

When Muslims Find Jesus

Although it takes a back seat to rumors of war, a tsunami of faith is quietly overtaking the Muslim world. Islamic adherents are laying aside their allegiance to Muhammad to follow Jesus Christ, despite the social ostracism, persecution and possible martyrdom that converts to Christianity face. Propelled by dreams, visions and miracles, this wave of revival is bringing vast numbers of Muslims-some say millions-into God's kingdom.

Middle East expert Joel Rosenberg believes more Muslims have come to faith in Christ in the last 30 years than at any time in history. "The vast majority of those conversions have happened since 9/11," he notes. He relates some of their stories in his upcoming book, *Inside the Revolution*, releasing March 10.

A few examples of this flock of converts:

-Last Easter at Vatican City, Magdi Allam-Italy's most prominent Muslim commentator-was baptized with six other people by Pope Benedict XVI.

-In August, ex-Sunni Muslim Emir Caner was elected president of Truett-McConnell College, which is affiliated with the Georgia Baptist Convention. Caner converted as a teenager in 1982.

-The same week of Caner's appointment, Mosab Hassan Yousef-son of an influential Hamas leader in the Palestinian West Bank of Israel-publicly embraced Christianity four years after his salvation. He now attends an evangelical church in San Diego.

One missionary to Iran, who asked to remain anonymous, says a "tremendous" number of Muslims there are seeing that "Islam as a religion has failed them personally, economically, spiritually and socially."

Tom Doyle, the Middle East director for Dallas-based e3 Partners, an independent missions agency, says his group planted 127 churches last year in the region, a significant upswing since the start of the decade. He says the news from the Middle East is awakening Christians in the West and showing them that, despite headline-grabbing terrorists, all is not lost.

"We've seen 1,000 Muslims come to Christ this year in Syria alone," Doyle says. "All the partner ministries we work with say this is the new revival."

However, California pastor Hormoz Shariat, whose International Antioch Ministries broadcasts by satellite to the Middle East and Europe, cautions against fixing specific numbers to salvations because Iranian churches shy away from publicizing conversion counts. "It provokes the government [and] hurts the church in Iran," Shariat says. "But our network is growing fast. Every day we have stories of dreams and visions and miracles."

Al Janssen, communications director of Open Doors International, also discovered that dreams and visions of Christ were the starting points of the spiritual journeys of dozens of Muslim-background believers in the Middle East whom he interviewed for his 2007 book, *Secret Believers*. Then, after coming to Christ, they would become creative evangelists, he says.

Typically their witnessing occurs only in one-on-one settings, with the believer asking questions to determine if the other person is receptive to the gospel. "They go through a series of questions, and if they sense the person is getting hostile, they resist playing their hand," Janssen says. "One ex-*imam* had a list of 62 people he was discipling. I met an ex-terrorist who had been with a group for seven years, and now he's proudly witnessing for his faith."

Despite these optimistic accounts, a spiritual battle rages that requires vigilant prayer. As Doyle puts it: "The task is so enormous, and the pressure is so fierce."

Rosenberg once saw a leading Saudi cleric on the Al-Jazeera TV network lamenting the fact that 6 million Muslims were converting to Christianity every year. "There's such an enormous number of Muslims converting through the region, it's a big topic for Muslim leaders who are upset about it," Rosenberg says. "You're seeing some blowback."

The dedication of these new converts is impressive when considering the common threat of ostracism from family and social networks. Jonathan Oloyede, senior associate pastor of Glory House in London, came to Christ as a Muslim while studying at a Nigerian medical school. He labels withdrawal of fellowship as one of the greatest challenges Muslims face.

"They have to overcome ... the sense of guilt and shame their relatives and friends try to place on them," he says. "Sometimes this can be very overwhelming and some cannot handle it, so they go back."

Yet many persevere despite persecution that includes death. In Iran the opposition comes from both the mosques and the government, says a missionary who goes only by the name "Pooya." He says people especially fear the religious police:

"The [Basij, Mujahedin and Revolutionary Guard] rule by the Quran. These are the ones who will come after people, beating them and killing them with no regard to the laws of the land. ... They are free to be judge, jury and executioner with no repercussions for their acts."

Prayer is vital. However, three new converts in Egypt recently told Janssen that Christians in America should pray "with" them, not "for" them.

"If you pray for us, you will pray for our safety, and the

persecution will stop," they told him. "If you pray with us, we can be sure the persecution will increase. Pray we will see millions [come] to Christ. We know there will be backlash. Pray we will be faithful, even if it costs us our lives."

The quiet revolution that is bringing Muslims to faith in Christ has resulted in many unique personal testimonies such as those that follow. Their stories exemplify what happens when Muslims find Jesus.

Maryam Asal

An Islamic evangelist for seven years, Maryam Asal* taught numerous women Quranic verses and the prayers they needed to lead an obedient Islamic life. She was on track to become a female *ayatollah*, a Shiite religious and political leader. But when her mother was stricken with multiple sclerosis (MS) she told Allah: "I have served you for many years of my life. I have given you my youth, and this is what you have done for me?"

As her mother's health rapidly deteriorated, Asal became disillusioned with God and wanted to commit suicide. She and her mother decided to kill themselves together, using sleeping pills and natural gas.

First, though, Asal flicked on their television and came across the *God Is Love* program. Before Asal reached the stove, a pastor on the show said: "My brothers, my sisters, why do you want to kill yourself today? ... The God we know will change your life right now and right here because He is a God of love and He is alive!"

Stunned, Asal returned to the couch to listen. Her mother wanted to call the station to tell them they were lying. When she did, she accepted Christ after talking to a pastor for 10 minutes.

Then Asal reluctantly took the phone and talked, finally

agreeing to allow Jesus to come into her life, but only on the condition she could still commit suicide if He didn't do anything after a week. The next morning Asal felt a peace so profound she thought it was a mind game. But when they went to the hospital and her mother's MRI showed no signs of MS, she knew Christ was real.

"The week after, I invited 10 people to my house and they came to Christ," Asal says. "Then I started my first house church. Praise the Lord; glory to Him."

Jeremiah Cummings

A singer so dedicated to the Nation of Islam that he wore the organization's trademark bow tie on the cover of a Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes album is now an itinerant evangelist who estimates his ministry has led 280,000 ex-Muslims to Christ.

Jeremiah Cummings was part of the pop group for about nine years before he moved to Dallas in 1981, where he went to work for General Motors.

His involvement in the Nation of Islam led to a chance meeting with its leader, Louis Farrakhan.

By the time he rose to become a top captain to Farrakhan, Cummings was known as Minister Jeremiah Fard Muhammad.

"It was exciting at first, to get to know [Farrakhan] and to be his student," Cummings says. "But something was missing. It wasn't what I was looking for."

Although he oversaw numerous bodyguards and employees, he still had ample time for reflection. In 1996 Cummings returned to his biblical roots and undertook a 13-monthlong study of Christ.

At the end, he fasted and prayed Psalm 23 five times a day. On the 43rd day, he accepted Christ and got filled with the Holy

Spirit.

A few hours later, he wrote a letter of resignation to the Nation of Islam.

"I knew Jesus was the Son of God and that there was power in His name," Cummings says.

Since then he has founded Amazing Life World Outreach in Orlando, Florida, and written several books, including *Reaching for the World: Revealing Jesus as the Messiah in the Koran*.

"I've taught things from the Quran about the virgin birth of Jesus and relation of stories in the Quran to the Bible," he says.

"That's gone all over the world, but I've never gotten any negative feedback."

Mark Gabriel

A former *imam* and Islamic history professor in Egypt, Mark Gabriel is familiar to many readers of *Charisma*, which has featured excerpts from some of his first five books. Before turning to Christ in 1992, he was expelled from the university and jailed for publicly questioning why Islam had such a violent, bloody past.

Gabriel [a name he assumed after immigrating to the U.S.] came to Christ after a pharmacist in Egypt—alarmed by his frequent visits to the store for medication—gave him a Bible and made him promise to read it. He accepted Christ after staying up all night reading, especially touched by Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5.

"He was so loving," Gabriel recalls. "It was such a contrast to Islam."

Gabriel survived several attempts on his life and later came

to the U.S., where he speaks and worships freely. He maintains contact with his homeland, where tens of thousands of Christians have formed underground churches, he says.

While his several books have angered Islam's defenders, his latest, *Coffee With the Prophet*, may stir their ire even more. The cover design violates a centuries-old tradition against any depiction of Muhammad.

Gabriel formed a publishing company and released the book in September. Subtitled *21st Century Conversations With Muhammad*, it is an attempt to show how Muhammad's followers have distorted the views of Islam's founder the last 1,400 years.

"I saw horrible confusion taking place," Gabriel says. "Nobody knows the truth about Islam. I care about the many Muslims who need someone to communicate the truth to them. This is the time for God to destroy the stranglehold of this religion."

Sofia Hasina

Sofia Hasina* has had a challenging time since deciding to follow Christ and has endured a life riddled with uncertainty, poverty and homelessness.

Hasina's parents died when she was an infant. Her uncle, a ship's captain, promised to look after her. Though he paid for her schooling, he was forced to leave her in the care of an aunt because of his frequent absences.

A good student, Hasina befriended other students who happened to be Christians. After spending considerable time with them, she asked them to tell her about Jesus.

Hasina accepted Christ, but her friends were ill-equipped to disciple her. Through relationships she made with members of an underground ministry she showed rapid spiritual growth. The ministry leaders advised her to keep her decision a secret to avoid premature exposure.

Despite following their advice, she was not able to hide the inner changes. Her family became suspicious, asking her about her increased absences from the mosque. They also wanted to know why she spent so much time with Christian friends.

One day, while Hasina was fellowshiping with friends, her family discovered a Bible in her bag. When she returned home they were waiting angrily.

The father of the house demanded to know where she had received the Bible. When she told him it came from a friend, he insisted she take an oath declaring her loyalty to Islam. When she revealed she had become a Christian, he tore pages from her Bible.

Fearing for her life, she ran away. Although her guardian parents didn't pursue her, they threatened to kill her if she returned home.

Hasina is struggling to make ends meet while working in a caf  and staying with a friend. She hopes to continue her university studies, but might need financial help from an uncle. She doesn't know what his reaction will be if she reveals her conversion.

Faisal Malick

A Sunni Muslim born in Pakistan, Faisal Malick was a budding young businessman when he attended an Amway convention in July 1994, hoping to keep his front-row seat all week by arriving on Sunday morning.

When the speaker opened, "Jesus is the Son of God," it prompted Malick to inwardly scream, "Blasphemy!" He stewed over how to lead these people to Allah, until he sensed God's presence penetrate his body. When he told God he thought Christians were the bad guys, he heard an audible voice reply, "No, these are My children."

“As He said it His voice moved through my being and everything I had ever known up to that moment shattered,” Malick says of the life-changing experience.

Though he soon found himself locked out of a family-owned rental house in Canada, several years later he returned to Pakistan and was reconciled with his family. Malick remained in business for a while, but his love of Christ ultimately led him into ministry despite his lack of a formal education.

“God trusted me in ministry by throwing me off the deep end,” says Malick, whose Covenant of Life Ministries is based in Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. “Ironically, I do teach now at Bible colleges-about how to relate to Muslims.”

Malick has also written four books, including *The Destiny of Islam in the End Times*. One of his goals is to help people understand that Muslims have a promise from God, made to their ancestor Ishmael (see Gen. 21:18). Since the publication of his book last January, the author has received numerous letters from churches telling him that his book has given them hope for the first time since 9/11.

“The other thing people are saying is, ‘We are repenting and praying to have a supernatural love in our hearts for the Muslim people,’” Malick says.

Raghib Ismail

Although few recognize Raghib Ismail by his first name, football fans know him as “Rocket” Ismail. A star at Notre Dame, “The Rocket”-a fleet receiver and kick returner-played 11 years of pro football, nine in the National Football League.

Injuries ended his career in Dallas, where he now works on a Cowboys post-game show, appears in reality TV programs and helps his wife with her Christian recording company.

Ismail became a Muslim at birth. His father converted after observing racism in Georgia and assumed that the Christianity embraced by whites there was a lie.

Young Ismail took his faith seriously. By age 9, he and his brothers had memorized 40 *surahs*, or “chapters,” of the Quran. “I’d say we were definitely committed to it,” Ismail says.

However, the spiritually sensitive youth was plagued by nightmares. The remedies his father recommended to chase away the demons didn’t work.

Things changed for him after his father died and he went to live with his grandmother, who was a member of an Assemblies of God church. She insisted that if he and his brothers wanted to eat, then they had to attend services.

Due to that exposure to Christianity, Ismail at age 13 stood at a concert by Christian artist Leon Patillo to accept Christ. Though he later slid back into his old ways, he also realized at age 24 that having money, fame and “cool things” was like repeating his childhood nightmares.

“I said: ‘I have to get my life back together. Where’s Jesus?’” Ismail recalls. “That put me back on pursuing the straight and narrow.”

He still hears of people who assume he’s a Muslim or became one because they thought that was his religion. If someone asks how his Muslim walk is going, he replies that he hasn’t been a Muslim for 25 years. “They look at me, stunned,” Ismail says. “Sometimes they want to hear [my testimony], and sometimes they walk away in disbelief.”

David Nasser

The son of a high-ranking Army officer, David Nasser fled with his family from Iran in 1979 after the Islamic Revolution overthrew the monarchy. Ironically they still considered

themselves good Muslims, even though their faith was primarily cultural.

After several moves, the family settled in a military town in Alabama. There Nasser struggled to fit into the strange customs and new faces around him.

A month after his high school graduation, he visited a Baptist church his friends attended. Thanks to the friendliness of a classmate he had treated rudely in the past, he returned. Though he initially resisted the Holy Spirit's call to follow Christ, he picked up a Bible two months later and read the account in Matthew 14 of Jesus calling Peter to walk on water.

"God said: 'You're stepping out of the boat for so many other things; I'm asking you to step out for Me,'" Nasser says. "God revealed Himself that night through His Word."

The week after his conversion, Nasser spoke at a pastors conference-and started a ministry that first saw him travel with Rick Stanley (Elvis Presley's stepbrother) and Jay Strack. After graduating from Bible college he founded D. Nasser Outreach and today speaks to more than 700,000 people a year. He is also the author of several successful, self-published books.

After overcoming resistance from his family and other Muslims, Nasser no longer faces much hostility. Still, he hopes to win more Iranians to Christ.

"I really have a passion for my people," he says. "There are a lot of Iranians in Alabama. I get letters from Iran all the time, too, from people who say: 'I'm considering Christ, but I'm concerned how my parents will react. Do you have any advice?'"

If they follow Nasser's pattern, they'll get out of the boat.

Jonathan Oloyede

The leader of a budding prayer movement in London with hopes of packing Wembley Stadium in 2010 with 90,000 Christians is a native of England who spent his formative years in Nigeria. Jonathan Oloyede is senior associate pastor of Glory House, a megachurch in East London with a network that extends far into the city. Some 300 congregations are involved in the 24-7 prayer initiative.

Oloyede accepted Christ during his first year of medical school in Nigeria and credits his decision to Christians on campus who prayed for him. He was filled with the Holy Spirit the same night.

"The spirit and soul of a man knows when he encounters God," Oloyede says. "All I can remember is the warmth of the presence of God. My inner man was ignited and something came alive in me."

After earning his degree in 1991, Oloyede came to England on a summer holiday, still with plans to become a medical aide in Nigeria and then to go to China as a missionary. Instead, God told him he was in England to help prepare the way for the return of His Son.

A founding member of Glory House, Oloyede was a member of the original leadership team and has served in numerous positions since 1993. Of his career shift, he says, "Medicine has served as a foundation model of discipline, dedication and knowledge in my ministry."

Like many Muslims who come to Christ because of dreams and visions, Oloyede has had numerous visions. He says the key ones concern a coming revival that he believes will have worldwide impact.

"The Lord told me not to start anything new but to act as a catalyst for national, united prayer," he says.

Reza Safa

A Shiite Muslim from Iran, Reza Safa met Christ after studying the Bible with two *Charismatic* Lutheran missionaries in Sweden. This interaction prompted him to wonder, *What if Muhammad is not of God?*

"For six months I couldn't sleep," Safa recalls. "One night I prayed: 'Jesus, are You the Son of God? Show Yourself to me and get me out of this confusion.' The following morning I heard the voice of God for the first time ... saying: 'There is no need to fear any more. Your sins are forgiven.'"

Because of Safa's conversion his family disowned him, and his Muslim friends verbally attacked him. Death threats continue today.

Unbowed, he enrolled in Bible school and soon became a traveling evangelist. In 1990 he settled in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and attended Rhema Bible Training Center. In 1998, God told him he would play a role in a massive, coming revival.

Five years later God told him he'd receive \$90,000 from a businessman, which happened, and to use \$40,000 of it for a TV program. Safa began filming Farsi-language shows and soon met several Iranian owners of satellite stations. One accepted his offer to purchase airtime.

Safa's three-hour weekly program became the TBN Nejat network, a joint venture with Trinity Broadcasting Network that blankets Europe and the Middle East. Since September 1, 2006, the network has received 300 calls and e-mails a week from up to 30 countries that have led to hundreds of thousands of conversions.

"I believe in America we need to pray the door to the gospel may be opened to the Islamic world," Safa says. "We need to pray that God would expose that religion for what it is."

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