

## Steven Barboza, Ex-Catholic, USA

**Description:** This African American former Catholic found spiritual peace and fulfillment in orthodox Islam having investigated and rejected the racist ideology of the Nation of Islam.

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My abandonment of Roman Catholicism was spawned by a premature death, my mother's at age 49, on the day before my 22nd birthday. I prayed like crazy for God to spare her, and when He did not, I established a new line of communication. I called God Allah and prayed with my palms cupped and my eyes wide open. Given the irony and absurdity of events in racially torn Boston, where I lived, Islam was a godsend. A few months after my mother's death, whites assaulted a black man in front of Boston City Hall, using as one weapon a flagpole with an American flag attached. With that attack and my mother's death, a lifetime of frustrations reached the breaking point.

My odyssey 26 years ago was not unlike that of hundreds of thousands of blacks in the United States. The journey became my jihad--literally "struggle"--waged not for political power or economic enfranchisement but for control over my own soul.

Christianity did not offer a complete way of life the way Islam did. Attending mass once a week and calling it religion failed to satisfy my spiritual needs. Islam offered a code of conduct on how to run my daily life and how to communicate with God. Prostrating in prayer five times a day as a Muslim offered me more solace than I had ever found kneeling before a crucifix.

In 1974, as now, in the Roxburys and Harlems across America, only liquor stores outnumbered churches in vying for blacks' attention, and in my opinion, both stupefied millions of black Americans.

Islam, as I was familiar with it, seemed the perfect way to fight back. As a religion, it offered clear-cut guidelines for living; as a social movement, it stood for a pride born of culture and discipline.

Before my mom died, I had dipped into Malcolm X's autobiography. After she passed, I plunged into it. Malcolm had undergone a metamorphosis: from hoodlum to cleaned-up spokesman for the Nation of Islam and finally a convert to orthodox Islam, and through his own transformation he had shown that change, even from the most miserable beginnings, was possible.

Of course, Malcolm's life and mine were very different. He had discovered Islam in prison. I discovered it in college. He was the spokesman for a black theocratic visionary.

I held down a mid-level white-collar job in a Fortune 500 company. Still, I felt a kinship with Malcolm and the Black Muslims. The color of our skin made us all cargo in a sinking ship, and Islam beckoned like a life preserver.

Two and a half decades ago in Boston and New York, however, there were few orthodox mosques. In black neighborhoods, one institution, the Nation of Islam, dominated in the teaching of Islam, or, rather, a homegrown version of it. Many blacks who converted took to the Nation's teachings--its admonitions to self-love and racial solidarity, its belief in productivity and entrepreneurship. And with equal ardor, they also took to the Nation's other teachings--its racial chauvinism and belief that white people were genetically inferior, intrinsically evil "blue-eyed devils" who had been created to practice "tricknology" against blacks.

Using the twin motivators of myth and pride, Elijah Muhammad built the Nation into one of the largest black economic and religious organizations American had seen. It claimed a heavyweight boxing champion the whole world adored, Muhammad Ali. Its women looked like angels in their veils, crisp white jackets, and ankle-length skirts; its men cut no-nonsense yet gallant figures in their smart dark suits and trademark bow ties. But sitting in the Nation's Roxbury temple was like being on a jury listening to a closing argument. The defendants (in absentia): white folks. The prosecutor: a dapper minister who practically spat, saying whites were so utterly devilish that their religion was grotesquely symbolized by a "symbol of death and destruction"--the crucifix. The charge: perpetrating dastardly deeds on blacks "in the name of Christianity." The verdict: guilty.

I barely lasted my one visit. To me, demonizing the "enemy" as the Nation did hardly seem the best way to learn to "love thyself." Anyway, I abhorred the idea of colorizing God, or limiting godly attributes to one race. And though Elijah deserved credit for redeeming legions of blacks from dope and crime when all else, including Christianity, had failed them, I didn't believe that earned him the title of Allah's "messenger."

So I moved to New York and became an orthodox Muslim in the manner all converts do: I declared before Muslim witnesses my belief in Allah and my faith that the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, was His very last messenger. I entered a Sunni mosque and prostrated myself on rugs beside people of all ethnicities.

Here was what I deemed a truer Islam--the orthodoxy to which Malcolm had switched, the one most of Elijah's followers opted for when the Nation of Islam waned after his death, the Islam to which most of America's 135,000 annual converts, 80% to 90% of them black, belong.

On a plane to Senegal I sat next to a black American wearing a traditional Arab robe. The man was headed to meet an imam, his spiritual leader, a black African Muslim. I later met other black Americans who had spent years in Africa studying Islam. Through research, I found that up to 35 percent of enslaved blacks brought to the New World were Muslim. In converting, many black Americans may have been simply returning to the religion of their forefathers.

Over the years, I have come to understand what should have been obvious long ago--that Jesus had not forsaken my mother. She died because God had willed it, regardless of what form my prayers took.

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