

My Journey to Orthodoxy though Islam- by John Marion

It begins when I was a student at Washington Bible College in Lanham, MD. The Bible degree included an emphasis on missions, cultural anthropology, comparative religion, and cross-cultural communication.

I was required to study various Christian denominations (Western Christianity with little to no exposure to the Orthodox Church) as well as world religions. The study of Islam and history of Christian missionary work among Muslims captured my attention and propelled me into what would become a 26 year journey into the Muslim world.



My first venture brought me to the Islamic Center on Embassy Row in Washington, DC where I was quickly and firmly told to leave because I was not dressed appropriately. It was a hot summer day and I was wearing shorts which is forbidden at the mosque. I went to my car where I had a pair of pants, put them on, and promptly returned where I was warmly welcomed by the cleric and his assistants who kicked me out a few minutes earlier.

This was the first experience of many when, in addition to my academic studies, I learned about Islam from Muslim clerics and devout Muslims. My training enabled me to develop a systematic approach to learning about Islam from Muslims by asking questions. I have had many conversations at mosques and in Shia and Sunni Muslim communities in Washington, DC, New York City, London, Istanbul, Islamabad, Peshawar Pakistan, Kabul, and Mazar-i-Sherif, Afghanistan.

The things I learned over the years have allowed me the opportunity to compare and contrast the beliefs and practices of Muslims with the fundamental, Orthodox teachings of Christianity. Without any knowledge of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the missionary community to which I belonged developed answers to various objections against Christianity. I realized later in my spiritual journey that the Orthodox Church had centuries earlier developed a set of answers to these theological debates, especially in the writing of Saint John of Damascus and the Church Fathers.

Muslims told me many things about their perspective of Christian theology and culture. These included their reasons for rejecting the fundamental teachings of Christianity and their beliefs about relevant topics such as prophets, revelation, sacred writings, and angels.

So what does all this have to do with my journey to Orthodoxy?

When I first discovered Orthodoxy and thought about the beliefs and practices of the Orthodox Church, I started experiencing new things that Muslims told me about Christianity! Some of these things have theological meaning while others are more culturally relevant to an Eastern world-view.

The following is a list of a few things that have been meaningful to me in my journey to Orthodoxy through Islam. As you read this list, please be aware that my understanding of Islam comes mostly from practical experience and personal encounters with devout Muslims, including clerics.

The Four Holy Books. Muslims believe God sent many prophets to mankind. While some have been “writing prophets” only four books are still extant. These are the Torah of Moses, the Psalms of David, the Gospel of Jesus, and the Quran of Mohammed. Muslims state that the Torah, Psalms, and Gospel have all be corrupted and that only the Quran has survived as revealed by God.

One of the arguments Muslims have developed is that the Christians do not have the Gospel Book of Jesus. Christians say they have the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John but they don’t have the Gospel of Jesus. I have thought about this for many years and have explained to Muslims that the four gospels together is the good news preached by Jesus Christ. But I have always asked myself, why do the Muslims say that Jesus has a Gospel Book?

After several visits to Saint Elizabeth, I realized that the Orthodox Church has the Gospel Book of Jesus!

Look at the icon of Christ to the right of the royal doors and look up on the ceiling. Jesus is holding the Gospel Book. Look and see the priest and deacon lifting up and processing with the Gospel Book of Jesus during the Little Entrance in every Divine Liturgy.

My Journey to Orthodoxy though Islam- *Continued*

Reverence Towards Clerics and Holy Objects. In Western Christianity formal reverence is rarely or never shown toward ordained ministers and holy objects. You will probably never see an Evangelical venerating a Bible or kissing the hand of their pastor.

Muslims however will show a reverence toward their clerics and holy objects, such as the Quran or prayer beads. While they categorically reject the use of icons, they will always demonstrate their reverence of the Quran by always placing it on a high shelf or place of honor and never on the floor. They will usually kiss the Quran book when they pick it up.

When the Quran is read in the mosque, it is reverently chanted and this is also usually practiced by devout Muslims when they read the Quran in their homes. It is never read casually without intonation.

I was absolutely stunned the first time I heard the Gospel chanted on YouTube by an Arab Orthodox deacon on Easter morning liturgy. The intonation was the same as what I heard in mosques around the world. I immediately understood that Islam learned this practice from Orthodox Christianity.

Seeing the reverence Muslims demonstrate toward holy objects and clerics prepared me to have a higher level of comfort entering the Orthodox Church. An Eastern world-view is enshrined in the practices of the Church. If it had not been for my experiences in the Islamic world I don't know if I would have been as open to the things that are considered to be weird from a purely American / Western perspective, such as venerating icons.

Angels, Invisible Spirits, and Saints. My Bible college and short seminary training gave me opportunity to study about the existence of angels and demons from an academic viewpoint. Most Evangelical pastors and Bible scholars I know preach and teach about angels from an academic point of view with little or no benefit to the practical Christian life. Saints are godly Christians who have fallen asleep in the Lord, but no prayers or communication with the saints are practiced. The saints are merely remembered for their exemplary lives.

In contrast to most pastors in Evangelical churches I know, the missionaries I worked with talked freely about the invisible spirit world. Our experiences with Muslims included conversations about angels and other spirits which the Muslims call jinn. Thinking and talking about the existence of invisible spirits in this context is normal. Muslims will give special reverence toward those who are considered saints. Special honor, and to a certain extent fear, is demonstrated at gravesites of saints and cemeteries.

Our missionary community even engaged in what we called "spiritual warfare" in our prayer life. We prayed against demonic activities we believe we were experiencing. Sometimes we mentioned specific angels in our prayers. The book of Daniel mentions the archangels Gabriel and Michael who speaks of "the prince of the kingdom of Persia" which is a reference to Satan. This had particular relevance to us in the missionary community who were witnessing for Christ in the Persian world of Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

Look at the icons on the walls at Saint Elizabeth. We see angels depicted in many icons. Some icons are devoted to a single angel, such as Michael, Gabriel or a guardian angel. The existence of and interaction with angels is a normal part of the Orthodox Christian experience. We honor and pray to saints of the Church in every worship service.

The belief in angels and the invisible spirit world is prominent among devout Muslims who will talk to angels several times a day. My experiences in the Islamic world prepared me to be receptive to the invisible spiritual world that we experience as Orthodox Christians.

Respect for Mary. Islam has more respect for Mary than evangelical Christianity. I always wondered why the Quran gave so much respect to Mary since my version of Christianity showed very little respect, and sometimes derision, toward Mary. Islamic theology denies the deity of Jesus. He is a great prophet, but not the Son of God. Islam teaches, however, that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus. One of the titles of Jesus is Masi (Messiah, Christ) but no specific meaning is attached to that title other than honor and respect for Jesus as a great prophet. Mary is highly esteemed in Islam.



My Journey to Orthodoxy though Islam- *Continued*

The experiences I have had in listening to Muslims speak reverently toward Mary was in stark contrast to how my Evangelical colleagues spoke of Mary. As I began my journey into Orthodoxy, these experiences kept my heart and mind open to learning more about why Mary is so highly esteemed.

Obviously the respect Islam demonstrates toward Mary in the Quran comes from ancient Christianity. What I have learned is that Mary is the best example of any human being who has followed Christ. She became like Christ more than anyone else.

Biblical Figures. Muslims have respect for some of the prophets and saints mentioned in the Bible. Here is a story of one of my experiences talking about saints to a Muslim. This took place in the area known as Pashtunistan, the place of the Pashtuns, which straddles the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is the homeland of the Taliban.

I was part of a relief effort to distribute food and blankets to refugees fleeing from the mujahideen wars in the late 1990's. We were scoping out a suitable location to bring in a massive amount of supplies. Our group was comprised of Christian missionaries from many different countries and local Afghans. During some down time I talked with one of the Afghan Muslim co-workers.

My new friend asked me about my father, which is a normal question. In this culture, the family structure and family relationships are important. I told him about my father and my mother, John and Mary. I showed him a photograph of my family and told him my son's name is John and my daughters name is Elizabeth. I explained that these are important names to me as they are names of important saints mentioned in the Bible. I knew he would know who I was talking about as I explained about the biblical figures of Mary the mother of Jesus, John the Baptist, John the Evangelist, and Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist. This was a natural conversation we had about my family and he told me about his family.

Shortly after this encounter Michele and I with our two young children, John and Elizabeth, moved from Pakistan into Afghanistan to begin the next chapter of our journey. A year or two later I ran into one of the missionaries I knew in Pakistan. He told me that one of our Japanese Christian co-workers had a friendship with the same Afghan Muslim I talked to about my family.

The missionary had been talking to his Muslim friend for several years about Christ. He had shown an interest in Christianity but wasn't ready to move forward making a confession of faith Christ. I was told that after my conversation with him about my family and the saints, the Afghan guy went to his Christian friend to tell him about his experience listening to my story and that he was now ready to become a follower of Christ!

This and other experiences in the Muslim world has helped me to talk freely about saints mentioned in the Bible to non-Christians. The lives of the saints are powerful stories to share. These experiences prepared me to take the next step as an Orthodox Christian to actually talk to the saints themselves!

Of course my wife Michele has many experiences and stories too. Ask her!

My Prayer for Muslims

Some of the Afghans we knew are Christians but most are not. Some of them are named Hussain, Abdul, Zahir, and Mohammed. Two of my American colleagues, Tom and Dan, have given their lives while serving as relief workers among displaced people in northern Afghanistan. I will never forget their selfless sacrifices to the Afghan people and I will never forget many of the Muslims I have met and lived among. They have been kind and hospitable toward me and my family.

Muslims have a zeal for God but they are spiritually blind to the love of Christ. My prayer for Muslims is like the Apostle Paul's prayer for Israel, "Brethren, my heart's desire and my supplication to God is for them, that they may be saved."

