

ACCEPTED ISLAM RECENTLY-WHAT NOW?

In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

If you have accepted Islam within the last two years, you are probably experiencing either a sense of calm or anxiety mixed with many questions. We realize that converting to a new religion can be very emotional and even traumatic. One of the best ways to cover what you can expect moving forward is to read other new Muslim encounters. Here are some actual life experiences. Per the request of the individual, we have omitted the contact information. Through the Mentor search of MyC2i you will be able to connect with many of these Muslim mentors. It is imperative that you establish connectivity with at least one mentor through MyC2i.org, preferably more, AS SOON AS POSSIBLE, so that you have the social support and a circle of friends you need to pass through this important and challenging phase of your life!

Ethnicity: Caucasian
Age at Accepting Islam: 36
Gender: Female

Who you are, and what were you before accepting Islam?

Currently I am co-owner and co-founder of an Islamic, multi-media, educational company and write/perform/produce audio and video products for Muslim children.

At the time I first met Muslims and was introduced to Islam, I was performing professionally in New York City as a concert and opera singer. I had shown musical abilities as a small child and began performing professionally at the age of eight. I sang, played piano and pursued my interests in the fine arts all through elementary and secondary schooling. I studied music in college and received a Bachelor of Music degree in vocal performance. Following college, I began to "earn my dues," singing with local amateur choral groups and symphony orchestras, later accepting intern positions with renowned opera companies in their summer festivals and, what would give me great insight later on, performing as "church choir soloist" with many different Christian churches and Jewish synagogues in various major cities throughout the U.S. Music became my passion, and I considered it a high form of worship. I believed God had given me a talent, and I worshipped Him through that talent, often singing the many forms of music with religious themes that are found in the concert genre.

In addition to my passion for music, I was always fascinated with human psychology and sociology. The study of people and their behavior was a natural way to find characterizations for my performances.

What could the Muslim community or individual Muslims have done better/differently before, during and after your acceptance of Islam?

After converting to Islam I moved back to live in my hometown in Wisconsin. To my delight and surprise there was a small, somewhat liberal Muslim community practically in my backyard. I was literally adopted and put to good use by the families there in a way that was very reciprocal and mutually beneficial. I never suffered from alienation or cold shoulders but rather was welcomed unconditionally and treated like family by all.

If there was an individual who was instrumental in your considering Islam, what were his/her attributes and characteristics that you liked most?

I was introduced to Islam by an Egyptian man I met in New York who opened a coffee shop in my neighborhood. I was pleasantly surprised by how polite and "old-fashioned" his manners were. He

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treated me with respectful interest each time I frequented his shop, and his attitude was refreshing and different compared to most of the men I encountered in New York City and elsewhere. As I progressed in my interest in Islam, many of his friends would stop by the shop to meet me. Their attitude toward me was the same; very polite, very respectful and very welcoming.

After embracing Islam and moving back to Wisconsin, I found in the Muslim community the most kind, hospitable and generous people I have ever met. I was welcomed into the community, constantly invited for dinners at people's homes, encouraged to attend events at the mosque and given gifts by everyone I met. One family in particular made me part of their family. Throughout my years with them, no one ever pushed me to do anything or criticized my lack of knowledge. There was much loving advice when I asked for it and a standing invitation open 24/7 should I ever need anything. I found many people in the small community like this.

How did you accept Islam?

After meeting in his coffee shop, the man from Egypt and I started talking about his homeland. How fascinating it was to learn about this incredible place first-hand! He mentioned he was a Muslim, and I was very ashamed to tell him I knew next to nothing about his religion. As he started to explain Islam to me, I was absolutely shocked! I expected stories about an idol-worshipping cult, not facts about monotheism and stories of the same prophets I knew from my upbringing as a Christian. We talked about Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. I was stunned. How could I not know that 1.5 billion people in the world believed very closely to Judaism and Christianity, my own belief system as well! This was rather big news to be so well hidden! I was fascinated and found myself coming back every day for more information.

What convinced you to join the religion of Islam, the true religion?

The more we talked, the more sense it made. I found him reading a beautifully bound book one day with exquisite letters of calligraphy. As an artist, my eyes were very drawn to it. This was the Holy Qur'an. I asked about it, hoping there was one in English, and he was quick to bring me a book of explanation the next day. The clear picture that emerged from the Holy Qur'an was this: God created the universe and placed man in it as His representative on the earth. He provided man with the knowledge that would help him through this life, which was filled with both trials and successes, and which would lead him one day to another life of extreme bliss. This knowledge was handed down to succeeding generations from the time of Adam either in the form of a written message or through a messenger or prophet. After awhile, people forgot this divine message. After various generations had drifted so far away from the original message or teachings, God would send another messenger or prophet, reminding the people how to return to their Creator. God had also created an adversary for man who would encourage man's belief in his own self-sufficiency. This adversary would appeal to the base natures of man, primarily his ego.

According to Islam, God's message and guidance to his creatures has never changed with regard to its core. The messages revealed over the course of human history to man from God, only differed in the language and capabilities of the people to understand. Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, may God's peace be upon them all, were some of the most important and influential of the messengers. Some of them were given the message in the form of a book, known to Muslims as the Torah of Moses, the Zabur of David, the Injeel or Gospel of Jesus, and the Holy Qur'an.

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God's message was often corrupted by man himself. Some were bold enough to change God's message by their own hands in order to suit themselves. Hence we have Jews, Christians and Muslims all professing to be children of Abraham, yet worshipping in opposition to one another, even within their own religious communities! The Qur'an reveals that God's message has always been the same. It is only people, out of arrogance, ego or ignorance, who have tried to change it.

I discovered a different "picture" of God in the Qur'an. He was not the old bearded man, so popular in drawings, judging us from afar, with an old message, not relevant to the people of the 21st century. God in the Qur'an is a Being the like of which we, with our limited human perceptions, cannot imagine. A Being capable of managing the entire universe yet aware of one small leaf falling from a tree. He is never in need of food or sleep; yet, He is aware of our most inner needs by being as close to us as our jugular vein. He is All-seeing and All-knowing of what was and of what is to be.

Also in the Qur'an, I found the greatest book of human psychology. Not only are humans perfectly described in all their weakness and fallibility, but there is also an incredible wealth of lessons with regard to matters of good conduct, particularly as related to the actions and behavior of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and his example.

How are you practicing the teachings of Islam?

After meeting Muslims and reading the Holy Qur'an, I sincerely chose Islam as my way of life. I try to apply as much practical advice and wisdom from the Qur'an and Sunnah (sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, with regard to religion) as I am able to throughout each and every day. I was particularly pleased to begin wearing the hijab (headscarf) as I believe it establishes my identity as a Muslim. I also chose to change my name. Both these issues prompt fellow Americans to ask questions, thus giving me an opportunity to share with them what I have discovered and come to believe in so strongly. Rather than preventing dialogue following 9/11, my scarf and name have encouraged it!

How are your relationships with your family after accepting Islam?

Most new Muslims say that their families perceive their acceptance of Islam as a passing fad. This even comes from families where the convert has always been a determined and strong individual, one not given to peer pressure or jumping from one thing to another! Many new Muslim women comment that major problems do not arise until they want or begin to dress modestly. This I hear across the board. In my situation, my mother (my only living parent at the time) "came around" after some time, particularly when she saw that Islam, rather than changing my character to something unpleasant and strange, had actually re-enforced all the good aspects and strengthened my attachment to her. I have only one older brother who has been opposed to Islam throughout. He found it strange and foreign, could not accept my "scarf," and asked not to have any further contact with me after my mother died. Unlike my mother who shared lively discussions with me about Islam and asked so many sincere questions, my brother never wanted to discuss my conversion or my new faith. I have to respect his wishes of course, but I still pray that he changes his mind one day.

How about your relationships with your previous friends in the society?

All but one friend slowly dissolved all communication. Most of my friends simply were not interested in hearing anything I had to say, felt that I was doing something "wrong," and were honestly afraid for me in terms of the Hereafter. As a new Muslim, with great faith but little knowledge of how to explain it,

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I also opted to close doors in some cases with friends who were just too argumentative. I have new friends (non-Muslims), however, that I have met since becoming a Muslim.

What is your advice to others who are contemplating embracing Islam?

The best way to understand Islam is simply to learn about it through the Holy Qur'an and other sources such as the *hadith* (sayings of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him). Many well-meaning Muslims will offer a lot of advice (welcome and not!). I have learned over the years that there is much discrepancy in how Muslims practice their faith, depending on their level of knowledge and culture. Typically, new Muslim classes offered at a mosque, led by the religious leader of the community or local scholar, are helpful. Learning about Islam in this way will offer you a better criterion to sift through what the many well-intentioned Muslims are telling you and what you are seeing yourself! At this point in time, we are very fortunate to have so many wonderful books available to us in English, including a number of explanations of the Qur'an.

Final Remarks

As a new Muslim prepare to be tested! Although it is usually so thrilling to embrace Islam, (and all new converts, Muslim or not, share a similar fervor), know that Allah will test you. Whether in your family, your new community or in your own psyche, there may well be periods of great stress. Islam DOES NOT promise a life of peace and contentment but a life of test! However, Islam gives you the tools to deal with the tests, and therein you will find your peace and contentment in this life and also the wherewithal to enjoy peace and contentment for eternity! The knowledge and grounding that Islam gives you is usually enough to carry you through this. **Also, strong friendships with Muslims or the Islamic community in your area can help a great deal.** You will know yourself better than anyone. For some, retreating to the "cave" to read and reflect is best, and for others, **a constant companion or social life with those who support your new decision may be the right move.** If there is a Muslim community in your area, go! Be active. Even if warm welcomes are not extended to you in some places, very few people can resist a smile and a pleasant comment over time. On the one hand, many new Muslims are treated like celebrities! Watch out, for this can be another type of test! You might be invited to the BOD of the mosque or immediately asked to be the local spokesperson for Islam (since your English is so good and your sincerity obvious!) On the other hand, you may be in a community of immigrants whose command of English is limited, who are unused to such things as converts and who are perhaps a bit suspicious! (After 9/11, anything goes!) Sometimes women converts go through the most trying times if the women in their community are not educated and speak little English and if the men come from a culture that does not approve of women in the mosque or any gender mixing.

Any other material

The entire point of Islam and being a Muslim is surrendering to Allah, being submissive to Him and His guidance. Know that all your past sins have been forgiven, and rejoice in that bit of news! Life with all its ups and downs is merely a test to see your gratefulness for Allah's favor and mercy and your patience and contentment with whatever He deals you. Life is short. The Hereafter is forever. Allah doesn't give you anything you can't handle, and if you walk in His path, even the nasty things that may happen to you are ultimately beneficial, though with our limited human comprehension that may be difficult to accept at the time. Act as if Allah is watching you at every moment, and treat people in the manner that you would wish to be treated AT ALL TIMES.

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Ethnicity: White American, Irish/Anglo Descent

Age: 34

Gender: Male

Who you are, and what were you before accepting Islam?

I was raised in a practicing Catholic family. I chose to stop practicing Catholicism when I was about 16. I believed in One God and that all religions are man-made. I thought most religions were started by prophetic figures, whose teachings were similar, but corrupted later on due to institutionalization. I remained a spiritual person.

What could the Muslim community or individual Muslims have done better/differently before, during and after your acceptance of Islam?

It is hard to say because the "Muslim Community" is not a monolith, and it is comprised of many diverse people. Among these are typically people who are immigrants and who carry a lot of baggage that is irrelevant to a convert. Converts don't always realize this either and often end up on a roller coaster, following this or that teaching, most of which is profoundly influenced by anti-colonialist movements. It might take awhile for a person to realize that, because much of this is irrelevant, s/he has been sidetracked from real Islam. Islam is not a movement. It is the reality. Everything is in a state of Islam to a degree; that is why the literal meaning of kufr is covering or denial. Therefore, the kaffir denies that his own self is in a state of submission, just as everything else around him. On this broader level, Islam is peace through submission to God and harmony that comes from acknowledging and surrendering to His natural order. This is deep and pervasive, and it has nothing to do with ethnicity, politics, or anti-colonialism. At this level, a lot of the superficial details that tend to be overemphasized become meaningless. The level to which immigrants and their natural sociological dispositions influence their manner of engaging new Muslims is a deep topic that I personally feel requires a lot more study. Doing so will help prepare us for the future of Islam in this country and its new cultural context.

If there was an individual who was instrumental in your considering Islam, what were his/her attributes and characteristics that you liked most?

I knew only one person, and we developed a friendship through our acquaintance at work over a period of about 9 months before I accepted Islam. He was 20 years older than I and also an American convert. He did not try to convert me and seemed quite surprised when I expressed interest in doing so. However, after I took shahada (testimony of faith) with him, our friendship deepened. We worked at night and had a lot of time to converse while we worked. He often asked me about what I was studying in college, and as we discussed things he would share stories about the Prophet and his companions. I think this is instructive because a good Muslim could always find a good example of something rooted in the Sunnah, and then share that in a manner that all audiences can relate to. I also enjoyed his stories about the lifestyle in Sudan, where he had migrated and lived for several years before returning to the US.

How did you accept Islam?

I was open minded and seeking. There are many anecdotes I can offer about this or that memory I have of the gradual process and the subtle tipping points along the way. Through a combination of my pre-existing beliefs, my friendship with a Muslim, the birth of my first child, and the realization that Islam

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was not a part-time religion, but a complete re-orientation of one's whole life around God – all of these things contributed.

What convinced you to join the religion of Islam, the true religion?

I think I have answered this already. You do not have to convince people of the truth. Truth just IS, whether a person acknowledges it or not. And after one accepts Islam, if you ever think you have “arrived,” then it continues to elude. I say this because I am convinced that Islam is NOT what a lot of Muslims think it is. It cannot be simply “practicing what we found our forefathers doing” since that is condemned in the Qur’an. I guess this is why Al-Fatiha (the first chapter of the Qur’an) contains the verse that means “Guide us along the Straight Way.” This is a dua’ that is made several times in each prayer. That means we cannot take our perceived handhold on the truth for granted. It must always be actively pursued.

How are you practicing the teachings of Islam?

I practice daily. I observe the major requirements and try to stay moderate within what is acceptable. I have become more wary of requirements and prohibitions that I think are more traditional or culturally determined than religiously legitimate. I think culture plays a much more significant role in this than I previously acknowledged. Some may perceive this attitude as a more “liberal” approach. But I think what is at the core of Islam is that I am accountable to God Almighty Alone. I am not accountable to what the people think.

How are your relationships with your family after accepting Islam?

At first, they expressed support because I could give them a name for my beliefs. They did not understand me during my period between Catholicism and Islam. Our relationship became strained when I became susceptible to religious extremism. (And I do mean religious, not political as the term is often misunderstood today). My extremism caused me to be anti-social toward them, and I refused to participate in important family functions on religious grounds. This created a lot of tension and disharmony. Now I am still working to repair the damage that this period in my life created.

How about your relationships with your previous friends in the society?

I moved around a lot and became immersed in the subculture of the Islamic centers. I am out of touch with my old friends.

What is your advice to others who are contemplating embracing Islam?

Well, I have a lot of advice, but for the most part, I expect that the individual will still have a lot to learn from experience. I think it is easy to fall into extremism on the grounds that promote a literalist understanding when we emphasize the “purity” of the religious sources. I admit that this is still important, but we make extraordinary claims about how everyone believes and practices the same things in Islam because of the Qur’an and Sunnah. As a new Muslim seeks to rectify the blatant contradictions between the ways of people and what is written, they can easily start to seek some illusory pure version of Islam that only a few saved people can grasp. I am speaking in general terms, because I think this can manifest under the names of many groups. The ethic of tolerance seems to be lost on us. So I would advise the person to go easy, to remain tolerant of differing views, to not sell out his own culture to fit in with any immigrant subculture under the pretense that the other is more “Islamic,” and to stick to the basics when things get too confusing – such as One God, Muhammad is the Prophet, the Qur’an is God’s word, Sunnah is the example, etc. Also, don’t lose sight of spirituality when being overwhelmed with learning the formalities.

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Final Remarks:

I am glad to contribute to this survey because I think this provides us with an opportunity to be introspective about our understanding of Islam and our example of Islam to others. There is much more to it than what I have written here. I do not think we will “win” much in the long term by taking the evangelical missionary approach. I think we should focus more on how our morals and service provide the right examples for others. When we are focused on converting others, we are out for self-preservation and offer very little in return. When we focus on living up to our own ideals, we will embody the true spirit of Islamic teachings, and this will naturally attract people. After all, Islam fulfills what people are instinctively seeking. We are also too easily distracted by the forms, and we fail to penetrate much further. Americans will seek Islam for spiritual fulfillment, not just a new way to pray in a tongue they do not yet understand. Spiritual/character needs are universal, and they will help people a lot more if they provide us with the bulk of our sermons and lectures, instead of political rants about the decline of Muslims or the latest instance of oppression. A seeker is looking for something he is missing. This is something he needs to align with and to improve himself through his recognition of the Creator. This is what will attract people, when we remind one another of how to be better while striving to live up to it.

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