

**Paper Presented at  
The AMSS 33<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference  
George Mason University  
Arlington Campus – Virginia**

**Sept. 24 - 6, 2004**

**“Leaving Islam: A Preliminary Study of Conversion out of Islam”  
A joint paper by:**

**Mohammad Hassan Khalil,  
Graduate student, (University of Michigan, MI)**

**And**

**Mucahit Bilici, Graduate student, (University of Michigan, MI)**

**[© Draft Paper. Please do not cite without authors' permission]**

## Introduction

It is frequently stated that Islam is the world's fastest growing religion, in part due to conversion. And while conversion to Islam has been the subject of extensive discussion, our goal is to investigate the processes through and conditions under which people exit Islam. Therefore, we aim to critically explore the contemporary dimensions of this conversion process from Islam and discern recurring themes that figure prominently in testimonies made by former Muslims.

In this particular paper, we will be presenting the first phase of our research, which is a preliminary survey of this type of discourse as found in both popular books and on the Internet. This will serve as a comparative ground when we later engage in the second phase of our research, which will consist of actual interviews, which we aim to conduct in the near future. Though there are certainly a number of sources to choose from, we will give special consideration to those few popular sources which have gained a considerable amount of attention, both positive and negative. These include the "Answering Islam" web site, the web site of Nonie Darwish, the "Apostates of Islam" web site, and, especially, the works of "Ibn Warraq" (Author of *Why I am not a Muslim* and *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out*). In fact, most of our analysis will be over *Leaving Islam* due to its perceived prominence.

Before delving into the sources, we should make several cautionary remarks. First of all, many, if not most, of the testimonies that we will analyze come from individuals who take on pseudonyms, presumably in order to hide their identity, for fear of putting themselves in harm's way. Partially because of this, some of the testimonies may have been fabricated. Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that a good

number of the testimonies may indeed be factual as they tend to involve lengthy descriptions of very specific personal details that seem to reveal a genuine element, particularly in those testimonies found in published works, such as *Leaving Islam*. Furthermore, the purpose of this phase of our research is simply to survey “popular” literature in order to get an idea of what is presented in the public sphere, and hence gauge the elements of public perception of conversion away from Islam.<sup>i</sup>

We should also point out that when listing the individuals’ motivations for leaving Islam, we are simply paraphrasing their viewpoints, as opposed to presenting either factual assessments of Islam or our own Muslim viewpoints. Thus, one may find that the understanding of Islam presented may be a controversial one that a number of prominent Muslim scholars, both dead and alive, would not attest to. An example of this is the recurring theme in many of the testimonies that Islam requires the belief in the eternal damnation of all good-hearted non-Muslims. In this case, when we look to the famous Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa bayna al-islām wa al-zandaqa* (*The Decisive Criterion for Distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity*), we find one of the most prominent classical jurists arguing that those individuals who have either never heard of Islam or are exposed to a distorted and undesirable presentation of Islam may attain God’s mercy.<sup>ii</sup> The controversial view of none other than Ibn Taymiyyah regarding the non-eternity of punishment in Hell may also be cited here. Another instance of this may be found in the discussion of the rules of Shari‘a that pertain to women. For example, we find some instances of individuals believing that, according to Islamic law, a woman *must* marry whomever the father selects, even if she is opposed to such an arrangement.

This, however, is clearly not the view of many Muslim jurists, conservative or otherwise, and can hardly be said to be a definitive representation of Shari'a.

Nevertheless, the purpose of this paper is not to engage the individual testimonies in an academic debate, but simply to understand the viewpoints expressed. For this purpose alone, the motivations cited by the individuals for their conversion out of Islam will often be listed as if they were indeed facts. And though the sources examined are highly polemical in nature, we would like to limit the purpose of this paper to simply being an academic survey of popular literature related to conversions out of Islam. We aim to do this by determining (whenever possible) the following factors in each of the testimonies: country/region of origin, gender, family background, and motivations for leaving Islam.

Furthermore, we should point out there is an unavoidable element of subjectivity used in analyzing the testimonies. For example, when describing the level of religiosity of the families of the individuals in question, we are largely dependent on the viewpoint of the individuals. Furthermore, how is one to determine who is religious and who is not without getting into a detailed legal, or even spiritual, discussion that may ultimately fail in achieving its purpose to begin with? Moreover, when discussing the motivations cited for leaving Islam, it should be noted that it is very well possible that some motivations played a more prominent role to the individuals in question than others. However, to rank the degree to which certain motivations were more influential than others would certainly be an unfeasible task given the limited descriptions presented in the testimonies. (And it is precisely because of the limited descriptions given that we were unable to systematically analyze other factors, e.g. socioeconomic class, level of education, race,

etc., though these details were discernible in a few instances). Furthermore, it is also possible that some of the items that we categorized as “motivations” were merely remarks that were not directly associated with the decision to leave Islam. Again, this is difficult to determine, as the testimonies do not always clarify the precise thought processes of the individuals in question. Finally, we have tried to categorize the different motivations into two groups: “Intellectual motivations” and “experiential/social motivations.” As one may imply, the former deals with theoretical and ideological concerns. The latter, on the other hand, deals with both personal experiences and what history has shown us with regards to the social behavior of those who follow certain ideologies. It goes without saying that the line between intellectual motivations and experiential/social motivations may be thin at times, particularly when analyzing those cases where an ideology is said to be the cause behind a particular social behavior or event. In such instances, we will classify the motivation as “experiential/social.” Whenever possible, these motivations will be grouped into further sub-categories in order to help us comprehend the results. For example, if an individual states a number of ideological concerns that all relate to the topic of “rules of Shari‘a pertaining to women,” then we will tend to list the motivation as such in order to avoid complicating this survey with very specific details. Now we are ready to examine the data we have.

### **Data**

We first look to the “Answering Islam” web site, which lists a number of testimonies by Christians who were formerly Muslims in a section entitled “Truth, Love, and Newness of Life: Why Muslims become Christians.” The web site lists approximately 128 testimonies<sup>iii</sup>, which can be broken down as follows: Most of the

testimonies (101) come from males, with only a little over one fifth (27) coming from females. A little less than half (60) of the testimonies (i.e. a little less than half) come from people residing in the Middle East<sup>iv</sup>; 43 come from people in the Arab world; 13 come from Iran; 12 come from Turkey; 21 come from Africa; 20 come from the region of Afghanistan, Pakistan and India; 18 come from Indonesia and Malaysia; 6 come from the West; and 1 comes from Russia. Of the 6 from the West, 4 are from the United States. These four are composed of two males, both of whom formerly belonged to the Nation of Islam, and two females who seem to have followed ‘mainstream’ manifestations of Islam.<sup>v</sup> (Table 1 summarizes these results).

Table 1 (“Answering Islam”) Gender and Origins

Gender:

Males: 101

Females: 27

Origins:

Middle East: 60

Iran: 13

Turkey: 12

Arab World: 43

Africa: 21

Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India: 20

Indonesia and Malaysia: 18

West: 6

United States of America: 4

For a detailed analysis of a testimony of a prominent ex-Muslim who converted to Christianity, we will now examine the case of Nonie Darwish. It is from her web site (NonieDarwish.com) that we can derive biographical information. We know that she was raised in the Middle East and eventually moved to the United States, during which time she found her way to Christianity. It seems that her family was not particularly religious. Her intellectual motivations for leaving Islam included: The religion is generally

intolerant, the Shari‘a laws pertaining to women are problematic, and Islam seems to lack the emphasis on love, kindness, grace and forgiveness that she found in Christianity. As for her experiential/social motivations for leaving Islam, these included the following: Following the requirements of the religion was found to be “almost impossible...to practice”<sup>vi</sup>, the total submission practiced by Muslims has led to rule by dictators, chauvinism, extreme sensitivity to criticism, and a strict hierarchy among Muslims; Muslims are taught to hate non-Muslims; and Christian pastors tend to be much better morally than Muslim clerics.

Another useful source is the web site entitled “Apostates of Islam.” In a section entitled “Meet the Apostates,” we find a list of 80 individuals who have chosen to leave Islam and their testimonies. Of the 80 individuals, most (54) are males, and less than a third (25) are females. Unlike the “Answering Islam” web site, however, we find individuals selecting destinations other than Christianity. More than half (46) have chosen to become either atheists or agnostics, about 15% (12) have become Christian, 4 are listed as theists, 2 have chosen Hinduism (with one coming from India and the other from the United States), 2 are still exploring, and 14 other individuals who have chosen unique ideological inclinations. (Table 2 summarizes these results). Furthermore, of the 80 individuals listed, more than one third (28) come from the region of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh; about 23% (18) come from the Middle East; and about 20% (16) come from the West. Of the 16 in the West, half come from the United States. (Table 3 summarizes these results). And most of those coming from the West (6) found their way to either atheism or agnosticism. The same goes for those coming from the region of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India (19), as well as those coming

from the Middle East (8) and the Arab world (10). The site also includes testimonies by six individuals who are referred to as “Famous Ex-Muslims”: Ibn Warraq of Pakistan (who is said to be an agnostic), Taslima Nasrin of Bangladesh (who is said to be an atheist, and is known for her feminist views), Ali Sina of Iran (who is said to be an atheist), Parvin Darabi of Iran (who is said to be an atheist), Nonie Darwish of the Middle East (whom we discussed above), and Tahir Aslam Gora of Pakistan (who is said to be a non-Muslim Sufi).<sup>vii</sup>

<u>Table 2 (“Apostates of Islam”) Beliefs</u>
Atheism: 33
Agnosticism: 13
Christianity: 12
Theism: 4
Hinduism: 2
Exploring: 2
Other: 14

<u>Table 3 (“Apostates of Islam”) Gender and Origins</u>
<u>Gender:</u>
Males: 54
Females: 25
<u>Origins:</u>
Middle East: 18
Iran: 4
Turkey: 1
Arab World: 17
North Africa: 6
Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh: 28
Indonesia and Malaysia: 8
West: 16
United States of America: 8

We now look to a prominent figure – a man known only by his pseudonym “Ibn Warraq.” Little is known of him, but there is good reason to believe that he is an actual

figure. For example, he was formally interviewed by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on a national radio broadcast on October 10, 2001.<sup>viii</sup> According to his biography, he was raised by a somewhat religious family in Pakistan, moved to Europe, and went on to become a teacher in Ohio. He is especially well known for his book *Why I am not a Muslim*, which was published in 1995 by Prometheus Books. In this book he mentions a number of reasons for his departure from Islam. His intellectual motivations included the following: It is difficult to ascertain the historicity of the sources of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad's character is problematic from a moral standpoint, the Koran<sup>ix</sup> does not seem to be divine, Islam advocates totalitarianism and is both intolerant and incompatible with human rights, the status of women is deplorable, there are problems with theism, and Islam has unnecessary taboos, such as those regarding wine, pigs and homosexuality. His experiential/social motivations for leaving Islam included: Muslims have a bad history of Arab imperialism and Islamic colonialism, and the historical treatment of non-Muslims, women, and slaves is deplorable. As he puts it, "The treatment of women, non-Muslims, unbelievers, heretics, and slaves (male and female) was appalling both in theory and practice."<sup>x</sup> As stated above, it appears that Ibn Warraq is currently an agnostic.<sup>xi</sup>

In a later book edited by Ibn Warraq, entitled *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out*, we not only find 25 detailed testimonies by other former Muslims, we also find 21 brief testimonies that were obtained from the web site of the Institute for the Secularisation of Islamic Societies ([www.secularislam.org](http://www.secularislam.org)), as well as some general information pertaining to conversion away from Islam to Christianity, Hinduism, atheism, agnosticism, deism, and humanism. As for the 25 detailed testimonies, 19

come from individuals who were raised in Muslim households (and were presumably Muslims themselves), 5 come from former Muslims who had converted to Islam, and, seemingly out of place, 1 comes from an individual who was simply raised in a predominately Muslim country though never claimed to be a Muslim. As a result of their conversion, it would seem that at least 19 of the 25 went on to become either atheists or agnostics. Besides these, there was at least one theist and one person who simply claimed to follow no religion. It was difficult to determine the final destination of the remaining 4 individuals. (Table 4 summarizes these results). Once again, most (18) of the individuals are males and only 28% (7) are females. Regarding countries of origin, 44% (11) come from the region of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, 28% (7) are from the West, 3 are from Iran, and there are individuals from Tunisia, Malaysia, Turkey, and a predominately Buddhist country in the Far East which is never identified. Of the 7 from the West, 6 were from the United States. (Table 5 summarizes these results). Of these 6, 2 were second-generation immigrants and the remaining 4 were former converts to Islam. It seems that most of the individuals coming from the West found their way to either atheism or agnosticism (based on that fact that 3 of the 4 individuals who listed their final ideological destinations described themselves as being either atheist or agnostic). Of those coming from the Middle East and the Arab world, all found their way to either atheism or agnosticism. The same applies for the overwhelming majority (at least 9) of those coming from the region of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.

<p><u>Table 4 (<i>Leaving Islam</i>) Beliefs</u></p> <p>Atheism: 8</p> <p>Agnosticism: 3</p>
--

Atheism/Agnosticism: 8 No religion: 1 Theism: 1 Unknown: 4
---

Table 5 (*Leaving Islam*) Gender and Origins

Gender:

Males: 18

Females: 7

Origins:

Middle East: 4

Iran: 3

Turkey: 1

Arab World: 1

North Africa: 1

Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh: 11

Malaysia: 1

Far East, Predominately Buddhist: 1

West: 7

United States of America: 6

As for general information pertaining to conversion from Islam to Christianity, Ibn Warraq includes a couple of brief testimonies of former Muslims who became Christians and then examines three more case studies of such conversions in Kuwait, Yemen, and the West. He then concludes this section with some data that he obtained from a French publication, *Le Figaro*, regarding former Muslim adults who were baptized as Catholics in France in 2000: Of the 2,503 adults baptized that year, 225, or 9%, were former Muslims.<sup>xii</sup>

As for general information pertaining to conversion from Islam to Hinduism, Ibn Warraq asserts that there is good reason to believe “that many Muslims in India are reverting to the religion of their ancestors.”<sup>xiii</sup> He also cites the work of Australian anthropologist Dr. Thomas Reuter of the University of Melbourne, who claims that there

are mass conversions of people from Islam to Hinduism in the Indonesia archipelago, particularly in Java, with estimates in the tens of thousands over the last twenty years.<sup>xiv</sup>

As for atheism, agnosticism, deism and humanism, Ibn Warraq notes the high percentage of second-generation Algerian immigrants living in France who claim no association to religion, with estimates in the 20-30% range.<sup>xv</sup> He then notes case studies from Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, and Syria. The only other statistic worth noting here comes from a 1980s census taken among Iranian exiles living in the Netherlands which showed that 50 percent of such individuals “declared themselves agnostics or atheists.”<sup>xvi</sup>

We shall now examine 10 of the 25 detailed testimonies and analyze each one. Those testimonies were chosen because they tend to provide a relatively good sample representing the cases we have studied.

The first testimony comes from a prominent figure, Ali Sina. He was born and raised in an upper-middle class family in Iran before the Revolution, moved to Pakistan at the age of 16, and then went to Italy for his college studies. His family is described as being religious yet having secular tendencies. His conversion from Islam appears to have taken place either during or immediately after his college years. It appears that he is currently an atheist.<sup>xvii</sup> His intellectual motivations for this conversion included the following: Islamic teaching regarding non-Muslims (such as the teaching that all non-Muslims are destined for Hell and that they are dirty) is problematic since there do exist many seemingly good non-Muslims, Islam advocates violence, the character of the Prophet Muhammad is not ideal, Islamic teachings contradict human rights, and the Shari‘a rules pertaining to women are deplorable (for example, the rape of women is said to be justified in Islam). His experiential/social motivations included the following: The

observation that “good” Muslims tended to be those who were not very religious, there are many “good” non-Muslims, Muslims are currently in a sorry state, and the great “Muslim” thinkers of the past were either not Muslim or not religious. As he puts it, “Most Muslims are extremely good people...What is wrong is Islam...Those Muslims who do bad things *are* those who follow Islam.”<sup>xviii</sup>

The next figure is Abul Kasem. He was raised in Bangladesh in a religious yet moderate household. It was following his graduation from college that he made the move from Islam to agnosticism. His intellectual motivations for this move included: Islam advocates illogical practices and prohibitions, making it suffocating; Islam advocates violence (for example, killing Hindus is considered a Jihad that is rewarded with admission into heaven); Islamic doctrine leads to racist beliefs; and the Koran is faulty. As he puts it, “The Koran is absolutely against everything in humanity we consider civilized.”<sup>xix</sup> His experiential/social motivations included: The concept of fear was instilled into him by his parents (by way of beatings, for example) for asking questions about Islam and making errors in Islamic practice; he found non-Muslims to be friendly despite what he was taught about them, while Muslims tended to devalue non-Muslims; religious Muslims that he encountered tended to be cruel, hypocritical, promiscuous, and in self-denial of their faults; and Muslims were often motivated to commit atrocities, such as the 1971 genocide in Bangladesh by Pakistani militants.

We now turn to Parvin Darabi. She was born in Iran and later moved to the United States. Her family was generally secular, however, they maintained cultural ties to Islam. She converted from Islam to atheism at some point during middle adulthood, however, at no point as a Muslim had she ever gone to a mosque or participated in

Islamic rituals. Her intellectual motivations for leaving Islam included: The Shari‘a rulings regarding women are deplorable (especially those laws which allow the marriage of girls at a young age and the Shi‘i custom of *Sigeh*, or temporary marriages), there is no need to have prayers in Arabic, the character of the Prophet Muhammad is not ideal, and religion in general is used to control people. Her experiential/social motivations included: The observation that Muslims are generally “cold” and particularly restrictive with regards to female family members. Furthermore, Iranian laws regarding women are unacceptable.

We now turn to Husain Ahmed. He was raised in Pakistan in a somewhat religious Shi‘i household before moving to the United Kingdom. Before leaving Islam, he joined *Ṭulū-i Islām*, whose founder, Ghulam Ahmad Parvez, rejected the use of Hadith. It is difficult to determine whether he then became an atheist or an agnostic. His intellectual motivations for leaving Islam included the following: The Koran is both disappointing and cruel; the rulings of Shari‘a regarding women are unjust; Islam is not universal; a contradiction appears to exist between the notion of a just God and predestination, misfortune and poverty; atheism as presented by Bertrand Russell seems logical; religion is seen as an enterprise that brainwashes its followers; the fact that there are no more prophets and that only some receive guidance and not others seems illogical; Islamic doctrine seems intolerant; and there is no logical reason for homosexuality to be forbidden. His experiential/social motivations included the observation that most Muslims tend to be ignorant of what the Koran really says and thus are in an illusion about the truth.

The next testimony comes from Sophia. She was born and raised in a liberal Pakistani household. She chose to leave Islam at the age of 21 after coming to the United States and beginning her undergraduate college career and majoring in psychology. In her own words, she describes herself as being an “atheist or perhaps an agnostic.”<sup>xx</sup> Her intellectual motivations for leaving Islam included the following: The Koran seems to have “unreasonable things”<sup>xxi</sup> in it, Sigmund Freud’s idea that God is simply “an infantile fantasy”<sup>xxii</sup> is logical, the Shari‘a rules pertaining to women appear to be unjust (e.g. women are considered to be equivalent to property), the character of the Prophet Muhammad does not seem ideal, and religion in general appears to be a “socioeconomic manipulation.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Her experiential/social motivations included the following: Muslim women in Pakistan are treated cruelly and Muslim moderates do not seem to be honest with themselves regarding the truth of what Islam really is. In order to demonstrate her passionate aversion to Islam, she states, “I believe religion, and Islam in particular, to be the biggest misfortune humankind has had a chance of coming across.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

The next figure is a prominent one: Anwar Shaikh. Born and raised in Pakistan in a religious household, Shaikh would eventually move to the United Kingdom and live as a liberal humanist. It is not clear whether he became an atheist or an agnostic. He left Islam by the time he was 26 years old, however, this would only be after he had murdered three innocent Sikhs in the name of Islam. It was this particular occurrence that served as an experiential/social motivation for leaving Islam. His intellectual motivations for leaving Islam included: The belief that Islam encourages fighting against non-Muslims (and seducing their wives) as a form of Jihad with heaven and its *houris* as the ultimate reward; the Koran appears to have been used by the Prophet Muhammad for

his own personal gain and in order to elevate him (As he puts it, “I have no doubt the prophet wanted to raise himself to the same status as Allah”<sup>xxv</sup>); the Prophet’s character was not ideal; the Koran appears to have contradictions; Islam appears to be an Arab national movement; the rules of Shari‘a regarding women are unjust; and humanism seems to be the ideal way for humans. Shaikh has gone on to write at least four books (all published by Principality Publishers) that are critical of Islam: *Faith and Deception* (1996); *Islam, The Arab Imperialism* (1998); *Islam, Sex and Violence* (1999); and *The Two Faces of Islam* (Forthcoming, according to *Leaving Islam*).

The next testimony comes from Nadia, who was raised in the United States by Moroccan immigrants who were religious, though somewhat liberal. It was sometime during her late 20s after she had married a devout yet strict Moroccan Muslim man that she chose to leave Islam. It is not clear what her current beliefs are, but up to the time of the publication of her testimony she was a pseudo-Muslim who had not revealed her ideological shift to her husband for fear of his reaction. In her words, “[E]very day, I go through the ritual motions that the religion requires, disguising my true feelings of revulsion for the hate that Islam preaches.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Ultimately, it was her interactions with her husband that served as an experiential/social motivation for leaving Islam since it demonstrated to her what true Islam was. Her intellectual motivation for leaving Islam was her finding the Koran to be man-made and not divine.

The next figure is Irfan Ahmad Khawaja, who was raised in the United States by Pakistani parents who were religious. By the time he was 17 years old, he had left Islam, and would go on to become an atheist. It also appears that he spent his college years at Princeton University. His intellectual motivations for leaving Islam included the

following: The character of the Prophet Muhammad did not seem to be ideal, especially after reading Maxime Rodinson's biography of Muhammad; the works of Bernard Lewis portray an ugly side of Islam; Islam seems to encourage violence; the Koran contains anti-Semitic rhetoric; the Shari'a rules pertaining to women are unfair; Islam encourages passivity to misfortune and hardship; there appears to be a contradiction between the notion of a just God and the existence of pain; theism is problematic, particularly due to the paradox of omnipotence, the tension between predestination and free will, the problem of evil, and the fact that arguments for theism (e.g. the Kalam cosmological argument) ultimately fail; and works of Western, non-Islamic philosophy appear to be more logical, particularly the works of Ayn Rand. His experiential/social motivations for leaving Islam included the following: Muslims tend to harbor anti-Semitic sentiments, many Muslims are misogynistic and chauvinistic, Muslims are generally apologetic, and the Muslim world tends to be backward. In his words, "My memories of life as a Muslim are mostly fond ones, and I learned many positive things from Islam... It is hard not to feel animosity, however, for what Islam has become in the last hundred years."<sup>xxvii</sup>

The remaining two testimonies come from Western converts to Islam who later chose to convert out of the religion. The first of these comes from René, who was born and raised in Spain. Besides that, we know next to nothing regarding his life before his conversion out of Islam. We do know that following this final conversion he became a theist, though we do not know more than this. His intellectual motivations for leaving Islam included the following: His belief in Islam was seen as having only been sustained by the fact that he had avoided looking at works that are critical of Islam (As he puts it, "There exists a great contrast between what we know about Islam and what it really

is<sup>xxviii</sup>), the Koran and Hadith tend to contradict science (particularly with regards to the Theory of Evolution), Islamic teachings may be deemed problematic when one considers that they can never be changed or adjusted, the historicity of the Koran is unreliable since it is not completely preserved, and the Islamic ideal of how to deal with non-Muslims and apostates demonstrates the intolerance of Islam. His experiential/social motivations for leaving Islam included the following: Muslims that he encountered tended to be ignorant (e.g. with regards to the Theory of Evolution), he was criticized by Muslims for doing “too little” despite spending about three and a half hours every day solely for the sake of Islam, and he found himself adopting anti-Semitic views as a Muslim.

The final testimony comes from Ben Hoja, who was born and raised in the United States. He went from being half-Jewish, half-Catholic to being a Sunni Muslim at the age of 16. During the first half of his college career, however, he left Islam. (It is difficult to determine which ideology he adopted at that point). His intellectual motivations for leaving Islam included the following: Islam ultimately wants Muslims to be like blind “sheep”<sup>xxix</sup>, the rules of Islam are both strict and limiting, the *Hadd* punishments are problematic as is the justification of rape of enemy women captured in Jihad, the works of Ibn Warraq and the “Answering Islam” web site present many logical criticisms of Islam, Islam tends to contradict science (particularly the Theory of Evolution), and it does not seem fair that good non-Muslims will go to Hell and that Hell be extremely painful. His experiential/social motivation consisted of his experiences with fellow Muslims who presented Islam and its rules as being strict. In his conclusion, he states, “My apostasy at first did not feel like in measure a liberation... On the other

hand, after a half decade of kufr, I have been able to analyze with greater candor what might be the causes of my despair.<sup>»xxx</sup>

### **Conclusion**

As far as final destinations are concerned, it appears that the overwhelming majority of those who leave Islam find their way to atheism, agnosticism, or Christianity. As far as gender is concerned, a large majority of the testimonies come from males, which is perhaps ironic considering how frequently the poor status of women in Islam is cited as an intellectual motivation for leaving the religion. As far as countries of origin are concerned, it would seem, based on this particular survey, that most of the people who leave Islam in order to become either atheist or agnostic come from the regions of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, whereas most of the people who leave Islam in order to become Christian come from the Middle East and the Arab world. This may possibly be a result of the close interactions between Christians and Muslims in that part of the world- interactions that are less visible in South Asia (for practical reasons). Nevertheless, it is unclear whether most of the people coming from the Middle East and the Arab world who leave Islam become Christian. Based on the “Apostates of Islam” data, which lists a variety of former Muslims (i.e. atheists, agnostics, Christians, Hindus, etc.), it would seem that most of the former Muslims from the Middle East and the Arab world became either atheists or agnostics; however, the “Answering Islam” data, which only lists former Muslims who became Christian, contains a larger number of testimonies of people from this region than what we find in the former site. As for conversions to Hinduism, it would appear that this is a phenomenon that is mainly found in Indonesia, particularly Java, (based on the evidence presented in *Leaving Islam*) and India

(according to Ibn Warraq's anecdotal evidence and one of the "Apostates of Islam" testimonies).

As for the *Leaving Islam* testimonies, as well those testimonies by Nonie Darwish and Ibn Warraq (27 detailed testimonies in all), though we may find many differences among them, we tend to observe a number of recurring patterns, especially with regards to the intellectual motivations for conversion out of Islam. As mentioned above, we find the issues pertaining to the status of women and the eternal damnation of good non-Muslims as being causes for concern, with more than half (15)<sup>xxxi</sup> citing the former and 6 citing the latter. Another element that we found in a little less than half (13) of the testimonies was the belief that the Koran is problematic. One of the reasons for this that we have not discussed thus far is the reflection by many of the individuals that, growing up, they had studied the Koran without understanding what it actually meant, and thus when they eventually read its translation, they were surprised to find that it did not possess the ideals and values that they had assumed it contained. Even more shocking for many of them was their encounter with secondary sources that were critical of Islam, particularly those sources written by western scholars. Mostly due to this, we find more than one third (10) concerned with the character of the Prophet Muhammad (as well as that of other Muslim leaders). Furthermore, we also find some (4) testimonies expressing doubt concerning the historicity of important Islamic sources, i.e. the Koran and Hadith. Another concern for more than half (15) was the apparent contradiction between the Shari'a on the one hand, and tolerance and human rights on the other, particularly when one considers the specific issue of Jihad and what Islam deems to be legitimate violence and punishment. This issue is not completely unrelated to another recurring intellectual

motivation: the apparent contradictions found within theism, particularly between the notion of a just God and misfortune, pain, evil, etc.- an observation that many discovered upon reading atheist literature. Such philosophical problems pertaining to theism were cited by one third (9) of the individuals, and 7 cited religion in general as being unreasonable. According to some (4) individuals, another perceived contradiction was found to exist between Islam and science (with the Theory of Evolution being a popular reference point). We also find some confusion stemming from the seemingly strict practices and prohibitions that Islam ordains, with many seeming to be both unnecessary (such as the prohibition of the consumption of pork and homosexuality), according to 5 individuals, and suffocating, according to 4. Furthermore, some (6) found Islam to be non-universal and designed specifically for Arabs. This is perhaps not unrelated to the 3 testimonies which noted that belief in Islam led to some form of racism. Finally, a finding that we have yet to mention (as it was not a “motivation” per se): A common remark made by a number of the individuals is that they felt that they had been raised in such a way that they had been brainwashed into accepting Islamic values and that they were fortunate to have discovered western values.

As far as experiential/social motivations are concerned, we find about 40% (11) of the testimonies citing encounters with cruel and “bad” Muslim leaders and relatives. Furthermore, we find 10 testimonies related to the oppressive nature of Muslims throughout history, with the 1971 crisis in Bangladesh being cited a few (3) times. We also find some (7) references to the backward state of Muslims, particularly *vis-à-vis* the West. Moreover, we find 6 citing Muslim hatred and ill treatment towards non-Muslims as being another experiential/social motivation. Another 6 also cited the ill treatment of

women. Another common theme found in 5 of the testimonies is the assumption that Muslims are ignorant of their own religion and that they are perhaps in a state of illusion regarding what their religion actually dictates. We also find mention in a couple of the testimonies of the passive nature of Muslims in the wake of oppression and misfortune due to the notion of submission. We also find references to how unhappy and immoral former Muslims may have been while following Islam. And as a final observation, we tend to find a number of people hiding their conversion out of Islam, either because they are involved in an intimate relationship with a certain Muslim (e.g. a husband) and do not want to dissolve it, or because of a fear that they will be harmed by radical Muslims.

While some of these results may not be entirely surprising, what is important to note here is the degree of emphasis that the individuals placed on certain topics more than others, as well as the manner in which their conversions took place. Certainly, a preliminary survey can only lead to preliminary conclusions. So let us say the following for now: If the Muslim community in the United States (and elsewhere) aims to sustain itself and limit migration out of its community in a world dominated by certain values, intellectuals should consider focusing on some of the recurring intellectual concerns listed above. And for both practical and idealistic purposes, activists should consider focusing their efforts towards relieving some of the social ills that motivated many of the individuals listed above to leave Islam. And while it is true that a community should not always let the views of some dictate the agenda for the rest, there should at least be an awareness of these issues. After all, as noted by Emile Durkheim “religion is an eminently social thing.”<sup>xxxii</sup>

- 
- <sup>i</sup> Once again, we should point out that this phase is important for two reasons: 1. There is little to no research on this topic to begin with, and 2. It will serve as a comparative tool for when we conduct the second phase of our research.
- <sup>ii</sup> Jackson, 65.
- <sup>iii</sup> There are a few others that are either not in English or accessed by way of links.
- <sup>iv</sup> “Middle East” is limited here to that region spanning from Egypt in the west to Iran in the east, thus not including Afghanistan and most of North Africa.
- <sup>v</sup> “Truth, Love, and Newness of Life.”
- <sup>vi</sup> Darwish.
- <sup>vii</sup> “Meet the Apostates.”
- <sup>viii</sup> “The Religion Report.”
- <sup>ix</sup> I have chosen to utilize this method of spelling Qur’an simply because it is the spelling used in most of the testimonies, hence it provides a sense of consistency.
- <sup>x</sup> Ibn Warraq, *Why I am not a Muslim*, 2.
- <sup>xi</sup> “Meet the Apostates.”
- <sup>xii</sup> Ibn Warraq, *Leaving Islam*, 99.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.
- <sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.
- <sup>xvii</sup> “Meet the Apostates.”
- <sup>xviii</sup> Ibn Warraq, *Leaving Islam*, 147.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.
- <sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.
- <sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.
- <sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.
- <sup>xxv</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.
- <sup>xxix</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.
- <sup>xxx</sup> *Ibid.*, 385.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> I have tried to estimate the number of individuals who cited this and other categories as motivations, though, because of the specific differences between each of the testimonies, these numbers should be regarded as rough estimates.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Durkheim, 9.

## Works Cited

---

Darwish, Nonie. "Escaping Submission." [www.NonieDarwish.com](http://www.NonieDarwish.com). Last accessed 08/23/2004.

Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Karen E. Fields. New York: The Free Press, 1995.

Ibn Warraq (Ed.). *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out*. Prometheus Books. 2003: Amherst, New York.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Why I am not a Muslim*. Prometheus Books. 1995: Amherst, New York.

Jackson, Sherman A. *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*. Oxford University Press. 2002: New York.

"Meet the Apostates." Apostates of Islam. [www.apostatesofislam.com/apostates.htm](http://www.apostatesofislam.com/apostates.htm). Last accessed 08/23/2004.

"The Religion Report: Ibn Warraq: Why I am not a Muslim" (transcript). The Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/re/rprt/stories/s386913.htm>. Last accessed 08/29/2004.

"Truth, Love, and Newness of Life: Why Muslims become Christians." Answering Islam. [www.answering-islam.org/Testimonies/index.html](http://www.answering-islam.org/Testimonies/index.html). Last accessed 08/23/2004.