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Is It Good To Be A Muslim?

A philosopher may debate whether there is such thing as absolute truth, or truth with a capital T. Another may say that all paths lead to God, i.e., that all religions or philosophies are equal. If that were the case, then it would not matter if I were Christian, or Muslim, or Atheist, or even if I were an Adolf Hitler, a Karl Marx or Mother Teresa. Each religion would have its own truths, and each person's deeds within the context of their own philosophies would be equally valid. There then becomes no agreeable standard for determining right and wrong.

A Muslim scholar once said that we are given the capacity within ourselves to determine right and wrong. That is plausible, because even from when we are very little, scientists report that we have ideas about fairness that are very unlikely to have been taught to us by our parents. However, I personally believe that the God-given ability to determine right and wrong can become impaired, or diseased, if we are not careful. Once it is diseased, as I imagine it is for most of us to some extent, it becomes difficult to make it well again. Thus, it is difficult for someone, as an example, raised in the West and surrounded by Western ideals, to see all the impairments in the judgment of their society concerning right and wrong. What a person is used to seeing, hearing, and believing seems fair to them.

“He [Satan or Iblis] said: My Lord! Because Thou hast put me in the wrong, I will make (wrong) fair-seeming to them on the earth....” Qu’ran 15:039

If we wish to examine our belief systems, the determining factor for right and wrong can only come from the source of absolute truth. In turn, I contend that absolute truth can only come from the One who created all things. To an Atheist, perhaps that would mean that absolute truth is an inherent characteristic of the Universe. But then where did the matter of the Universe come from, and who endowed it with that characteristic? Are these questions unanswerable because science does not have the means to prove from whence the universe came?

Scientists used to be called natural philosophers and they tried to logically prove the existence of God. My favorite of their arguments is thus: Imagine that you are walking along and find a watch. Upon examining it you find that it has intricate parts which all work together to serve a common purpose of telling time. It has hands that must be placed just so upon a face that must be numbered just so and inside are a multitude of gears and cogs which all must be placed in just such a way and be of just such a size. It has to be made from certain materials and not others. Now imagine that you had never before seen a watch until that very instant. What would be your natural conclusion, that the watch was created by someone to serve a purpose, or that it had come together on its own through a random accumulation of atoms and molecules as physics and geology permitted over time?

When it is put that way, it may seem very silly to imagine that the watch did not have a creator with a purpose in mind. Well, then, what of the universe? It, too, has numerous intricate parts which all work together in such a way as to perform certain functions. For our existence to take place, we require that the universe expanded in uneven clumps that led to distinct galaxies.

The matter has to have arranged in such a way that stars could form, and then lots of stars had to live out their life spans so that we could have the heavier chemical elements. And those have to have traveled through space and massed themselves together into a roughly spherical thing called Earth that then has to have formed around a class-M star within a very narrow range of distances to allow for a proper environment for life.

This Earth had to rotate at just such a rate so that temperature did not get too cold or hot one side or the other. It had to be tilted for proper weather. Water has to have found itself on this planet in abundance and then, some not-yet-understood circumstances have to have taken place to allow for the beginning of life. Next, this life has to have somehow found the way to sustain itself, and has to have found a food supply and shelter. And then it figured out how to reproduce itself, and to adapt to other environments, and then some of it became man and acquired the power of reason....

Look at all the pieces (and I know I am missing quite a few) that had to come together in order for us to exist. And we would imagine that it was all by chance? It only makes sense that there is a Creator of the Universe and of us, just like it only makes sense that there is a creator for the watch. The Universe is a sign of its Creator, and you also are a sign of your Creator. This is the argument for God as put forward by some of history's best natural philosophers. It is not impossible to find logical flaws in such a method depending on your point of view, but at the least it is something to ponder.

I believe it is possible to see that God exists through these many signs of His creation. When I was in junior high, lots of people were telling me that the Universe just happened randomly on its own, as did life, and I heard it so much that it seemed almost plausible.

The Qur'an tells us that there are signs of God's existence all around us:

“We have sent down to thee manifest signs, and none reject them but those who are perverse.”
(2:99)

I concluded from the evidence at hand that God indeed existed, that the Qur’an was a sign from God as per my previously mentioned investigations, and that therefore, as stated in Qur’an, the Prophet Muhammad (saw) was sent by God. The criterion for right and wrong, I decided, was in Islam. That left me with a choice: convert or be a hypocrite, living what I did not believe.

So, I converted. I was relieved that I was on the path I had been looking for, but I still knew very little about Islam. And, I knew I had just done something that would cause more pain to my parents than anything else I had ever even thought of doing.

I dreaded telling my family. I knew there would be yelling and screaming and crying and a long time of anger, hurt, and shock. Well, I was right. They thought I was being foolish, that I could not possibly be in a right state of mind. I had been brainwashed. They would have to lock me up in my house or something. I was going to burn in hellfire. I was doing it to please that Muslim guy because I could not actually believe in it. I would be beaten, oppressed and treated like property. The evil Muslim clerics would come and take me away and treat me horribly. I would change my mind soon.

I learned that when your child converts to another religion, it often feels as if you have lost him or her. There is anger, denial, mourning, and, eventually, acceptance. Some accept it by accepting that they have lost the child and having nothing to do with it. Others accept it by ignoring it as much as possible, or overlooking it, in order to have a relationship with the child. My parents try to ignore it and sort of pretend it didn’t happen. But of course you can’t always do that and so time and again there is pain and conflict.

When I decided to wear *hijab* (Islamic modest dress), I was called a traitor to my family and a wannabe Arab who was abandoning her culture. I was told I was slapping my parents in the face. My mother cried non-stop for a week. And when I wanted to go for *Hajj*, it was repeated. When I fast in the month of Ramadhan, they are unhappy and uncomfortable. I am a fanatic because I eat only *halal* (similar to kosher) meat. I have to pray secretly to avoid their reaction. My mother insists on displaying pictures of me without proper Islamic dress throughout the house where non-related guests might see them, because it is the way that she prefers to remember me.

It hurts knowing your own mother doesn’t like you the way you are and cannot accept it, and it hurts to do something knowing how much pain it causes her and how much strife it causes at home. That probably was the hardest thing for me about converting. It is strange to be doing what you believe to be the right thing and yet your family hates it.

“We have enjoined on man kindness to parents, but if they strive to make thee join with Me that of which thou hast no knowledge, then obey them not. Unto Me is your return and I shall tell you what ye used to do.” (29:8)

My dilemma has always been how to be kind and yet disobey when what they want is contrary to my religious belief? The answer is not always clear, but I pray to Allah (swt) for guidance.

My family has been and continues to be one of my greatest trials. I want to do right by them and also do my best in following God’s commands. I do not really talk to them about religion, and fear I am failing them in that regard. But, they can’t stand to hear it because it is still a very painful issue. I often find myself frustrated with the daily obstacles they put up for me in following my religion, and I must struggle to be patient and kind at all times.

To anyone thinking of converting but worried about a family’s reaction, you cannot let that stop you if you find Islam to be true. I cannot tell you it will be easy, but I can say that the house cannot be in turmoil all the time. Families react differently, and often they react better than expected in the long run. Almost every convert I have known has reported that their families reacted better than they expected. There are a lot of good times, and there are times when it is almost as if nothing has changed, but your relationship with your family will never be quite the same – you will not belong to them like you once did. So, when I am troubled by anything in this life, including my family, I try to remember this:

“And as for those who believe in Allah, and hold fast unto Him, them He will cause to enter into His mercy and grace, and will guide them unto Him by a straight road.” (4: 176)

The purpose of life is not to be happy all the time and have it easy. Our trials are there for a reason and if we bear them patiently then we may be one of the successful. It is good to be Muslim, even if it is sometimes unpopular or misunderstood. It is good to be Muslim even though others oppose you. It is good to be Muslim because you have a clear purpose in life.

“I have created Jinns [spirit-beings living on Earth and created of fire] and humankind only that they might worship Me” Qur’an 51:56

You have detailed guidelines on how to live life and worship God so you don’t have to doubt yourself. When you become Muslim, instead of finding a confusing, winding, many-forked road in front of you, you are confronted with a blessedly straight path. From the day I became Muslim, I have never looked back or doubted that I made the right choice.

What Happens Next?

This is the big question once you have undone your life and started anew as a Muslim. There are quite a few resources and people out there to help those who want to study Islam, or are thinking of converting. Initially, they are hard to find, but when one door is found, it tends to lead to another door and yet another. Muslims seem to like to help people interested in their religion, even though most of the work must be done by the potential convert alone. But for those who have already converted, the situation is sometimes different.

Some Muslims act as if their job is completed and seem to think that because the person has converted he/she no longer needs any help. They do not have the personal experiences in their lives to understand the needs of a convert. The converts may complain that they find themselves forgotten, and again on their own with their struggles to remain on the right path. So you may have to be proactive and persistent in your initial searches for help and information.

In my experience and study, the state of the new converts is truly a state of limbo. They no longer fit into the world from whence they came, and they do not yet fit in to the New World that they have elected to join. Some converts have access to a mosque, but many do not. Either way, their situations are often quite the same.

In my case, that Muslim man that had inspired me to learn about Islam had moved away, and I didn't really know any other Muslims. I saw some men on the university campus who were obviously Muslim, but I didn't dare approach them. They were a group of men with long beards who stood in the engineering building speaking Arabic. And if ever they looked at me as I passed in the halls, it was certainly not a warm, welcoming look. That look they gave was one of judgment. I imagined I could read their minds, thinking that I was an evil American woman.

I felt very bad because here I was a Muslim and I didn't know the first thing about what I needed to do. I only knew that I believed. I tried hard to find out how to pray, but without success. It was months after I converted before a man, who had been a friend of the guy that initially sparked my curiosity in Islam, approached me and taught me how to pray. He was about the only Muslim man on campus that I had met other than my friend. Later, he invited me a few times to eat at his house with his wife during the month of Ramadhan when we were all fasting. When the month was over I didn't see them again for a long time. Eventually, I found that a group of Muslims would get together every week, sometimes more often than that. And then I was invited by the wife of the man who had taught me to pray. I went, very excited and eager for Muslim companionship.

When I came to her house, no one greeted me except the one who had invited me. I wore *hijab* (Islamic

modest dress) and they all knew I was Muslim, and still no one talked to me. They all could speak some English, but it was too burdensome for them, and so they spoke only in Arabic. At times, it seemed as if they were talking about me, but I couldn't tell for sure. Once, one of the ladies who was more talkative and a little better in English spoke to me. She asked if I was married or had children, then she relayed the answer in Arabic to the rest of the group. And that was all. Another time when I was invited, the ladies had removed their *hijab* and so I did likewise, and the same one spoke to me again to tell me that my hair was too dry and I should use conditioner. Again, that was about the sum of their conversations with me. They met every week, yet I was invited maybe once in four months, and never spoken to by anyone except the wife of the man who had taught me to pray. In retrospect, the ladies probably would've talked to me more if I had been more outgoing, but I was rather shy in this strange, new foreign environment.

Another time I was fortunate enough that the man and his wife invited to take me with them to the nearest large city, about an hours' drive, to go to the mosque. There, the women stayed in a small overhang above the mosque floor. It had one-way glass so that supposedly we could see down to the floor and the men couldn't see us. But the glass was so dark that really we couldn't see; the only people who could see were those few who were closest to the glass and could put their foreheads on it to look down.

Whatever happened at the mosque that night was in Arabic, but that didn't matter because I couldn't hear it anyway. It was hard to hear from the overhang, and the ladies up there made it worse because all they did was talk and play with the children. Later, we moved to a basement room and had dinner. This time several ladies greeted me after I had been introduced, and one of them asked me if I would be interested in marrying her brother so he could come to the United States. During dinner, some of the Muslim boys were reciting something but again I could not hear. I wondered why the women bothered coming if all they were going to do was talk. I was pretty disappointed because I had expected more a religious rather than social experience at the mosque.

One day, it came back to me that many ladies felt I had converted so that I could marry one of "their" men. It was then that I realized that not only was it hard for a lot of non-Muslims to understand my conversion, but it was also hard for some of the Muslims. They apparently doubted that anyone would convert to their religion because of its Truth. They preferred to think that people converted for the men, or to associate themselves with the Muslim people and get benefits from them. Even my own husband's family could not believe that any American woman could be a suitable Muslim woman.

This is a strong statement, but perhaps they lack confidence in their religion if they cannot see how others would find the Truth in it. If they knew how much mental turmoil was involved in conversion, or if they realized how much converts give up (their family relationships, their previous way of life, friends, status among their non-Muslim associates, etc.), then maybe they would realize those negative ideas about converts generally have no basis. Out of the many converts I have met, I have never known one

who found conversion easy or took it lightly, nor have I ever known one who converted for any other reason except true belief in the religion.

Many Muslims, on the other hand, act as if they love converts. They tell us, “We so much admire you.” Maybe that is true, but these same people also tend not to build strong associations with the converts. Some Muslims consistently do not invite us into their circle of friends. Someone once told me that this was because the presence of the converts reminds them of their own shortcomings, or because they do not know how to relate to the converts.

My eyes and skin are light. I can speak only English. I am not from their country or culture. My parents are not Muslim. Islam has no place for bigotry, but sometimes Muslims (usually unintentionally) find a place for it anyway. I am sure that frequently they are unaware of what they are doing, but I also know that we are responsible for our actions whether we are aware of their results or not. Often a convert finds it very difficult to understand the apparent cold-heartedness of some Muslims when the religion itself is so contradictory to that behavior. I think it takes converts by surprise to find that the Muslims are mostly just like everyone else, except for those who are truly steadfast in the religion. The Muslims know, however, better than any other group, that their religion is the right one, and so they tend to be confident in their superiority over the non-Muslims. I believe this is a serious shortcoming because it leads to arrogance.

Among Muslims exist some of the most arrogant, judgmental, and tight-fisted people, yet among them also exist the best people of the Earth. I have been fortunate enough to meet some of these, as are most converts eventually.

Many converts are first inspired to study Islam upon encountering a Muslim. This is only true because of the behavior of that Muslim. They see peace of mind, unmatched generosity, uncommon patience, amazing steadfastness, and genuine humbleness before God. These stellar qualities often exude even in the Muslim who is only mildly practicing his faith. And it is these that make the non-Muslims take another look. Perhaps more than in any other religion, Islam is judged by the behavior of its adherents.

When a Christian in a foreign country commits a murder that has nothing to do with his religion, his religion is unlikely to be mentioned. But, if a Muslim does the same, it is very likely that he will be identified as a Muslim and the act will be associated with his faith. I do not know why this occurs, other than the fact that Islam itself does not differentiate between politics and religion. Thus, it becomes confusing for outsiders when Muslims themselves often do differentiate between the two and are capable of committing acts without it having directly to do with Islam.

Many Muslims tend to isolate themselves from the non-Muslims due to lack of commonality and because of Qu’ranic verses which say to not choose non-believers as friends over believers. I think this

is often taken to the extreme, leading them to neglect their duties of neighborliness.

“Allah forbiddeth you not, those who warred not against you on account of religion and drove you not out from your homes, that ye should show them kindness and deal justly with them. Lo! Allah loveth the just dealers.” (60:8)

An average Christian in my country would not think twice of giving charity to a Muslim, but many Muslims would not offer major help to a Christian even if he were his next-door neighbor. They seem to think that there is no reward with God for helping a non-Muslim, or that if they are going to be charitable, there is only enough room in their pocket or time for the Muslims. However, I believe that in Islam it is a duty to help any living thing regardless of its faith, unless doing so would be helping to commit an act against the Muslims.

I firmly believe that those Muslims who are open to appropriate interaction with non-Muslims and treat them with kindness are helping to spread the faith. But before rushing out into the non-Muslim world, the Muslim needs to be sure and strong in his faith and practice. On the other hand, those Muslims who shun non-Muslims and treat them poorly are helping to spread the negative stereotypes of Islam. Those evil stares from the Muslim men in the engineering building made me think their hearts were filled with hate and darkness. And if I had not already found Islam I would have associated that strong negativity with Islam itself.

The One Who Sticks Around is a Blessing

Islam is truly a social religion, and an isolated Muslim is an incomplete Muslim. Someone who is born to a Muslim family and community may not realize the effect of isolation. An unmarried convert lives in a place where no one else rises for prayer in the morning, no one else pays attention to the approach of the next prayer, no one else fasts, no one else is concerned with Islamic behavior, no one else avoids pork or alcohol. When this persists for a long time, it takes its toll. I am sure those who were born to a Muslim family can relate if they have tried to be the only one in their family who prays on time or wears *hijab*, etc. Initially, they are able to keep their focus on the right path, but when surrounded with people who aren't doing that, they lose strength in time, or what the others are doing again starts to become more fair-seeming.

It is only when faced with a Muslim who is better in faith that they are able to see where they have started to slip and find the strength and inspiration to work harder. To me, this is an example of why the Qur'an says,

“...so strive as in a race in all virtues.” (5:48)

Just as a pious Muslim is an inspiration and a help to a non-Muslim, he or she is also an inspiration and a help to other Muslims.

My advice to a new convert or a struggling Muslim, other than simply to pray constantly for help and be patient, would be to seek out the inspiring Muslims until they are found, and then make them your friends, and do not let go of them.

To this day, I do not know what would have happened to my faith if Allah (swt) had not blessed me by leading some of these people to me. When I was at my lowest and did not know where to turn for help, it came. Through the Internet, I found a new wellspring of information and a new source for Muslim companionship. The information helped me to improve my faith and increase my knowledge. It is the people who stick around who make all the difference. A lot of us like to help other people, but in the busyness of our lives, we do it and then move on. We like to send some books and then we forget or lose touch with the recipient; we answer a question and then leave. But, the companionship of a steady friend, one who does not disappear in a day or a week or a month, is the best support.

Truly, I think this companionship is not only the best help, but it is essential. The one who sticks around serves as an unfading link to knowledge, advice, and good example. Further, he/she serves as an access to the Muslim community; becomes the means through which the convert or struggling Muslim establishes a network of other friends, and, finally, a place where they are welcome and where they want to belong. For the convert, these individuals may serve as the Muslim foster-family where their natural family is unsupportive.

What did these people do that made the difference to me? They kept writing back. They were patient. They went out of their way to figure out what I needed and help me get it. If they didn't know an answer, they admitted it and asked around for it. They opened up their hearts and their homes and made me feel like a member of their families. They shared their meals, their thoughts, and the happenings in their lives. They overlooked my shortcomings. They encouraged me. They didn't judge me. They did not hesitate to spend time or money, and they did not make me feel bad when they did so. They kept confidences. When they couldn't help, they still listened. They made me feel as if I was not just taking from them but giving them something in return. They taught me.

These are the inspiring Muslims. They are the blessings to the rest of mankind, although they do not know it. Although none of them are perfect, their efforts make a world of difference.

Too many people think they cannot help when they can. They think they can do little so they do nothing. Allah (swt) has effectively said that He is more pleased with one who has two dollars and gives one than

the one who has more but gives a smaller proportion of what he has. One dollar or one minute may make a difference for the person you seek to help, and it certainly makes a difference for you in the Hereafter. We are so neglectful of our duties to others. There is enough food in this world that everyone should be able to eat five meals a day, and yet millions of people are starving. We look in our own communities and say, “No one is truly needy here.” Isn’t that just an outrageous lie?

There are people in every community in need of mentoring, education, companionship, prayers, transportation, employment, interest-free loans, encouragement, or other gifts. How many youth are there who are confused and in danger of being lost?

How many elderly in your community are sitting alone? How many could use assistance in obtaining forgiveness and worldly needs through your prayer? How many need a ride to the store, to a friend’s house, or to the masjid? How many are struggling to do right and need a hand up? How many are worried about how to send their child to college, or pay their bills or fix their car?

The Muslims and non-Muslims should extend their sight and see the countless opportunities for doing good. Remember that doing good does not cost a thing but rather at least doubles what you have. That is a promise of Allah (swt). In truth, the most reliable investment of all is charity, because it has a God-guaranteed 100% profit margin:

“If ye lend unto Allah a goodly loan, He will double it for you and will forgive you, for Allah is Responsive, Clement....” (64: 17)

Our time and money are not really ours. They are Allah’s (swt), just as everything is His.

Therefore, we should spend it in goodness rather than waste. When we give, we should give something that we ourselves would like to receive if we were in the other person’s shoes.

Did you realize that when you give what you do not want for yourself, you are doing yourself a favor by getting rid of that thing more than helping the other person? Islam teaches that when you give, never mention it again, do not allow yourself to desire something in return, and do not act as if it is difficult or a burden for you even if it is. If you do any of those things, you make the recipient feel bad for needing and accepting your help, and you have lost any reward that you had earned. The inspiring Muslims vie with one another in helping others because they realize that it does not cost them but rather increases what they have; they believe Allah’s Word.

Sometimes we forget Allah (swt), and we allow ourselves to be confused by this world and its distractions. We think, for example, that we should not wear a beard or *hijab* because we will not be able to earn as much money. However, if we pause to reflect on Allah’s (swt) Word, we would realize this is

nonsense because the money comes from Him. If you obey Him, you will be rewarded; it is not the other way around. If you are disobedient to Allah (swt) and find yourself with abundant wealth, this may be a curse, not a blessing.

“So let not their riches nor their children astonish thee. Allah thereby intendeth but to punish them in the life of the world and that their souls shall pass away while they are disbelievers.”

(9:55)

Since whatever we have is not ours but God’s anyway, we should not despair if we have less than others do and should give it freely. A fancy car will do us no good in the Hereafter; neither will a large bank account or hours in front of the television. Whatever passes through our hands may be a test from Allah (swt) to see if we forget that it is His.

God knows, I do not always remember that it is all His. And I know I fail in my duty to those around me. So writing this is a reminder and help to me -- one that I am led to reflect on the selflessness and tirelessness of those that I have called the inspiring Muslims. I leave them nameless here for their sake, and lest I forget to name one, but they do not remain nameless in my prayers and Allah (swt) surely knows who they are.

In summary, the path after converting is not always smooth and a convert may find trials both from Muslims and non-Muslims alike, but he or she will also find a lot of support and in time should find him/herself as a welcome member of a Muslim community, and able to make a positive contribution to it. Allah (swt) is the best supporter.

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