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Revelation, Islam, And Conversion:
A Series Of Essays

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Experiences of Conversion

In William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, James describes religious conversion:

> To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about.[1]

James correctly describes the spiritual state of an individual before and after religious conversion (at least, the desired outcome of religious conversion). Within academic discourse, explanations for religious conversion reduce to sociological or anthropological definitions. Sociological explanations limit religious conversion to an attempt for the individual to find a sense of belonging through human interaction and care. Anthropological explanations often cite the history of religions throughout human history, noting that the idea of a deity being active in human life gives one a sense of comfort or relief from worldly suffering. These answers need to pay more attention to the spiritual circumstances involving religious conversion. And what exactly are these "spiritual circumstances" that make people convert from one religion to another? Focusing on conversion to Islam through theological and personal reflection, this essay highlights theological reasons for converting to Islam, including strategies some converts may use to adapt to their newfound faith and the practical repercussions of accepting Islam.

The revelation of the Qur'an was a spiritual evolution that uplifted and inspired those within the Prophet Muhammad's milieu. The Qur'an reveals a conception of God that is overwhelmingly singular and perfect. He has no offspring, no spouse, and no partner. God created the universe, and his creation worships him (Q 7:44). The stars and the trees submit to

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[1] James, "Religious Conversion" 189.

his glory (Q 55:6). Living entities such as animals, which lack the ability of speech, worship God through their means (Q 22:18). Human beings and *jinn* (unseen beings) were created for the sake of acknowledging their creator (Q 51:56). This *fiṭrah*, or natural disposition, gives both jinn and humankind the free will to accept or reject God's guidance.

For human beings to recognize their *fiṭrah* within themselves, God had previously sent prophets tasked with conveying the message affirming his existence (Q 10:47). Yet time and time again, humankind ultimately failed to adhere to their *fiṭrah* and perished (Q 16:36). These prior failures to believe in God, from Abraham to Jesus, stems from our restless nature (Q 70:19). The reason why we assign partners to God, worship other entities besides him, or covet worldly desires like wealth or fame, is to deal with this anxiety rather than turning to God. Not even Muhammad, who was designated to be the one who conveyed the Qur'an for humanity, has the power to change people's hearts (Q 28:56). The Qur'an asserts that God does not want human beings to believe in him unless they are already willing to change themselves (Q 13:11). God opens the hearts of those who have this willingness to change and closes those who do not (Q 6:125). For those that attain belief, their hearts tremble when the Qur'an is recited to them (Q 8:2). When accepting the Truth, they have finally become mindful of God (Q 39:33). When the Believer calls to God through prayer, God is close and listens to every prayer (Q 2:186). God reminds the Believers to remember Him, for He will remember us (Q 2:152). God asserts that those who believe have the upper hand against discouragement and despair (Q 3:139). And, in the Hereafter, they are rewarded based on such belief and their deeds after attaining faith (Q 95:7).

Even though the revelation of the Qur'an formally stopped after the Prophet Muhammad's death, its timeless nature has permeated throughout the centuries, inspiring

individuals and entire cultures to believe in its message. In *Conversion to Islam in the Premodern Age: A Sourcebook*, Peter Webb notes a poem narrated by Ibn al-Kalbi from 'Adi b. ' Amr b. Suwayd al-A 'raj al-Ma 'ni al- Ta'i:

> When the morning prayer's announcer rises,
> I leave poetry aside and replace it
> With the Book of the One God.
> Farewell to drink and carousing!
> I abstain from wine though
> All my life, I was an addict.[2]

al-A 'raj, the poem's author, was supposedly a man who lived within the *ummah* of the early believers. He felt the initial rush of arriving at belief after hearing revelation being revealed from the Prophet's lips. The poem reveals how converts go through processes of changing their lifestyle into one that matches their newfound spiritual disposition. The line, "I leave poetry and replace it with the Book of the One God," is likely a motif from the early Meccans accusing the Prophet of being a poet (Q 21:5). Yet, the fact that poetry is replaced with the Qur'an is meant to assert that the Qur'an is more significant than any poetry created by humankind. "All my life, I was its addict" after renouncing wine is a testament to how the convert viewed their former lives before Islam. Rejecting alcohol is proof of the convert's dedication to their faith and an acknowledgment that their life was improved after embracing Islam. The notion of the individual's life being enhanced is also affirmed in the Qur'an, which proclaims that God takes those out of the darkness and into the light (Q 2:257).

What about the convert that has attained faith from among the *ahl al-kitāb* (People of the Book)? Continuing from *Conversion to Islam in the Premodern Age: A Sourcebook*, Clint Hackenburg translates a letter from al-Hasan b. Ayyub, a Christian convert to Islam in the tenth century, addressed his brother about refuting Christianity. al-Hasan composed his letter after

[2] Web, "The Spread of Islam in Arabia: Expressing Conversion in Poetry," 65.

significant societal, familial, and psychological challenges. He states:

> "Whenever I delved into these beliefs and pondered them, their shortcomings became obvious, but I kept myself from acknowledging them. However, when I contemplated the religion of Islam, which God has bestowed upon me, I found its sources verifiable, its doctrines true, and its law beautiful."[3]

Polemical in nature, al-Hasan interrogates his former faith and displays vital moments where he became dissatisfied with Christianity: how his frustrations with Christianity began twenty years before writing the letter after learning about how Trinitarian Christianity was officially established, disagreeing with Nicene Creed, and proclaiming that doctrine of the Trinity is an example of Christians corrupting the oneness of God. al-Hasan's experience fits William James' definition of conversion. Through intellectual inquiry, he found Christianity to be the "consciously wrong inferior" that left him with nothing but unhappiness and dissatisfaction. Yet through the same process of intellectual inquiry, he transformed into "consciously right superior and happy." But his conversion came with challenges. He came to believe that Islam was the truth, yet he delayed his conversion because Christianity was so integrated into his culture, community, and family life. Familiar with the faith he was born to believe in, converting to Islam would be entering a new faith that would take time to get accustomed to. After reading from all of the revealed scriptures, the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospels, the Books of the Prophets, and the Qur'an, al-Hasan was so convinced of Islam that he was prepared for his life to enter a massive upheaval:

> "As a result, when I did not find any means to defend my belief, to alleviate my doubt, or to justify enduring or lingering any longer, I went forth alone as an immigrant to God, may He be exalted and glorified, and with my new religion, I left behind comfort, communal stability, my home, respect, and the ability to earn a living. I openly professed Islam with a sincere motivation, a clear conscience, and an absolute conviction. Praise be to God, who has guided us to this, for if God had not guided us, we would not have been

[3] Hackenburg, "A Christian Convert's Examination of His Former Faith," 148.

guided."[4]

al-Hasan continued to remain faithful despite the repercussions of embracing Islam. Even though he lost his livelihood and community, he continues to praise God that he was willing to accept Islam despite his worldly sacrifices. Even so, the fact that the rest of his letter is a polemical address about the irrationality of Christianity gives me the sense that attacking Christianity is his way to cope with the traumatic loss of his former life. al-Hasan writes this letter to his brother to explain his reasoning for converting. Still, based on his letter's attitude, he was forever considered an outcast by his community and was never welcomed back with open arms.

Although al-Hasan's case was tragic as his family never accepted him back into his former community, another instance displays Muslim poet al-Qasim b. Yahya al-Maryami consoling a Christian friend, Ishaq, whose nephew has converted to Islam. The first stanza reads:

> Take solace! Even the best of us wears out in time;
> For good and ill alike are all men made.
> Reprieved from the ravages of Fate are gifts;
> Some profit from them, others are deprived.
> It is altogether prudent for a good and upright man,
> Drowning in a sea of cares, to steel himself.
> If he finds no way out
> Then it is fitting and most proper that he bear up.
> Sorrow came to me by some joyful news I heard,
> and now I am neither unchained nor free.[5]

al-Qasim first acknowledges the pain that, like al-Hasan, Ishaq's nephew, is about to undergo the social implications of being ostracized by his community. He tries to uplift Ishaq by stating that even the best of humankind must experience sadness, trial, and utter despair. But even amid that

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[4] Hackenburg, "A Christian Convert's Examination of His Former Faith," 149.
[5] Yarbrough, "A Muslim Poet Consoles a Christian Friend Whose Nephew Has Converted to Islam," 137

despair, they must pull themselves up from their anguish. The ending of this stanza is a compelling example of the conflicted feelings that al-Qasim has for Ishaq's nephew's conversion, which exemplifies early Muslims' conflicted feelings about those who converted to Islam. Not far from the *sahaba*, the generation of the Companions of the Prophet, the early Muslims are keenly aware of the difficult circumstances of converting and what that means for all parties involved; not only the convert but their families, communities, and economic prosperities are seemingly wiped away overnight due to conversion. The early Muslims probably had inherited stories about their family members and their trials after converting to Islam, so it is understandable how they are much more sympathetic towards Christians who felt as much sorrow as they did. These sentiments starkly contrast with later Muslim emotions about conversion that are met with a convicted, celebratory agreement, mainly dismissive of the sacrifices one makes for embracing Islam.

Conversion is a spiritual experience that has massive social consequences in an individual's life. Individuals who convert from one religion to another bring their personal spiritual beliefs into the public domain. Converting, in a sense, entails renouncing aspects of one's former spiritual life and potentially even social identity. But from an overall societal perspective, it is a public declaration that something in one's former life was insufficient to lead them to such a decision. When someone converts, the potential backlash may come from familial or social connections. Also, the conversion may have unexpected social problems for the individual's family. For example, suppose one child converts to Islam while their parents and everyone else are still Christian. In that case, other family members may accuse the parents of not teaching their child about Christianity. Parents may consider themselves failures because their child failed to become a devout Christian.

Me and Jesus

In my childhood, at a Lutheran Church in Detroit, Michigan, I regularly walked past a painting on the top floor as I went up for Sunday School. It depicted Jesus, in full divine glory, floating towards stairs that lead into Heaven. I remember always seeing this painting with a feeling of uncertainty. It is supposed to give the person hope that Jesus was the way, the truth, and the life and that no one goes to the Father except through him, yet it always gave me anxiety and discontent. Why was I feeling this way? I said the Nicene Creed during our liturgical prayers. I sang "Jesus loves the little Children" during Sunday School hours. During Christmas time, I would sing "Go tell it on the Mountain," "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," or "We Three Kings." I would periodically sing in the church choir or help light and set the candles during and after service. Yet, even after all of that, this painting always served as a glaring reminder that I didn't honestly believe in the faith I was reared to believe in, which frustrated and scared me consistently.

When hearing from Muslims who converted to Islam from Christianity, I often listen to testimonies from individuals disillusioned with Christianity at a young age. Often, they quickly find any attempts to disassociate from it, either by not attending Church, ignoring pastoral sermons, or disregarding their Sunday School teachers. Some also considered themselves "cultural Christians," only Christians by cultural affiliation rather than genuine conviction in mainstream Christian theology. However, I cannot relate to this sentiment. From an earlier age, I have always been fascinated by religion. I remember marveling at figures in the Torah like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. I was floored by the amount of faith Job had when Satan altered his life seemingly overnight. The Exodus story, especially as a Black American, constantly reminded me that God hears the cries of those who believe in him and cares about his

creation. Yet, these stories, however, are linear within the Christian tradition. These stories of the "Old Testament" were taught to me as a precursor for the "New Testament." The entire Christian Bible focuses on the coming of Jesus through prophecy or Divine will. So, out of all the figures in the Bible I had come to love and respect, Jesus was the only one who gave me confusion and despair when someone uttered his name.

Now, first things first, what exactly is wrong with Jesus? Why did he frustrate me so much? In the four Gospels, Jesus does amazing things. He heals the sick, cures the blind, feeds the 5,000, walks on water, casts out demons, and raises the dead. And even after that, the folks around him still scorn and mock him wherever he goes. Then suddenly, the Roman Empire crucifies him with the feeling of satisfaction, ensuring that his movement has ended. Yet, three days later, he was resurrected from the dead and ascended into Heaven a bit afterward. His story is supposed to be more than just confirming the triune God, but that God's promises are fulfilled with the coming of Jesus. With Jesus, God is showing unconditional love for his creation, offering them eternal life in exchange for believing in his Son. The Trinity, on the surface, is a beautiful story brimming with hope. Yet, even when knowing the supposed boons for believing in this message, I never believed in it.

The Christian message does not apply to you if you do not believe in the Trinity. If the Trinity is false, then Christianity is false. If the Trinity does not exist, then God does not exist. At least, this is how I framed it as a child. However, not believing in the Trinity has a ripple effect. Instead of just not believing in the Trinity, I also was skeptical about how God relates himself to humanity. If Jesus is not God, then God does not care about his creation or the sins we have committed. If Jesus is not God, then an afterlife is in question. If Jesus is not God, then there is no accountability for the actions we have committed on Earth. There is no redemption, hope, or

Covenant that is fulfilled. If anything, the only truth we can access is that all life will eventually cease to exist whether God exists.

I refused to accept that I did not believe in the Trinity. I would tell myself, “I'll come to believe it, eventually!” or “Every Christian goes through a phase of unbelief. If I try hard, I will believe that Jesus died for my sins and that Christianity is true!” Therefore, I stayed in the Church, hoping to find content in its message. To this day, I cannot tell you a sermon from my childhood pastor that resonated with me (or any Christian sermon, period). Whenever he used the Gospels within his message, I would get frustrated and read from the Hebrew Bible instead to pass the time. I remember asking my mother for a cross necklace for Christmas but feeling incredibly uncomfortable when attempting to wear it. I would do activities in the Church, hoping that the Holy Spirit would reveal to me that “He has Risen.” I even briefly participated in confirmation classes, initially excited to learn more about my faith. Yet, my pastor reprimanded me for being too eager to interrupt him (which made the other children involved feel like I was a know-it-all). This incident led me to gradually walk away from actively participating in Church, aside from receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion. Ironically, this further fueled my longing to cure my unbelief eventually. During high school, I would watch Christian apologetics on YouTube, coming across solid arguments about the Trinity. I would often scroll on "GotQuestions.org," a fundamentalist Christian website where people ask theological and religious questions, usually intending to settle the curiosity of the asker. But my Christian identity reached a standstill as a student at Morehouse College.

At Morehouse College, I had the space to question religion freely without someone asserting their theology. Historian and Dean of the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel, Lawrence Edward Carter Sr., constantly encouraged my fellow members and me to go beyond

the “embedded theology” we were taught to believe: “Seek a theology free from the shackles of the interpretations of others. Reach your conclusions about God instead of relying on the perspective of others.” To this day, I thank God for Morehouse and the opportunities it gave me. Yet, I found myself in a religious culture clash with students. Being reared Lutheran in an all-black city with a majority-black congregation, I was not used to the culture and worship style of the Black Church. Of course, I understood the significance of Black American religious life and what religion means to Black Americans. But I did NOT understand church practices like “speaking in tongues,” the call-and-response during sermons, and the many instances of shouting when in praise of the Lord. When telling students I was Lutheran, I was occasionally laughed at or mocked. I remember a student saying I did not “have the Holy Ghost” because I was Lutheran, which often damaged my self-esteem as if the Christianity I was taught to believe in was inferior or “whitewashed.” As if the Black Church was the brand of Christianity that was the natural religion of Black Americans and any Black person who was not involved in it was a sellout or did not care about Black issues or Black life.

Being called “whitewashed” because of my religious tradition is painful. But what was more distressing was witnessing the conviction from my peers. In the Chapel Assistants program, students were committed to being preachers. Some come from long lines of preachers, know in-depth histories of prominent Black pastors, have connections from famous churches, and developed a slight sense of fame from already-established preaching careers. For my peers, Black Christianity connected them to the Divine. Even in religion classes where the Historical-Critical method often seemingly tore apart the Bible or Philosophy classes that questioned attributes of the Divine and the very existence of God itself, my classmates still held firm in their Christian beliefs. Frequently I was annoyed and perplexed as to why they cared so

much about a religious tradition with so many problems. Still, I was envious of the convictions and sad that I did not have the same feelings they had (even if I acted as I did).

Being in the Chapel Assistants program, I often acted like I was invested in Christian beliefs like the others. People assumed I wanted to work in the Church, constantly asking if I wanted to be a preacher like my peers. I would help set up church services and chapel assistant meetings, occasionally usher for funerals hosted by the Church, and almost do anything to be accepted by others around me. I would tell myself it was because I believed in the Christian message like everyone else during that time. But, in reality, it was the opposite. I desperately worked with the Chapel to make Christianity work for me. I would do all that work in the Chapel because I wanted to feel what the others felt when in Church. I wanted to feel what the Christians feel when praying to God or taking the sacraments. I wanted to know what it means to believe in something greater than myself. Like my younger self failing to wear a cross necklace, I was forcing myself into a religious mold that never worked for me. And this was painful. Hearing the congregation around me become moved and invigorated by the pastor's sermon while I sat wholly uninspired was painful. Listening to peers mention gospel stories and getting spiritual fulfillment from them while I was left unconvinced and aimless was painful. Why was I not feeling the same feeling when I read the Gospels? Why did I not resonate with the Resurrection like everyone else? Was there something wrong with me?

The feeling of "Was there something wrong with me?" did not wane after my early graduation a semester early. In January 2020, I went to Israel and Palestine with the Philos Project, a Christian Zionist organization that markets itself to students, offering "homecoming" trips to Israel by visiting Christian and Jewish sites mentioned in the scriptures. I was not precisely well-versed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but I went nonetheless because I wanted

to see the places from the Gospel accounts. I figured I would "find God" if I went to Israel. If anything, I found out more about myself. I was in a majority-Black group who were from Black Church traditions that firmly believed in the Trinity (often unquestionably so). I visited sites like the Garden of Gethsemane, the Pool of Bethesda, and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. I was in Capernaum, the Mount of Olives, the Sea of Galilee, and the Dead Sea. I even had the opportunity to visit the Church of Nativity in Palestine (which came with its issues). Seeing these places made me realize I had forgotten many of the areas Jesus had visited or engaged in during his ministry. I was perplexed when people in my group said they "felt the spirit" when we came upon these places. Frankly, I didn't feel the presence of God at all. I considered many of the places I visited to be archeological rather than holy. Israel did not feel like the place coveted in my religion. Referring to Israel as the "Holy Land" felt like the practitioners of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam proclaiming a land to be Holy because they wanted it to be. If anything, Israel is just an area on the map with vast historical significance. Different people have conquered Israel repeatedly, and the presence of humanity has tainted the initial holiness of the land. It is another place where people live—nothing more, nothing less.

My dissatisfaction peaked on the last day of our trip. Picture this: As a storm (rare during this time of year) hits our bus, we arrive at the River Jordan, where John the Baptist baptized Jesus. At this point, I feel frustrated, jaded, and confused due to my lack of spiritual experiences during my trip. Ironically, this site was one of the few I was initially excited to visit. Nonetheless, I declined to participate in the baptism that day. A friend also requested not to be baptized, but his decision was not due to dissatisfaction from the trip (if not just deciding that he did not want to get wet). I tell him, "We believe in one baptism in the Lutheran Church. I already got baptized as a child, so why do I need another one (I was not sure if this was accurate, just an

excuse for me not to get baptized)?" One by one, I see the folks on my trip dip into the River Jordan as the storm is relentless, with rain pouring down on us. People began to cry and shout out of anguish or relief when baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Right before me, my program director begins shouting in tongues while other students join her. Some start to cry simply by seeing others cry. And finally, the storm lifts as we get back into our bus and return to our hotel.

During the bus ride back, I was stunned and did not know what to say. My friends who grew up in the Black Church were unsurprised, telling me this always happens in their worship spaces. I had heard speaking in tongues before, but never in a situation where an individual used the practice to convey their emotions. Like my days as a Chapel Assistant, this event reminded me that I was around others in a religious tradition that does not resonate with me and never will. At the hotel, we had an opportunity to express our feelings about the trip. Many told personal stories about intimate details of anguish and despair, which the previous baptism made them finally confront how far they had come from them. Although many shared stories of immense trials and tribulations, the baptism made them closer to God to the point where they sensed that everything would be okay. And again, I marveled at how I felt nothing at the River Jordan. While there, I thought, "There is nothing holy about a river that people get baptized in all the time." But for them, it was as if the baptism finally made them honest about their feelings. The pain and struggle they locked in their hearts were briefly opened, giving them a sense of relief.

Back in the States, I felt even more jaded than I possibly could about Christianity. The trip to Israel and Palestine made me realize I would never believe in the Trinity. No matter how much I try to be in the Church, how much I try to be accepted by Christians, and how much I know about Christianity, the Trinity will never ring true in my ears. This realization also meant

that I would never truly have a home in the Christian faith. The Lutheran Church no longer appealed to me, and the Black Church never accepted me. Yet, Trinity aside, I was also totally disconnected from Jesus. I was at a total loss regarding who I thought he was or even who he thought he was. When one professes to be a Christian, they assert to the world that they are a "follower of Christ." How can I follow Christ when I do not know who Christ is? I tried looking at Christianity through the lens of 20th-century Christian liberalism, liberation theology, and post-colonial readings of the Gospels. I even briefly called myself a Christian existentialist after reading Soren Kierkegaard's works. Yet, the label of "Christian" would always reign supreme. No matter what I do, I cannot escape the public profession of Jesus as the center of my faith. Instead of a message of hope, it was as if I was forever doomed to be a part of a religion that I never believed in.

Coming to Islam

In the Spring of 2021, I took a class on angels within the Abrahamic tradition by Kimberley Patton. I initially found the course interesting for discovering more about angels and growing suspicion regarding seeing the world only through mere empirical analysis and the human senses. One day, a Ph.D. student introduced our class to the Islamic notion of *fiṭrah*, the belief that everything in the universe is hardwired to worship God. Not just humans but even plants and animals praise God in their ways. My fascination escalated when re-encountering the concept of *jinn*: beings of fire that live alongside humans in the Unseen realm. I was excited enough to the point where, for my final essay, I decided to write about the relationship between *jinn*, humankind, Iblīs (the Qur'anic conception of Satan), and how they all fit into Islamic theology.

Even though I was obsessed with these esoteric theological concepts, I often needed clarification on why Islam shared so many aspects of the religion with Christianity and Judaism. I also was uncomfortable with the honorifics attributed to the Prophet (such as peace be upon him) because it seemed like the Islamic sources exalted him too much (which I experienced in Christianity with Jesus). Nonetheless, I decided to take a class called Exploring the Qur'an, which was a three-hour seminar. I didn't know what to expect, but I told myself that I would refrain from any preconceived judgments about what I know about religion and approach this class with an honest attempt to understand.

Due to scheduling issues, our first class was an uploaded lecture on Zoom. At the beginning of the course, my professor recited the following passage in Arabic and English:

> "By the Sun and her brightness
> By the moon when he follows her
> By the day when he reveals her
> By the night when he covers her
> By the sky and Him who built her
> By the Earth and Him who spread her
> By the soul and Him who fashioned her
> And inspired her with her virtues and her vices:
> One who purifies her is felicitous
> And one who betrays her fails"- (Q 91:1-10)

When I first heard these verses from *al-ḍuḥā* in English, I had no clue about what these verses meant. Yet after I had heard them in Arabic, I was surprised to hear how almost every end of the verses rhymed. He again recited other passages in the following order: Q 74:1-7, Q 28:1-7, and Q 2:240-242. After those recitations, he gave background into the historical development that led to the Pre-Islamic Arabian milieu where the Qur'an was revealed. Yet in the second week of the course (in-person), the subject matter was the Life of the Prophet Muhammad, which included critical facts like his battles, clashes with the Quraysh, and relationships with the Arabian Jewish tribes. One point that interested me was that although we have no accounts of the Prophet in both

Muslim and non-Muslim sources during his lifetime, the Qur'an was most likely preached by the Prophet himself and can be reliably traced back to him. This fact is unlike the Gospel stories, a collection of oral tradition stories written at the earliest forty years after Jesus' death.

I was going along and keeping up. Suddenly, the professor showed the hadith from *ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* about how the Prophet received his first revelation on Mount Hira. I was amazed at how the Prophet was shown to be genuinely afraid over this experience, even when he runs home to his wife in complete distress. This conception of the Prophet differed greatly from the person who Islamic scholars constantly exalted within past Islamic scholarship I had read. In the next slide, the beginning verses of *al-ʿalaq* , *al-muzzammil***,** and *al-muddathir* were shown, and we had to discuss them with the person next to us about which Qur'anic passages were the earliest revealed. First of all, earliest? What does that mean? You're telling me that some verses are earlier than others? I was tongue-tied and had no clue what to say. Luckily, the person next to me was my friend, who was Muslim, and he just shrugged his shoulders and said, "Well, it's from God, so who knows?" "What do you mean it's from God, and how are you so convinced that it's from God?" I thought.

The Professor showed another passage after these, the first eighteen verses of *an-Najm.* Reading these verses on the projected screen, I found them cryptic and vague without context. I was figuring out what to make of what I was reading. It didn't seem like poetry, a narrative, or even a hymn. All my prior knowledge of religion failed me at this very moment. I was extremely overwhelmed until, at the end of the class, a slide showed the Lord's prayer and *al-fātiḥah.* I was shocked at how both prayers are similar in acknowledging God as the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth, asking God to help us through our lives and to help keep us from evil. But, for me, it assured me that Islam wasn't far off from what I was reared to believe in (at least, on some

level), which made me happy that I decided to enroll in the course and excited for what was to come.

Each week, we were assigned *sūrah*s to read alongside assigned book chapters. Admittedly, I saw the Qur'an compilation as wholly insane and hard to follow at this point. I was often dumbstruck at trying to make sense of what I was reading and would neglect it in favor of the book chapters. Even with the book chapters, I was frustrated because they came from non-Muslim authors who used the historical-critical method. To understand a religious text, engaging scholarship with authors who profess to believe in that faith is fundamental to understanding what that faith means to those who practice said faith. Learning about a new religion from scholars who had no stake in Islam beyond academic interests didn't feel right.

Yet this week, we were assigned two chapters from Fazlur Rahman's *Major Themes of the Qur'an*: "God" and "Man in Society." Reading the chapter about God gave me a rush of excitement I hadn't experienced before when reading a theological text from a scholar. One quote that I fell in love with is as follows:

> God's existence can, however, be brought home to those who care to reflect so that it not only ceases to be an "irrational" or "unreasonable" belief but becomes *the Master-Truth*. This is the task of the Qur'an: if the task is accomplished, everything has been accomplished; if not, nothing whatever has been achieved.[6]

This quote is fantastic because it asserts that the Qur'an is a text that presumes that God already exists. The fact that God is a reality is never questioned since God is reality itself. Unlike those who may consider the idea of belief in God or religion to be "irrational," what is actually "irrational" is rejecting that God exists at all! Going through the chapter, I finally got the gist of what kind of text the Qur'an was: a text that calls human beings to believe, reflect, worship, and act as if they know how God is intimately involved in the lives of human beings. This point was

[6] Rahman, "God", 2.

further emphasized during my professor's lecture when he showed verses about God's relationship to humanity:

> "We created the heavens and the earth and what is between them in six days, and no fatigue touched us" (Q 50:38)
>
> "It is He who created you from a single soul" (Q 7:189)

Between these two verses, the professor noted, "Compare Genesis 2.2: "On the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done." Amazingly, the Qur'anic verse here seems to be fully aware of the Genesis account, almost as if the verse intended to correct a lost conception of God. Other slides had verses that spoke about God being distinct from his Creation:

> "Say: 'He is God, the One (*aḥad*)'" (Q 112:1-2)
>
> "God has no offspring, and there is no god beside Him.
> For [had this been the case,] then each god would have taken away
> what he created,
> and some of them would surely have risen up against others" (Q
> 23:91)

The first verse has a radical simplicity that exemplifies *tawḥīd*. It's not just saying, "I believe in God," but saying, "I believe in a radically monotheistic God that has always existed and will forever exist." The second verse was provocative to me, which would continue when the Qur'an mentioned the idea of God having offspring or Jesus being God's son. Verses were also shown displaying God's Omniscience:

> "Knower of the unseen and the seen" (Q 13:9)
>
> "Indeed, We created the human being, and We know what his soul whispers to him.
> And We are nearer to him than his jugular vein" (Q 50:16)
>
> "With Him are the keys of the unseen.
> None knows them but He.
> And He knows what is on land and sea.
> No leaf falls except He knows it.

> Nor is there any seed in the dark recesses of the earth,
> nor anything moist or dry,
> except that it is in a clear book" (Q 6:59)

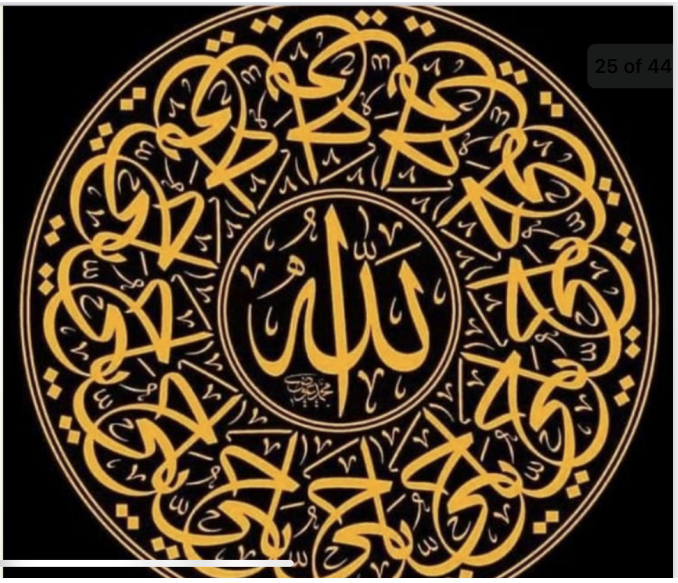
These verses depict how God not only knows all aspects of His creation, He is forever active in the lives of human beings. The God of the Qur'an is not a god who is disinterested in His creation, nor is He a god who created the Earth and left us to our own devices. This God loves, cares about His creation, and wants us to believe He is always there, even though He is Unseen.

Moving along in his presentation, the professor showed slides addressed the Qur'anic verses mentioning *shirk*, attributing partners to God, which reminded me of parts of the Hebrew Bible where God chastises the ancient Israelites for worshipping Canaanite gods or God declaring He is better than the other gods. However, the difference between the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an is that the ancient Israelite religion was initially henotheistic, a belief in one God without disregarding the existence of other Gods. The God of the Qur'an vehemently asserts that other gods do not exist, and those who worship these gods are praying out of their desires and confusion. The highlight of the Professor's presentation, however, was the calligraphy shown alongside these Qur'anic verses[7]:

[7] Permission to use from Dr. Mohsen Goudarzi

O Living One!

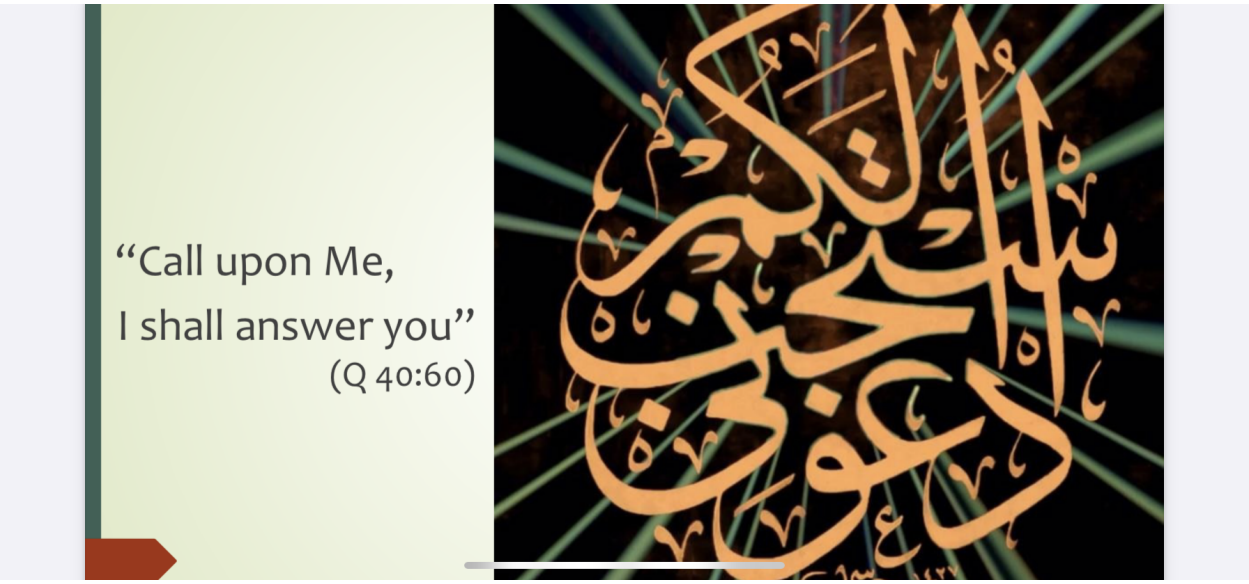
(Q 40:65, etc.)



"He has power over everything"

(Q 2:20, etc.)







I remember sitting in the Braun Room of Swartz Hall at Harvard Divinity School, silently thrilled at witnessing the calligraphy. The calligraphy brought the verses to life, which genuinely attempts to captivate the divinity of the verses themselves. However, it is essential to mention that without the English translations, the aesthetic beauty of the calligraphy art failed to merge with the conceptual beauty of the verses.

Engaging with Muslim Classmates

During the section, I would have opportunities to get to know some of my classmates and their thoughts more intimately than in the lecture space. A few of my classmates were converts to Islam and told their stories about their choice to convert. My few references to conversion were knowledge of higher forces within society either forcing people to convert to their religion or spreading their faith through Missionary work. I often heard of instances where people would convert to a religion to marry another person. But I had seldom heard of someone who had converted to another religion by coming to believe in that faith. One student, born into a Catholic family in New York, converted to Islam when he was ten. Another student, whose family was initially Christian, converted to Reform Judaism when she was young. Even though she attended a Jewish seminary, she converted to Islam after living in Palestine for a year. I was stunned at how these two decided to alter their identity in such a way. Sure, they came to convert to Islam, but what ultimately made them convert? What made them think, "Yes, I am converting to Islam, without a doubt?"

I had known a few born Muslims at Harvard Divinity School, both in and outside the Qur'an course. I started asking them more questions about their faith, which brought some surprises. For one thing, most of them seldom knew about Christianity or the Christian Bible. And not only did they not know anything about Christianity, but they were also unaware that the Qur'an shares similar prophetic stories with the Bible. Since this class highlighted numerous comparisons between Christianity and Islam, it made me wonder: How can someone understand the Qur'an without the Christian context I had? Yet talking with them, they expressed frustration with our section leader's pedagogy. Many felt our section leader was "secularizing" the Qur'an or expressing Modernist views about scripture. After witnessing this, I realized their frustrations are similar to many Christians encountering secular, academic conceptions of Christianity. The

traditional theology that those born into the religion were reared to believe in was seldom taught in an academic setting. These observations aside, I felt a theological kinship with the converts and Born Muslims. When I mustered the courage to express my unbelief in the Trinity, one of my friends said, “Okay?” implying what I just said was evident without explanation. Another friend, who knew I did not believe in the Trinity, asked me what I thought about Jesus. I said that I thought that Jesus was the greatest example of a human being, to which he replied, “Oh, that sounds a lot like what we think about him!” He did not know it then, but his comment relieved me and made me realize that my conception of God fits much more with Muslims than any Christian.

Deciding to Convert

I remember walking home with a Muslim friend who asked me, “Have you considered converting to Islam? You’ve been hanging out with many Muslims lately.” I impulsively said, “Yes,” and I was then shocked at how something like that came out of my mouth, which I had not even admitted to myself yet. That made him very excited, and he encouraged me to convert. I told him, “Even if I convert to Islam, I am going to have beliefs about Islam that the vast majority of Muslims don’t believe!” He replied, “I mean, you already believe in what most Christians don’t believe.” This made a lot of sense to me! He was right! Why stay in a religion where I do not believe in most of its theological convictions? Does not another religion exist that completely aligns with my conception of God? What would be the point of staying in Christianity when I have found something better? This moment with my friend reminded me of the Qur’anic verses similar to this one:

> And when it is said to them, "Follow what God has revealed," they say, "Rather, we will follow that which we found our fathers doing." Even though their fathers understood nothing, nor were they guided? (Q 2:170)

Verses where the Qur'an notes that the Early Meccans only worshiped their gods because it has been in their culture rather than genuine conviction always made me reflect on my life. It is one thing if I was born into a Christian family, but I have to believe in Christianity to call myself a Christian. I thought that if I stayed a Christian, I would just commit the same error some of the Early Meccans committed. I would be a Christian for convenience, not out of true belief. And there is no reason to die in a religion you do not believe in.

Sitting on my couch late at night, I thought, "I'm converting to Islam!" It felt so relieving. At that moment, I did not care what others thought about Islam or the repercussions of conversion. It didn't matter to me that I decided to join a religious minority within my country. And above all, I certainly did not care what my family or friends thought. In my case, It was about being honest with myself and my creator. I couldn't explain why, but the Qur'an is from God! The God that I've always believed in! The God who created the Heavens and the Earth and everything in between. Not converting to Islam would have been a crime against accepting who I am, and once I came to believe that the Qur'an is divine, not submitting to that belief would have caused me more sorrow and grief than I could imagine. So, I asked a friend to help me with my *shahādah*, the Islamic declaration of faith and decided to deal with whatever challenges come with accepting Islam.

On Death and the Afterlife

Three months after I converted to Islam, my grandmother passed away. She was 91, and before her death, she slowly succumbed to dementia. For a woman born in 1930, she was incredibly

sharp and could recall events she went through as a child. Growing up around her, she would tell me stories about the world back then, and I was amazed at how the world had changed so much in her lifetime. During her 80s, probably feeling like she was at the end of her life, she would tell me all the time not to worry about her if something were to happen to her, saying things like "I've had a good life" or "Don't worry about whatever happens to me." I hated when she would say these things and, much to her amusement, would instantly change the subject and say, "Don't talk like that, grandma, you'll live past 100!" Even when she had health flair-ups or surgeries, I figured she would pull through, given how healthy and sharp she was.

Yet, in the end, dementia took its toll. In the last years of her life, she lost her hearing without hearing aids. Her short and long-term memory capability withered away, her ability to speak fluidly was gone, and she could barely recognize family members at first glance (although she always recognized me). I remember being frustrated during this period of her life. She slowly became unrecognizable, a shell of her former self. I often mourned seeing her in such a pitiful state and slowly realized that she would never "bounce back" as she did so many times before. The last time I saw her, she lived in an assisted-living home. She smiled at my face, then went into an almost trance state as if I was not even there. My Mom kept talking to her to help her recognize her situation while I sat there irritated, as if it was pointless. But suddenly, my grandmother was shocked back into a moment of lucidity, recognizing the two of us. It was a great moment, knowing that she was herself deep down.

When I got the call from my father about her death, I felt an immense loss. Almost as if a piece of myself died along with her. She had been admitted to the hospital for a UTI, but the infection was too much for her weakened immune system as she kept losing weight in the hospital. Looking at her during the wake, I felt a strange sense of closure. The embalmers did a

great job with her body, but it was just her body, not her. I thought, “Yup, she’s gone.” and moved out of the way for my other family members to say their goodbyes. And the next day, my family felt immense sadness and grief during the funeral. Yet at the same time, their anguish revealed their anxieties surrounding the seemingly unknowable reality of death.

One summer during my childhood, I attended a week-long overnight camp called SpringHill in Evart, Michigan. A selling point of the program is that no electronics are allowed nor spending money in order to encourage kids to interact with others. I remember being anxious about being overnight and away from home, but I wanted to try something new and get out of my comfort zone. When I first arrived at Spring Hill, I was shocked at how religious-centered the camp organization was! I had never been exposed to white evangelical Christianity before Middle School, so I was taken aback at how all of these evangelical white kids instantly surrounded me in a religious culture that was extremely foreign to me. Sure, I was reared in a majority-white denomination (Lutheran Missouri-Synod), but my congregation was majority-Black, and my pastor was Latino. But really, White evangelical culture is more than just the fact of being majority White. It is an exclusionary, idyllic form of Christianity that is a form of a Christian culture that is intrinsically embedded with American whiteness that excludes others.

Throughout the camp experience, I mostly hung out with the camp instructors and had religious conversations with them. I felt isolated from most white kids, but the instructor was very kind and loved engaging with my questions about God. The only kid I somewhat hung out with was a kid with Down syndrome whom the others used to laugh at or avoid. I recall feeling angry at how the others would laugh when he did something or when he would have an outburst, which was contrary to the Christian principles our camp counselors told us. And truth be told, I

oddly felt a sense of kinship with this boy. We were isolated from the other campers, but I remember thinking, “What happens to people like him who don’t have the mental capacity to accept Jesus?” I could tell that most of these others had this Christian conviction that I did not have, which made me very concerned that I did not love God enough and that my fate after I died was “up in the air.” The uncertainty involving his salvation strangely coincided with my own, so it weirdly gave me a sense of not feeling alone!

On the last day before our parents came to take us home, the campers and camp instructors had a huge bonfire that led to campers asking questions about salvation and the afterlife. One student asked, “If Hitler accepted Jesus Christ on his deathbed, would he go to Heaven?” The camp counselor responded, “Yes if he genuinely believed that Jesus Christ was his savior, he would enter Heaven.” This unsettled me! Are you telling me someone who has committed as many atrocities as Hitler can just go to Heaven? That having faith alone would save someone from Hell as opposed to someone who does not have faith yet is still a good person? When I heard this, I essentially heard: “Hiram, your actions in this life do not matter because since you do not believe in Jesus, you are going to Hell anyway.” Another camper mentioned a book called *90 Minutes in Heaven*, an account of how Baptist preacher Don Piper went into Heaven for ninety minutes after being the victim of a bad car crash. He was pronounced dead at the scene of the accident. As soon as the camper mentioned this...I started to get scared. I remember visibly shaking out of immense fear and anxiety and couldn’t calm down. Fortunately, a camp instructor sat beside me and calmed me down after noticing how distraught I was.

Now you may be wondering, why would the reality of Heaven freak me out? The existence of an afterlife is a good thing! In the Gospels, there are many instances where Jesus

describes the kingdom of Heaven: It is a place where there are many mansions (John 14:2-3) and eternal life (John 4:14. A mustard seed that grows into the greatest of all shrubs (Mark 4: 30-32). Heaven is also where neither moth nor rust destroys material items (Matt 6:19). In his parables, Jesus compares the kingdom of Heaven to a man who sowed good seed in his field (Matthew 13:24-30), a king who made a marriage feast for his son (Luke 14:16-24), ten virgins who took their lamps to visit the bridegroom (Matthew 25: 1-13). Heaven is said to be a paradise that people can go to unless they adhere to specific requirements. And what are these requirements? Some are: Becoming like a child (Matthew 18:3), who does the will of his Father in Heaven (Matthew 7:21), those who are persecuted for righteousness sake (Matthew 5:10), and those who believe in him and also God (John 14:1-3). Therefore, Heaven is a part of God's promise of an afterlife for those who believe in Him and act virtuously. In Trinitarian Christianity, the main event which enacts God's promise is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, who died to redeem humanity from sin and death.

So, if this is the case, what if you do not buy into this message? Or hear God's message, yet choose to disbelieve or ignore its truth? Or, perhaps, completely denying the divinity of Christ altogether? Unbelief enacts another part of God's promise of an afterlife: Hell. Jesus alludes to Hell as the place of eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46), a blazing furnace where there is weeping and gnashing of the teeth (Matthew 13:10), a place where it is better to enter with your hand cut off than your entire body being thrown into hellfire (Mark 9:43), and a place where the entrance is wide and many enter (Matthew 7:13). My lack of belief in the Christian New Covenant also gave me a lack of conviction towards believing in the afterlife or anything outside this world. It was not as if I thought it was improbable or silly; I just didn't have enough conviction to believe that there was life beyond this one. Even if these verses were accurate and

revealed the truth about the kingdom of Heaven, the text alone could never give me the sincere belief I longed for. So, imagine suddenly hearing about someone who went to Heaven and returned to tell the tale!

The day afterward, my parents came to pick me up. I remember excitedly telling my parents about everything I had learned during the car ride home. In the following weeks, I attained a copy of *90 Minutes in Heaven* and was amazed at the account of what Piper had seen and experienced. He saw his deceased family members, friends, and former teachers. Some he barely remembered while alive, and some he remembered vividly. He saw a variety of ages, both old and young, and they were all excited at the idea of meeting him. He felt a sense of joy and happiness that was indescribable. He recalls his great-grandmother, who had osteoporosis on Earth, standing upright with a smile. In one chapter, he recalls hearing heavenly music and people praising God around him.

Interestingly, he did not hear any references to Jesus' death, considering them sad songs that were not needed in Heaven. Nor did he see God in an anthropomorphic sense. He comes across a pearly-glistened gate seeing a city paved with streets of gold (similar to the gate described in the Book of Revelation). Yet, as soon as he arrives at the gate, he finds himself regaining consciousness at the scene of the car crash. The EMT that accounted for him dead at the scene is amazed that he's alive and rushes him to the hospital. Initially, I was intrigued by Don Piper's account of going into Heaven and returning to Earth. However, one thing that brought skepticism is that he encountered neither Jesus nor God during his supposed time in Heaven. I figured that the first person a Christian would see in Heaven would be Jesus. Still, this account said otherwise. Piper's time in Heaven was cut short when he returned to life, leaving me unsatisfied and wanting more.

The Qur'an is well aware of how human beings think about the afterlife. In *sūrah al-qiyāmah*, after swearing by the Day of Resurrection, the Qur'an proclaims:

> "Does man think that We cannot [resurrect him and] bring his bones together again? Yea indeed, We are able to make whole his very fingertips!" (Q 75:2-3).

This *sūrah* reveals that since most human beings value life within the *dunyā* (material world), they give no thought to the afterlife until their reckoning. At the end of the surah, it is revealed; "Does man, then, think that he is to be left to himself to go about at will?" (Q 75:36). Saheeh International translates "go about at will" from Muhammad Asad's translation to "neglected," and both are translated from the Arabic word *suḍan*. Both translations reveal different human beings who deny the afterlife. To say "neglected" targets humans who believe in God yet are flimsy towards the belief in the fact of the resurrection. Using "to go about at will" makes sense to humans who think our souls wander aimlessly after death without a real destination or reckoning. Throughout the Qur'an, verses are revealed to command the Prophet to respond to Meccan critiques of the revelation:

> "And they say, 'There is not but our worldly life; we die and live and nothing destroys us except time." (Q 45:24)

> "And he (the non-believers) resents for Us an example (that death is the end of consciousness) and forgets his creation. He says, 'Who will give life to bones while they are disintegrated?" (Q 36:78)

> "But nay - they deem it strange that a warner should have come unto them from their own midst; and so these deniers of the truth are saying, "A strange thing is this! Why - [how could we be resurrected] after we have died and become mere dust? Such a return seems far-fetched indeed!" - (Q 50:2-3).

In pre-Islamic Mecca, Meccans believed in a polytheistic religion that lacked any mythology or creation stories attached to them. Despite knowing about the previous prophets like Jesus and Moses, the Meccan religion did not have a concept of an afterlife, nor did the Meccans themselves care about what happened to them after death. Often, traditional exegetes write from

the perspective that the Qur'an considers these critiques laughable or illogical. I think the fact that the Qur'an addresses critiques similar to the verses mentioned displays that the Qur'an considers its listeners capable of rational thinking and deeply considers their comments. From the Qur'an's perspective, it is only being sent down to remind those of what their *fiṭrah* is telling them what the truth is. Yet, these verses are more than addressing the Meccans within their historical context. Meccan's takes on the Qur'anic message accurately reflect how many Americans conceive of a life beyond this one in American post-Modernity.

Other instances made me think about the afterlife. In 2014, my classmate, Paige Stalker, was killed when a gunman opened fire on a car she was in at the Detroit-Grosse Pointe Park border. My high school community was utterly devastated. She was a fantastic student who always got top grades; everyone could attest to her intelligence. She was even my sister's tutor in middle school; they had a great relationship. I was also really shaken by her death. I heard about it through social media during the night of the shooting and woke up to tell my parents. I remember the funeral: the main funeral room was packed, and I was escorted to another room to see the service being streamed on television (which was also full). Everyone around me was devastated and filled with anguish. Another death in my senior year occurred abruptly. My classmate's father was shot dead at a stoplight when someone tried to mug his car. I did not find out until the next day I was in class. It was tragic because my classmate's family was well-known in the community, and my classmate had siblings in our school's middle school program. His father's funeral rang the same: everyone was devastated while the pastor consoled the family. And for the rest of the year, my classmate struggled daily to engage with my other classmates, not knowing how to interact with him after what had happened.

These two deaths were a wake-up- call for me that death is a reality everyone must face. But what fascinated me, amid all of this, was the reaction from others during the funerals. Most of these families come from strong Christian backgrounds. They went to church consistently, went to Bible study, threw their kids into YoungLife programs, and donated to their worship spaces. It looked like everyone at these funerals had no idea where they would go when they died. The pastor tried his best to console Paige, and my classmate's father's family, but neither they nor anyone at the funeral seemed convinced about where she was after death. These are just two examples, but Christian funerals tend to emit similar feelings. It does not matter if it is a Black Church or a White Evangelical church; American Christian funerals tend to reveal that many within the American context struggle to believe in something unknowable or materialistically unattainable. I doubt that most people think about death consistently until significant instances in people's lives. But I thought about death all the time.

Even though the Qur'an assures one of an afterlife, how would we look within this afterlife? The Qur'an reveals: "We will raise you into a form of which you have not the slightest knowledge" (Q 56:62). The Qur'an assures humankind that not only the day of resurrection is a reality but also acknowledges that the afterlife is unknowable to human beings. Saying that the first and second creations will be identical shows the gaps between what humans know and what God knows. From a Qur'anic view, our resurrected form is like our birth, being entered into a new reality that we have no understanding or awareness of until that day comes. But the Qur'an provides how human beings would react within the afterlife:

> "Some faces will on that Day be bright with happiness, looking up to their Sustainer; and some faces will on that Day be overcast with despair, knowing that a crushing calamity is about to befall them" (Q 75:22–25).

This contrast in the Qur'an reveals that humans (and *jinn*) will finally reach a point where the unknowable becomes knowable on the day of judgment. The anxiety that human beings feel about the uncertainty of death would finally be alleviated, replaced with either knowable delight or despair. Those who have been admitted into Paradise act as if they have been expecting it due to their God-consciousness, but those who have been sentenced to damnation are also not shocked, almost as if the day of resurrection is a reminder of what they used to deny or fail to listen to.

> "By the fig and the olive, and the Mount Sinai, and this land secure! We indeed created Man in the fairest stature, then We restored him the lowest of the low save those who believe, and do righteous deeds; they shall have a wage unfailing. What then shall cry thee lies as to the Doom? Is not God the justest of judges?" (Q 95)

sūrah at-Tīn, like the other *sūrahs,* is the only thing that gives me true conviction in the afterlife. When I read this *sūrah*, I am reminded of my creation. Once, I was nothing, then I was giving life, and eventually, I will be in the same state that I witnessed my grandmother in. But since God exists, and God is Just, I have no reason to fear the unknowable. What I do fear, however, is how some may never feel my conviction. Many people will forever walk in darkness, worrying about how things will end. It does not matter if it was untimely deaths like Paige and my classmate's father or deaths from long-lived lives like my grandmother; people still fear their deaths as the ultimate. I was relieved when I listened to my grandmothers' Eulogy and witnessed how the Pastor's words soothed my family and the congregation.

> "Indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Sabians—those who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness—will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve." (Q 2:62)

Although I am now Muslim, I finally believe in the Gospel's message through the Qur'an. There is an afterlife, God's promise is true, and my grandmother is alive.

Conclusion

A year or so after conversion, I better understand why I came to believe in Islam. In hindsight, it comes down to the nature of revelation within Christianity and Islam. In the case of Christianity, belief is based on oral tradition narratives within the Bible, allegedly written by "divinely inspired" authors that are primarily unnamed. I did not attain conviction because I do not know who the person was relating the story to, how they came to know the story's contents, or their true purposes for writing it. This is especially true about the Gospels since all four Gospels have a different conception of Jesus with different goals of each author. The Qur'an is written in a first-person, divine voice speaking directly to the Prophet, eliminating the confusion involving multiple authors. Either the text is not from God, and Muhammad made it up, or it is a revelation from God for the Prophet to proclaim to all humankind. Being Muslim has also given me a better appreciation for Jesus and the Gospels. I had always been skeptical about the miracles of Jesus and wondered if he did such miracles or not. But verses such as this one are very clear about the works of Jesus:

> "And [make him] a messenger to the Children of Israel, [who will say], "Indeed I have come to you with a sign from your Lord in that I design for you from clay [that which is] like the form of a bird, then I breathe into it and it becomes a bird by permission of God. And I cure the blind [from birth] and the leper, and I give life to the dead - by permission of God. And I inform you of what you eat and what you store in your houses." "Indeed in that is a sign for you, if you are believers." (Q 3:49)

Instead of Jesus being the incarnation of God, Jesus was merely a human being who God commanded to be a prophet. Finally, I am liberated from worshipping Jesus. I do not have to endure confusing sermons that feel obligated to assert Jesus' divinity. I am no longer bound to confusing verses about the nature of Christ. Even the entire event of the Crucifixion of Jesus is questioned within Islamic theology, which I greatly appreciate. The one moment that always puzzled and frustrated me is now merely a side note within the main goals of the Qur'an. In the

grand scheme of things, the crucifixion of Jesus does not matter. Jesus did not die for one's sins. Only God alone can redeem humans from sin; a redemptive sacrifice is not required for salvation. Instead of being affiliated with a religion that claims to follow Jesus, I am now a follower of the true religion that Jesus believed in. *Alhamdulillah,* for Islam, a religion where I have come to love Jesus much more than I ever loved the Jesus of Christianity.