

# THE CONVERSION NARRATIVE OF SAMIRA: FROM SHI'A ISLAM TO MARY, HER CHURCH, AND HER SON

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## 1 Introduction

Samira and I first met at an NT Wright conference in San Antonio, Texas in 2007. I had mentioned to someone else at the table where I was sitting that I was, at that time, living in the Middle East. Later I was introduced to Samira who mentioned that she had been born into a Muslim family. I had read a little on apostasy (*ridda*) at that time, but it was well before I started my doctoral work which centers on what I call Islamic Christianity, which I have described elsewhere:

The placing together of [these] two words - two words which have often been seen as exclusive of each other - is unsettling to many people. Yet recent decades have seen a genuine and substantial, if numerically minute, growth of individuals and indeed communities that have allegiances to both ways of life. It is also important to specify what I am not purposing to do: I am not intent on making a verdict regarding whether different forms of Islamic Christianity are legitimate forms of Islam or Christianity, or some syncretistic *tertia quid*. (Miller 2009: 4)

Samira and I stayed in touch by e-mail from time to time. After I had learned more about conversion from and within Islam to the Christ of the Gospels, I recalled the bare outlines of her conversion

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narrative and how it seemed, in numerous ways, unique. Whereupon I e-mailed her requesting a phone interview which she agreed to; that interview was carried out in July of 2009. Much of what I present here is in terms of extensive, verbatim quotes<sup>2</sup>. I did not have a list of questions to ask when we started, so the flow was very conversational.

## 2 Interview

### 2.1 St. Mary in Iran and the Church in Dallas: conversion and initiation

DAM: *What was your first exposure to Christianity or Jesus or the Bible or any of those things?*

Samira: Well, my first exposure was when I was six and had a vision of the Virgin Mary. And at the time I didn't know who Mary was or who Jesus was or who Muslims were—I didn't know anything about anything. I was in a mountain place; it was dark, I fell and I couldn't get up. And there was this huge rock; this lady came from behind the rock: she was all in white, and she held my hand and picked me up and said that she was Mary. And when she held my hand something stayed with me and I just loved her and I asked my mother who she was, and she said she was the mother of Prophet Jesus, as Muslims knew her. And I just knew since then that I wanted to be where she was, which was the church. And then when I was nine I learned about St Bernadette; there was a movie called *The Song of Bernadette* and that is when I received my calling into ministry because I knew that my life belonged to the church. And that was the place to go to [inaudible]. And the interesting

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<sup>2</sup> I have removed the occasional “ahhh”, “mmm” or “you know.” That is all.

[thing] about that is I didn't know anything about Jesus and—or the Bible. It was all the love of the church through the Virgin Mary. And then after we left Iran and came to the US, eventually—

*And how old were you when that happened?*

When which happened?

*When you guys left Iran.*

I was 23.

OK

And before that, when I learned about St Bernadette and received my calling, I wanted to become a nun because in Iran all you know about is the Catholic Church, um, and that was the only way I knew how to belong to the church. I asked my mother and she went and talked to—there was a little teeny tiny convent left from the Second World War in Iran, and she went and she talked to the few, old nuns that were living there. But they didn't accept me because they were afraid that the government would cause them problems. And—so that didn't happen and eventually I got married and we left Iran and that's when I was 23.

We came to Dallas and started going to church—to a Baptist church because that is how I got—the friend that I had here who invited me to the church was Baptist. So I started going there and after six months I was baptized and it was immediately home. And that is how I came to Chris—to become a Christian. (7:20)

*You said something very curious early on which is not very common in—in conversion narratives, which is that your initial attraction was through the Virgin and through devotion to the Church and through love of the Church. Now both of those concepts don't fit in very well with the Baptist understanding*

*of the Christian faith. What was that like, starting to go to a Baptist church? [...] Did it feel different? I mean, what was that like?*

Yeah, that is something I have [to] talk about. I...I was baptized, and even when I was baptized I was not fully aware of...you know issues like, say, for example, for me was a loving, trusting God—it was not an abstract belief in one idea. And that faith, and that trust in God have come to...to grow in me because of the experiences I had with God throughout our journey and you know, when we fled from Iran. But it was the Church for me—at that time I didn't know the differences between the churches. I was—I was fully new because I didn't know anything about Christianity when I got here [the USA] except that I loved the Church and I loved the Blessed Virgin and I—that I would be where she was and [...] that, you know, that would be my life: the Church, the life of the Church. But I didn't know the differences between [...] the Baptist churches and the Catholic Church. I didn't know anything about that.

*[Talking over each other, I say go ahead, she says, no you go ahead]*

*I'm wondering what did the Baptist church do in terms of preparing you for baptism? Did they have any—where there people there who knew about Persian culture and history or who knew about Islam? Or was it just, you know, the same thing they did for everybody?*

No, they didn't know anything—they didn't know much about Islam or the Persian culture. And I talked to my pastor and I told him I loved Christianity and I believe in Jesus, you know, as my savior and he talked to me and I told him about the vision and all that and he baptized me. But uh, I knew something was *off*. And, so when I started seminary—well I knew something

was off even before I started seminary, sorry. That was when we had the Lord's Supper which Baptists do—which this particular Baptist church does every once a month. Every time we had that I would tell my pastor, you know I cannot believe this is just...symbolic; there is more, I'm experiencing more; it's more powerful. And, he would say, it's just your mystical upbringing, you know. Or when I would say—whenever he would have people that were not ordained to administer the sacrament and every time that he would do that we would get into an argument afterwards. I would say, you know you cannot do that. Even though I had no training whatsoever, I would say, this is wrong, you know: someone who is not ordained should not be doing this! It's...it's sacrilegious, it's unholy.

So, then I start going to seminary and...the second year I came to realize I could not be a Baptist anymore. The difference between ontological priesthood and functional ministry was so huge, and I could not be a minister in the sense that Baptists wanted me to be, you know. And the sacraments—those were completely absent. And so [...] that's my experience of Baptist church.

*Great...I'm just finishing a couple of notes here...you've said a lot of interesting things here. [Pause.] Tell me a little about you—you said, of course, you had been interested in possibly becoming a nun when you were a little girl and that didn't work out for—because the convent in Iran was afraid of possibly being punished by the government which, I think, probably would have happened.*

*Let me ask you about...getting married. Where did you meet your husband? And he is also from...somewhere in Asia or is he an American guy or something else?*

Well, my ex-husband, he was Iranian: he was a Sunni Muslim. And I was a Shi'a and he was a Sunni and he was very relig-

ious: his family were extremely religious. And...let's see, we got married when I was 15, and he was older than I; he was 23. I was 15. And he fell in love with me and he—you know, he was so religious he could not be with someone without being married to them. And that was [...] the right way to do it—to be with [...] the person you love in that culture. Anyway...and my family was against it and eventually he talked to my father and eventually he promised I could study as long as I want: you know, go to school as long as I want. And, you know eventually we got married. [...]

## **2.2 Conversion, belonging, and the nature of the Christian gospel**

*When you first started learning about Jesus and how he's portrayed in the Gospels, did you ever have a time when you went back to the Qur'an and said, you know, I know that Jesus and Mary, these are figures in the Qur'an, you know, let me figure out what the Qur'an says about these people? Or did that not happen?*

No, well I grew up in a religious community and I was always interested in God. God was always the most interesting person for me. I was obsessed with him in a sense so even as a Muslim and even though I know that I would be at a church I would still [...] pray my prayers. I would...memorize the Qur'an. [...] So I read the Qur'an, and it is part of the curriculum at the school. We had every day, we had two hours of religious studies. So I had learned about who Jesus was to Muslims and who Mary was to Muslims. Which— [...] you know how they think about that<sup>3</sup>. And...but when I started going to church here, no,

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<sup>3</sup> The interviewee was aware of my knowledge of Islam, and the tone of the comment was not, in my mind, derogatory. It was a simple way of acknowledging

I never went back, I never [...] paused. I mean, it was a sure thing for me. It was...it was not the knowledge of Jesus, it was the love of the Church, and that was the body of Christ. You know, and it was never something intellectual for me. [Silence.]

After this I asked about her sense of belonging as a convert. She told me about her initial experience at the Baptist church and she makes the comment that American evangelicals are very friendly “as long as they don’t have to share their life with you.” The people at her Sunday school got together for dinners and gatherings on a regular basis, but she never was invited even though the Americans knew she and her husband had no family or friends in the country. After this she nevertheless repeats, “but they were nice to us...but then they would not want to share their lives with us”. She explains how odd it was not to be invited to anyone’s home since, in Iran, this is a very basic and usual step in welcoming a new person or family to an area. (I have spent most of the last four years in the Arab world and during a recent sojourn in the US I was struck by how everyone will eat with us at a restaurant and even foot the bill, but not invite us to their homes.) “In the Middle East if you are a stranger in town, people do not let you be alone!”

Samira was eventually on the missions committee of her church, a group of mostly laity who coordinate the missionary budget and work of the congregation, and she came to the conclusion that “they do missions for the wrong reason...out of self-righteousness”. She described a church that was concerned and devoted to sharing a message about Jesus, but not willing to allow personal, sacrificial relations to be part of that communication. She gives an example of a minister friend of hers who had a Paki-

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that she knew that I knew the Islamic understanding of Messiah and his blessed mother, Mary.

stani neighbor of 13 years and had never been to his house, and had never invited him over to his own home, “but he was going on mission trips!” There is a clear irony here according to Samira’s understanding of the nature of the Gospel message. Merely communicating a message about salvation in terms of knowledge and belief is an incomplete or even insincere communication of the Gospel. There is a relational, sacrificial aspect that must be present. She concludes with this strong statement regarding American evangelicals: “They do not evangelize or do mission work because they are transformed by the love of God...it’s not about loving your neighbor for them, it’s about we are right, you are wrong.”

I mentioned that she had a number of influences here: the Catholic convent in Iran, the Baptist church in Dallas. How did she end up becoming part of the Episcopal Church? She started seminary as a Baptist, and it was during those studies (for an MDiv) that she became convinced she could not longer be a Baptist. She describes the difficulty in leaving the Baptist church in Dallas, recalling that, “they were there for us through...so many things. And I was completely at home after a few years... people trusted me and they cared for us...they had been there for us through everything.” But in the second year of seminary “I just couldn’t do it.” She agonized for five months over the decision, and says it was like “leaving my country all over again.” She started going to the Anglican Church and it had everything she was looking for: “the sacraments, the priesthood—everything.” She became Anglican (Episcopalian, in the USA). She left the Baptist church with the blessing of her pastor and they are still good friends. She is presently ministering in the Episcopal Diocese of Dallas at the Cathedral Church of St. Matthew.

I then asked about her impression of the Muslim world today. Her answer is measured. I was actually wondering more about the political and human rights situation in Dar al Islam, but she proceeded to speak of Islam in terms of what people ask her. Is it a true religion? “I don’t know.” She points out that under



Muhammad there were positive changes in Arab culture, but “was Muhammad the Son of God? No.” “Could he have been a prophet? Well, I don’t know, I wasn’t there.” “I just know who Jesus is and what he has done and I think that there is no need to go further, to want to prove them wrong.” Nevertheless, we should love them and share the Gospel with Muslims in word and deed. So a non-confrontational approach does not mean that Christians should not intentionally share the Gospel with Muslims.

She goes on to wonder about why her own church, The Episcopal Church, is not more effective in missions. Why is it that the evangelicals are so energized for this work while her own church which has so many spiritual resources is not? “And that’s always the curious thing for me...we are the ones that ought to be on fire for God.”

We then have a lengthy discussion about systematic theology and her current interest in Von Balthasar<sup>4</sup> and her desire to do her PhD on this topic. Her research interest is thus summarized: “What I want to do is develop a Christo-centric anthropology that would focus on the transformation of man into the nature of Christ in such a way that would allow the person to fulfill the mission of the Church which is evangelism.”

After this discussion I ask her if she knows any other Christians in her area who are also ex-Muslims. She does, “but they are mostly Baptist, they are mostly evangelicals.”

*Do they seem like they’re pretty content with that fairly non-sacramental, non-mystical, fairly modern, fairly Western understanding of the Christian faith?*

Oh, they are very happy! They are very happy, and they evangelize because it is easy: when you say that if you believe in Jesus Christ and that’s how you are saved, well, that’s—that’s

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<sup>4</sup> A Swiss-born Jesuit theologian, d. 1988.

easy. You know, they don't do the hard work of the Cross, and carrying their cross, and that's a problem. And the way they evangelize is absolutely—doesn't make any sense to me.

She goes on to give an example of an American “senior missionary” from the Baptists who recently sent out a mass e-mail asking for people to pray for Iran, so that “through all these difficulties<sup>5</sup>, they may come to know Christ.” “I was just furious!” Her concern was their human rights and the fact they were not being treated with dignity. “What I care about is for...their humanity to be safe-guarded.” But again, we find in Samira's theology not a vague pluralistic position—and that would be the standard approach of most clergy in the US Episcopal Church today. The Gospel is not the same as human rights, though they are related to each other, and this relationship is founded in the natural law: “I want them to be safe and I want them to have their dignity—because without that they will never, ever come to know Jesus.” “It's actually really upsetting [...] and we do need to pray for them because they are fighting for freedom, and freedom is the basic, you know—if you go by the natural theology it is the basis of human dignity.”

We then talk a little about the word *evangelical*. She is obviously critical of evangelicalism, but on the other hand holds evangelism (when done holistically) in a very high position. She explains: “I am an *evangelist*, and I am an Anglo-catholic<sup>6</sup>.” I then

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<sup>5</sup> The interview was done in July of 2009, and the context is very significant unrest with street demonstrations against the perceived rigging of elections by incumbent president Mahmood Ahmadinejad, with the subsequent suppressive, and sometimes violent, actions taken by the state's security forces. It has been described as the most widespread and turbulent period in the country's history since the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Anglo-catholic refers to a movement within the larger Anglican tradition that sees Anglicanism in continuity with Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Anglo-catholics use language of the seven sacraments and place an emphasis on the

ask her about Christian presence in the Muslim World. What advice would she have for white Westerners seeking to live the Gospel in a place like Iran? She immediately answers: “I think the most important issue is the issue of humility.” She explains that anyone being engaged in mission needs to spend time in prayer, spiritual disciplines (like fasting), connected to the Church through its sacraments. When we approach the sacraments with a humble heart, they actually transform the individual within the context of the community, so that the end result is that mission and evangelism “should come natural to us; it should be effortless; it should be part of who we are, not something that we do.”

### **3 Reflections and commentary**

Most Protestants only recognize two sacraments (Baptism and Communion), but an Anglo-catholic view would also recognize five others (Confirmation, Confession/Reconciliation, Holy Orders, Holy Matrimony, and the Anointing of the Sick and Dying). On the whole it is a tradition that is much closer to the very sacramental forms of Orthodoxy, which would encompass the ancient churches in what is now called Iran. Samira reflected on how, in her own experience, even before she had learned any theology she objected to having lay persons preside over the Holy Communion which, in Baptist churches, is usually called The Lord’s Supper. The emphasis on sacrament is rare in conversion narratives.

Another uncommon element we find here is that of the church. Conversion narratives often involve positive encounters with Christians who are perceived as more moral or virtuous than Mus-

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Eucharist, the priesthood, and tend to use more ornate, formal liturgies than do evangelical or progressive Anglicans. The Oxford Movement (mid-19<sup>th</sup> C.) is seen as the beginning of the post-Reformation anglo-catholic movement by many. The great majority of converts from Islam to Christianity do not join such communities.

lims. But Samira wanted to be where Mary was, and that was the church: she did, at least initially, understand that word in a very physical way—the church building. This is what led her mother to the little convent. This runs counter to much of contemporary evangelical missiology which de-emphasizes the significance of the worship space, preferring for numerous reasons worship in homes or public places. Perhaps there is a real role for physical worship places in the church's missionary practice, but this has been excluded from the conversation *ab initio* because evangelical theology for the most part just doesn't have any sort of coherent theology of the church *qua* worship space. (A visit to one of the many warehouse or mini-mall churches in the USA will demonstrate the point effectively.)

I sense in these elements—the strong Marian emphasis, the sacramental inclination, the openness to monastic spirituality—that in fact many Muslims would be attracted to such a presentation of the Christian faith. But on the whole, the main communities able to undertake such work—Catholics and Orthodox—are not taking part in mission to Muslims, at least not in the area of evangelizing them. One wonders what a frontier mission to some unreached Muslim people group carried out by lay Catholic families would look like. There is nothing inherent in the endeavor that makes it especially difficult, though eventually if a church were established the presence of a priest could be difficult to obtain. But as far as the work of pre-evangelism, evangelism, catechism, and indeed baptizing goes, there are no hindrances. What is lacking is simply the will and initiative.

Finally, we have her theology of mission to deal with, related as it is to her criticisms of her experience of evangelical missionary praxis. On this point though, I think we are best off just waiting to hear what she has to say. It may take several years for her work to be published as she is just beginning her PhD, but the wait will be, God willing, worthwhile.