

Growing up Muslim and Turning to Jesus in the West Bank

When I was a child, I often wondered, “How do Muslims become Muslims, Christians become Christians and Jews become Jews?”

I asked my father this question, “Who chooses our religion? Who determines our identity and why we follow different religions and sects?”

He told me, “Every new baby born into this world is born according to the nature of Islam, according to the hadith that came from the Prophet, which says: ‘Every child that is born, is born upon the Fitrah, but his parents make him a Jew, a Christian, or a Zoroastrian. This is just as the animal is born, complete with all of its parts.’”

The family determines the identity of the newborn, whether Muslim, Christian or Jewish. When you are born into a Muslim family, you do not choose to be a Muslim. Your parents were born Muslims and they did not choose to be Muslims because their grandparents chose for them to be Muslims and so on sequentially from generation to generation.

In this article, I want to tell you what it means to grow up as a Muslim in a committed family, following the teachings of Islam and living in a city whose population is mostly Muslims, and then discover and follow Jesus.

When I was six years old, my father began teaching me the teachings of Islam, which are the pillars of Islam.

I learned the confession, called the Shahadah: I confess that there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet.

I also learned the five pillars of Islam: Shahadah, Salat (Prayer 5 times per day), Zakat (almsgiving), Sawm (fasting

especially in Ramadan), and Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca).

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I received training in memorizing and reciting the Qur'an.

When I saw family members practicing Islamic rituals, I would imitate them and participate during prayers. I would also go with them to the mosque every Friday.

The first school I went to was Islamic. This school showed care for the student, focusing on both academic and spiritual aspects. The students learn about Islam, including instruction in the prayers, reading and reciting the Qur'an, and learning about the life of the Messenger (Muhammad) and the Companions. We were taught to imitate the Prophet and his Companions. We were taught why Allah gave Islam and how it spread. We would study and memorize hadiths (sayings) of the prophet and learn what it means to be a pious Muslim.

The four years from age 6 to 10 are an important time for teaching a person to become a devout Muslim, especially in a religious family. This time lays a foundation of religion "until religion becomes the most important part of life, making it clear to people that life without religion is Nothing, a person cannot live without practicing the rituals, worship, customs and imitations that this religion imposes on him."

As a Muslim progresses in Islam, he imitates the Prophet and the Companions, becoming more religious and more Islamic.

Muslims are taught that Islam is the only religion acceptable to Allah (Surah Al Imran 19). They are also taught that it is the only religion which truly teaches monotheism, which came for every time and place in order to restrain immorality and evil.

The Muslim believes that there are three religions which come from God: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He believes in the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel, and believes these books came to teach monotheism. He believes in the prophets of the Old Testament, and that they taught monotheism, which he understands to mean Islam and the coming of the Prophet Muhammed.

However, the Muslim also believes these books have been corrupted by the followers of Judaism and Christianity, causing them to leave the path of truth and become polytheists, who associated other gods with Allah.

The West Bank is majority Muslim, with only around 2% of the population being Christian, mostly in Bethlehem, Ramallah, and Jericho. Christians mostly live in specific neighborhoods in these cities and are often divided into groups such as: Catholic, Orthodox, Syriac, and very few Evangelicals.

When a Muslim gets the opportunity to mingle with Christians, like in private Christian schools or in sports clubs, he has a distorted view of their beliefs and practices, such as thinking that Christians believe in three gods, that the Virgin Mary is a god, that all Christians pray to or worship saints, images, and statues, and that there is more than one mediator between God the Father and mankind.

A Muslim living in places like Hebron, Qalqilah, or Tul Karem, where there is practically no Christian presence, does not meet Christians, and only hears about them from Islamic sources. Some may be surprised to hear that Christians believe in God, because they will think that Christians are polytheists who worship the cross, get tattoos, drink alcohol, eat pork, and have Western names like George, Tony, or Steve.

In Arabic society, in addition to the distorted image that the Muslim gets from the Qur'an about the Christian faith and Christianity, he also gets a distorted image about the

Christian faith from the Christians themselves. How will a Muslim know the truth about the Christian faith?

I can tell you what happened to one Muslim in the West Bank when a genuine Christian believer met him.

This believer was able to change the distorted image that the Muslim had acquired, who believed that Christianity was merely a weak, mythical, illogical religion, based on heresies, which could not come from God.

This Muslim was so amazed that he could hardly believe that what he saw was real, when confronted with a Christian person who was talking to him and sharing the Christian faith with him!

This Muslim had questions about Christianity, the questions that every Muslim might ask him, such as: Has the Bible been distorted? This is one of the most famous questions that Muslims ask whether they are educated or uneducated. Every Muslim grows up with the idea that the Bible has been distorted without evidence, so much so that they never look at the Christian doctrine and are content with what the Qur'an and the sheikhs of Islam tell them.

Through the dialogue between the Muslim and the believer in Jesus, the Muslim discovered that he had a distorted image of Jesus and Christianity, an image obtained from the Qur'an or from Christian sects. This attracted the Muslim to learn more about the Christian faith, because what he had heard before and what he had been taught was not true, and he began to read the Bible and get to know more about Jesus. After a period of time this Muslim decided to follow Jesus and believe in him because he discovered that he is the true God.

What does it mean for a Muslim in the West Bank to leave Islam and become a follower of Jesus?

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When a Christian abandons Christianity and becomes a Muslim, he is not exposed to physical violence by his family or his former community or the government. Their families may disown them, but they can clearly introduce themselves by saying they used to be Christians without fear of persecution or killing. Some even announce their conversion to Islam on social media.

But what does that mean in a religion where there are clear texts ordering the killing of apostates?

The Sunnah clearly states that whoever changes their religion should be killed, whether they stay or leave, because they have abandoned the religion. The prophet Muhammed said, "He who changes his religion (i.e. apostatizes), kill him."

Sheikh Al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian Muslim scholar and former president of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, said in television interview, "If there was no punishment for apostasy, there would be no Islam. It would have ended Islam since the death of the Messenger."

When you convert from Islam in the West Bank, there is a cost, as the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 16:24-25. This is especially true in places where there are no Christians. There are many brothers and sisters who left Islam and followed Christ, and some of them faced the serious consequences of beating, expulsion, persecution, and killing. Especially those who professed their faith publicly and went out of the circle of secret believers. They became persecuted, expelled, and sometimes killed. Only it's supposedly their fault, because they decided to leave their religion, the religion of their parents and grandparents.

If you live in the West Bank and leave Islam, follow the truth, and believe in Christ, your life will change. Yes, your life will change upside down, and it may be destroyed by

people you love. The deeper you go in faith, following Jesus, the more difficult life will be, as Jesus said in Matthew 5:44, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

You may even be accused of treason for following the teachings of Christ and loving your enemies, especially the Jews. Human nature does not teach you to love your enemies. It teaches you to hate and kill your enemies. It is unnatural when someone says, "I love my enemies."

When we talk about enemies in the West Bank, we involuntarily think about the Israeli Jews. How could you love them? But when Jesus changes your life, only then will you love your enemies and pray for them. But this will be something unusual for the society in which you live, and you will be persecuted.

Knowing Jesus and following him is a very difficult decision in the West Bank. Despite the difficulties and consequences for those following Christ from a Muslim background, when they realize the true joy that exists in Christ it is worth it.

The worst thing that can happen to a person who believes in Jesus from an Islamic background is murder. If someone comes to kill you, to fulfill the commandment of the prophet to kill the apostate, this person may be a brother, a father, or an uncle. The true joy will be to say to him, as Christ said on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." When you can say to them, "Thank you, I am going to Jesus now." This is the true joy of knowing Christ, there is nothing better than that.

Pray for the believers, brothers and sisters from an Islamic background in the land where Jesus lived and was crucified. They need your prayers. And ask the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into his harvest, (Luke 10:2) so that the good news of the Gospel will change the distorted image of Christ and Christianity.

This article originally appeared on ALL ISRAEL NEWS, and is reposted with permission.

Abdel-massih (Servant of the Messiah) grew up in the West Bank in a Muslim family before finding Jesus and becoming a disciple. He has been a follower of Jesus for several years. Abdel-massih is not his real name, as revealing his identity at this time would be dangerous to himself and his family.