

## Jerald F. Dirks, Former Minister of United Methodist Church, USA (part 2 of 4)

**Description:** The early life and education of a Harvard Hollis scholar and author of the book "The Cross and the Crescent", disillusioned by Christianity due the information learnt in its School of Theology. Part 2: A lack of religiousness, contact with Muslims, self-questioning, and the answer.

By Jerald F. Dirks

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Category: [Articles](#) > [Stories of New Muslims](#) > [Priests and Religious Figures](#)

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As the years passed by, I became increasingly concerned about the loss of religiousness in American society at large. Religiousness is a living, breathing spirituality and morality within individuals and should not be confused with religiosity, which is concerned with the rites, rituals, and formalized creeds of some organized entity, e.g. the church. American culture increasingly appeared to have lost its moral and religious compass. Two out of every three marriages ended in divorce; violence was becoming an increasingly inherent part of our schools and our roads; self-responsibility was on the wane; self-discipline was being submerged by a "if it feels good, do it" morality; various Christian leaders and institutions were being swamped by sexual and financial scandals; and emotions justified behavior, however odious it might be. American culture was becoming a morally bankrupt institution, and I was feeling quite alone in my personal religious vigil.

It was at this juncture that I began to come into contact with the local Muslim community. For some years before, my wife and I had been actively involved in doing research on the history of the Arabian horse. Eventually, in order to secure translations of various Arabic documents, this research brought us into contact with Arab Americans who happened to be Muslims. Our first such contact was with Jamal in the summer of 1991.

After an initial telephone conversation, Jamal visited our home, and offered to do some translations for us and to help guide us through the history of the Arabian horse in the Middle East. Before Jamal left that afternoon, he asked if he might use our bathroom to wash before saying his scheduled prayers; and borrow a piece of newspaper to use as a prayer rug, so he could say his scheduled prayers before leaving our house. We, of course, obliged, but wondered if there was something more appropriate that we could give him to use than a newspaper. Without our ever realizing it at the time, Jamal was practicing a very beautiful form of Dawa (preaching or exhortation). He made no comment about the fact that we were not Muslims, and he didn't preach anything to us about his religious beliefs. He "merely" presented us with his example, an example that spoke volumes, if one were willing to be receptive to the lesson.

Over the next 16 months, contact with Jamal slowly increased in frequency, until it

was occurring on a biweekly to weekly basis. During these visits, Jamal never preached to me about Islam, never questioned me about my own religious beliefs or convictions, and never verbally suggested that I become a Muslim. However, I was beginning to learn a lot. First, there was the constant behavioral example of Jamal observing his scheduled prayers. Second, there was the behavioral example of how Jamal conducted his daily life in a highly moral and ethical manner, both in his business world and in his social world. Third, there was the behavioral example of how Jamal interacted with his two children. For my wife, Jamal's wife provided a similar example. Fourth, always within the framework of helping me to understand Arabian horse history in the Middle East, Jamal began to share with me: 1) stories from Arab and Islamic history; 2) sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him; and 3) Quranic verses and their contextual meaning. In point of fact, our every visit now included at least a 30 minute conversation centered on some aspect of Islam, but always presented in terms of helping me intellectually understand the Islamic context of Arabian horse history. I was never told "this is the way things are", I was merely told "this is what Muslims typically believe." Since I wasn't being "preached to", and since Jamal never inquired as to my own beliefs, I didn't need to bother attempting to justify my own position. It was all handled as an intellectual exercise, not as proselytizing.

Gradually, Jamal began to introduce us to other Arab families in the local Muslim community. There was Wa'el and his family, Khalid and his family, and a few others. Consistently, I observed individuals and families who were living their lives on a much higher ethical plane than the American society in which we were all embedded. Maybe there was something to the practice of Islam that I had missed during my collegiate and seminary days.

By December, 1992, I was beginning to ask myself some serious questions about where I was and what I was doing. These questions were prompted by the following considerations.

- 1) Over the course of the prior 16 months, our social life had become increasingly centered on the Arab component of the local Muslim community. By December, probably 75% of our social life was being spent with Arab Muslims.
- 2) By virtue of my seminary training and education, I knew how badly the Bible had been corrupted (and often knew exactly when, where, and why), I had no belief in any triune godhead, and I had no belief in anything more than a metaphorical "sonship" of Jesus, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. In short, while I certainly believed in God, I was as strict a monotheist as my Muslim friends.
- 3) My personal values and sense of morality were much more in keeping with my Muslim friends than with the "Christian" society around me. After all, I had the non-confrontational examples of Jamal, Khalid, and Wa'el as illustrations. In short, my nostalgic yearning for the type of community in which I had been raised was finding gratification in the Muslim community. American society might be morally bankrupt, but that did not appear to be the case for that part of the Muslim community with which I had had contact. Marriages were stable, spouses were committed to each other, and honesty, integrity, self-responsibility, and family values were

emphasized. My wife and I had attempted to live our lives that same way, but for several years I had felt that we were doing so in the context of a moral vacuum. The Muslim community appeared to be different.

The different threads were being woven together into a single strand. Arabian horses, my childhood upbringing, my foray into the Christian ministry and my seminary education, my nostalgic yearnings for a moral society, and my contact with the Muslim community were becoming intricately intertwined. My self-questioning came to a head when I finally got around to asking myself exactly what separated me from the beliefs of my Muslim friends. I suppose that I could have raised that question with Jamal or with Khalid, but I wasn't ready to take that step. I had never discussed my own religious beliefs with them, and I didn't think that I wanted to introduce that topic of conversation into our friendship. As such, I began to pull off the bookshelf all the books on Islam that I had acquired in my collegiate and seminary days. However far my own beliefs were from the traditional position of the church, and however seldom I actually attended church, I still identified myself as being a Christian, and so I turned to the works of Western scholars. That month of December, I read half a dozen or so books on Islam by Western scholars, including one biography of the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. Further, I began to read two different English translations of the meaning of the Quran. I never spoke to my Muslim friends about this personal quest of self-discovery. I never mentioned what types of books I was reading, nor ever spoke about why I was reading these books. However, occasionally I would run a very circumscribed question past one of them.

While I never spoke to my Muslim friends about those books, my wife and I had numerous conversations about what I was reading. By the last week of December of 1992, I was forced to admit to myself, that I could find no area of substantial disagreement between my own religious beliefs and the general tenets of Islam. While I was ready to acknowledge that Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, was a prophet (one who spoke for or under the inspiration) of God, and while I had absolutely no difficulty affirming that there was no god besides God, glorified and exalted is He, I was still hesitating to make any decision. I could readily admit to myself that I had far more in common with Islamic beliefs as I then understood them, than I did with the traditional Christianity of the organized church. I knew only too well that I could easily confirm from my seminary training and education most of what the Quran had to say about Christianity, the Bible, and Jesus, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him.

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