

Transforming From Christianity to Islam:
Eight Women's Journey

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By

Janet Testerman

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

Why do Christian women from the West convert to Islam? What compels them, having lived for years in a culture that worships beauty – with its hair-and-makeup ads, its fashion magazines, its celebrities – to cover their hair and bodies in the Islamic style? Are they lost and lonely? Confused? Inspired?

I came to Kuwait in August, 2008 with my husband, to work as a professor at a university. Among the many women I met through my work and through friends as well as at social gatherings, there were several from the West who wore headscarves. Immediately I wondered how this transformation had occurred. What had prompted these women from more-liberal Western cultures to subject themselves to the strict rules of Islamic society? Why would any woman give up her freedom to dress as she pleased? What other sacrifices had they made? Had they been dissatisfied with their Western lives? What did they find attractive about Islam? Were relationships with men different?

This is not a systematic, scientific study. My interviewees were not chosen at random; they were either friends or friends of friends, all from educational communities in Kuwait. I began with 38 interview questions I intended to ask each woman, but as their stories evolved I adapted my inquiries to their interests and experiences. Furthermore, not all of the women had converted to Islam (though most of them – seven out of eight – did). One woman, Lynda, gave up her life in the U.S., moved to Kuwait, and married into a Muslim Pakistani family; but she remains devoutly Christian. Nor did all of the women marry. Rashida converted to Islam, but has not yet married and is presently looking for a Muslim husband. And one woman, Marta, reluctantly converted to Islam when she became the second wife of a Kuwaiti Muslim. The remaining five women all converted to Islam and are married to Muslim men. All of the women but one, Marta, from South Africa, were baptized Christians and raised in Western, Christian households.

Islam is a diverse and complex religion that is interpreted and debated by Muslim scholars worldwide. This is in no way a scholarly piece on Islam. The interpretations each of the women make about Islam are not presented as factual knowledge, but rather as expressions of their understanding of Islam as converts and people newly exposed to the

religion and cultures of the Middle East. It is in no way the purpose of this book to explain or describe Islam; the intention, rather, is to describe eight Western women's journeys as they experience fascinating spiritual and cultural transformations in the Islamic State of Kuwait. Nonetheless, it will be helpful for readers unfamiliar with Islam to understand the religion to some degree in order to empathize with the women discussed in this book. I will therefore first present a cursory overview of the main facets (or tenets?) of Islam. Because Islam is a rich religion with scores of interpretations, it is recommended to read further on the subject, and not to rely entirely upon the short summary below.

CHAPTER ONE

A BRIEF PRIMER ON ISLAM

Muslims believe the Quran is a Holy Book that is the word of God revealed to Muhammad in the mid-seventh century. Islam – the word itself means “submission” – encompasses the Bible and the Torah and is considered by its adherents to be the final message from God to man, as revealed to Muhammad. Thus, the prophets familiar to Christians and Jews are also highly lauded in Islam. Christianity and Islam diverge, however, in that in Islam, Jesus is considered to be a prophet rather than a divine being.

There are Five Pillars of Faith, all of which Muslims must perform. They are:

1. Kalima: Testimony of Faith. One must state: “There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah.” This statement is also called the Shahada.
2. Salat: Prayer. It is compulsory for every Muslim to pray five times a day at specific times while facing Mecca. The prayer should be said in Arabic, and it is accompanied by various physical prostrations.
3. Zakat: Almsgiving. It is mandatory for Muslims to give 2.5 percent of their yearly savings (excess income) to charity.
4. Sawm: Fasting. Muslims are required to fast during the month of Ramadan, from sunrise to sunset.
5. Hajj: Pilgrimage. Every physically and financially able Muslim must make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his lifetime (Mansupuri, 2010).

Muslims also believe in the Six Articles of Faith

1. There is only one God and he created everything.
2. There are many angels made of light, two of whom record human actions; one the good deeds and another, the bad deeds.

3. Muslims believe the messages of the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospel, and the Quran. All the books but the Quran have been altered over time.
4. Muslims believe in all the prophets from Adam to Muhammad. The Quran treats all prophets equally.
5. There will be a Day of Judgment at the end of the world. Good people will go to heaven, bad people go to hell.
6. Muslims believe in predestination, that although Allah knows all in the past, present and future, Allah does not interfere in man's free will (Mansupuri, 2010).

Muslim Life: It is important for Muslims to worship God, or Allah, but they do not neglect the world to devote themselves solely to worship and prayer. Muslims strike a balance by fulfilling the obligations of and enjoying this life, while always mindful of their duties to Allah and to others. Islam prescribes thoughts and behaviors that pertain not only to one's spirituality, but to all aspects of life:

- Morals and manners
- Business ethics
- Modesty in dress and behavior
- Dietary rules
- Marriage
- Care of children and elderly
- Racism and prejudice
- Relations with non-Muslims (Huda, 2013)

CHAPTER TWO

PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS

As in any endeavor, one has preconceptions that are best acknowledged and reckoned with before the project has gotten underway. Before I began the interviews, I carefully took an inventory of what I expected to hear in response to my inquiries. My preconceived notions of the women I was about to interview fell into three categories: spirituality, family, and reaction to Western values.

I imagined that all the women who converted to Islam would be seeking a higher spiritual plane. I thought perhaps they had been searching relentlessly for truths that had eluded them, and that they longed to be closer to God, and that they had found that closeness and spiritual uplift through Islam. As I prepared for my journey to Kuwait, . . . I caught myself from time to time imagining that I might find some truth or beauty in what I might learn and observe about Islam. The apparent piety of Muslims, praying in a prostrate position, and fasting, had impressed me.

A second preconception I had before I met any of my interview subjects was that Muslim women placed the importance of family in a more central position than did their more-career-oriented Western counterparts. I pictured them whisking their children off to mosque several times per day, praying together as a family, and enjoying weekly gatherings of their extended families; I also assumed that these women might if not entirely abandon their professional and social aspirations, then at least make them of secondary importance. I assumed they aspired to have swarms of children at the expense of spending time at the gym, the salon, or the mall or in high-powered careers.

Finally, I expected to witness a wholesale rejection of Western values. I pre-admired their freedom from the trappings of consumerism and status-seeking so prevalent in the West. Women would be free from the pressure to maintain an acceptable appearance that so relentlessly drives women in the West. At last, a woman could wear whatever she wanted, forgo makeup, wear baggy clothes, and gain a few extra pounds without fear of being rejected. Materialism would go out the window as these women found acceptance and love in the aspects of the self that do matter: the

treatment of one's fellow man that grows from an acceptance and love for all.

Through the interviews I hoped to find some clear patterns in the types of environments from which these women hailed, and which may have led them to convert; I also hoped to detect commonalities with respect to their experiences with men, their Western families, and any issues attendant upon adjusting to their new religion. While I did see some patterns emerge as I read and re-read the interview transcripts, the commonalities were neither entirely clear nor universal, but they were remarkable.

I will present the content of each of the nine interviews first, after which I will include an analysis of the common themes that became apparent. Some of the women encounter extraordinary events that contribute profoundly to the way they live their lives as Muslims. The discussions that follow support my preconceptions to some degree, but more often, the women's comments surprised me. The first interview is with Dr. Theresa Leshner, a director of the AWARE Center, which operates in Kuwait as a place for expatriates and Arab natives to meet in an effort to promote Arab-Western relations. I include her interview first because she best reflects the preconceptions I had about Western women who convert to Islam. She is thoughtful and devout. She considered the tenets of Islam seriously before accepting them. I had seen Theresa at the AWARE Center several times as I inquired about Arabic lessons and attended several *diwanias*, or discussions. She is a tall, elegant woman of 40 years who dresses simply and gracefully, careful to keep her hair and body covered. Her soft-spoken, calm demeanor underscores a solid certainty she expresses regarding her faith.

CHAPTER THREE

DR. TERESA LESHER

Teresa Lesher kept her maiden name when she married, although she did initially change her name to her husband's family name at the insistence of her mother. She was uncomfortable with the name change, since in Islam a woman does keep her name, so she changed it back to Teresa, which is a Christian name.

Teresa has been a Muslim since 1981. Born in Carlsbad, New Mexico, she was raised in Indiana, and educated in Pennsylvania, at Claren State College, north of Pittsburgh, where she met her husband. They later moved to Kuwait, where she has lived for thirty years.

Teresa was raised a Roman Catholic, and in her teenage years became a born-gain Christian. When she went to college, she started exploring different churches. She wanted to find the church that best suited her, and while attending these churches she met her husband. She was a freshman in college at the time. She was looking for something.

Teresa's husband, Yasser, was born in a Muslim family in Egypt, but he was raised in Kuwait. She met her husband through an international students' club. Nasser was a graduate student in the same club, and they started comparing religions. She had never known a Muslim, didn't know what Islam was, and she didn't know anything about the Middle East. Teresa enjoyed inviting her foreign friends to her church, "especially the Muslims because obviously they wanted to become Christians. Yasser seemed really interested, so I thought 'Good, I caught one.'" Teresa said Yasser went to church with her and asked many questions "about the communion, confession, the Trinity, her belief in God, priests, and the saints and their roles. He had questions, and he wouldn't give up until he had a satisfactory answer. He kept saying 'Why? Explain it more.' He didn't just accept an unthought-out response. He really wanted to get to the bottom of it with me. I thought I was gaining ground the whole time with him. He was so interested in Christianity. But what happened through this process of questioning was that I was examining myself and my own religion." Yasser was genuinely interested in Christianity, but their conversations became a form of self-analysis for Teresa. Yet Yasser never

offered any information about Islam. Nonetheless, Teresa said the discussions “would end up with me being frustrated. I couldn’t explain it to his satisfaction. I couldn’t explain it to my own satisfaction. I would think ‘That’s a really dumb thing that I just said. It doesn’t make a whole lot of sense to me. Why do I believe in this? How come I can’t explain it? How come he can’t understand it? Shouldn’t faith be very logical? Shouldn’t it be simple so that average people can accept it easily?’” In a moment of frustration, she said “You tell me what you have. Tell me what Islam is.” So now the tables had turned and Yasser always answered questions to her satisfaction, including questions she had had since she was a teenager and had asked the clergy, without ever hearing a satisfactory response. When she asked Yasser about different aspects of Islam “he would give me a simple and logical answer that made me feel really comfortable. I felt these were the answers I had been searching for, for many, many years. That was surprising to me and shocking, that I was finding answers to questions outside of my religious circle.”

She found that the Islamic beliefs about the fate of the soul appealed to her adolescent desire to find justice. “As a Christian, I was taught that only Christians would be saved, and that the other people would go to hell. So I thought ‘That’s not fair.’ I could think of several categories of people that I thought it’s just not right that they would be punished. For example, people who lived before Jesus was born. What about them? They didn’t even know about Jesus, He wasn’t even born yet. The indirect answer I got from Christians was ‘Well they would go to Hell, too’ because they had not been baptized. My next question was ‘What about babies?’ Sometimes babies are born and sometimes they die before they’re baptized as Christians. What about them? Again, because there’s that thing, unless you believe in Jesus, the way, the truth and the light no one shall enter Heaven except through Me. So the answer was, yes, unfortunately, even those babies will go to Hell. What about people who never heard about Jesus? They live on a far-away island and they’re away from his teachings. Unfortunately it’s our responsibility to tell them, but if word doesn’t reach them then unfortunately they will go to Hell, too. I just felt it wasn’t right. What about good people who believe in God and they do good things all their life and avoid all the bad things all their life but they don’t believe that Jesus is divine, like my soon-to-be husband Yasser. What about them? They don’t believe, they’ll go to Hell, too. I had that feeling that it wasn’t fair, but I just kind of went along with it and never got an answer that made me feel comfortable.”

Nasser answered those same questions from the Islamic perspective and they were far more compassionate. “When I asked him ‘Well what

about babies, what about people who live far away and never heard?' His answer satisfied me and it's a basic belief in Islam that if you believe in God, and if you don't worship false gods and you're a good person, yes, you'll go to heaven. Why not? I thought 'Yeah, that makes sense to me. That is an answer I can accept.' I asked him about babies. 'What about babies who are born and they die and they have no religion and they haven't had a chance to believe in God?' He said all babies are pure and any baby or child who dies before he can make decisions for himself will also go to Paradise. And I thought 'Oh that's an answer I like. That's an answer I'm comfortable with.' If I had a child and he couldn't talk yet how could he make a choice? I didn't feel that I could be responsible to make a choice for him. Anyway, he answered my question for me. I was very comfortable with that. And all the questions I had as a teenager that were basically about justice, were answered from the Islamic viewpoint and I was very happy with that. I felt that it was fair."

There were other points about her Christian faith that bothered Teresa when she was asked, by Yasser, to explain them, such as the sacrament of confession. Yasser wanted to know why it was necessary to confess one's sins to a priest. "I was young, I was 19 at the time and I hadn't thought through everything about the Christian faith, but I was led to believe that we're not worthy enough to go directly to God. It's better to go through intermediaries like a priest, like a saint, like the Virgin Mary, that these people would relay the messages to God and it's more guaranteed, so to speak. I tried to explain that to him and he kept saying 'God created you, why don't you just talk to God? Is He inaccessible, is He not, you're not worthy, I just don't get it. We talk directly to God when we pray it's just between us. Nobody's between us. We don't have priests that we have to go to. If we feel sorry for a sin, we should confess to God and ask for forgiveness, and we should ask the person we offended for forgiveness. But why should we have to ask a third party for the power to forgive the sin that wasn't against him?' I thought 'That's a good point.' He just made me realize I am good enough to talk to God because God created me. I should feel free to address my Creator instead of having to go through different levels. That appealed to me, too. It was very direct and very simple. That was another major answer that made me consider Islam."

Teresa also began to feel that Christianity was too easy, and that Islam made people carry more responsibility for the fate of their souls. "I felt that to be a Christian I wasn't really responsible. It was easy. You just believe in Jesus, you just believe you're going to Heaven because of that, and you don't have to worry about a lot of things you have to do or about things you shouldn't do. It's easy. The church taught me that Jesus died

for my sins so I don't have to worry about it. It's not something that's going to bother me at any time. Quite honestly, I felt it was easy, but when we talked about divinity, and Trinity and we talked about all of this and the subject of accountability came up, and responsibility, Yasser explained from the Islamic viewpoint that nobody can carry the sins of another person. Every person is responsible for the sins of himself. 'I hope that you won't think that Jesus is going to carry your sins because eventually you'll stand just by yourself in front of God and you'll be accountable for yourself and that's the way it has to be.' This is fair. So when I went back to the concepts of justice I changed my mind and decided that God is just. How can we have a God that's not just? Then I thought that if God is just, then we have to have accountability, because how can we have justice and not have accountability? I realized I'm going to have to either accept that I'm going to have to be accountable for myself and accept the system of justice, or I'm going to accept not being accountable and not having a just system. It was really scary in a way to face my own accountability. Before, it was easy. 'Yeah, we're Christian, I'm safe. I've got my ticket to Paradise.' When I realized, what if I am accountable? What if I am responsible? What if no one is going to carry my sins? It seemed pretty logical. It seemed pretty fair. I really had to, that's when I decided that I have to become a Muslim, because if I don't, if I keep believing in this 'I'm not responsible' attitude, then I have a lot to lose, there's a lot at risk."

At that point, when Teresa felt Islam was more just and feared that her Christian behaviors might not be sufficient to gain her access to Paradise, she decided to convert to Islam. "I thought I'm just going to take the leap. I'm going to accept responsibility, I'm going to live a good life and I'm going to believe that if I am good, and I do worship God without worshipping any false gods, then he'll accept me. That's when I decided to do it. It was kind of scary, changing my whole belief system. It was difficult because it's the whole foundation of what I've grown up on. Suddenly it's like loose sand. It was a touch and go situation for a while but once I really said look, this is logical, then I didn't see anything that was unfair or cruel. I couldn't find anything wrong with it, with this system that was explained to me. It's basic enough for simple people to understand, it's logical enough for intelligent people to accept. I thought 'Why am I afraid? What am I worried about?' So I became a Muslim."

There was very little literature in English about Islam for Teresa to study until she came across a translation of the Quran, which she read with great interest; a few months later, she became a Muslim and married Yasser. "Not to say that being a Muslim is a requirement, I think he

probably would have married me anyway. It was me, I felt it was important for me to start out this marriage being Muslim.”

Becoming a Muslim is a very simple process. One makes a statement in front of two witnesses that you believe that there is only one God and no other creature is divine and that Muhammad was one of His messengers. Teresa made the statement of belief, or Shahada, after she felt she had learned enough about Islam to feel she was ready. “Of course I studied about the role of the Prophet Muhammad and the role of Jesus and other Prophets, so believing in the basic things I thought ‘Well, I am a Muslim, why am I waiting? I do believe in that so why don’t I just say it?’ In front of a couple of people I made my statement and that was it. It’s a very simple process. Actually there are many, many Muslims who don’t know they’re Muslims. They believe there’s only one God, they believe in Heaven and Hell they believe in their own accountability. These are the basic things, the basic beliefs of the Muslim. By the way, Muslim means that you submit to God and you try to live according to his law. It’s a very simple explanation. I’ve heard people say, after they became Muslim, ‘I’ve always been Muslim, but I didn’t know that’s what it was called.’ It’s a state of being that is submitting to God, going along with his system of the universe and our own system of right and wrong. That’s innate. We know when we’ve done something wrong because we usually try to hide it or we keep it a secret. Muslims were Muslims long before the Prophet Muhammad came. It’s like the Quran tells us, it was Abraham who coined the term Muslim. It says all through the Quran that he was a Muslim, Abraham was Muslim, Jesus was a Muslim, Moses’ followers were Muslims in the sense that they submitted to God and tried to live according to his law. That’s a Muslim.”

I asked Teresa how her family responded to her conversion, and to marriage to a Muslim man. After all, she was quite young, and these were significant changes for a family to accept. Since her parents divorced when she was ten, and her father moved to Germany, his home, after the divorce, it was mostly her mother and five siblings who dealt with her conversion. “I lived with my mother and her husband. My family were the ones who dealt with my conversion first. They were very gracious and accepted Yasser into the family. They tried to understand my viewpoint. They were very understanding, thoughtful, welcoming. I know there was tension, I know that there was some hurt, probably especially on my mother’s side and being a mother, I understand. I had accepted some beliefs and traditions that were different from their own. It’s not that I rejected theirs, but it probably felt like rejection in some ways. They’re wonderful and have always been very welcoming and very loving

throughout the years. I can really say that through my twenty-seven odd years being Muslim, that their respect for Islam and Muslims definitely has increased. They didn't know much, almost nothing, really when I became a Muslim. They've known me a long time and I talk a lot sometimes. They've all been to the Middle East, all have been to Kuwait and some have been to Egypt, where we have a summer home. Of course, my husband and myself and my children have travelled to the states almost every summer and stayed with my parents."

Teresa credits her three daughters, ages twenty-five, twenty-three, and fourteen, and her twenty-year-old son, with the ease with which her family has adapted to her conversion and move to the Middle East. "I have to give the most credit to my children. I think they're really exceptional, I know every mother would say that, but when my family sees that they turned out to be very respectful, they're wholesome kids, all three are in their twenties. They see their development alongside the development in their society and I think they have a lot of respect for the way they've been raised. They're born Muslim and they've been raised in a Muslim community, so if there was something wrong with Islam I think it would probably show through them. I think they've really grown to love and respect us, especially the kids."

Teresa worked hard at being a devout, knowledgeable Muslim from the very start. She passed her beliefs and values to her children. "From the very beginning of my conversion, I was very devout. I really took it seriously, the decision I made. The reason was going back to that accountability thing. I just felt so shaken by the idea that I might be accountable for myself. So as soon as I became a Muslim, I really straightened up. Every day I would think about how I was living my life, what good I had done that day, what mistakes I had made. I really tried to improve myself. I studied not just religious but secular information, because a Muslim has to, to be successful in life he should be strong, he should be wealthy, he should be intelligent, he should have every quality that everybody wants. I worked hard from every aspect that I could, to be the best person I could be, stemming from that aspect of responsibility and accountability. I took it very seriously. When it came to raising the children, I wanted to raise them as Muslims, definitely. There are some traditions, I was not sure what to do. When the holidays came, how should I handle it? Those things, we found our way to reconcile the differences in my cultural upbringing and my religious beliefs, so it's been OK. We're very flexible and open. We don't get hung up on differences. Differences are what make life really interesting." In that vein, Teresa and her family do not subscribe to any particular sect of Islam, but rather try to follow the

basic teachings. “Of course I know there are different sects of Islam, but honestly I try to follow the Quran. That’s where I get the bulk of my religious information, and I think that’s the correct approach. I do also refer to the prophetic traditions, the ones that are reliable, and there’s a whole science of the traditions, the authenticity levels and so on.”

In fact, Teresa sees the various sects of Islam as divisive, and believes the thoughtful Muslim will follow the Quran as closely as possible. “So the Quran is the first source. If I don’t understand it or if I need further explanation, I go to other sources. If people ask me “What are you, Sufi, Shiite or Sunni?” I say “No, I’m just a Muslim. I follow the Quran as much as I can, and if I have questions I go to scholars, but I don’t get myself involved in any divisions. Many people who are born Muslim and grow up in a certain tradition will attach labels to themselves, but I think that’s wrong. I don’t think we should be in one group and not in another group. We should really just understand what it is to be a Muslim and do that. Some people are raised in a Sunni community or a Sufi family and so they just accept it, as I accepted being in a Catholic family, because that’s what I knew. People who really think about it and really analyze it say ‘I’m a Muslim and not anything else.’ That’s what I can call myself.”

Teresa’s husband’s family reacted to his marrying a non-Muslim in a similarly accepting way, especially since Yasser’s family already had some international marriages. When asked how her husband’s family responded to his marrying a non-Muslim, Teresa said “Honestly, his mother would have been so happy if he had married the girl next door kind of thing. We had lived in the states for about a year and a half before we moved here and we had communicated through letters and they were very accepting. They have always been very welcoming, supportive, loving, the whole family.

Most of them live here (in Kuwait). My husband’s family moved to Kuwait in the 1950s and he and his siblings were raised here. Some of them have gone back to Egypt to settle with their Egyptian husbands and families, but some of them are here as well. I’ve never had any problem at all. They’re so welcoming. My husband does have a couple other Western relatives, one of his aunts is German, and another uncle married an American lady, but they never became Muslim, either one of them. I suppose it was maybe a bonus that I was a Muslim, but even if I wasn’t, I’m sure they would have been just as loving and welcoming. They’ve travelled internationally, they’re very open-minded.”

Teresa and her husband both have PhDs in library science. Yasser’s degree was conferred after she had three of her children. Teresa then decided to go back for her Master’s before completing her PhD as well.

They both work for the Ministry of Education, in Kuwait's College of Education, a teachers' college run by the government. The students earn a teaching degree in library and information science then go on to become school and public librarians. Although it is primarily an Arabic institution, Teresa teaches most of her classes bilingually, because her Arabic is evolving.

Prayer is of great importance to Muslims. In Kuwait, as in other Islamic countries, the *adan*, or call to prayer, is heard five times per day throughout the city, issuing from loud speakers in the mosques that are in every neighborhood. Teresa cherishes her prayer times, as do most Muslims. "It's really great. It really makes sure that I'm keeping my connection with God. I was talking to my daughter, Hannah, she's fourteen, about the prayer. This is really to simplify what we were talking about, but in a way it's like God's roll call. Five times a day he likes to know that we're there, that we're in touch with him. It's my way of showing up, of attending, of having a conversation with God. We need this in our lives. If we spend a period of time when we are not communicating with God, and we're not in touch and reminding ourselves that he's there for us, we can start having wrong feelings, or start maybe participating in behaviors that maybe we wouldn't normally participate in, because we're losing that touch with God. When you stand in front of God five times a day and say, "Here I am, here you are," it keeps you very, very focused. The prayer brings you back and makes you refocus on what I'm doing in my life, God's will in my life and his importance in my life. I consider it the minimum amount of time we should connect with God. Our prayer times are early morning, so when you first wake up, you want to pray. Let's log in, let's connect to God. Around noontime you've put in a full morning, you need a break, this is about the time we take our lunch, maybe have a little rest. This is the time we pray, reconnect. Then, (we pray) in the afternoon and as the sun sets and before we sleep. They're natural timings in a way. I've benefitted a lot from that. I can't imagine a life without prayer. That would be very lonely."

For most Christians, there are formal prayers they have memorized in either school or church; there is also always the opportunity to stop at any time and say a quick plea, or thanks or any sort of extemporaneous communication with God. But according to Teresa, "The Islamic prayer is different. The Muslims have the ritual prayer, which is the formal prayer where you're really standing one on one, personally with God. It's different in the sense that you prepare for this prayer by washing, and by making sure that your clothes are clean and that you're standing in a clean place and follow a particular formula. Sometimes I think, when people say

‘That’s stupid, if you want to pray to God just say it, no matter where you are, no matter what you’re doing.’ It’s true, that as Muslims we do that. Throughout the day I’m always asking God for help on something or thanking him for something else. There’s this informal conversation. But if I think, for example, that I’m going to meet an important person, even if I’m going on a date with my husband, I would prepare myself. Maybe I would take a shower, I would wear some nice clothes, I would make sure that I didn’t have spots on my shirt, I would brush my teeth, I would present myself in the best way. I would think about the subjects I would talk about or the way I would greet this person, especially if he’s very important, like a president or a king. There’s a protocol for meeting important people and there’s a protocol for meeting people in life, our own personal protocols. Why shouldn’t there be a protocol for meeting God? The ritual prayer is the formula that God gave us as the proper way to meet him. It requires some physical and mental preparation. It has certain words that we say, certain greetings, certain requests, a certain format. It’s sort of like meditation. It also has a physical aspect that keeps us very limber. It helps focus us both physically and mentally. It’s very useful as an exercise. Other than that, the prayer is very open, you can pray any time, no matter what you’re doing, anything you’re doing you can say what you want to say. Often, I think the things I’m thinking, I’m saying those things to God. No matter what I’m thinking, ‘Oh, she’s a really neat person.’ Well, because God knows everything I’m thinking, I’m saying that to God. So I check myself even in that, well I shouldn’t be thinking that, that’s not a nice thing to think because I realize I’m talking to God at the same time. In this aspect, communication with God never stops, but there is a time when we stop and take a formal interchange with God. It’s a very special, uplifting kind of exercise.”

Although there is a small window of time after the *adan* during which one can say that particular prayer, Teresa and her family find the prayer times to be somewhat flexible, a notion not very common, especially among Muslims living in the Middle East. “It says in the Quran that the prayer is at a prescribed time. Definitely there is a prescribed time for each of the prayers. We know them. It goes by the time of the day. It is important to pray on time, I know I was a couple minutes late, but you know, people like to be on time. If your boss told you to be there at ten in the morning you’re going to be there at ten o’clock because it’s important to you in your relationship with your boss. A Muslim believes that, ‘If God wants me to be there at those times, I’m going to do my best to be there at those times.’ On the other hand, Islam, although it has very clear guidelines, it’s also extremely flexible. So, for example, if I’m travelling,

it's possible to join our prayers together if it's hard for me to pray them at the right time. Last weekend, we went down to Heran, which is almost an hour's drive from where we are now, and so we all decided that this is really far, and it will be hard for us to say our prayers at the right time and find a place to do so. We travelled pretty far from our home, so we just combined them. We did that, and it was very comfortable. Anyone who is travelling can combine his prayers. If you're sick and can't perform the movements of the prayer, there's no difficulty there, you can pray sitting down. You do as much as you can from what you know. Yes, there is a prescribed time but Islam doesn't place any difficulty on people. If it's hard for you, then there's always flexibility so you can meet your requirements, but in a way to make it comfortable. That's a great, great blessing to have that sense of flexibility." Not all Muslims agree that this flexibility in prayer times is acceptable. In a similar way, Teresa believed the rules regarding other Islamic tenets to have some flexibility. "Even in the haram things. For example, you may know the Muslim is forbidden to eat pork. Of course you know, from a medical or health perspective, it's not the healthiest meat. We don't eat pork, but if we're hungry and that's the only food, we should eat it. We must eat it because you have to survive. Islam is very flexible. If there's a strong need, you're allowed to do that until the need is passed, then you should go back to your usual habits."

The great majority of women in Kuwait wear headscarves and abayas (long black robes that cover one's body, arms and legs). Some women, however, wear different colors of headscarf...from gauzy, plain ones to flashy, heavily sequined scarves with Cadillac emblems. The black abaya is not universal either, younger women, especially, wear designer jeans, fashionable heels, and blousy tops that cover their backsides. Teresa is in her forties and does not wear the black abaya, but keeps her hair covered in hijab and wears tasteful, loose-fitting long shirts and skirts. When asked if she changed her clothing styles as soon as she converted, Teresa said "Actually I did. When I became a Muslim I wanted to do everything as best as I could, so I did change immediately my clothing style. I started wearing looser clothes, longer clothes. I didn't have the right combinations, it was kind of a disaster, you know?" "She laughed. "I just looked kind of funny for a while. My husband said 'Look you're rushing yourself, you're taking on too much at once, just give yourself a little time until you can get clothes you're comfortable in that look nice on you and then start.' So I did sort of relax for a while, and it took me two or three months to collect some things that I was comfortable in. I did start wearing the hijab in the states while I was still in college, and my family didn't

really like it because it was such an outward statement. It was hard for them, I think. They never said anything negative, but I could tell that they weren't comfortable. Even for myself, I was struggling with being the only person I knew who wore a hijab. I didn't know any other Muslims but my husband, and he's just a guy, he doesn't dress any different. I've worn the hijab ever since. I really like it, actually. It's kind of liberating, in away."

Liberating? Headscarf? Dressing according to rules? I told that most Americans believe the hijab to be oppressive. Teresa responded that she was pleased to be interacting in the world without being judged according to her figure and other physical features. "Yes, it is very liberating because I don't have to think about all the things that women have to do to look beautiful, to look slim, to hide their bulges. I just wear my hijab and nobody knows (what my hair is like) with it. I don't think my sisters know what's under it. I don't have to worry about my physical form as much, although I do take very good care of myself and I even color my hair. It doesn't define who I am. That's what I really love about hijab. When I'm sitting at work, most of my colleagues are men wherever - I go people are not judging me by how I look, how pretty I am or how slim I am or physical features that I won't mention. They're looking at my face and my skills and what I offer the community, because that's all they can see. My physical person is just a very private thing to me. I don't have a problem with it at all. I love the hijab and I can just throw something on and go out and it doesn't really matter what I have underneath."

Although hijab is liberating for Teresa, there is a large segment of Muslim society that speaks disparagingly about women who do not cover, or do not cover in a manner that is socially acceptable. There is a great deal of animosity among both men and women toward women who do not conform to the dress expectations; these women are judged to be immoral. Was Teresa aware of this possibly unintended consequence of the hijab? "That's so bad. The Quran says explicitly that a woman should cover her beauty in public places. Prophet Muhammad once advised that a young woman, when a girl reaches puberty, that nothing should show except her hair and her face. She should cover her body, especially in this wonderful time of life. I would say hair is a beautiful thing on a woman. When I really thought about it and was honest with myself, I realized it has no function other than beauty. I said "Oh that's something that I can accept, to cover when I go out in public." As far as hijab being forced on people and these parliament members, if they don't want to wear hijab, it's a personal choice, belief is a personal choice and it says very clearly in the Quran 'He who wants to believe can believe and he who doesn't...' that's his choice. If belief in God is a choice, then I think a little square piece of

cloth, whether you decide to wear it or not is a choice, too. They should be given that choice. As far as women being better or worse if they're covered or not, no, definitely not. I know women who don't wear hijab, two of my daughters don't wear hijab even though they're, you know, definitely at the age when they technically should. It doesn't mean they're bad people, they're still very good people, very upright citizens doing their best. Of course there are women who wear the hijab and maybe even cover their face and are wicked! To me it's not a criteria of good or bad, it's just an outward display. I think it's respectful to wear modest clothing in public places, the opposite way, we know if people are just wearing the wrong things, we just think 'Ahh, that's just the wrong thing to wear in a grocery store' you know? I just think in public places it's respectful to wear more modest clothing, but it definitely does not have a reflection on someone's character."

I was surprised to hear Teresa say that her own daughters did not wear headscarves, and I asked her how she felt about it. "One of them does. The other two, I guess they don't feel ready to accept that responsibility and that is their choice. Like everything, there comes a time when you have to choose for yourself, and if someone chooses for you, then it's not your choice. I realize that everything in their lives has to come from their own conviction – otherwise it's useless. They believe in it, they believe it's the right thing to do, but it's not an easy step to take, especially when you're young and beautiful. I mean, for others, it's easy, and for me it's comfortable, it's a comfortable way to dress, but, you know young kids are young and they don't always see things from an older perspective. I respect that, I respect their decision. I know that if I force them, it would be a worthless gesture on their part. I won't do that."

Wearing the hijab in Kuwait is supposed to serve to cover a woman and to not attract attention to one's appearance. But since that type of attire is not the norm in the U.S., I asked Teresa if she reverted to her Western wear when she visited relatives in Michigan. "In Kuwait, I'm really much more comfortable in skirts. I love wearing long skirts, they're so extremely comfortable. But in the U.S., I think it's a little too much for the people, so I usually switch to jeans and long shirts."

Muslims go to mosque on Fridays. I asked Teresa if the mosque experience was any different for her than what she had been accustomed to when she was a Christian. "It's required for men to go at least once per week, which is the Friday prayer. You'll see that all work stops on Friday and all the men will go to the mosque, also many women; however, it's not a requirement for the women to go to the mosque for any prayers at all.

I think it's very practical because I take it from two viewpoints. First, there are the family obligations - having children, taking care of the home. Sometimes it's not easy to wrap the kids, bundle them up, and take them to the mosque. Logistically, it's really a relief that I don't have to do that on Friday. I can just stay home and offer my prayers at home. But from a social perspective, I think women are very social and we always find opportunities to socialize in one way or another. Men, on the other hand, in my experience at least, are not quite as social and they need that extra nudge to get out there and meet other men and get involved in a community. I think that's the whole wisdom behind the men being required to go to the mosque. Naturally, after the prayer they talk, they know the Muslims in their neighborhood. They develop a rapport, a relationship with their neighbors, really. I think that that's really great, while we are welcome to go to the mosque at any time. I know one woman who goes to the mosque for nearly every prayer. She lives right next door. It's not a requirement for us, and we can get our socialization many other ways."

Thus far, in our interview, Teresa had shown nothing but enthusiasm for Islam. I wondered how so many Westerners had come to view it as oppressive, while here was a Westerner who had been practicing Islam for 30 years and had not one word of criticism for it. I had spoken with several other Muslims about the fact that, in a court of law, two women were required to be witnesses for every one male witness. I asked Theresa how this practice squared with her sense of justice. "Through my 25 years there have been questions I've had and I think it should be logical, I think it should be fair, which is the whole reason I accepted Islam in the first place. When I come across a situation that doesn't seem fair or logical, it doesn't sit right with me. There have been a few things which I initially objected to, but when I studied, and this is the key, you really have to study, you really have to give it its due thought processes and time. We don't have knowledge automatically, it comes with age and experience and time. So anything I have ever found uncomfortable, when I understood it, I could accept it, even about the witnesses. This question has come up also with my friends, the thing about the witnesses. I was so surprised when I was talking to a brand new Muslim, and the thing about the witnesses came up. She said this is to protect the woman from being coerced by her husband or another male relative to adopt a certain stance in court. I mean, we know what it's like. Often if a father, a husband, a strong male relative is beside us and wants us to do it a certain way, women are, by nature, very compliant, adaptable, you know, bending, flexible. We might relinquish our own opinion and just adopt our

husband's opinion. I was so shocked when this brand new Muslim said this is to protect the woman. When two women stand together, a man has a much harder time opposing them. A woman finds strength in another woman. I thought, what a unique way to look at it. Another woman told me 'Sometimes women are wrapped up in so many details of life with their families or their communities' – I mean really, we do take on quite a bit of responsibility – 'that sometimes she may not be paying attention to certain aspects of business or finance or loans, and we may not be as experienced in these areas.' The Quranic verse in relation to witnesses is about business deals. I've been told that witnessing is only in relation to business deals, because women are not as versed in these matters. In some cases, a single female witness is enough and a man's witness is not accepted.

I'll give you just one case which may not be very relevant these days, but in the old days babies were often given to nurses to breast feed them during their infancy because maybe the mother was busy or she didn't have enough milk or whatever. There was sort of like a sibling relationship between milk babies, okay? A woman's testimony would be acceptable as far as who fed that baby, because she had intimate knowledge about what went on in the home and with mothers and families; and a man would not have that knowledge. There have been cases, and they're in the history books, where a single woman's testimony was accepted and the man's testimony was rejected because she's the expert in that field. As far as I know, the Quran does not mention any other case where the woman is not valued as a witness, except in business cases where she would need a co-woman with her. I like that idea, quite honestly. To be quite honest, I often forget, if you ask me what my salary is, I couldn't tell you. I honestly don't know the exact amount of my monthly salary because I'm just not interested so much in money matters and business and contracts."

According to Teresa, women were accorded great status during the Prophet's time. "Women, even in the Prophet's time, were accepted as judges, because the community knew they were the most knowledgeable in this area, their testimony and witness was accepted first and foremost. It's not standard that the woman is always half the testimony of the man. It's been propagated that way and widely misunderstood to the point that I would say the majority of the Muslim population believes that. But if you go back and look at the Quran, and look at the hadiths related to the subject, you'll see that their knowledge is wrong."

I asked Teresa if household responsibilities were shared equally between husband and wife in her family. Women are expected to remain home to care for children and maintain the household. "Yeah, that's really

a luxury for a woman. When I was home, I was taking care of most of the cooking, the child care etc. because I was there and my husband was extremely busy because he was supporting a large family singlehandedly. Our roles were divided but we worked equally hard. When I went back to work, that's when things changed. I said, 'Wait a second, I can't do this and that' so that's when we very naturally fell into different patterns of sharing housework, and even sharing professional work. Sometimes he graded my students' papers, and sometimes I'd look over things that he's writing up in English and I edited. We find ways to cooperate so the job gets done. So as long as the job gets done and the one who can do it best, does it, it's okay. My husband doesn't really cook, but every now and then, he says, 'Let me cook', and he gets on the phone and calls a restaurant." Teresa laughed. "That's okay with me. We find ways to work it out. Rules have changed with bearing responsibilities both ways. Family, size and structure, it's always worked."

The changes Teresa had to make to adapt to a new religion and Kuwaiti culture seemed monumental to me. I questioned whether her husband had to make any significant adjustments as a result of marrying her. "Honestly, I don't think I live very differently than my siblings do, for example. I really don't think so, other than our daily prayers, the absence of alcohol from our lives, and small dietary changes. All around the world, people live almost the same way, the whole school and work and maintaining the house routine that takes up ninety percent of our time. Has he had to change? I think he's had to change mentally to look at different lifestyles and different personalities to be more open than maybe some of his colleagues who have single-culture, single-nationality families. It's probably made him wiser, but I don't think he's really had to change much – no I don't think so."

I noticed in the local newspapers that there is a fledgling women's movement in Kuwait. In 2005, women won the right to vote, and in 2009, women were elected to Parliament for the first time. There was also the scandal of the two female Ministers who didn't wear the hijab to Parliament one day; a big uproar from the men had ensued. More than half the men of Parliament walked out in protest. I asked Teresa what she thought about the direction the women's movement was taking.

"It's sad in a way, because I really believe that the Quran laid out the rights of women. Unfortunately, the male interpretation, and the adherence to traditional culture that was there before the Prophet Muhammad came – this whole patriarchal, macho, system has really colored many interpretations. I believe that women have many, many God-given rights that are not always upheld by the communities. I'm really happy for the

Kuwaiti women, and for the progress they are making toward getting the rights that are theirs by right and that have been identified already for them in the Quran. It's just taken the culture some time to finally accept that. It's not an Islamic culture that would deny a woman her rights, it's maybe an Arab culture or a Kuwaiti culture or other cultures that might see her role differently. I've never seen this coming from Islam, ever."

Teresa's final remarks underscore her confidence that she made the right decision to convert to Islam. "The hardest point in my experience as a Muslim is that first decision, am I going to do this or not? Am I going to admit that this seems right, and then follow through with the actions that are required from this admission? Or am I going to turn my back and say 'Hmm, that's kind of hard, and I'll take an easy road, and I'm going to pretend that I don't know about it.' That was the hardest point. I just really had to face myself. I'm so glad I walked forward – my life has been so rich in so many ways because it makes you really look at things from a different perspective. Not from a material or physical perspective only, but also from a spiritual or timeless criteria. That's what has made all the difference. Also, being able to stand up for what I believe in, to dress the way I believe is best, to follow rules that I know are good for me. In the face of opposition, it makes you strong, makes you confident."

For Theresa, it was important that Islam made sense to her before she accepted it. For example, her anxiety over the fate of non-Christians, like her husband, and newborn babies who, under Christian rules, were going to Hell, were allayed when she discovered that, according to Islam, these groups were mercifully spared damnation. It is, however, interesting that nothing changed in theology or reality. Theresa reoriented her thinking regarding what she felt was just. How does Theresa know what is just, or which scenario is true or correct? Maybe newborns and Muslims do go to Hell because they fail to be baptized. Theresa would respond, "That doesn't make sense, God would never do that," but how does she know how God thinks and behaves? She is creating God's will and decisions, in accordance with her own interpretation of justice. Theresa walked me through the steps of her apostasy from Christianity and subsequent conversion to Islam, outlining the ways in which it made sense to her. Yet, by accepting Islam as the word of God, she at the same time relinquished her freedom to similarly assess the sensibility of other religious tenets of Islam. This sentence is not clear

Theresa was apparently unaware of the fact that she was determining religious truths, rather than being presented with them. The following comments reflect how her thinking changed as a result of rational thought and some persuasion from Yasser, but instead of acknowledging her own

part in creating and accepting the ideas as truth, Theresa decided to accept the whole doctrine of Islam. Again – unclear “Before, it was easy. Yeah, we’re Christian, I’m safe. I’ve got my ticket to Paradise. When I realized, what if I am accountable? What if I am responsible? What if no one is going to carry my sins? It seemed pretty logical. It seemed pretty fair. I really had to, that’s when I decided that I have to become a Muslim, because if I don’t, if I keep believing in this ‘I’m not responsible’ attitude, then I have a lot to lose, there’s a lot at risk.”

Surely, Teresa did not truly believe she was in no way responsible for her actions when she was a Christian. Theresa was a highly disciplined, deeply religious young lady, and there is no doubt that she thoroughly understood the Christian concept of Judgment Day, and behaved as though this eschatological event was really going to happen. Nonetheless, this is another example of Teresa making a decision about how God behaves. All her life, she indicates, she believed that she did not bear the responsibility of her actions; and now suddenly she must. What will happen five years hence, when she realizes that God wants something else? When Teresa was a Christian, she was certain as to what she must do and believe. Now, as a Muslim, she is equally certain.

“Oh, that’s an answer I like. That’s an answer I’m comfortable with.” Is it truth she seeks, or something that reflects what she thinks the truth should be? As I listened, I admired how Teresa had risked the comfort of her strong Christian faith to learn and accept a more compassionate explanation of the fate of unbaptized souls. Making sense should be important to everyone: that is my stated bias. But I couldn’t help but wonder what would happen when she encountered aspects of her new religion that were not as rational, logical .or just. Her solution was to rationalize.

As we will see in the next case, that of Marta, men are allowed to have more than one wife, but women are allowed only one husband. Women in Kuwait rationalize this unfairness by saying, “If a man wants to have children and his wife is unable to, he should be allowed another wife, as long as he treats her the same was as he does his first wife.” When I ask Muslim women why a woman married to a man who is sterile is not allowed to marry a second man, they laugh and say, “She should adopt”.

CHAPTER FOUR

MARTA

Marta is another woman I met at the AWARE center in Kuwait. Marta was as uncomfortable with her conversion to Islam as Teresa was sanguine about it. The speaker on the evening I met Marta was Dr. Teresa, the woman interviewed above. She was giving a presentation on how Muslims view Jesus. It was an hour-long presentation, and I missed the first half because I was lost and in traffic; but from what I gathered, the gist of the lecture was that Muslims hold Jesus in high regard as a prophet, but do not recognize His divine nature. Following the lecture there was a discussion, or *diwaniya*. At one point, a handsome, bearded Arab man, wearing a brown *dishdasha* spoke. He was sitting with a woman in full abaya (adorned with sequins) and hijab. I thought it was his mother, but it turned out to be Marta, his wife. The man spoke at length in response to another man's question about why Westerners so seldom name their children Jesus, unlike Middle Easterners, who often name their sons Muhammad. When controversies about the actual birth date of Jesus arose, Marta commented emphatically and emotionally that December 25 was not His real birth date; she argued, rather, that the Druids had probably decided that date, to celebrate astronomical events. She added that the origins of the Christmas tree were as follows: "That goes back to barbarians who used to use the branches to put heads on, to decorate the tree, after they killed enemies."

Later in the *diwaniya*, her husband, a calm, pleasant young man, said that his wife had become very upset upon learning that, according to Islam Jesus is not considered to be the Son of God. Marta interrupted, shouting, "And don't tell me I have to speak Arabic. I'm so sick of people telling me I don't understand because I don't speak Arabic." Her husband explained that she had been told to pray in Arabic. "It's like saying poetry to me. I don't know what I'm saying. I can't feel it in my heart. They keep telling me I can't understand until I speak Arabic. Then they say they can't understand my English." She had begun to cry, and her voice trembled as she shouted angrily, "I speak the Queen's English!" Her primary concern, though, was with her recent discovery that Muslims do not believe in the