



From a Muslim Brotherhood Member
to a Follower of Jesus Christ

by Hesham Shehab



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Who am I? What is my true nature or essence? What is my true identity? What is my greater purpose? How should I live my life? What is death? What happens when we die? Is there a god, and, if so, what is his nature?

Most of us do not walk around every day asking such questions, but in times of upheaval, we will experience existential crises. When our normal life is stripped away by separation from those we love or by some tragedy, we start asking questions. Soul-searching starts over one's own religion or faith and may remain focused there or go beyond to explore other faiths.

This author was born in 1960 in a Sunni Muslim family in Lebanon and started seeking the Truth at age twenty after two tragedies devastated and decimated his family.

Early Childhood

From early childhood, I became aware that the country in which I lived was divided along sectarian lines between Christians and Muslims. I learned that my family is one of the biggest in Lebanon, and that we descended from the tribe of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam (570-632 A.D.). Historians say that we came as warlords with the Arab conquests of Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. Nowadays, the Shehabs number more than ten thousand people in Lebanon.

Playing as a young boy in the few green fields left in Beirut's growing "forest of cement," I realized that boys who had different names like Pierre and Tony were Christians. Muslim boys had Arabic names like mine, or names that combined words like "Muhammad" and "Allah," which I heard in the Muezzins' call for prayer chanted from the minarets. I also became aware of the words used by the older generations of Muslims to describe

Christians. I heard that Christians "eat those filthy animals" (pigs); drink those "stinky liquids" (whiskey and Arak, a Lebanese wine); get drunk and lose their composure; and that their women were loose and have neither honor nor chastity (even though I did not know then what chastity meant). I could see then that their women dressed in more revealing clothes, unlike my mother and our female relatives who covered their heads and wore skirts or overcoats that went way below their knees.

The boys with French or Western names sided with each other in any quarrel that took place, irrespective of what was right or wrong. In those days, a disagreement over marbles would lead to a fight between the Muslim boys and the Christian boys.

I remember two incidents clearly. In the first, my cousin chased a Christian boy to beat him up. In his attempt to escape, the "cowardly" Christian scampered across the street and was run down by a car. We did not see him for weeks, and it seemed that nobody felt sorry for him. "Allah has punished him," we thought. "He had it coming."

The second incident occurred when Pierre, the youngest brother of the wounded boy, appeared from nowhere, banged me on the head with a piece of wood that had a protruding nail, and ran away. I cannot remember why he attacked me, but I still remember how a teenage cousin of mine dragged me home, weeping and with blood trickling down my cheeks and into my eyes. Then six or seven, I did not understand the reasons behind the animosity between Muslims and Christians, but I still have the scar of that attack on my forehead.

In the Ranks of a Muslim Militia

I was only 13 when the Muslim Brotherhood, an extremist Muslim group, recruited me two years before the Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975. The group in Lebanon adopted another name, Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya. The Brotherhood was anti-Arab Nationalist and the feeling of Arab nationalism was still high after the death of its leader, Egyptian

President Gamal Abdul Nasser. Nasser had accused the Brotherhood of collaborating with the British against his regime.

I was able then (I thought, in the ranks of that faction) to comprehend the big picture of the sectarian community in which we lived during the 1970s in Lebanon.

My late elder brother, Toufic, then 14, and I were first attracted to that Muslim faction by a group of teenagers studying the Qur'an in the mosque built jointly with our neighborhood school. We heard its call for prayers five times a day and it was only a three-minute walk from home, so we did not have to go far to get there.

Kamal, the young man who was leading the discussions in a corner of that mosque, was around 20. He was bright and educated and drew our attention to the political privileges of the Christians, the large "minority" in Lebanon, and the grievances of the Muslims, the majority. He asserted how shameful it was for the descendants of the Caliphs, who once ruled the world, to have a Christian president.

Before the Ta'ef agreement that officially marked the end of the civil war in 1989, the president of Lebanon headed the executive authority but was not accountable to anybody. The prime minister, who was decreed by tradition to be a Sunni Muslim, was sometimes like a puppet in the hands of the Christian president and took the blame for all the political and economic crises in the country. Kamal said that the Christians were put into that position superior to the Muslims by the French colonizers in the 1920s.

We understood then that we were second- class citizens in our homeland and deprived of our full rights. We were denied the top positions in the government and had no clout in any public sector. We felt that our rituals and holidays were not respected. Christmas and Easter were celebrated in the official media, while our holidays went unnoticed. We were even denied the right to have Fridays off for the weekly Muslim ceremonies in mosques.

In addition, we believed that most Arab Christians or Armenians could be naturalized and become Lebanese because churches and the official authorities helped them in order to tip the demographic balance to their favor, while more than 250,000 Muslim Palestinian refugees (today they are a million) and 200,000 Kurds living for decades in Lebanon were refused naturalization. All the circumstances around us smacked of a "conspiracy" between the West, Israel, and the Lebanese Christians.

Kamal also blamed many Muslim politicians for "our miserable situation," but overall he blamed the late Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser. Kamal said that Nasser was merely a demagogue who led the Arabs and Muslims astray or to defeat, and in 1967 lost what was left of Palestine to the Zionists. He claimed that Nasser had been a double agent for the West and the Soviet Union, crushing the Muslim movements in Egypt and pressuring other Muslim groups in the Arab world because they had the solution for our dilemma, and that he collaborated with foreign powers to keep us backward and defeated, in order to exploit us and drain our resources. Kamal asserted that Allah revealed Nasser's treachery and let him suffer shameful defeat in 1967 because he was following the way of the world, not the path of Prophet Muhammad. But Kamal often strongly argued that the solution was in doing what the early Muslims did: re-establishing the Caliphate that was abolished by Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey. The Caliphate would be a succession of leaders wielding both mundane and spiritual authority over all Muslims across national borders.

"We tried pan-Arabism, communism, socialism, and capitalism, but failed. The answer lies in Islam. It is not impossible. We have a good example in Saladin and how he defeated the Crusaders," argued Kamal.

After two weeks, Kamal added to the Qur'anic reading assignment from books written by Sayed Qutub (Osama bin Laden's master philosopher) and the late founder of Pakistan's Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiyyah (The Muslim Group),

Abu Al-Aala Al-Maudoodi. Kamal said that Qutub was able to explain what Allah wanted from us in this age of defeat and shame.

We understood from reading Qutub's works that the world is divided into two realms: the realm of Islam and the realm of unbelief. International borders are set up only to keep the Muslims divided. Muslims, if they are real Muslims, have to work for the foundation of a global Muslim state.

Kamal and other mentors in that faction taught us that the Christians were "unclean infidels," Crusaders, and an appendage of the morally corrupt West in the Middle East; that they were spies among us; and that their hostile presence should be taken care of.

Kamal confirmed that Muslim groups in Lebanon were part of an international revival movement that would topple the regimes, overturn the tables of history, and reunify the divided Muslim countries.

The situation in Lebanon was aggravated by the presence of the Palestinian refugees and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which found in the "wronged" Lebanese Muslims "natural allies." This relationship was enhanced especially after the death of Nasser in 1970 when Lebanese Muslims lost a major ally against the Christian Right.

The PLO began helping to arm Leftist parties and Muslim movements. Allied with the PLO, those groups formed a "National Movement" that mobilized the indignant Muslims, organizing nation-wide strikes, rallies, and demonstrations against the Lebanese government which was often accused of being biased in favor of the privileged Christians and extreme Rightist Christian militias. Those Christian factions seized every opportunity to engage with the Palestinians and their allies in street fights or armed skirmishes and get away with it unscathed because of their clout with the Lebanese authorities.

Most Muslims believed then that some Christian parties had been training since the late 1940s to mow down the Muslims, with Israel as their main ally.

In 1973, my brother and I were invited to a military training camp. We felt that we were following the path of Muhammad or Saladin. In shabby buses we climbed the distant, desolate mountains of North Lebanon with others ranging in age from thirteen to sixty and most under twenty. With great zeal we were all chanting "Islamic songs" written by Muhammad Iqbal (a Pakistani Muslim poet and thinker who was considered one of the founders of Pakistan), Qutub, and others:

"China is ours, India is ours.
Islam is our religion.
The world is our homeland. "

"Muslims... Muslims...Muslims.
Wherever there is justice and truth, you find us.
We prefer death to humiliation.
Sweet is death in the cause of Allah."

In that training camp in the distant mountains we learned how to use rifles and rocket launchers. We were told: "If you want to shoot straight, imagine there is a Christian in your sights." This statement puts in a nutshell all the hate we had for our Christian neighbors.

Verses from the Qur'an were often invoked to prove that Jihad (struggle against the infidels) was an obligation. Preachers often supported their views with fatwas (verdicts) that dated to the Middle Ages. They argued that all Muslims were sinners if they gave up the path of Jihad, especially since Muslim lands, like Palestine, the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union, and Kashmir were under occupation.

The Lebanese Civil War

As soon as the Civil War in Lebanon broke out in 1975, I was caught in the cycle of violence that devastated the country.

It was a terrible war. Everyone lost somebody. From a population of over three million, there were 150,000 dead--almost five percent. One hundred thousand were injured and seventeen thousand disappeared.

It was so insecure. There were over 200 militias with alliances always shifting and the enemies changing.

Beirut was divided into a Christian part and a Muslim one with a green line separating them. Both sides perpetrated atrocities by killing civilians. However, Muslims felt that they were taken by surprise when one of the most extremist Christian militias massacred hundreds of Muslim civilians on their way to work at Beirut's harbor in September 1975.

It was an ugly war. A friend, once a leader in that Christian militia but now a Peacemaker whom I have worked with for national reconciliation, used to phone bomb threats to Muslim theatres, so that he could mortar the crowds as they fled onto the streets.

Once, my brother, Toufic (then 17) took me with him to show me how to use a mortar cannon. Toufic set up the small 60 mm cannon, and started shelling the largest Christian neighborhood in Beirut. After the third shell, I told him that I did not like what he was doing, and that he might harm innocent people there. After pulling out of the Green Line, we headed towards the Brotherhood headquarters where I asked for a meeting with the head of the movement in Lebanon, Sheikh Faysal. He led prayers in the mosque next door, and he was available.

I told him that I was disturbed by that military action: using a cannon to shell civilians. I told him that I signed up only to defend Muslims against Christian militias.

He responded by asking me a question: "Who is your example in life, as a Muslim?"

I replied: "Muhammad, the prophet of Islam."

The Muslim cleric said that Muhammad shelled his enemies with catapults. While catapults were blind medieval war machines, he explained, mortar canons are blind modern war machines. The outcome would be the same. By analogy, he said, we were doing what Muhammad would have done.

Then he addressed me: "You sound like a thinker. I heard you recite the Qur'an. You are very good. We need new blood in the movement, new preachers. Would you like to get training and become one of our preachers?"

"This is an honor," I replied. He assigned a mentor who was very tough and demanding. I focused on Muslim religious studies for six months and was ready to preach on a Friday.

Just a few days before I was supposed to give my first Friday sermon, I had a car accident, a head-on collision, and suffered compound fractures in both legs. I was hospitalized for fifty days at the American University of Beirut hospital and was bedridden for a year. However, it gave me time to reconsider what I wanted to do in life. I admired the doctors and thought I should plan to go to that American college and study medicine. In order to teach myself more English, I started reading comics in English. It was expensive to devour those comic books, so I switched to reading novels. After a year in bed, I was able to read unabridged English novels. When I was able to walk on crutches, I went back to high school and kept reading novels. I stumbled on a Western novel written by Louis L'Amour who wrote around 120 novels. I read them all. I got better at English and passed the American University of Beirut English Entrance Exam.

Jesus, the Prince of Peace

Enrolled at American University as a biology major intending to go to the medical school, I focused on my studies and worked hard in order to get high grades, something crucial for admission to the medical school.

However, during that first semester in college in 1980, my brother and only sibling, Toufic (by this time a militia captain) was killed by a Christian militia while he was trying to negotiate a truce.

My brother and I were very best friends, not only brothers. We used to do everything together. We learned how to swim and bike, had the same friends, and went to school together. I thought that revenge would be sweet.

So, I got a silencer and two pistols, and I started stalking my enemies in the streets at night.

Meanwhile, as a student I had to take a course in cultural studies, including a series of classes that included Greek myths, religious texts, and Western philosophy. In that course, then, I had to read selections from the Bible and the Qur'an. I had known half of the Qur'an by heart, but the Bible was a new thing to me.

At the climax of my hate and thirst for vengeance, I read the Sermon on the Mount. Christ's exhortation struck me with full force: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:45) I felt that I heard the voice of God in stereo. I, who knew what an enemy is, and who sought to kill my enemies, felt that Jesus' exhortation was superhuman and could not emanate from an ordinary human being, but only from a divine source.

Even though I was taught by Muslim clerics that the Bible was distorted by rabbis and bishops, I was compelled to know the truth of Christ's words: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a

second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."(Matthew 22: 36-38)

Even though I was suffering and grieving the loss of my brother, I thought: "There is another way, a way of forgiveness."

I was touched by Jesus' parables, especially that of the Good Samaritan. I discovered that my countrymen who were fighting us were not good Christians. They were not Good Samaritans, as if they were reading a different Bible.

However, I stopped my night activities, deciding to reconsider things and see if it were possible to follow that Jesus.

At the same time, I found it odd that Lebanese Christian militias used symbols such as crosses with dagger-points, or crosses dripping with (presumably Muslim) blood. It was like they weren't reading the same Bible.

I realized that many Lebanese Christians changed the symbol of love and salvation into a symbol of hate and murder. Muslims saw in them what some Western Christians saw in the Ku Klux Klan.

I told myself then that if I was really seeking truth, I should follow up on my readings of the Bible, irrespective of my "bad neighbors," and walk in the shoes of Christians. So I started to sneak into churches in order to listen to what believers say about Jesus.

It was very difficult to go into Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches because of two things: (1) the figures and icons they had for Jesus that reminded me of idolatry and (2) the liturgical language they used. I preferred to attend Protestant churches with English services, especially because I read the Bible at college in English, mostly the King James Version.

So, having experienced tragedy and loss, in my time of upheaval I experienced an existential crisis, asking many questions about my religion and faith but also seeking answers to my questions about Jesus.

Questions About the Qur'an

As I set out to compare the Qur'an and the Bible, it became clear that most of the Qur'anic stories are fragmentary and cannot be understood without their biblical origins.

A perfect example of the fragmentary nature of the Quranic narratives and the need for their biblical counterparts is the story of King David's adultery and murder.

The Qur'an tells an incoherent story where David (Dawood, in Arabic), who is considered a prophet in Islam, realizes that he has sinned and repents, but there are no details about the reason behind his feeling of guilt:

[38.21] And has there come to you the story of the litigants, when they made an entry into the private chamber by ascending over the walls?

[38.22] When they entered in upon Dawood and he was frightened at them, they said: Fear not; two litigants, of whom one has acted wrongfully towards the other, therefore decide between us with justice, and do not act unjustly, and guide us to the right way.

[38.23] Surely this is my brother; he has ninety-nine ewes and I have a single ewe; but he said: Make it over to me, and he has prevailed against me in discourse.

[38.24] He said: Surely he has been unjust to you in demanding your ewe (to add) to his own ewes; and most surely most of the partners act wrongfully towards one another, save those who believe and do good, and very few are they; and Dawood was sure that We [Allah] had tried him, so he sought the protection of his Lord and he fell down bowing and turned time after time (to Him).

[38.25] Therefore We rectified for him this, and most surely he

had a nearness to Us and an excellent resort.

[38.26] o Dawood ! surely We have made you a ruler in the land; so judge between men with justice and do not follow desire, lest it should lead you astray from the path of Allah; (as for) those who go astray from the path of Allah, they shall surely have a severe punishment because they forgot the day of reckoning. (Quran 38: 23- 26)

I compared how the Bible gives the missing details in the Quranic narrative:

“And the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, “There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.” Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

Nathan said to David, “You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. And I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be

your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' Thus says the Lord, 'Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.'" David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die. (2 Samuel 12: 1- 13)

While some Muslim commentators cite the biblical narrative above to explain the missing details in the Qur'an, they usually try to water down the gravity of David's sin, and claim that he had only made advances to Bathsheba, but had not committed adultery. In the Middle Ages, Muslim theologians had developed the doctrine of the infallibility of prophets that denies any sins committed by prophets. Most probably, that doctrine was wrought to defend Islam from any biblical influence. The outcome is a partial portrayal of the life of biblical figures, a cut-out picture that strips them of their full humanity and elevates them into sainthood.

Another example of this is Surat Yasin (Qur'an, chapter 36), recited at every Muslim funeral in Lebanon during the burial ceremony. Many Muslims have memorized this chapter by heart, especially those who have large extended families that usually witness more deaths.

According to certain Muslim commentators, chapter 36 in the Qur'an suggests that Jesus' disciples functioned as Allah's messengers. The story is about Allah's three messengers who came to preach monotheism in a town that worshiped idols and later rejected them. Even though the Qur'an states that they are Allah's messengers, the Muslim commentators identify them as the disciples of Jesus who went to Antioch (today in Turkey). This raises the question: If those messengers were God's messengers, then who

is Jesus Christ? Below is the story in question, that made me doubt the Qur'an more and more:

[36.13] And set out to them an example of the people of the town, when the messengers came to it.

[36.14] When We [Allah] sent to them two, they rejected both of them, then We strengthened (them) with a third, so they said: Surely we are messengers to you.

[36.15] They [the townspeople] said: You are naught but mortals like ourselves, nor has the Beneficent God revealed anything; you only lie.

[36.16] They [the messengers] said: Our Lord knows that we are most surely messengers to you.

[36.17] And nothing devolves on us but a clear deliverance (of the message).

[36.18] They [the townspeople] said: Surely we augur evil from you; if you do not desist, we will certainly stone you, and there shall certainly afflict you a painful chastisement from us.

[36.19] They [the messengers] said: Your evil fortune is with you; what! if you are reminded! Nay, you are an extravagant people.

The story above and the overlap between Allah's messengers and Jesus' apostles caused me to doubt the authenticity of the Qur'an, and opened the door for belief in the divinity of Jesus and the authenticity of the Gospels.

Every Thursday evening, devout Muslims recite chapter 18 of the Qur'an. The chapter begins with a story about a challenge to Muhammad by the Jews in Medina. The Jewish rabbis ask Muhammad three questions, the first of which is about some young men who disappeared in antiquity. After

thirteen days, Muhammad responds to their challenge and the Qur'an tells the story. It is the legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.

This is a summary of the Early Christian version of the legend: during the persecutions by a Roman emperor, seven young men were accused of following Christianity. They were given some time to give up their faith, but chose to flee and hide in a mountain cave where they fell asleep. The Romans ordered the mouth of the cave to be sealed in order to bury them alive. Many years passed during which Christianity went from being persecuted to being the state religion of the Empire. Later, the seven sleepers awoke, imagining that they had slept only one day. They were hungry and sent one of them to town to buy food. Arriving in town, that person was astounded to find crosses on churches while the townspeople were amazed to find a man trying to use old coins that could be a treasure. The authorities went to see the sleepers who told their miraculous story and died.

The Qur'anic version of the story below retains and adds details:

[18.9] Or, do you think that the Fellows of the Cave and the Inscription were of Our wonderful signs?

[18.10] When the youths sought refuge in the cave, they said: Our Lord! grant us mercy from Thee, and provide for us a right course in our affair.

[18.11] So We [Allah] prevented them from hearing in the cave for a number of years.

[18.12] Then We raised them up that We might know which of the two parties was best able to compute the time for which they remained.

[18.13] We relate to you their story with the truth; surely they were youths who believed in their Lord and We increased them in guidance.

[18.14] And We strengthened their hearts with patience, when they stood up and said: Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and

the earth; we will by no means call upon any god besides Him, for then indeed we should have said an extravagant thing.

[18.15] These our people have taken gods besides Him; why do they not produce any clear authority in their support? Who is then more unjust than he who forges a lie against Allah?

[18.16] And when you forsake them and what they worship save Allah, betake yourselves for refuge to the cave; your Lord will extend to you largely of His mercy and provide for you a profitable course in your affair.

[18.17] And you might see the sun when it rose, decline from their cave towards the right hand, and when it set, leave them behind on the left while they were in a wide space thereof. This is of the signs of Allah; whomsoever Allah guides, he is the rightly guided one, and whomsoever He causes to err, you shall not find for him any friend to lead (him) aright.

[18.18] And you might think them awake while they were asleep and We turned them about to the right and to the left, while their dog (lay) outstretching its paws at the entrance; if you looked at them you would certainly turn back from them in flight, and you would certainly be filled with awe because of them.

[18.19] And thus did We rouse them that they might question each other. A speaker among them said: How long have you tarried? They said: We have tarried for a day or a part of a day. (Others) said: Your Lord knows best how long you have tarried. Now send one of you with this silver (coin) of yours to the city, then let him see which of them has purest food, so let him bring you provision from it, and let him behave with gentleness, and by no means make your case known to any one:

[18.20] For surely if they prevail against you they would stone you to death or force you back to their religion, and then you will never succeed.

[18.21] And thus did We make (men) to get knowledge of them that they might know that Allah's promise is true and that as for the hour there is no doubt about it. When they disputed among themselves about their affair and said: Erect an edifice over them-- their Lord best knows them. Those who prevailed in their affair said: We will certainly raise a masjid [mosque] over them.

[18.22] (Some) say: (They are) three, the fourth of them being their dog; and (others) say: Five, the sixth of them being their dog, making conjectures at what is unknown; and (others yet) say: Seven, and the eighth of them is their dog. Say: My Lord best knows their number, none knows them but a few; therefore contend not in the matter of them but with an outward contention, and do not question concerning them any of them.

[18.23] And do not say of anything: Surely I will do it tomorrow,

[18.24] Unless Allah pleases; and remember your Lord when you forget and say: Maybe my Lord will guide me to a nearer course to the right than this.

[18.25] And they remained in their cave three hundred years and (some) add (another) nine.

[18.26] Say: Allah knows best how long they remained; to Him are (known) the unseen things of the heavens and the earth; how clear His sight and how clear His hearing! There is none to be a guardian for them besides Him, and He does not make any one His associate in His Judgment.

[18.27] And recite what has been revealed to you of the Book of your Lord, there is none who can alter His words; and you shall not find any refuge besides Him.

This story is different from other legends included in the book of Islam because it was meant to be a response to a challenge to Muhammad by

the Jews. The challenge was supposed to be about an incident that had taken place in ancient Hebraic times; however Muhammad's response was a Christian story that allegedly happened in the early centuries of Christianity. This undermines the consistency of the Qur'an and shows some of the anachronistic elements in the book of Islam.

In addition, the story of the Seven Sleepers proved to me that the Qur'an is a compilation of ancient Jewish and Christian legends with few or no authentic historical accounts.

Finally, since the Seven Sleepers is a version of a Christian legend, why does the Qur'an praise Christians who worshiped Jesus Christ, an "idol" according to Islamic theology? Muslims may say that they were Muslims and Jesus himself was a Muslim. But the history of the early Church talks about the same Christianity we know today. Persecution occurred at the hands of the Romans because the Early Christians would not accept Caesar as a god along with their God, Jesus Christ.

Another problematic story that discredits the Qur'an appears in chapter 18, the story of Dhul-Qarnayn which means "The Two-Horned One." While he is never mentioned explicitly by name, most Muslim Quranic commentators endorse the identity of Dhul-Qarnayn as Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.). This identification of Dhul-Qarnayn has become particularly problematic because the historical Alexander was a Greek pagan who claimed to be a god, neither a saint nor a prophet as the Qur'an portrayed him.

Some Muslim scholars have sought to identify Dhul-Qarnayn with other historical figures, but the Qur'anic text gives a story that is more parallel to that of popular lore about Alexander than any other story of an ancient conqueror, especially with his title "The Two-Horned One".

[18.83] And they ask you about Zulqarnain [Dhul-Qarnayn]. Say: I will recite to you an account of him.

[18.84] Surely We [Allah] established him in the land and granted him means of access to every thing.

[18.85] So he followed a course.

[18.86] Until when he reached the place where the sun set, he found it going down into a black sea, and found by it a people. We said: O Zulqarnain! either give them a chastisement or do them a benefit.

[18.87] He said: As to him who is unjust, we will chastise him, then shall he be returned to his Lord, and He will chastise him with an exemplary chastisement: And as for him who believes and does good, he shall have goodly reward, and We will speak to him an easy word of Our command.

[18.89] Then he followed (another) course.

[18.90] Until when he reached the land of the rising of the sun, he found it rising on a people to whom We had given no shelter from It;

[18.91] Even so! and We had a full knowledge of what he had.

[18.92] Then he followed (another) course.

[18.93] Until when he reached (a place) between the two mountains, he found on that side of them a people who could hardly understand a word.

[18.94] They said: O Zulqarnain! surely Gog and Magog make mischief in the land. Shall we then pay you a tribute on condition that you should raise a barrier between us and them

[18.95] He said: That in which my Lord has established me is better, therefore you only help me with workers, I will make a fortified barrier between you and them;

[18.96] Bring me blocks of iron; until when he had filled up the space between the two mountain sides, he said: Blow, until when he had made it (as) fire, he said: Bring me molten brass which I may pour over it.

[18.97] So they were not able to scale it nor could they make a hole in it.

[18.98] He said: This is a mercy from my Lord, but when the

promise of my Lord comes to pass He will make it level with the ground, and the promise of my Lord is ever true.

[18.99] And on that day We will leave a part of them in conflict with another part, and the trumpet will be blown, so We will gather them all together (...)

The story is about a man who travelled to the East and West and trapped the nation of Gog and Magog between mountains. This author asked his Muslim cleric about the location of Gog and Magog and the dam. His answer: China.

In addition, there is controversy among Muslim commentators over the divine "mission" of Dhul al-Qarnayn because of verses that talk about Allah's direct directives to him. Such revelations pose the following question in Islam: Was Dhul al-Qarnayn a prophet or a saint? But how could a pagan who committed all sorts of transgressions be an Islamic prophet or a saint?

My questions about the Qur'an all led to the most significant question: Is the Qur'an the word of Allah and the final revelation that rectifies the previous Jewish and Christian scriptures that Muslims are taught to have been corrupted? Or is the Qur'an actually a confusing hodgepodge of myths and legends that someone put together in the early days of Islam?

New Directions

As a university student I lost my focus and could not concentrate on biology courses. I changed my major and completed my Bachelor of Arts in English Language, earned a Teaching Diploma in English, took undergraduate history courses, and completed a Master's degree in the History of the Arabs, all at the American University of Beirut. Later, I did doctoral studies in Islam at the University of the Holy Spirit in Kaslik, Lebanon.

By 1990, when the international community and the Syrian Army imposed a cease-fire on Lebanon, I vowed to work for peace and reconciliation.

Together with the Muslim mayor of a Beirut suburb, I founded a non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to Muslim-Christian dialogue and gradually recruited community leaders.

In addition to my jobs as an educational advisor and a journalist, I took on a lot of work. By the 1998 elections, my group could form a National unity ticket and elect a Christian mayor in a predominantly Muslim area.

It was not easy to work in a sectarian community against the tide of popular prejudices and bigotries. Even though I kept a low profile, as a "Muslim" follower of Jesus (even though it sounded like a contradiction in terms), sometimes I paid dearly for my openness, and was labeled as a "Christian-lover." Being a human rights activist and a peacemaker, I was suspected of being a CIA agent who worked to promote peace (Arabs usually call it surrender, not peace) between Arabs and Israel.

When a Christian Western NGO called the Reconciliation Walk (RW) came to Lebanon, I helped its members bring different Lebanese communities together. The RW's original goal was to apologize for the Crusades, but its members soon discovered that there was a lot to be done in Lebanon, and I did their public relations and arranged their meetings.

The National Prayer Breakfast

In 1999, as an activist in Christian-Islamic dialogue and a follower of Jesus I was invited to the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C. It was memorable in many ways.

First, I was threatened by my superior with being fired if I went there. His hostility towards my public work in Lebanon started to surface when I wrote an article in Beirut's leading daily newspaper defending Christians in Egypt and their right to build churches. The article was based on first-hand information I gleaned at an international conference I attended the previous year. I did not heed his threats, made the trip, and lost my full-time job.

Second, it was a big spiritual boost for me. 4,000 people from 160 nations were there praying in the name of Jesus.

Third, I stayed for a few days at the house of a Christian in Virginia. A new acquaintance then, he became a friend for life. Preston showed me in actions, not in words, how a Christian could be a Good Samaritan.

Fourth, toward the end of that trip I lost my animosity toward the sign of the cross, bigotry acquired from the ugly years of the civil war. In Washington I met a young man from Alabama, Richard, a "promise keeper." We spent three days together. We prayed and had meals together. At the end of that trip, Richard drove me to the airport. At the terminal, he went out of his car crying, as if he was parting with a close relative or a dear friend, and took out a silver cross from his wallet with the words: "May the angels of God guard thee."

It was his personal cross given to me in love. I cried like a baby, accepted the cross, and hugged Richard good-bye.

I went back home, a father of three without a job. Usually, if someone loses a good job in Lebanon, it would take years to find another one. I found a better job in two weeks. Later, I found out that some of my Christian friends, members of the Reconciliation Walk and other missionaries, sent a prayer request for me by email. It seemed unbelievable. Later, I met people from different countries and discovered that they had prayed for me then too.

Only Jesus Is the Savior

The biggest turning point came in August 2000. I was invited to an international conference in Switzerland on conflict resolution and Christian-Islamic dialogue.

I gave a speech to about 500 people from 54 nations on my work in Lebanon and how I was transformed from a "militia kid" to a peacemaker.

I wanted to be careful. There were 17 Lebanese people in audience, and I thought that since I had lost a good job the year before, I'd better not offend anyone by talking about Jesus as the Savior. So I portrayed myself only as a peacemaker, like a Gandhi. I was given a standing ovation twice, with tears in the eyes of many. Scores of people lined up to shake my hand. I went back that night to my room thinking of the glorious moments of the day, and the big promising future in neutrally representing the Lebanese former militiamen in international conferences.

I decided that night that when I would go back to Lebanon, I would tell my praying partner, Carl, an American missionary living in Lebanon, that I did not want any part of Jesus or the Bible anymore and that I was satisfied with the way I was. I had been wrestling with following Jesus then for 20 years with nothing but shame and headaches in my Muslim community. I thought that I would tell him that I had the full respect towards the teachings of Jesus the peacemaker, not the Savior.

That night I went to bed with this determination in mind, but saw Jesus Christ in a vision. Two huge slabs of rock parted and He came out from a grave the size of a castle, fit for the King of Kings, and in a shroud. He pointed his finger at me and told me to keep on praying.

When I denied Him, He came to the rescue.

I understood: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Luke 24: 5) "I am not a Gandhi, but your Savior."

I looked at my roommate, a Norwegian journalist, and found out that he was awake too. I told him about the vision. I had not known that he was a believer too. He pulled out a pocket Bible from his luggage and we read and prayed until sunrise. I decided that morning to serve Jesus.

At seven o'clock that morning, a Lebanese Evangelical Christian and a Briton who lives in Switzerland came to pick me up and drive me to the main conference. I told them about the previous night's events. The

Lebanese Christian's attitude was cynical, like that of a Jew towards a Gentile when Jesus walked the earth.

"I have served Jesus all my life and did not have such a dream or vision... You of all people ... a Muslim would see Jesus," she snapped.

Nonetheless, I was on cloud nine for many days. The day after I returned to Lebanon, my praying partner, Carl, and I began planning for a National Prayer Breakfast in Lebanon which occurred in October 2000 with the participation of 150 people from all sects.

I started the meeting with readings from Isaiah where he prophesied that Lebanon would become a fertile field (Isaiah 29:17). Five speakers spoke and prayed at that event, two of them in the name of Jesus.

That year with Carl and other believers I planned to start prayer groups in the Lebanese parliament. I resigned from my full-time job as a journalist in order to serve the Lord and share the Gospel with Muslims in Beirut. However, my involvement in full time ministry lasted only six months since many dynamics were working against sharing the Gospel with Muslims in the streets of Beirut. I had to find other sources of income in order to provide for my family.

The Lutheran Ministry

That was also the year I met a Lutheran pastor, Dr. Bernhard Lutz, who used to come to Lebanon as a missionary and who became my best friend in Beirut. One day I stepped into an elevator and saw his friendly face. The gray-haired man shook my hand and gave me his business card. It read: "Middle East Lutheran Ministry." A thought struck my mind: since I was teaching two history courses at the American University of Beirut, and they included the Reformation, why not invite this Lutheran pastor to give a lecture in my class? He could get me off the hook for fifty minutes and the students would love it. As soon as I arrived home that afternoon I called

him, and already that evening we were visiting together and planning a Bible study.

Bernie and I worked together as if we had known each other for ages. I introduced Bernie to a Palestinian soccer coach and his team, located at the Palestinian refugee camp near Beirut where Bernie visited and made friends with many refugees. Later we were able to help in supporting some of their soccer games, things that kept them out of mischief and away from Palestinian militias.

Bernie and I distributed Lutheran publications in the poor Shiite suburb of Beirut. We had an instrumental Syrian couple who held Bible studies in their house for Muslims and distributed Christian literature to their neighbors.

I took Bernie to meet Beirut's notables, cabinet ministers and members of the Lebanese parliament. We went to Bedouin communities and shared the Gospel with them in the Bekaa valley, a plain stretching between Mount Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon. I took him to an orphanage run by a Muslim follower of Jesus, a Bedouin chief who had been converted with the help of a Lutheran missionary in the 1950s. This Bedouin chief was teaching Muslim Bedouins the Bible in the heart of the land of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite terrorist militia backed by Syria and Iran. At one point, we met a Hezbollah leader and his group, and shared with them the Gospel. I learned later that for Bernie they were scary moments as we waited for them to finish their prayers. But our strength was in the Lord. Bernie talked for 90 minutes (I translated for him) and answered all their questions over dinner. Later this Hezbollah group invited us to their annual ceremonies.

Bernie came only four months a year, so I was in charge of the Middle East Lutheran Ministry office in the Muslim part of Beirut the rest of the year. Also, during my annual vacations, I worked with an editorial board of the Sharif Bible, a version translated and contextualized for Muslims.

Earning a living in Beirut with four children (I had a new baby by then), the last two years were not easy. I had to work full time in two newspapers, and

work part time as a university professor to put bread on the table. I was working 16 hours a day. Even though I was thirsty for the Word of God, I was not able to read the Bible and lead a study more than a week. I even worked weekends. I prayed to God to provide me with work that would put me at His service because I felt that my spiritual life was deteriorating.

Bernie and I discovered while trying to start a Lutheran church in Lebanon that there is a law in Lebanon against planting new Protestant churches. This does not mean that Muslims have clout over the Lebanese government, but Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches were wielding their power over Protestants. The latter are attracting young people from other denominations, something old churches are against.

Bernie called me in October 2004 after I went to Qatar for a job interview and told me that there was no way the Lutheran church could help me serve the Lord in Lebanon full-time, and that the only way was to come to the United States. I told him that even though it meant that I would have to be uprooted from my homeland, so be it. I was ready to serve God, whether it is in America or Afghanistan.

Above all, I was excited about going to Concordia Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, to study the Bible and become an ordained pastor.

I had a U.S. tourist visa, so I boarded a plane heading to Detroit, Michigan, with no written job contract or agreement. A friend in Lebanon called that "a leap in the dark." I believe it was "a leap in the light" - the Light of Jesus Christ. Søren Kierkegaard once called something like that "a leap of faith."

It took six months of wrestling with the U.S. immigration without income to get a work permit that would also allow me to go to seminary.

It was an emotional moment when I first walked Luther Drive, the road that goes from Luther's bronze statue to Kramer Chapel on the Concordia Theological Seminary campus. There I was, a former Muslim, a descendent from Muhammad's tribe, who had studied at the best Muslim Seminary in

Beirut, walking Luther Drive to pursue my dream, to reach my highest goal in life: to learn the true Word of God, and become an ordained disciple of Jesus Christ.

After living in the suburbs of Detroit for two years, I was called to move to Chicagoland. There, with the prayerful guidance of Lutheran pastors from a few churches, I founded a new ministry to the Muslims, Salam Christian Fellowship (www.SalamChristianFellowship.org), which shares the Gospel with Muslim immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa. It is a Word and Sacrament ministry that was classified in 2011 by the Prayer Breakfast in Chicago as one of the top 25 influential ministries to the immigrants in Illinois.

God moves in mysterious ways. Until now I do not understand all those developments in my life. But I can say that He has carried me from glory to glory in my walk with Him. He is the Father who has never let me down.

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty; but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”

Isaiah 55: 10- 13