the Merciful, the Wise, the Self-Sufficient, knows best.

In *Even Angels Ask: A Journey to Islam in America*, the author attempts to share the American convert's experience of discovering Islam. During his fifteen years of being a university professor on college campuses across the United States, he has met many young Americans of Muslim heritage who avoid or even reject Islam, being unable to reconcile their inherited faith with their acquired Western outlook. One of the principle assumptions behind this book is that even though the American culture has alienated these young people from the faith of their parents, they will be able to relate to what other Americans, of non-Muslim origin, have discovered in Islam. Talking with converts, like himself Dr. Lang found a shared common experience that approximates a characteristic path to the faith. This book takes the reader along this path by discussing conflicts between faith and reason, difficulties associated with the decision to convert to Islam, obstructions to conversion erected by Muslims themselves, the indispensable experience of Islamic rituals, extremism within the Muslim community, and what the future may hold for American Muslims.



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