

From Cairo to Christ: How One Muslim's Faith Journey Shows the Way for Others

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"My religion was not an afterthought about what life after death might be like, but a holistic understanding of what life is now. The air I breathed was Islamic. Changing from Islam to Christianity would mess up my life forever."

An Egyptian Muslim Encounters Christ

In my last year of high school my best friend, Abd al-Rahman, joined the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood is a conservative group in Egypt that believes Egypt should be an Islamic state, complete with sharia law and a caliph. In order to socialize with the al-Rahman family, I joined the Muslim Brotherhood too. In doing so I not only wanted to get close to them but also entertained the hope that Allah would reward me with good enough grades to qualify for Cairo University. For me, joining the Muslim Brotherhood wasn't a formal or religiously significant event; I just took up their practices and tagged along with my friend and his father.

In the mid-1970s, the Muslim Brotherhood began to take very aggressive positions. They took over many labor unions, including the Student Union at Cairo University. They threatened with knifing any non-Brotherhood student who contemplated running for the Student Union. They segregated the men from the women in classes. Anyone who dared to oppose them risked death from knifing. This was too much for me. I left the Brotherhood as quickly and quietly as I had joined it.

Once, while I was sitting in the cafeteria at the university, I saw one of the Muslim Brothers walk up to a young Christian woman. I knew he was one of the Muslim Brotherhood because he had a full beard, a special head covering, and he wore a shin-length robe. She was a Coptic Christian, and she wore a necklace with a cross pendant on it. He ripped the necklace off her neck, spat on her, and ground the cross pendant into the floor with his heel. He slapped her and said, "You infidel! You are going to hell!"

As you can imagine, this made quite an impression on me and the other students who were there. We were all Muslims, but in Egypt we had learned to tolerate the Copts over many centuries. After all, Egypt was once a Christian country, and Alexandria was a major Christian center before the Arabs took over. What was going on? Why were the Muslim Brothers acting this way? There is a saying among Muslims: "Islam is perfect, though its practice is often flawed." I certainly saw the flaws in its practice when I looked at Muhammad Abd al-Rahman and the vicious Muslim Brothers at the University of Cairo.

Our neighborhood was quite cosmopolitan, and included many Europeans. One of these was the son of a German engineer who was about my age. The boy, Jansi, was an atheist like his father, who had grown up during World War II and lost all faith in God. Jansi was also a first-class womanizer. He was hot for Egyptian women, especially the Christian ones, since they were considered classier and worldlier than the plain and pure Muslim women.

Jansi dragged me to a meeting where such women were to be found. To my great disappointment it turned out to be a Christian meeting in which they prayed and studied the

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Abu Atallah is the founder and CEO of European Training Centre and a pastor, professor, and missionary with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. He was born and raised in Egypt and after his conversion was involved with Campus Crusade at Cairo University.

In 1979 he came to the United States, where he attended the Urbana missions conference and heard God's call to minister to his people. He founded the Arab American Friendship Center in Dearborn, Michigan, and was a consultant and trainer for Arab World Ministries in London and across Europe.

Atallah has ministered in fifty-six countries on six continents. He has a master of divinity from Calvin Theological Seminary.

Bible. The women there did mingle openly with men and wore no veils. They walked freely among the young men, who seemed to think it nothing unusual. *How could they!* I wondered. But there was nothing unseemly going on. The men and women treated one another as if they were brothers and sisters, not like the characters in Western soap operas, which is what I expected. I later learned that they were as surprised by my presence as I was by theirs.

One person at this meeting got up to pray, and he thanked God for helping him with his homework. *What idiocy!* I thought. Why would you expect the Lord of the universe to care about your homework? Allah is the master, and we are the slaves. Islam means "submission," so a Muslim's duty is to submit to the will of Allah, not try to influence it. The servant must please the master; the master never serves the slave. So addressing God as Father was both strange and blasphemous. How dare we bring God to our level and give him an earthly title like Father?

The prayer also seemed wrong in the very way it approached God. In Islam, prayers are clearly prescribed and programmatic. They are typically memorized chapters from the Qur'an. We know the words in advance, and we repeat the prayers five times a day, each time the muezzin calls us to prayer. We may occasionally add a few personal notes to the end of the prayer, called *Du'a'a*, but we never just pray whatever comes to mind. Reciting prayers is a good deed for which Muslims receive credit. These Christians, on the other hand, spoke to God as if they were conversing with a friend.

Allah demands submission and obedience, whereas the Christian God asks for our love. There are ninety-nine names for Allah in the Qur'an that Muslims commonly recite. One of them, *Al-Wadud*, is sometimes translated as "Loving God." But a more accurate translation of *Al-Wadud* is "the Concerned or Friendly God who visits us." The actual Arabic word for love, *mahaba*, is not a name for Allah, and even *Al-Wadud* is but one of the ninety-nine names. The nature of Allah is not revealed in the Qur'an; only his will is. As a result, few Muslims will say that they know Allah himself; they only know what Allah demands. As I would soon learn, the first letter of John simply says, "God is Love." This difference between the Christian God of love and the Muslim God of law and justice would change my life. Hearing the children's song "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know" was an amazing revelation for me. God loves me? What a strange idea!

My brother Yasser had once dated a Christian woman from Armenia while she was studying in Egypt. She had given him an Arabic Bible with the hope that he would read it and perhaps convert. But Yasser forgot about it and stuck it in a drawer. I happened (or was I predestined?) to find it there one day and began to read it sporadically. There is no way a proper Muslim should have a Bible in the house, but I was safe with this one. If someone caught me with it, I could honestly say that it wasn't mine — that I had simply found it.

From the Bible I learned a great deal. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the divine



revelation Muhammad received directly in visions, and that the Bible and the Torah are the mistaken early versions of God's revelation to Muhammad. But I began to suspect that the opposite might be the truth. When I read the Bible, I found that Jews and Christians have always prayed to their God as if conversing with a loving friend and father, and their prayers were answered. They prayed not as trembling servants to a Master but as a child to his Baba, or sometimes as a sibling to an older brother – Christ. *Different*, I thought, *Very different*. I would never have thought of addressing Allah as a father or brother.

As I continued to read the Bible and observe the Christian young people I began to see a consistent message throughout. The message was that Jesus not only spoke the truth but was the truth. And the truth was that he loved us as a father and brother. He was more than a prophet. A prophet like Muhammad might have spoken the truth, but to be the truth itself required that he be more than a prophet.

I had an inkling that I might want to become a Christian, so my curiosity led me to a local Protestant church. I met with the pastor and told him I thought I would like to be baptized and become a Christian. He told me I was too young and didn't know what I was doing. He was right. So I began a two-year period of study and reflection: I read books on Christianity, met with Christians, and continued to pray to God in Christ.

If I were to become a Christian, it would mean not only changing my religion but changing my whole identity and bringing shame upon my family. My whole family is Muslim, and my society and culture was Muslim. My religion was not an afterthought about what life after death might be like, but a holistic understanding of what life is now. The air I breathed was Islamic. Changing from Islam to Christianity would mess up my life forever. I could not expect to get a job in the diplomatic corps or any other high-ranking position in Egypt if people found out I was Christian. Muslim women would not consider me a legitimate marriage partner. My family would disown me. I might even be considered a spy or someone who betrayed his country, his people, and his religion. I could even lose my life – not only figuratively but literally. How could I leave country, family, and religion behind? It was as if I would no longer exist. Becoming a Christian would be truly crazy. Not only might I face death, I would put my family to shame, and the worst thing that an Arab can do is to put his family to shame.

Nonetheless, I kept having internal conflicts and continued to raise questions. Most of them had to do with the behavior of the Christians I was getting to know, in comparison to that of the Muslims I had long known. There is a saying in Arabic, "Only a rotten orange produces rotten juice." So if Christianity is so rotten, why were the Christians I had gotten to know so good? The Muslim Brother in the cafeteria and Abd al-Rahman's father were far worse than the young people in the Christian group. How then was this rotten orange of Christianity producing such good juice while the perfect orange of Islam was producing rotten juice?



BOOK EXCERPT

I went back to the Christian study group now and then. They kept praying and speaking spontaneously with God. They loved their God and one another. A Muslim like me didn't love or yearn for Allah. We feared and obeyed Allah. The Christians turned to their God as if he were their dearest and most beloved friend. For them it was almost a romance; for me such a romance was a scandal. They were pursuing a relationship with a Person, and that Person loved them dearly enough to give up his life for them. I began to wonder, *How much of what I have learned about both Islam and Christianity is wrong?* Could everything my family and society taught me about Islam and Christianity be untrue? My whole sense of reality and truth was collapsing right in front of my eyes. What would I do if my whole belief system were a lie?

The official penalty for apostasy from Islam is death. Most Westerners, and especially Muslims in the West, don't want to acknowledge this, but within the *hadiths* death is clearly prescribed as the punishment for a Muslim who apostatizes by becoming a Christian, Jew, or other religionist. Granted, the death penalty is not always carried out for those who convert from Islam, but it is part of the sharia, and the more intensely Islamic the nation, the more likely that death will be meted out. In Egypt, death was a real possibility if I were to convert. The death sentence might not be administered by the government but by the religious community. There have been cases where the secret police informed a radical Islamic group about converts in their midst so they could ferret them out and kill them.

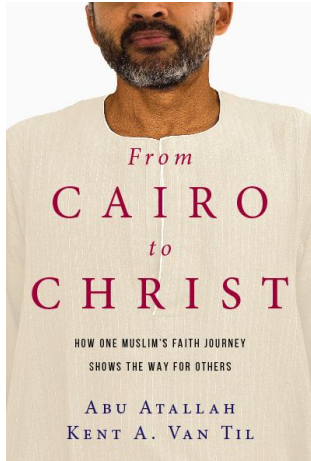
I came to recognize that I would never become perfect by following all the rules of sharia. I could never be sure if my book of good deeds would be heavier than my book of evil deeds on Judgment Day, but I believed Christ could make me perfect. Since he was perfect, I could claim his perfection as my own if I accepted him. I was about to commit *shirk*, which is the unpardonable blasphemy of putting someone or something at the level of Allah, namely, Jesus Christ.

Would it be worth it? Should I risk death?

I didn't know what to pray or what to say, but I knew I had changed. The love of Christ had found me. One day I came across a copy of the *Four Spiritual Laws*, and in it I found the "Believer's Prayer." I prayed that prayer. I needed the love of Christ and his redemption, not merely warnings from the Prophet Muhammad. Jesus loved me; this I now knew.

I became a Christian, and on Christmas Day 1977 I was baptized into Christ. I chose the Christian name of Stephen, the first martyr, suspecting that my own martyrdom might not be far off.

—Adapted from chapter three, "Encountering Christ"



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From Cairo to Christ is the remarkable story of how one Muslim man was drawn to the Christian faith and how he later became an ambassador for Christ with a ministry in the Muslim world. Abu Atallah shares his journey of faith and growing up in Egypt, shedding light on Islamic cultural dynamics and helping Westerners understand the struggles of Muslim-background believers. His compelling narrative also demonstrates how God is bringing surprising numbers of Muslims to Christ.

Christianity Is Growing in the Muslim World

Many Muslims are coming to know Christ. And I see the current events in the Arab world as leading to further growth in Christianity. The view of Christianity in Egypt and throughout the Arab world has changed dramatically after the Arab Spring. On the one hand, the ugliest portrait of Islam is apparent in country after country. On the other, the beautiful love of Christ beckons all.

Tens of thousands of Muslims are becoming Christians in Europe, and tens of thousands more in the Arab-speaking world. As an example of how things have changed, consider the recent opportunity I had to serve as a trainer for missionaries. A Christian from Egypt, I was training South Korean Christians, in Europe, to work in the Arab world. Clearly the days of the British gentry trekking off to Africa carrying a Bible and wearing a pith helmet have come to an end. The globe is shrinking, and nationalities are blending. Getting involved in God's redemptive mission can take many forms today, from medical missions to media missions, teaching, aid and development, and tent making of various kinds. Where God is already at work, any of these means can be effective.

Another reason I believe Christianity will continue to grow in the Muslim world is that global communication is now so easy. On any given day I am in contact with supporters in the United States, recent converts in Libya, our training center in Europe, and a church leader in Indonesia. The Internet is available globally, though the poor may lack direct access to it. Email has overtaken snail mail by factors of millions. North American teenagers send thousands of texts to one another every month, and teens in developing countries are not far behind. Whereas one hundred years ago the news of the gospel had to be delivered in person, today it can be delivered in multiple ways. Today you have to live in a pretty thick cocoon not to hear at least something of Christ.

God also sometimes has some pretty dramatic ways of bringing Muslims in. Since Muslims are so dogmatic about their faith, God uses healings, dreams, and other miracles that show his truth backed by his loving power. I call it God's "two-by-four method": if you won't listen to reason, I'll smack you upside the head with miraculous surprises. The Holy Spirit is a powerful weapon in the battle of faiths, one that Islam does not have.

As for me, I have no regrets about following Christ, though many people have asked whether I do. After all, I had to flee my native country and leave behind a society, family, and language that I know and love. I gave up some measure of wealth. Today when I travel to the Middle East and North Africa I still risk possible death. If I were to return to my family home in Egypt under my true Egyptian name, I would likely be imprisoned, or

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BOOK EXCERPT

"I have no regrets about following Christ, though many people have asked whether I do. After all, I had to flee my native country and leave behind a society, family, and language that I know and love. I gave up some measure of wealth. Today when I travel to the Middle East and North Africa I still risk possible death. If I were to return to my family home in Egypt under my true Egyptian name, I would likely be imprisoned, or perhaps even killed. But I do not regret it."

perhaps even killed. But I do not regret it. Not once in the years since I became a Christian have I felt that I made a mistake. The love of Christ found me, and I will not leave him.

I have experienced this love for over thirty years as a Christian and have not questioned whether I should follow Christ since that first day in Cairo. On the other hand, I saw – and continue to see – the political anger, religious insecurity, and destructive sexism that Islam has produced. I have seen the violence of Muslim versus Christian and Muslim versus Muslim. Islamists are eager to die for their religion, whereas the leader of Christianity died for us. The difference is clear: Islam is submission to an impersonal lawgiver who honors his fallen warriors, whereas Christianity honors those who follow the personal and living God of love. In Christianity, heaven came down to us. In Islam, we must get to heaven by our good deeds or by martyrdom.

More Muslims have come to Christ in the last forty years than have done so in the previous fourteen centuries, and most of them come to Christ for the same reason that I did: they see the love of Christ and of Christians. My task is to support them. I do this today by discipling new believers at our study center, visiting oppressed believers throughout the Arab world, writing, and raising money for converts who have lost most or all of their family and social connections.

I am confident that when my days on earth come to an end, I will not stand before a God who merely looks at the scale weighing my good deeds versus my evil ones. Were it so, I would live in uncertainty, as many Muslims do. I know that it is not what we can do for God that matters, but what God in Christ has done for us. I am not interested in the wine, milk, honey, or maidens of an Islamic paradise. I am confident, rather, that I will live in an eternal relationship with my loving Father, who has shown his love by sending his Son. I am also confident that when I come face to face with God I will be joined by people from every tongue and nation. Many of them will be Arabs who bow before Christ and confess him as Lord. It will be a great delight to see them – and to know that I was able to introduce some of them to Christ.

– Adapted from the epilogue