



Face . . .

Why I Am a Christian

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I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts and sanctified and preserved me in true faith...*Luther's Small Catechism, Third Article of the Apostles Creed**

AS LUTHERANS, WE ESPOUSE A MEANS THEOLOGY. MY GRANDMOTHER, SADIE Anderson Shannon, is the means through which the Holy Spirit called me to my Lord Jesus Christ. For me, to be a Christian is to breathe. Christian is what I have been all of my thirty-four years of life.

My earliest recollections of Christianity are associated with my grandmother, who at ninety years old is a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. As a little one, I vividly remember the Sunday morning frenzy as Grandma gathered her grandchildren to go to church. My dress was always starched so crisp that it repelled water. My legs were greased shiny with Vaseline and Jergens lotion. I was excited and ready for church! I would bound out of the door to meet this honey brown, white-haired woman who always smelled of lavender. She would greet each grandchild with a huge hug and a peppermint candy. I often look upon those times with warmth and nostalgia, but the hindsight of twenty years informs me that I lived in the complex and turbulent times of the '60s.

I grew up at a time when James Brown, the recording artist, had released the song, "Say It Loud, I'm Black and Proud." Up until that time, collectively my people were called Negro. Those of grandmother's generation defined themselves as Colored. My very enlightened parents taught me that I was not a Negro, I was Black—much to my grandmother's chagrin. For her, the term "Black" was used pejoratively and reserved for those for whom she had a particular disdain. However, she came to accept the relevance of the community's decision to name itself.

My parents were politically active and aware during those times. My father understood that imaging was important, so all of my dolls were Black. Black dolls

**The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959).

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to Face

Why I Am a Muslim

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“We plan and God plans, and God is the best of planners.” (Islamic Saying)

GOD SAYS TO THE MUSLIM THROUGH THE QUR’ĀN: “I PREFER FOR YOU THIS religion [Islam].” God further says that He has conditioned the heart for receptiveness to it. The easier course for me to have taken, without God’s aid, would have been to just blend in with my Christian majority. After all, being part of one minority is struggle enough, and now I want to be part of two minorities – African American and Muslim among African Americans. It would have been easier to swim with the dominant currents of the stream. Why try to swim upstream?

For as long as I can remember, I have believed in and loved God as that Supreme Existence who is like nothing else imaginable. I have sought to please that God and to understand my role in His scheme of things. I have prayed to Him for forgiveness of my shortcomings and for help to always do better. I am a child of Christian parents, born and reared in Mississippi. My Christian parents, devout, God-fearing, unpretentious, responsible, and socially conscious people, raised me with a love of God and an insatiable urge to please God. My conversion to Islam did not stem from their failure as Christian parents. Nor is my conversion and that of many others in the African American community simply a protest against Christianity or Christians, those who brought Africans to American shores in chains. Do not look upon my Islam as an expression of hate for Christians. It is not. Rather, the catalyst for my conversion was the search to know and please God. God says that He has created man (and woman) for no other reason but to worship Him. Pure worship requires a purity of knowledge.

To be Muslim is to make a public declaration about God. Thereafter I must stand out. Even if it means isolation, the ultimate goal is to acknowledge that God is One, not limited by His creation or creatures. God has no beginning, no ending; when all else is gone, only God will remain. This is the God that Muslims worship,

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were a rarity in those days; he went to great lengths to get them for me. Religious images were Black as well. He taught me that the depiction of Jesus that was presented by the church and on religious paraphernalia was not Christ. My grandmother affirmed this, and it was so. Grandma Shannon embodied the gospel and, for me, personified truth. When this diminutive woman spoke, the whole Shannon clan trembled!

As a child, I was also exposed to people of other faiths. They were my parents' friends. Their respective religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam) were point of fact and not an issue. I was taught to respect my parents' friends simply because they were adults and I was a child. In retrospect, I now see that experiences of that sort built self-confidence and taught me to greet others openly.

No experience is ever superfluous; I believe that my grounding greatly assisted me in my sojourn to India last year. I went for my internship to the capital city of Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad. I served the Lutheran Church of Hyderabad as its first woman vicar. Additionally, I took Arabic classes at the Henry Martyn Institute for Islamic Studies (HMI). HMI provided fertile opportunities for interreligious dialogue. Often I would find myself in conversation with Muslim students. There were times when I had to examine assumptions that I had made about my faith as I sought to explain its tenets. I also met regularly with my neighbors the Brahma Kumaris Sisters. Sister Anjali agreed to teach me about Hinduism; in return, I would teach them about Christianity.

Interreligious dialogue can easily disintegrate into a polite tête-à-tête. This was not so in the encounters I had with my Muslim and Hindu friends. Rather, we asked each other serious questions about our respective faiths. Questions such as, what are baptism and eucharist and how are they efficacious, or the meaning of the ritual practices found in the *salāt*. Finding the words was no small task as I attempted to explain what I had taken for granted all my life to people who found Christianity totally other. While the theological discourse was stimulating, it was the basic act of being in one another's presence that was life-changing and life-giving, for I believe that the Holy Spirit was present working through the sharing of food and our stories. In the apparent mediocrity of daily life the bright light of epiphany shone through the eyes of Muslims, Hindus, and Christians so powerfully that I knew I had been in the presence of God.

The crucible of Indian culture with its multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic heritage called my being and faith into an arena of sharper clarity and awareness. So now I can better articulate the reasons I am a Christian in a variety of settings. My experience in India broadened my vision of God and made me mindful that my life is entwined with all creation. However, beyond reasoning or human understanding I was called to the gospel of Jesus Christ by God's grace via a ninety-year-old Colored woman, Sadie Anderson Shannon. The gospel makes me holy and blesses the totality of my being, and that is why I am a Christian. ⊕

calling Him Allāh, a word distinct in Arabic in having neither masculine, feminine, nor plural form.

I believe that Allāh, God heard my prayers to know Him and led me in the process of conversion to find His Grace through Islam. After twelve years, the birth of children, even divorce, that faith has only grown stronger. A second generation of Muslims now grows from the seeds of a Christian family within the United States of America. I have chosen Islam and not become Muslim simply as the wife of a Muslim. Islam is my liberator. It removes for me all barriers between me and my Creator. It makes me responsible for my own deeds and gives me full credit for my achievements. In the Qur'ān, the final revelation from God to humankind through the final prophet in the succession of prophets, Muhammad, the peace and blessings of God be on him, we read: "Oh mankind! Lo, We have created you from a single soul, male and female," and "We have made you nations and tribes that you may distinguish one another. Lo! The noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who feareth Him most." Another Islamic saying goes: "The most honored before God is he who is most useful."

Muslims believe that no one can "convert" another. God converts; others play the role in conversion to Islam assigned by God. Why would God convert me to Islam? Perhaps so that understanding may come to others through my conversion. My Christian family, for instance, understands and honors my wishes to live and die in Islam. They have softened their assumptions of my being "unsaved" or lost. We agree about the power of prayer; Resurrection and God's reward and punishment; and God's equal love for *all*. We agree that charity is an obligation; restraint in acquiring luxuries a duty; and resistance to all things degrading and profane an imperative.

Although we disagree about the role of Jesus, we work against the common enemies that distract Black and White children and all children from their recognition of an Absolute Authority in their lives. As Imam W. Deen Mohammed explains, in Islam "that Absolute Authority is God, the Creator." This God created differences, but He did not create racism and intolerance; He created choices, but not prejudices. He gave to human beings free will, and the most knowledgeable among us have given it back in worship to God. Afzal Iqbal, in his book *Diplomacy in Islam*, explains: "Indeed, Islam may be increasingly recognized as acting as a bridge between the warring ideologies of the East and the West." He speaks of Islam in its purity, not as it has been twisted for war.

Allāh, God, has brought once opposing religious hearts together in His Own way. There are many avenues leading to God's Grace. Some take a Christian way; some are Jews; others – now about one out of every five people – go the way of Islam. I have found my place, peace of mind, heart, and soul in Islam. After all, the word Islam simply means submission to God's Will, and a Muslim is simply the person who accepts making that submission. ⊕