

An open letter to a recent convert from Christianity to Islam

Dear _____,

2853 9.1.97
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Today I received by fax a copy of your 2.24.97 letter explaining, to your only living parent, your recent conversion to Islam, a religion in which you say "the intelligence dominates." I take that assertion as an opening to make some intelligence comments--whether or not you consider them intelligent--on your letter.

1 You've been working mainly in Muslim countries & know some of the languages, so I'm not surprised that you have been for some years predisposed toward positive impressions of Islam. One of my students, like you a PhD, became--on the same basis--predisposed toward Buddhism after considerable residence in Japan, & became a Buddhist. Sounds like geographical determinism, but isn't: I applaud any who try to affirm their neighbors within the limit of their own integrity, & believe God wants all human beings to find & affirm the best in each other (in Jesus' words, "Love your enemies" as well as your friends, which of course even goes beyond loving the stranger).

2 The lure of the exotic, I hope you will concede, is a factor, of whatever strength, in conversion to a religion/culture very different from one's own birth-&-nurture situation-in-life. Through the centuries, Christian missionaries have had to assess this factor in their converts--some of whom are mainly "new-culture Christians" (as multitudes in any culture are mainly "culture Christians," "culture Muslims," etc.).

3 A further "nontheological factor" is your long marriage to a Muslim. "Your God shall be my God" translates the last two Hebrew words in Ruth 1.16. Very often, the spouse whose religious conviction & praxis are weakened by neglect yields to the religion of the spouse whose religion is more inwardly, if not also outwardly, alive. You have long been an unfaithful Christian, unfaithful to Christian praxis & therefore also to Christian faith-convictions-beliefs.

4 In calling you an unfaithful Christian, I'm not insulting you! I'm making an intellectual, objective, statement. A faithful Christian prays 5x daily (a practice the early Muslims picked up from Christianity), attends Christian public worship weekly (if not more often), observes the Church Year (the Christian festivals--in our denomination, ours & our children's, the United Church of Christ [Congregational & Christian, Evangelical & Reformed]; our UCC CALENDAR includes also Jewish & Muslim Festivals), lives the Faith morally-ethically-socially, & witnesses verbally (in speech & writing) to the Faith. (Now, the usual 5x daily is morning devotion-&-Bible-study [individual], group prayer before each of the three meals, & family [or spousal] study-&-prayer before retiring. This has been our ritual for the 52 years of our marriage, & we can't imagine anyone remaining religious without ritualization. You didn't: you lost your religion to your non-ritual living.)

5 In light of the above, perhaps it shouldn't be said that you converted from Christianity to Islam: you converted, rather, from nothing (specifically, ex-Christianity) to Islam.

6 You speak appreciatively of Ramadan. I wonder if you're aware of its Jewish & Christian antecedents. Not being Jewish, you never practiced the High Holy Days. But did you never practice Advent & Lent?...If you were ignorant of your former religion's rituals, I wonder why you didn't seek them out & practice them. It may be that you never were all that serious about Christianity. Were you only a "culture Christian"?

7 How come Islamic rituals, but not Christian rituals, "have long held particular allure for me"? The allure of the exotic (\$2)?

8 Next, you mention "the philosophical and theological implications of an Islamic world view. What has drawn me to Islam is not the perceived weaknesses of Christianity, but the inherent strengths of Islam." In teaching the world's great religions in the U. of Hawaii, I had many "Christian" students who'd never explored "the philosophical and theological implications of a Christian world view" but had done so vis-a-vis some other religion(s), including Islam. They hadn't looked for diamonds in their own back yard. You are of the age they now are: I wonder if that's your case? In your letter, I see some evidences of your having made a serious study of Islam, but no such evidence anent Christianity.

9 Your letter reflects all the basic, ages-long propaganda against Christianity. I note sadly that you've been taken in (from my point of view, suckered) by it. But I can't object to your trying to make of life the best sense you can, & for the time being at least that's Islamicizing yourself.

10 "We in the West have come to think of rituals as forms empty of content": who's that "we"? Especially in the struggle (jihad!) to achieve two earned doctorates, I've run across academic types in that "we" category; & then of course in every culture there's a lazy-ignorant lumpen proletariat parasitic on the ritual core (ie, the religious praxis) of the culture. In light of your social location as a teacher in a world-famous university, & in light of your own decades-long religious-ritual-less living, I can understand the first word in your sentence. But I personally am very much encultured in "the West," & I've never lived religious-ritual-less-ly. From my point of view, you've been living in the wrong "we."

* Not, as your letter, "Kuhn."
11 Where do I see Muslim propaganda peeping through your letter, albeit unwittingly? A number of places. Here's one: you speak, invidiously, of Christianity's "perceived" weaknesses (but not of its perceived strengths) & of Islam's "inherent" strengths (but not of that faith's inherent weaknesses). You claim that "in Islam, the intelligence dominantes": but surely you can't claim, can you, that that propaganda statement is intelligent, or even fair-minded? But you offer that statement in explanation of your being "drawn to Islam." You are, I'd say, too easily drawn, enticed. I beg you to have another look, this time a more intelligent & just one.

* Good Friday & Easter.
12 More propaganda: "I understand Islam as a continuation of Christianity, but with Jesus perceived not as God Incarnate"--an oxymoronic statement! The essence of Christianity is that Jesus is God incarnate: you deny the essence, but claim to continue the reality? As for Hans Kung's*ON BECOMING A CHRISTIAN (which I used to teach a theological seminary course), that Catholic theologian is not so ignorant as to believe (as you aver) that "Jesus came to be thought of as...God Incarnate only several centuries after his Resurrection." No scholar believes that the New Testament stems from "several centuries after the Resurrection": all scholars believe that Jesus as God incarnate is a NT teaching (eg, Jn.1). Further, Jesus as "Son" is part of God's "name" in the NT (Matt.28.19, "the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"). Further of the Christian essence is the conviction that through Jesus's sacrificial death, freedom-forgiveness-reconciliation-redemption was won for all who trust God through that death.* Yet smoothly, slickly, Muslim propaganda claims to be "a continuation of the same message" as Christianity!* How does Islam pull that off? By claiming that its "core," viz, "that God is One...", is also the core of Christianity! I should think that you would be ashamed to repeat that propaganda to your parent--unless you are too innocent to perceive the fraud--which is probable.* "According to Islam, Jesus never died...."

13 "I don't have the sense that I have 'converted' to Islam--conversion implies a dramatic change of direction; rather I have the sense of becoming a Muslim, becoming one who submits to the will of God." Most conversions are not "dramatic." Further, you didn't have to change direction: for a long time, you hadn't been facing toward Christ, but rather more toward Muhammad (largely, I'd guess, without awareness of the shift).

14 A learned Jew can easily recognize Christianity as at many points a conscious divergence from Judaism: a learned Christian can easily recognize Islam as at many points a conscious divergence from both Judaism & Christianity. Jews rightly deny that Christianity is a "continuation" of Judaism, & Christians rightly deny that Islam is a "continuation" of Christianity. Your letter has paragraphs of Muslim propaganda aimed at (1) obscuring non-continuity & (2) claiming superiority for Islam. You say (against Jesus incarnate), eg, "I do not believe that God must become like us for us to know Him; rather we must become more like HIM (to the extent possible) to know Him." (Such words cut the core out of Christianity, but I must congratulate you for using masculine pronouns for God.)

15 I hope you'll think, & pray, about the deceptive verbs you use here: "Islam **embraces** Christianity and Judaism....both faiths are **accepted** within Islam." How bitter that would sound to south Sudanese Christians now being slaughtered by north Sudanese Muslims!....And this sheer boilerplate: "In Islam, faith is based on knowledge, not [as, allegedly, Christianity] on volition" (contrast Jn.1.13, "not by human will")....I will continue to pray for you. You've been had.