

Raphael Narbaez, Jr., Jehovah's Witness Minister, USA (part 2 of 2)

Description: His first encounters with Muslims and the faith, and finally his acceptance of Islam.

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We're working on this mall. It's the holiday season, and they put these extra booths in the hallways. There was a gal at one, and we had to pass right in front of her. I'd say, "Good morning, how are you?" If she said anything, it was "Hi." And that was it.

Finally, I said, "Miss, you never say anything. I just wanted to apologize if there was something I said wrong."

She said, "No, you see, I'm a Muslim."

"You're what?"

"I'm a Muslim, and Muslim women, we don't talk to men unless we have something specific to talk about; otherwise we don't have anything to do with men."

"Ohhhhh. Muslim."

She said, "Yes, we practice the religion of Islam."

"Islam - how do you spell that?"

"I-s-l-a-m."

At the time, I knew that Muslims were all terrorists. She doesn't even have a beard. How could she possibly be Muslim?

"How did this religion get started?"

"Well, there was a prophet."

"A prophet?"

"Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him."

I started some research. But I just came from one religion. I had no intention of becoming Muslim.

The holidays are over. The booth moves. She's gone.

I continued to pray, and asked why my prayers weren't being answered. In November of 1991, I was going to bring my uncle Rockie home from the hospital. I started to empty his drawers to pack his stuff and there was a Gideon Bible. I said, God has answered my prayers. This Gideon Bible. (Of course, they put it in every hotel room.) This is a sign from God that He's ready to teach me. So I stole the Bible.

I went home and I started praying: O God, teach me to be a Christian. Don't teach me the Jehovah's Witness way. Don't teach me the Catholic way. Teach me Your way! You would not have made this Bible so hard that ordinary people sincere in prayer could not understand it.

I got all the way through the New Testament. I started the Old Testament. Well, eventually there's a part in the Bible about the prophets.

Bing!

I said, Wait a minute, that Muslim lady said they had a prophet. How come he's not in here?

I started thinking, Muslims - one billion in the world. Man, one out of every five people on the street theoretically could be a Muslim. And I thought: One billion people! C'mon now, Satan is good. But he's not that good.

So then I said, I'll read their book, the Quran, and I'll see what kind of pack of lies this thing is. It probably has an illustration on how to disassemble an AK-47. So I went to an Arabic bookstore.

They asked, "What can I help you with?"

"I'm looking for a Quran."

"Okay, we have some over here."

They had some very nice ones - thirty dollars, forty dollars."

"Look, I just want to read it, I don't want to become one, okay?"

"Okay, we have this little five-dollar paperback edition."

I went home, and started reading my Quran from the beginning, with Al-Fatihah. And I could not get my eyes off of it.

Hey, look at this. It talks about a Noah in here. We have Noah in our Bible too. Hey, it talks about Lot and Abraham. I can't believe it. I never knew Satan's name was Iblees. Hey, how about that.

When you get that picture on your TV set and it's got a little bit of static and you push that button [klop] - fine tune. That's exactly what happened with the Quran.

I went through the whole thing. So I said, Okay, I've done this, now what's the next thing you got to do? Well, you gotta go to their meeting place. I looked in the yellow pages, and I finally found it: Islamic Center of Southern California, on Vermont. I called and they said, "Come on Friday."

Now I really start getting nervous, `cause now I know I'm going to have to confront Habib and his AK-47.

I want people to understand what it's like for an American Christian coming into Islam. I'm kidding about the AK-47, but I don't know if these guys have daggers under

their coats, you know. So I come up to the front, and sure enough, there's this six-foot-three, 240-pound brother, beard and everything, and I'm just in awe.

I walked up and said, "Excuse me, sir."

[Arabic accent:] "Go to the back!"

He thought I was already a brother.

I said, "Yessir, yessir" [meekly].

I didn't know what I was going back for, but I went back anyway. They had the tent and the rugs were out. I'm standing there, kind of shy, and people are sitting down listening to the lecture. And people are saying, Go ahead, brother, sit down. And I'm going, No, thanks, no, thanks, I'm just visiting.

So finally the lecture's over. They're all lined up for prayer and they go into sajdah. I was really taken aback.

It started making sense intellectually, in my muscles, in my bones, in my heart and my soul.

So prayers are over. I say, hey, who's going to recognize me? So I start to mingle like I'm one of the brothers, and I'm walking into the mosque and a brother says, "Assalaamu alaikum." And I thought, Did he say "salt and bacon"?

"Assalaamu alaikum."

There's another guy who said "salt and bacon" to me.

I didn't know what in the world they were saying, but they all smiled.

Before one of these guys noticed that I was not supposed to be there and took me to the torture chamber, or beheaded me, I wanted to see as much as I could. So eventually I went to the library, and there was a young Egyptian brother; his name was Omar. God sent him to me.

Omar comes up to me, and he says, "Excuse me. This is your first time here?" He has a real strong accent.

And I said, Yeah, it is.

"Oh, very good. You are Muslim?"

"No, I'm just reading a little."

"Oh, you are studying? This is your first visit to a mosque?"

"Yes."

"Come, let me show you around." And he grabs me by the hand, and I'm walking with another man - holding hands. I said, these Muslims are friendly.

So he shows me around.

"First of all, this is our prayer hall, and you take your shoes off right here."

"What are these things?"

"These are little cubicles. That's where you put your shoes."

"Why?"

"Well, because you're approaching the prayer area, and it's very holy. You don't go in there with your shoes on; it's kept real clean."

So he takes me to the men's room.

"And right here, this is where we do wudoo."

"Voodoo! I didn't read anything about voodoo!"

"No, not voodoo. Wudoo!"

"Okay, because I saw that stuff with the dolls and the pins, and I'm just not ready for that kind of commitment yet."

He says, "No, wudoo, that's when we clean ourselves."

"Why do you do that?"

"Well, when you pray to God, you have to be clean, so we wash our hands and feet."

So I learned all these things. He let me go, and said, "Come back again."

I went back and asked the librarian for a booklet on prayer, and I went home and practiced. I felt that if I was trying to do it right, God would accept it. I just continued to read and read and visit the mosque.

I had a commitment to go on a tour of the Midwest on a comedy circuit. Well, I took a prayer rug with me. I knew that I was supposed to pray at certain times, but there are certain places where you are not supposed to pray, one of which is in the bathroom. I went into a men's room on a tourist stop and I laid out my carpet and I started doing my prayers.

I came back, and when Ramadan was over, I started getting calls from different parts of the country to go and lecture as a Jehovah's Witness minister who embraced Islam. People find me a novelty.

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