

## BRANDON TOROPOV, EX-CHRISTIAN, USA (PART 1 OF 2)

**Rating:** 3.4

**Description:** A man's personal quest to study the most authentic verses of the Bible, the Q verses, leads him to Islam. Part one: A problem with conventional Christianity.

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### A Wave of Conversions

If you are a Christian, the idea that Jesus, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, practiced the same faith that today's news broadcasts hold responsible for so many of the world's problems may seem far-fetched to you. It seemed far-fetched to me when I first encountered it, before I consulted the Gospels closely. Yet you should know that many, many contemporary Christians have reached life-changing personal conclusions about the Gospel message and its relation to Islam.

"There is compelling anecdotal evidence of a surge in conversions to Islam since September 11, not just in Britain, but across Europe and America. One Dutch Islamic centre claims a tenfold increase, while the New Muslims Project, based in Leicester and run by a former Irish Roman Catholic housewife, reports a steady stream of new converts." (London Times, January 7, 2002.)

### Mainstream Media Ignores Us

The Western news media only rarely shares the stories of these individual converts to Islam with the world at large, but I strongly suspect that most of these people -- if they are like me -- found themselves, at the end of the day, concerned about the consequences of calling Jesus "Lord" without obeying his instructions ... found themselves far more concerned about that, in fact, than about any media coverage of geopolitical issues.

This kind of concern causes people to change their lives.

### The Challenge of Q

Speaking personally, I changed my own life because I could not ignore the implications of the authentic, stand-alone Gospel passages that today's most accomplished (non-

Muslim!) scholars believe to be of the earliest date available.

These sayings, which form a reconstructed text known as Q, can all be found in the New Testament. They are almost certainly the closest we will ever be able to come to an authentic oral tradition reflecting the actual sayings of Jesus, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him.

## **Q Confirms Islam**

If you are new to Q, you should know what the best New Testament scholars now know, namely that today's scholarship identifies certain Gospel passages as not only instructive, but historically more relevant than other passages. This scholarship has led to some fascinating discussions among scholars (and a comparatively few lay readers).

I believe the Q verses tend to confirm Islam's depiction of Jesus as a human Prophet with a Divine mandate essentially indistinguishable from that of Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him.

## **A Human Prophet**

I did not develop the theory of Q. It has been around for years. "Traditionalist" Christian clergy and theologians are generally hostile to it. They claim that students of Q are somehow eager to diminish the status of Jesus, peace be upon him. Actually, we are eager to learn what he is most likely to have actually said.

Q represents a major challenge for contemporary Christianity, not least because it strongly suggests that Islam's picture of Jesus is historically correct. The fact that Q essentially confirms Islam's image of Jesus as a distinctly human Prophet has not, I think, been widely noticed by today's Christians. And it must be. Because a careful review of the scriptures demonstrates that Jesus is in fact calling his people to Islam.

## **Jesus Brought Me to Islam!**

I came to Islam, Alhamdulillah [all praise be to God], after three decades of restless dissatisfaction with conventional Christianity. Although I've read a lot of conversion stories since I embraced Islam in March of 2003, I haven't found many that cited the Gospels as a point of entry to the Holy Quran. This is how it was for me.

I was drawn to the Gospels at a young age -- eleven -- and I read them compulsively on my own, despite the fact that I did not live in a Christian household. I soon learned to keep religious matters to myself.

## **Early Questions**

For most of my adolescence I studied the Christian scriptures on my own. I still have the red King James Bible I bought as a child; my own handwritten note on the front page proclaims June 26, 1974, as the date I accepted Jesus as my personal savior.

When I say I read the scriptures compulsively, I mean that I was drawn to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John like a magnet. There are plenty of notes and highlightings in that old Bible of mine in Psalms, in Ecclesiastes, in Proverbs -- but most of the notes and underlinings are in the Gospels. But I sensed, even at an early age, that there were some internal problems with the texts I loved so dearly.

## **Who Tampered with the Gospels?**

I can clearly remember reading the account in the 22nd chapter of Luke where Jesus withdrew from the disciples, prayed, and returned to find them fast asleep. Who, I wondered, could have possibly observed him praying ... and then related the incident so that it eventually could be included in the Gospel of Luke? There's another passage in the Gospels where Jesus supposedly includes the words "let him who reads understand" in one of his spoken discourses, which seemed odd to me. And there was yet another spot where the New Testament author assured first-century Christians that their generation would see the second coming of the Messiah -- a passage I found difficult to square with modern Christian doctrine. These and other queries about the New Testament arose while I was still quite young, certainly before I was fifteen. Had someone manipulated the Gospels? If so, who? And why?

I "filed" my questions for later, and decided that the real problem was that I was not part of a vigorous Christian faith community.

## **Catholic**

At eighteen, I headed East for college and entered the Roman Catholic Church. In college, I met a beautiful and compassionate Catholic girl who was to become the great love and support of my life; she was not particularly religious, but she appreciated how important these matters were to me, and so she supported me in my beliefs. I do a great injustice to her seemingly limitless resources of strength, support, and love by compressing the beginning of our relationship into a few sentences here.

## **An Encounter with a Priest**

I asked the campus priest -- a sweet and pious man -- about some of the Gospel material that had given me trouble, but he became uncomfortable and changed the subject. On another occasion, I remember telling him that I was focusing closely on the Gospel of John because that Gospel was (as I thought then) a first-person account of the events in question.

Again, he stammered and changed the subject and did not want to discuss the merits of one Gospel over another; he simply insisted that all four were important and that I should study all of them. This was a telling conversation, and a fateful one, as it turned out.

## Christianity or Paulism?

Now, this is not my life story, but rather my reversion account, so I'm going to fast-forward over a lot of important events. That sweet campus priest eventually married my girlfriend and me, and we settled in suburban Massachusetts. We each moved ahead professionally and became grownups. We had three beautiful children. And I kept reading and rereading the Bible. I was drawn, as ever, to the sayings about the lamp and the eye, the Prodigal Son, the Beatitudes, the importance of prayer, and so many others -- but I had steadily more serious intellectual problems with the surrounding "architecture" of the New Testament, particularly with the Apostle Paul. The fact that Paul never seemed to build a theological argument around anything that Jesus actually said was a big, big problem for me.

In the mid-1990s, my wife and I both became deeply disenchanted with the Catholic Church, in part because of a truly terrible priest who gave very little attention to the spiritual needs of his community. We later learned that he had been covering up for a child abuser!

## Protestant

I found it necessary to immerse myself in a faith community. I joined, and became active in, the local Protestant denomination, a Congregational Church.

So I led Sunday School classes for children, and briefly taught a Gospel class on the Parables for the adults. In the Sunday School classes for the kids I stayed right with the curriculum I had been given; but in the adult class, I tried to challenge the participants to confront certain parables directly, without filtering everything through the Apostle Paul. We had interesting discussions, but I sensed some resistance, and I didn't try to teach an adult class again. My wife eventually joined my church. (She is a member there today.)

By this point, I had become deeply affected by the apparent intersection of the Christian mystic tradition and that of the Sufis and the Zen Buddhists. And I had even written on such matters. But there seemed to be no one at my church who shared my zeal for these issues.

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