

Walter Gomez, Ex-Christian, USA

Description: Latino immigrant finds peace in Islam after an adolescence of clubs, drinking, drugs, promiscuity and gangland violence in Washington DC.

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My conversion to Islam has alarmed many friends and family members. It seems to them strange and odd for a Latino like me to become a Muslim. Catholic and Protestantism are the leading religions in Latin America so these are reasonable religions for any Latin American to convert to, but when my family follows either Catholic or Protestant domination's, why Islam? Well my conversion to Islam was not introduced to me by any family member, like most of my family members, whose parent's ideas of life were given to them and they adhere to that as truth, without searching. The journey to God is a beautiful road that was given to the Prophets from God, to us humans. The Prophets are our ways, and that's the way I follow.

My story begins at my birthplace, El Salvador, a beautiful tropical country located in Central America, filled with exotic, delicious, and tasty fruits. The people are warm and welcoming to others, and they have a very intimate culture. Our culture is a crossroads of the mingling of many rich cultures. If you mingle Spanish, Arab intellect with the African tangy taste of rhymes, and the Native Indians love of the earth, you get the beautiful people of El Salvador.

I was born in 1975, from middle class of the poor, yes we were poor but we had an abundance of food. My father was a farmer, whose family had bought a lot of cheap land, so they were well off and my mother was from a very humble, poor family who lived by fishing and working for others to get by. Their families opposed the marriage because one was poor and the other very poor. So my father did what most do, elope with my mother to my grandfather's house, even if my grandfather didn't like it. Later, both families became fine with it and a house was given to my father by my grandfather, where I was born. The house was an old adobe house.

My father came to America in 1978, to make some quick money and he kept coming and going back for a period of 4 years until he bought a cargo truck with his brother and worked for a while. Then he felt the urge again to come back and since the war began, he felt scared for himself and me. In 1983, he left El Salvador again but with intentions to bring the family and stay for good. So after my father left, I spent a lot of time with my grandfather who was a Protestant. I used to listen to the Biblical readings and I used to love looking at the pictures in the Bible. I used to ask, "does anyone still dress like the people drawn in the bible, with long robes, turban and beards" and they replied "No" it was long-time ago. I was fascinated with Noah, Moses, Abraham, and particular with Jesus. I had this immense hunger to find people like Jesus, the way he spoke in the Bible and the way he dressed, his beautiful beard brought mystery and he looked very wise. I never saw this in my family who were very religious or anybody in the two Christian branches.

In 1984 my father sent a letter to my mother telling her come to America, and to bring me too.

When my mother told me about it, I felt sick and destroyed. Because I felt that I was in paradise and I didn't want leave. I cried almost everyday pleading with my mother to leave me with grandpa, but my words were not heard.

We left El Salvador in August, and I did enjoy the trip to America but it was very hard for my mom. My two sisters stayed with my aunt in San Salvador the capital of El Salvador. We arrived in the National Airport of Washington D.C. three weeks after we left El Salvador.

After spending time here in America I found out that religions are thrown away by society and are considered private, and not a way of life. I didn't feel the love of God as I did in El Salvador, but still tried to keep Him in my heart. Most of my desires of God in my life were gone in America. I went to regular schools from second grade to High school, but my thirst for religion began at High school.

In 1990, my first year in High School, what a joy!!! I was so happy the first day, and my cousin Ana warned me to be careful because seniors threw freshmen in lockers, but I didn't care I was happy. Surely, soon I found out that seniors weren't the ones who beat and threw freshmen in lockers but it was the football team. The football team was not interested in freshmen only but in Latinos in general. We were terrorized so bad that we used to hide in bathrooms when we saw one of them coming! These guys were 6'5" tall when most of Latinos are 5'6"! In the middle of the year we formed a Gang to protect ourselves from the football team, and we were becoming really crazy, at one point the football team tried to offer an apology to us, but we were having fun and we didn't want to stop.

We started going to clubs, drinking, using drugs, and of course women were not excluded. This period of time was the most dangerous in my life. We used to fight for stupid things. I almost got shot on the metro (train) in Washington D.C. for a stupid argument between my friend and some young kids. The kids started shooting at me like I was the one arguing with them, and a bullet went by my head barely touching my hair. This was crazy and we went after the guys who shot at us, and they got beat up really bad. Twenty minutes later, I felt a drawling rush in my whole body and felt like I was superman! It felt like a dream and I thought that if my friends found out they would really respect me! When I told them about the incident, none of them believed it. In another incident at a nightclub, we had the biggest fight ever. The fight was so serious that many of my friends left the gang that we belonged to. Three of my friends got stabbed badly inside the club, so a group of us went outside looking for them, and the cops separated us into subgroups. The cops showed up right in time, because I felt death on my throat. They could easily have stabbed me or killed me, and I looked up in the sky and said, "My Lord save me, and I will serve you." One of my friends got thrown from a bridge and broke his hand while others got away.

That same friend who was with me at the train shooting and the nightclub started to become more aware of life. After this incident, he started learning about different doctrines. His philosopher was Carl Marx, his sociology was communism, and his theology was Islam. To me, he was becoming unaware of life, and I myself started to search but in the Protestant church. I found myself becoming religious again, once again praying to God for guidance. However, I didn't want to become too religious because I knew my family would ridicule me. I had always been a person that looked uninterested in life. My friend started preaching about his thoughts and beliefs and I told him that my love for Protestant church was growing so that he would leave me alone. I told him Jesus is my teacher; not a black man named Elijah Muhammad or Farrakhan.

My friend at that time was confused what the true Islam was. His Islam looked weird to me. He believed that Nation of Islam was the true Islam; he did not know the differences, that the real Islam was not racist like Nation of Islam was.

I did accept his socialist belief in Communism and "Che" Guevara, and Fidel Castro became our Leaders for world modernization. At the same time, I was not too happy, for Communism denounced God's existence. He pushed on about Islam, telling me to read his Koran, so I did. I was amazed to see Jesus, Moses, Abraham, and many more Prophets of the Bible in this Koran. He told me "We believe Jesus is a Prophet of God, not the son of God or God himself" and immediately responded that I believe in the same. He said, "Your church believes that Jesus is God and the Son of God and they make up the Trinity," I said to him that is not my belief in Jesus and God. That made me think a lot more about Christianity and the Protestant church of their Triune god, because I never knew that Jesus was considered this even though I did go to church. I felt confused but happy that there was a religion that had what I believed in.

In 1995, I went to work at a cafeteria at a University, a year after I graduated from High school. At work, I saw so many cultures and different religious people. I still had hate towards non-Latinos, yet my first week at work a group of students came to buy some stuff at the store I worked at, and they were fighting amongst each other, that everyone wanted to pay. This incident was very touching to me because I was a very giving person yet my friends took advantage of that quality. All the people in that group who came into the store wanted to pay for the others. I asked one of them later that week, why Middle Eastern people were so generous amongst each other? He replied, "See, we owe it to Islam because Islam teaches us to be generous, some of us don't practice that much but Islamic manners are imbedded in our hearts." This statement moved me. I told him that I used to study Islam for political reasons. He asked, "Why did you stop?" I told him that I didn't know where to get more information about Islam. He looked at me with joy and he said I have an American Muslim friend that converted six months ago. The next day they came to visit me, and I saw this white male dressed like the people in the Bible and looked like Jesus. My heart felt this peaceful calm feeling that I still feel. He started asking me about my health, my family and my work. He didn't mention anything about religion. I was so happy that I told him to come every time he could to teach me. For two months, Muslims were coming to me with books, pamphlets, and just to talk. It went on for two and half months and the place got closed during the summer. So for two months I just relaxed and partied all summer. However, I started to feel guilty while drinking. When I felt that way, I used to prostrate in forgiveness. In September, I went to a party with my friends and I really got drunk that night and almost got into a fight, but my friend reminded me that I was studying Islam, so I stopped and asked him if we could go home. The next day, at 9:00 in the morning I woke up with this disgusting feeling and the phone rang. It was my friend from the University. I told him to please pick me up and take me to the Mosque. He came like a lighting flash to my house. I was nervous and happy at same time. We arrived at this beautiful Mosque, Darul-Al-Hijra, in northern Virginia ten minutes away from my house. At 10:00 a.m. the teacher came, very calm, and not pushing and asked me if I believed that God is One, I said, "Yes." He asked if I believed that Jesus was a Prophet and the son Mary? I said, "Yes." Do you believe that Muhammad is the Last Prophet of God, in doubts, I replied "Yes." At that moment in doubts of Muhammad, I said to myself, "If I believe in the teachings of Islam, I must be a fool not to accept in the one who brought it, I told the teacher that I was ready to become a Muslim (in submission to God); He told me to repeat:

"Ashadu anla ilaha ilallah Wa ashadu ana Muhammadan Rasululah"

"I testify that there is nothing worthy of worship than Allah and I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah"

" Yo atestiguo que no hay nada digno de adoraci que Alah y Atestiguo que Mujammad es el Profeta de Alah"

At this point, I could smell the mercy and the sweetness of heaven, felt the presence of God in my torn, sick heart. I felt brightness in my new way of life. My life was ready for the next journey on earth, the journey to Paradise.

All Praises are due to Allah, Lord of the Worlds that He has invited me to Islam, from among billions of people in the earth to be a Muslim. I am very thankful to Allah for giving me the chance to perform Umrah in 1997.

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