A Muslim's Non-Conversion Story

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I come to this writing with humble sentiments: what can I possibly contribute to an academic discussion on the process by which Mennonites become ex-Mennonites? I do fit this discussion, because, yes, I grew up as a Mennonite and yes, I am now a Muslim. For me to write this piece is somewhat akin to coming home, in part because I perceive that I'm on familiar ground, and that this is a safe space. And in this safe space, I've been asked to talk about my journey away from the Mennonite community. This dubious position makes me feel somewhat awkward and rather vulnerable. How much do you want to hear? I expect that you'd like to hear what happened and why: how is it that I am now a Muslim?

Ever since a significant day in November 1988 when I pronounced the *shahada* in the presence of my husband, I have identified as a Muslim. We were living in Fort Chipewyan, Alberta; I was 33, teaching in Athabasca Delta Community School; our first child was almost a year old. I jokingly tell my son that he's been a Muslim longer than I.

If someone directly asks me, "Are you a convert?" I will say yes, but I've never really thought of myself as a convert. The term

"conversion", in its Latin roots, literally means "turning round," and the Greek *metanoia* is a transformative change of heart. Conversion to Christianity demands repentance from sin and taking a new direction in life. Islam teaches that every child is naturally inclined to goodness and to worship the one true God alone. It teaches that everyone is born a Muslim, so when someone accepts Islam she or he is considered to revert to their original condition. Though I don't like the label of "revert" either, the term helps theoretically, in that we are all born upon *fitrah*, that is, have an innate nature and the revert is one who has returned to the original state. I have no road-to-Damascus conversion story with a moment of enlightenment nor have I had a wholesale reversal of belief. I do have a story of change and transformation.

When telling a story, we generally begin at the beginning and go to the end. If we've followed one path, it means we trace our way back from the trailhead. But in life's tapestry, the interlacing of weft through the warp is rather complex.

I grew up in the Mennonite milieu, in an extended family of pastors and church leaders and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) volunteers, rooted in the family farm near Pleasant Point Mennonite Church in Saskatchewan. I grew up learning to work hard and cherish Anabaptist values, and always took my faith seriously.

Deciding what to do in my life became a journey with an emerging map. I joined my aunt in Miyazaki, Japan where I lived the pulse of missionary families for a year; then Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC) in Winnipeg helped me explore questions of the faith, religious traditions and ethnicity of our people. I remember wondering at our graduation about how many of the class would become congregational leaders and if I would be in their ranks. I myself seemed to be on the MCC trail – my brother Harry was a hard-core MCCer whom I visited in Jerusalem. So after degrees in theology, education and home economics, I finally became a home-ec (human ecology) teacher. In retrospect it seems a lot of back and forth, where essentially I learned to follow my nose and live on my own, yet from many different and distant places, I was still keeping closely connected to home and would seek out local Mennonite connections; on Sunday mornings you'd usually find me in church somewhere. These were the ties that would bind. And the bird would always fly home.

Mom and Dad gave unconditionally, were always there for me; I knew I could always come home to Saskatchewan skies and get recharged at the family farm. Then, the unanticipated: I married a man who did not fit the puzzle! There was no common ground. He

meant nothing to them. Everything imploded in our family. My parents couldn't fathom that their Mennonite daughter would throw herself away, they talked of me being brain-washed, a lamb led to the slaughter, everything around them crumbled. They pleaded that I come to my senses; I responded that my love for them had not waned. It was impossible for them to understand how this could happen. We all lost. It was an incredibly tragic chapter in the life of our tightly-knit Mennonite family.

By stepping off the trail, all the questions that had never been thought demanded consideration. Why did everyone think I was rejecting them? How could I be causing my parents such heartache? Could I keep all the people I loved in my circle? I was certainly sincere in my inner being, but the external responses to my decisions brought me to a spiritual conundrum.

We left. I could tell you stories about life at the University of Wisconsin and how I attended the Quakers' silent meetings in Madison, about dark days in Montreal and finding a spiritual home at the Mennonite church's Maison de l'Amitié. But it was only when we moved to Fort Chipewyan, far from the beaten track, that a sense of ease and comfort in solitude opened a new space in our hearts. My husband, Muzaffar, often refers fondly to the "Fort Chip" time – it was working on him too, we were both growing spiritually. It was a time and place of inner nurture for our small family. When we moved north, our son, Basit, was nine months old. The name Basit means "one who enlarges" or "he who extends the horizon" and this was true – he enlarged our hearts. *Alhamdullilah*. We named our second child Noor, Arabic for "light"; true to her name, she brought light to our hearts.

From Fort Chipewyan, I mailed a letter with great trepidation on January 7, 1990, praying that it would be received in the spirit in which it was written.

> Dear Mom and Dad, sisters and brothers,
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> Some time ago I became a Muslim. You will have questions. I want to put down on paper what I believe with the hope that it will clarify some things for you.
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> Becoming a Muslim requires that a person declare two things: 1) that there is no god but God; and 2) that Muhammad is a prophet of God. This was a simple matter because I already believed in one God and cannot disagree that Muhammad was a prophet.
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> I believe that God is the Creator and Sustainer of the world and the whole universe displays God's unity and majesty. God gives guidance and shows the right path to whomever chooses to follow. Our paths are not necessarily the same. Each of us is unique and our relationships with God are similarly unique. We are responsible for our choices along

the path we have taken and, in the end, no one else can answer for us. Though we may guide each other and teach our children, faith remains an individual matter.

The word "Islam" means 'submission' and a Muslim is one who submits to God's will. The Qur'an states that nothing in creation has been made without a purpose and that humanity's purpose is service to God. In my understanding, being a Christian and being a Muslim have the same purpose; both call for a dedication to live a life of devotion and righteousness.

In Islam, there are five pillars of faith which help a believer to grow spiritually. The first is the testimony of faith: that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His prophet. The second is regular prayer; five daily prayers are prescribed with a specific format. I have already found the regular prayer helps to keep my thoughts and priorities focused throughout the day. The third is the giving of alms, sharing what we have. Fourth is fasting during the month of Ramadan and fifth is the pilgrimage to Makkah once in our lifetime.

Altogether, Jews, Christians and Muslims have a continuous tradition of guidance from God, especially as revealed in their scriptures. All share a basic belief in angels, the prophets, the revealed books and the Last Day. Historically, the Jews did not accept Jesus as God's messenger; similarly both Jews and Christians have not acknowledged Muhammad as a prophet. In Islam, the line of prophets extends from Adam to Noah to Abraham to Moses, Jesus and Muhammad who is the last prophet entrusted with the mission of guiding the whole mankind. A Muslim believes in all the prophets and the books revealed to them. In the Qur'an, Christians and Jews are called "people of the Book." All prophets have come with the same message. I see becoming a Muslim as an expansion of my faith, as building upon the Christian tradition in which I was raised.

In 1972, at seventeen years of age, I was baptized upon my confession of faith at Hanley Mennonite Church. Despite my many questions at the time, particularly about the idea of 'being saved,' I was encouraged to participate actively in the church and keep working through my issues. My experience at Rosthern Junior College, CMBC, summer camps and Bible schools, the many different church groups in which I have participated across the country and in different parts of the world – all have been enriching and I am thankful for them. I was a staunch member of the Mennonite church, and appreciated especially the strength of the community of believers, the styles of worship, the theological positions on stewardship and nonviolence. Many experiences, the cross-cultural ones in particular, opened my eyes to the world beyond the Mennonite realm, and I have gained appreciation for the ways other people live and believe. I also found myself becoming more critical of missionary activity and ethnocentric attitudes in myself and groups with whom I associated.

When Muzaffar and I met, we connected on a spiritual level and after five and a half years of marriage, that spiritual connection is growing stronger and deeper.

Naturally you wonder: what do I believe about Jesus? My confession of faith at baptism was that Jesus, God's son, died for my sins and I was thereby redeemed and offered salvation by God's grace. I was firm in my belief about God's grace but always uncomfortable with the language about 'being saved.' The idea of original sin – that God created us with a sinful nature which we chose to follow and then from which we had to be saved, and that God, in human form, then had to die to save us – all this seems contrary to the all-powerful, gracious, loving nature of God. I've also never understood the idea of trinity. Historical controversies within the church, debates over how Jesus could be human and divine at the same time and other such issues – these are far from the message that Jesus brought.

I believe that Jesus, like all other prophets, came with a clear and powerful message from God to show us the right path – the path that guides us on the earth and that leads to salvation and God's grace on the Day of Judgment.

I know you will remember that once I told you, in answer to your questions, Mom, that "I was not going to become a Muslim." It is true. I had no intention. I saw it as something foreign to me. Only after study, meditation and exposure to people who were Muslims did I gain serious appreciation and understanding of Islam. God works in mysterious ways and through the heart which is the seat of spiritual consciousness. My heart was always closed until suddenly it was open.

On the Last Day, no one can take responsibility for anyone else; each will be judged according to his or her deeds. God created us, He guides us and has allowed us the gift of free will to choose between the path that leads to Him and that which leads us astray.

I sincerely hope that this letter will help you to understand, at least in part, the path I have chosen. We plan to be in Saskatoon for the next eight months until we move to Pakistan. I pray that our differences may not divide us but that we may meet each other in mutual acceptance and our relationships may continue to grow.

Love, Elma
December 1989

That letter was written twenty-five years ago; at this point in time, it stirs memories, seems rather simplistic, yet is still cause for deep reflection. Things have not always been clear. In sorting out what kind of sojourner I am in this world, it has been helpful to think about identity, about affiliations, about agency…How is it to transition from Mennonite to Muslim?

If we're just talking about cultural identity and ethnicity, it's easy to live with an eclectic lifestyle. It has meant that my children grew up speaking German and Urdu, hearing Punjabi and Platt Deutsch, eating *Rollkuchen* and *Piroshki* as well as *roti* and *ma'moul* and *samosas*. In the nine years we lived in Pakistan, I made jam with mangoes, *Pluma Moos* with local fruit and sewed my own *shalwar kameez*. I felt honoured as a warmly-accepted, dear

daughter-in-law and we lived as family with a far-reaching network of relatives.

Living at intersections does not imply suspension of faith, or dissociation from tradition or the significant impacts of heritage. We could say that my children live as Muslims with a strong Mennonite background. They've learned to negotiate their way in diverse circles and along many forks in the road. They are comfortable at intersections. And they have a deep sense of nuance. It's often difficult for others to place them, because they don't neatly fit into a box. Integral to all this is the fact that maintained relationships sustain identity – our family ties were not broken; despite despairing difficulties on all fronts, time has had its healing quality and we have certainly matured.

On my path, I've continued to draw on a strong foundation, gained more understanding of theological subtleties, extending concepts of faith and networks with people, linking to the past and the future. I can look back to CMBC, where I wrote a paper on the theology of farming to examine the connections of faith and living close to the land, values that were rooted in my childhood. Now, as a program specialist in Edmonton Public Schools, I'm involved in the development of a naturescape at our school wherein I understand the conceptual framework built in Doc Schroeder's classes, which made enduring theological understandings that connect ecological thinking for me, forty years later.

Is it possible to be a Muslim Mennonite? Or a Mennonite Muslim? Hardly. It seems possible to be a secular Mennonite, and there are certainly secular Muslims, but what does that mean? To what extent does being secular trivialize faith? Beyond the cultural embodiment and our ethnicities, what can we say about the essential yearnings of being an authentic person?

I've learned how much Mennonites and Muslims have in common. They believe in God. They dress modestly, don't drink, value family, gather in community, carry a sense of stewardship, understand paradox, do good works… I realize these generalizations are certainly not black and white, nor do they make any sense in a postmodern context for either group, yet, from personal experience in my younger years, I know that women and men did not sit together in our church, there was no alcohol in our home, wedding dances were circle games.

There are layers of faith within cultural identities; some layers are definitive, some layers are so subtle we may miss seeing them. We cannot generalize that all of us operate in the same paradigm. If we engage in interfaith relationships, we have to start somewhere, at one layer, and be clear about the layer we see. And the

continuous encounters with different people take myriad directions; it is the authenticity of the encounter that counts. It means we have to listen to one another. How do we then live so that differences do not divide us, so we don't lose each other?

I'd like to share with you the prayer of the fifteen century Persian poet and scholar, 'Abd al-Rahman Jami, who died in 1492, during the same times when Anabaptist forerunners questioned the current ways of living and believing. 'Abd al-Rahman Jami wrote this meditation on the constant supplications of Prophet Mohammad:

> O God, deliver us from the preoccupation with worldly vanities, and show us the nature of things. Remove from our eyes the veil of ignorance, and show us things as they really are....Make this phenomenal world the mirror to reflect the manifestation of Thy beauty, not a veil to separate and repel us from Thee. Cause these unreal phenomena of the Universe to be for us the source of knowledge and insight, not the causes of ignorance and blindness. Our alienation and severance from Thy beauty all proceed from ourselves. Deliver us from ourselves, and accord to us intimate knowledge of Thee.[1]

In 1923 when a refugee train pulled out of a station in Lithuania, where a young mother had just died of typhus, her new-born traveled on to unknown destinations in western Canada. My dear mother has said that there was a reason that she survived. She looks back and marvels. I cherish her story, because it speaks of hope and new horizons, enduring understandings and having faith. Marveling at where we stand today, I recognize her story as part of my story. Deeply-rooted, profoundly internalized, journeying on and on into greater maturity: this is a story of transformations.

Notes

[1] Found in Muzzaffar Iqbal, "What makes Islamic Science Islamic?", *Meta* Listserv, post #112 (June 18, 1999), http://ncse.com/book/export/html/3152, accessed October 2, 2014.