

# Conversion Out of Islam: A Study of Conversion Narratives of Former Muslims

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Islam is often claimed to be among the fastest growing religions in both the world and the West, in part due to conversion. Conversion to Islam has consequently generated considerable discussion.<sup>1</sup> While the same may be said of the religious, legal, and political implications of apostasy,<sup>2</sup> there are few studies of current trends of conversion out of Islam in either a Western context or among English-speaking Muslims. The rare extant studies — some of them non-academic — on such conversion patterns deal with other contexts.<sup>3</sup> The contemporary scene of conversion out of Islam is deeply marked by past events such as the Taslima Nasrin affair<sup>4</sup> and, more importantly, the Salman Rushdie affair.<sup>5</sup> Today, even figures like Irshad Manji<sup>6</sup>, who criticize Islam while remaining within it, provoke similarly well-publicized discussions. Yet the literature on the debates surrounding such events does not tell us much about the overall landscape of conversion out of Islam. It fails to address such questions as: By what processes and under what conditions do people leave Islam? How do former Muslims or those who speak on their behalf represent their departure?

In this article, we explore contemporary accounts of conversion out of Islam, tracing the recurrent themes that figure most prominently in former Muslims' narratives. Although we are looking at a worldwide phenomenon, our emphasis here is on Western contexts and testimonies made by English-speaking Muslims. Our study is based in part on a preliminary survey of "leaving Islam" narratives found in popular books and websites. We supplement these with a few interviews with former Muslims, whom we had considerable difficulty locating. Of the many print and Internet sources available to us, we

have chosen to focus on a few of the best-publicized — and presumably most influential. These include the website of Muslim-turned-Christian Nonie Darwish, as well as the works of Muslim-turned-agnostic Ibn Warraq, particularly, *Why I am not a Muslim* and *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out*. We also look to a Muslim source, Jeffrey Lang's recent book *Losing My Religion: A Call for Help*. Finally, we examine two popular websites: *Answering Islam*, run by Christian missionaries, and *Apostates of Islam*, run by former Muslims. Our sources thus fall into three groups: published narratives, online testimonials and our own interviews with former Muslims. Our analysis represents an exploratory discussion of this material.

## Preliminary Remarks

With regard to the 'popular' sources, we should make several cautionary remarks. For one thing, many, if not most, of the testimonies come from individuals who have assumed pseudonyms in order to hide their identities, presumably out of fear of putting themselves in harm's way. It is thus possible that some of the testimonies may have been fabricated. Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that a significant number of the testimonies are indeed factual. They contain detailed descriptions of very specific — and seemingly credible — personal experiences. This is especially true of the testimonies found in published works such as *Leaving Islam*. Moreover, many of the elements found in these published and online narratives are supported by our own interviews. In any case, regardless of the reliability of the testimonies, one of our primary goals is to analyze the narratives themselves, to examine how this conversion process is being represented to and shared with the larger public.

We should also note that when listing the individuals' motivations for leaving Islam, we are simply paraphrasing their viewpoints, and not necessarily presenting factual assessments of Islam. The former Muslims' understandings of Islam are at times (though not always, of course) controversial and may not take into consideration the full range of Muslim scholarly opinion, historical and contemporary. One 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. If we look to the famous Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's (d. 1111 CE) *Fayṣal al-Tafrīqa 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 God's mercy will be granted to earnest individuals who have never heard of Islam, are exposed to a distorted and undesirable presentation of Islam, and/or pass away before having the opportunity to investigate the reality of Islam.<sup>7</sup> The controversial view generally attributed to none other than Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328 CE) regarding the non-eternality of Hell may also be cited here.<sup>8</sup> Another instance of former Muslims' misapprehensions

of Islamic norms may be found in the discussions of Shari‘a as it pertains to women. We find, for example, some instances of individuals believing that, according to Islamic law, a woman *must* marry whomever her father selects, even if she is opposed to such an arrangement. This, however, is not the view of a large number of traditional Muslim jurists, and can hardly be called an accurate representation of the boundaries of Shari‘a. Nevertheless, as the purpose of this article is simply to understand and analyze the viewpoints expressed in the testimonies, these types of issues become irrelevant.

We have tried to categorize the different motivations into two groups: “intellectual motivations” and “experiential/social motivations.” The former deals with theoretical and ideological concerns, the latter with both personal experience and historical examples of social behaviors exhibited by individuals or groups belonging to a particular belief system. It goes without saying that the line between intellectual motivations and experiential/social motivations may at times be thin, especially in cases where a particular belief system is said to cause a certain social behavior or event. In such instances, we have classified the motivation as “experiential/social.” Whenever possible, these motivations have been further grouped into sub-categories (e.g., “the status of women in Islam”) in order to help us make sense of our findings. Analyzing the testimonies required choices on the part of the researchers.

When discussing the motivations cited for leaving Islam, it is possible that some motivations played more prominent roles than others; however, variations in the levels of detail across the testimonies made it difficult to compare the relative influence of competing motivations. (And it is precisely because of this variation that we were unable to systematically analyze other factors, e.g., socioeconomic class, level of education, race, etc.).

Finally, since conversion to and from Islam is not always black and white, we have generally avoided examining cases of individuals who either are unsure of their commitment to Islam or have oscillated back and forth.<sup>9</sup>

### **Three Voices**

We first turn to the three individuals we interviewed. Collectively, they illustrate the breadth of the spectrum of “leaving Islam” narratives presented in the print and Internet sources.

#### ***Jamal: Darwin vs God***

Jamal is an undergraduate student who would like a career in health care. Though raised Muslim, Jamal decided to leave Islam a year ago, primarily for intellectual reasons.<sup>10</sup> He says, “From everything I read, both pro and anti-evolutionary stuff, I arrived at the conclusion that we did evolve through an unguided process, and there is no place for a God anywhere in it.” The theory

of evolution and the writings of scientists such as Richard Dawkins and Carl Sagan seem to have had a profound impact on Jamal's thinking about religion. He now believes that God is unnecessary for explaining the existence of life. Speaking in strictly rationalistic and scientific terms, Jamal treats the question of God as a hypothesis that he believes "is not falsifiable and cannot be taken seriously." Moreover, Jamal finds the Qur'ān unscientific, the idea of eternal damnation horrific, and the role of women in Islam deplorable.

Jamal has decided that Islam, like all religions, is simply a cult. His readings of philosophical works and Ibn Warraq's book *Why I am not a Muslim* have helped him cement his decision.

### ***Ben Rukhsana: Islam as a Social Impediment***

Ben is a 26 year-old male who left Islam two years ago and currently lives in England. Unlike Jamal, whose reasons for leaving Islam are primarily intellectual and science-related, Ben Rukhsana has both intellectual and social motivations for exiting Islam. Among the main intellectual reasons he gives are the treatment of women in Islam and the permissibility of the Prophet's marriage to a young 'Ā'isha.

In response to our question about his social/experiential motivations, Ben says, "I practiced Islam as best I could from age 14. I feel it hindered my academic life as well as my social development and career prospects. This is because I skipped classes to pray or to go to Friday prayers. I avoided certain jobs believing them to be un-Islamic." Consequently, Ben finds himself living a more socially fulfilling life outside Islam.

### ***Cati: Marrying into and out of Islam***

Cati is a 49-year old Caucasian female who lives in the southeastern United States. She became a Muslim through marriage but left Islam mostly because of that same marriage. It has been eight years since she decided to return to her original Christian faith. In her words, she is currently a "born-again spirit-filled follower of Christ Jesus," and is a member of the Assembly of God Church, the same church to which she belonged while growing up.

As Cati explains,

Muslims have asked me many times why I came back to Christianity. Many said it was the fault of my husband for not treating me right, and that is why I changed my religion . . . I made my choice in everything I did. I cannot blame anything, or anyone else. I walked away from Jesus all by myself, and became Muslim. I opened the door to my own deception.

Even so, Cati suffered all kinds of abuse from her husband and his family (particularly his mother). After four children and a long marriage, Cati finally

decided to leave both her husband and her faith, and go back to Christianity. Now, retrospectively, she thinks that she was actually worshiping both her husband and his religion. She says that she had felt that “something was missing” and that she had no true peace in her life. She also finds the idea that God saves people according to their works, as opposed to His grace, to be problematic. She finds Christianity to be the only true religious path and the only key to salvation.

These three stories demonstrate the diversity of motivations for departure from Islam. As we shall see below, they provide helpful points of departure for examining additional narratives that can be found in the mass media.

## **Media Narratives**

In addition to our interview subjects, there are several converts out of Islam whose cases have been widely publicized.<sup>11</sup> One of them is Nonie Darwish, who is now a Christian and has her own website ([www.noniedarwish.com](http://www.noniedarwish.com)). 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 include the religion’s general intolerance, the problematic nature of Shari‘a laws pertaining to women, and the fact that Islam seems to lack the emphasis on love, kindness, grace and forgiveness that she finds in Christianity. As for her experiential/social motivations for leaving Islam, she found the religion “almost impossible . . . to practice.”<sup>12</sup> The total submission practiced by Muslims has led, she believes, to rule by dictators, chauvinism, extreme sensitivity to criticism, and a strict hierarchy among Muslims. Furthermore, as she sees it, Muslims are taught to hate non-Muslims, and Christian pastors tend to be morally superior to Muslim clerics.<sup>13</sup>

We now look to a relatively prominent figure — a man known only by his pseudonym “Ibn Warraq.”<sup>14</sup> He was raised by a somewhat religious family in Pakistan, moved to Europe, and went on to become a teacher in Ohio. He is best 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 include 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 Qur’ān 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 concerning wine, pigs and homosexuality. His experiential/social motivations for leaving Islam include the history of Arab imperialism and

Islamic colonialism, and the historical mistreatment of non-Muslims, women, and slaves. 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>15</sup> Ibn Warraq is currently an agnostic.<sup>16</sup>

In a later book edited by Ibn Warraq, entitled *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out*, we find 25 detailed testimonies by former Muslims, as well as 21 brief testimonies taken from the website of the “Institute for the Secularisation of Islamic Societies,”<sup>17</sup> and some general information pertaining to conversion patterns from Islam to Christianity,<sup>18</sup> Hinduism,<sup>19</sup> atheism, agnosticism, deism, and humanism.<sup>20</sup> Of the 25 detailed testimonies, 19 come from individuals who were raised in Muslim households (and were presumably all Muslims themselves), 5 come from former Muslims who had once converted to Islam, and, seemingly out of place, 1 comes from an individual who was simply raised in a predominantly Muslim country, though never claimed to be Muslim. As for their origins, 44% (11) come from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, 28% (7) are from the West, 12% (3) are from Iran, and there are individuals from Tunisia, Malaysia, Turkey, and an unidentified, predominantly Buddhist country in the Far East. Of the 7 from the West, 6 are from the United States. Of these 6, 2 are second-generation immigrants and the remaining 4 had been converts to Islam. It is likely that most of these 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 out of the 11) of those coming from the region of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.<sup>21</sup>

We find such conversion narratives in Muslim sources as well. In his recent book *Losing My Religion: A Call for Help*, Muslim convert Jeffrey Lang documents some of the letters and email messages that he received from American Muslims and former Muslims. Though he does include communications from individuals who have vacillated in their commitment to Islam, he discusses the case of three individuals who seem to have left Islam and not returned. One case is a 58-year old Syrian male who immigrated to the United States in his early 20’s. He now claims to be “more of an agnostic,” despite having been “fanatical” in his youth. He cites as the main reason for this transformation his difficulty in believing that a divine revelation like the Qurʾān would address “trivial” issues related to the private life of Muhammad.<sup>22</sup> The second case is a second-generation college student who first became a Christian, then abandoned religion altogether. The reason for his/her leaving Islam was that (s)he found the religion to be a “dead faith” of “empty rules and regulations,”<sup>23</sup> which made it difficult to establish a relationship with God. The

third case is a young American male who had issues with the problem of (the creation of) evil. He no longer believes in the Islamic conception of God because of the “killing of innocent people” by natural phenomena such as disease. Moreover, he finds no real motivation to worship God, and thinks that there is no reason why non-Muslims cannot be “saved.”<sup>24</sup>

Having looked at a few case studies and narratives, we will now take a step back and examine the conversion narratives of former Muslims at a broader level, taking into consideration such popular websites as *Answering Islam* and *Apostates of Islam*.

### Former Muslims: Who Are They?

“Leaving Islam” narratives come from individuals of various ethnic backgrounds and age groups, and from all over the world. Of the sources we examined, three in particular provided us with a sizeable number of testimonies: Ibn Warraq’s *Leaving Islam* and the websites *Answering Islam*<sup>25</sup> and *Apostates of Islam*.<sup>26</sup> Table 1 indicates the gender and origins of the converts out of Islam mentioned in these three sources.

As far as gender is concerned, the great majority of the testimonies come from males, which is intriguing considering how frequently the status of women in Islam is cited as an intellectual motivation for leaving the religion. By contrast, a 1996 academic study finds the proportion of male and female converts to Islam in the United Kingdom to be equal,<sup>27</sup> while a 2003 report states that there appear to be more female converts to Islam than males in the United States and Europe.<sup>28</sup> In order to best understand this apparent discrepancy, this finding warrants further investigation.

**Table 1. Origins and Gender of Converts**

		<b>Answering Islam</b>	<b>Apostates of Islam</b>	<b>Leaving Islam</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Male	79% (101)	68% (54)	72% (18)
	Female	21% (27)	32% (25)	28% (7)
<b>Origins</b>	Arab World	34% (43)	21% (17)	4% (1)
	Iran	10% (13)	5% (4)	12% (3)
	Turkey	9% (12)	1% (1)	4% (1)
	Africa (non-Arab)	4% (5)	0% (0)	0% (0)
	S Asia	16% (20)	35% (28)	44% (11)
	SE Asia	14% (18)	10% (8)	4% (1)
	West	5% (6)	20% (16)	28% (7)
	Other/Unspecified	9% (11)	8% (6)	4% (1)

In terms of geography, or cultural zones, it seems that, generally speaking, most of these conversions are occurring at ‘frontier zones,’ where Muslims are more likely to have immediate contact with members of other religions, be they missionaries or an indigenous non-Muslim majority. Indeed, it would appear that conversion movements have historically been more common in ‘frontier zones’ such as the Ottoman Balkans,<sup>29</sup> Tatarstan,<sup>30</sup> Argentina,<sup>31</sup> Rajasthan,<sup>32</sup> and colonized Algeria.<sup>33</sup>

## Why Do They Leave Islam?

Based on our interviews and the “media narratives” referred to above, we can discern recurring themes that fall under the categories of intellectual/ideological motivations and social/experiential motivations. These themes are ranked in order of prevalence.

### *Intellectual/Ideological Motivations*

1. The status of women in Islam.
2. The contradiction between Shari‘a and human rights.
3. The problematic nature of the Qur’ān.
4. The character of the Prophet and other Muslim leaders.
5. Islam as illogical and unscientific (e.g. *vis-à-vis* the theory of evolution).
6. The eternal damnation of good non-Muslims.
7. The unnecessary, strict rules and expectations of Islam.
8. Islam as not universal, but rather Arab-centric.
9. The dubious historicity of the Qur’ān and Hadith.

### *Social/Experiential Motivations*

1. Encounters with bad, cruel Muslims.
2. Muslims as oppressive.
3. Muslims as backward.
4. Muslim ill-treatment of women.
5. Muslim ill-treatment of non-Muslims.
6. Muslims in a state of illusion regarding their own religion.

The significance of such social motivations are brought to light by observations such as the following made by Christian writer S. V. Bhajjan:

I have not so far come across any Muslim convert who confessed that he accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour because some Christians were able to explain to him the Sonship of Christ, the Atonement, and the Christian doctrine of Trinity. It is always through a small deed of brotherly love done by a Christian that the heart of a Muslim is moved.<sup>34</sup>

One finding that we should also mention (as it was not a “motivation” *per se*) is that 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. Another point worth noting is that regarding the issue of Muslims being oppressive, three of the testimonies specifically mention the 1971 crisis in Bangladesh. This seems to parallel a 1996 report published in *Muslim & Arab Perspectives*, which states that there has been “widespread *riddah*” (apostasy) there since 1971.<sup>35</sup>

### Where Do They Go?

The three major destinations appear to be atheism, agnosticism, and Christianity. While all of the testimonies in *Answering Islam* refer to a conversion to Christianity, we find the exact opposite when looking at the 25 *Leaving Islam* testimonies. It is only on the *Apostates of Islam* site that we find references to both Christianity and other beliefs, with 58% of the individuals claiming to be either atheist or agnostic.<sup>36</sup> 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. This is partly a reflection of the fact that many individuals from these regions are cited in the first place. Nevertheless, the proportion of these individuals who became either atheist or agnostic appears to be relatively high (68% according to *Apostates of Islam*, as opposed to 44% of individuals from the Middle East, and 38% of individuals from the West).<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, according to *Answering Islam*, most of the people who leave Islam in order to become Christian come from the Middle East and the Arab world.<sup>38</sup> Based on the smaller pool of testimonies found on *Apostates of Islam*, however, it would seem that a larger proportion of the former Muslims from the Middle East and the Arab world became either atheists or agnostics.<sup>39</sup> This can be explained by the ideological differences underpinning these sources. Table 2 illustrates the various proportions of final destinations cited in the three sources.

As a final observation, we found that a number of people hid their conversion out of Islam, either because they were involved in an intimate

**Table 2. Conversion Destinations**

	<b>Answering Islam</b>	<b>Apostates of Islam</b>	<b>Leaving Islam</b>
Atheist	0% (0)	41% (33)	32–64% (8–16) <sup>40</sup>
Agnostic	0% (0)	16% (13)	12–44% (3–11)
Christian	100% (128)	15% (12)	0% (0)
Other/Unspecified	0% (0)	28% (22)	24% (6)

relationship with a Muslim (e.g. a husband) and did not want to dissolve it, or because of fear that they would be harmed by radical Muslims.

## Conclusion

There are several conclusions to be drawn from our preliminary excursion into the landscape of contemporary conversion out of Islam.

### *Motivations*

Based on our distinction between intellectual/ideological motivations and social/experiential motivations, the two major motivations identified in our study are the following:

- (1) *The status of women in Islam.* Gender issues figure prominently in these narratives, with the status of women in Islam being the most popular intellectual motivation, and Muslim ill-treatment of women a popular social motivation.
- (2) *Muslims as cruel, oppressive and backward.* This includes two types of assessments. The first is that, in comparing the behaviors of Muslims and non-Muslims, some converts find the behavior of the latter to be more attractive. The second is that some claim that their conversion owed more to their repulsion by Muslim behavior than to their attraction to positive non-Muslim behavior.

The preponderance of these particular motivations appears to mirror the commonly known stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. One might theorize that in describing their departure from Islam, former Muslims often fall into tropes that have widespread acceptance or circulation.

### *Conversion Destinations*

The main destinations are: (a) atheism, (b) agnosticism, and (c) Christianity. It is ultimately difficult, however, to determine which is most popular given the polemical nature of the sources.

### *Convert Backgrounds*

As for the authors of the narratives themselves, we find that the overwhelming majority are males for reasons worthy of investigation. We also find that most are from South Asia, which is arguably a reflection of the region's relatively large English-speaking Muslim population (hence the ability to produce narratives in English) living in an Indian "frontier zone."

### *Contexts of Conversion*

It is important to note here the degree of emphasis that the individuals placed on certain themes as opposed to others. The narratives about conversion reveal not only individual reasons, but also institutional environments that facilitate religious recruitment and transitions. In other words, those who

convert to Christianity, for example, tend to adopt the language and framework provided by missionary institutions, as was the case in the *Answering Islam* testimonies. The ways in which conversion narratives are deployed in each of the sources we analyzed significantly vary and reflect the religious or ideological orientations of the sources as much as they reflect individual accounts of what really happened.

The process of globalization and digitization of the media seems to have created unprecedented spaces for both conversion and the mass communication of narratives of conversion. The Internet has also galvanized a virtual competition between religions like Islam and Christianity, which have historically maintained missionary orientations. Testimonies of conversion to and from Islam continue to proliferate in the new public sphere of the Internet, where both anonymity and publicity can be easily found. New spaces like websites and the larger process of globalization have also undermined the conventional hold of religions on their adherents. In this new environment, religions seek to expand their discursive reach.

In this article, we have provided an overview of the landscape of conversion out of Islam based on conversion narratives available in the media. In addition to the representations of conversion provided here, future research is needed to produce information about the actual converts and their unmediated narratives. One intriguing starting point would be the fact that both converts into and out of Islam cite the status of women as a major motivating factor. Research should compare conversion to and from Islam and evaluate the relative power of motivations in each direction.

## Endnotes

1. See Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (London, New York: Kegan Paul International, 1996); L. Poston, *Islamic Dāwāb in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Stefano Allievi, *Les Convertis à l'Islam: Les Nouveaux Musulmans d'Europe* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998); Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, *Konversion zum Islam in Deutschland und den USA* (Frankfurt/Main; New York: Campus Verlag, 1999).

2. See Ahmed Seif al-Islam Hamad, "Legal Plurality and Legitimation of Human Rights Abuses: A Case Study of State Council Rulings Concerning the Rights of Apostates," *Legal Pluralism in the Arab World* (Baudouin Dupret, Maurits Berger, & Laila al-Zwaini eds., 1999); Mahmoud Ayoub, "Religious Freedom and the Law of Apostasy in Islam," *Islamochristianity*, no. 20 (1994), 75–91; or Syed Barakat Ahmad, "Conversion from Islam," *The Islamic World from Classical to Modern Times: Essays in Honor of Bernard Lewis* (Princeton, N.J.: Darwin Press, 1989), 3–26.

3. See Seppo Syrjänen, *In Search of Meaning and Identity: Conversion to Christianity in Pakistani Muslim Culture* (Vammala: Vammalan Kirjapaino Oy, 1984) (This study was undertaken by a missionary group [the Finnish Society for Missiology and

Ecumenics] and is, as the title suggests, specific to the Pakistani context); Paul W. Werth, "From 'Pagan' Muslims to 'Baptized' Communists: Religious Conversion and Ethnic Particularity in Russia's Eastern Provinces," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 42, no. 3 (2000), 497–523; J. C. van Santen, *They Leave their Jars Behind: The Conversion of Mafa Women to Islam* (Leiden: VENA publications, 1993); or Alessandro Gori, "La 'Silloge' de Shāh Zākkareyas (Analisi Preliminare): Contributo allo studio della polemica cristiana contro l'Islam in Etiopia," *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, no. 35 (1993), 73–134.

4. Taslima Nasrin (Tasalima Nasarina), the Muslim-turned-atheist feminist from Bangladesh, made headlines in 1993 following the controversial Bengali publication of *Lajja*, which was later translated into English with the title *Shame: A Novel* (Prometheus Books, 1997).

5. This in reference to the uproar that followed the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (Viking Penguin, 1989).

6. Author of *The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004).

7. Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, Studies in Islamic Philosophy I (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 65, 127–8.

8. We should note, however, that it is perhaps safer to ascribe this view to Ibn Taymiyyah's student, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d.1350 CE), as implied from his work *Ḥādī al-Arwāḥ ilā Bilād al-Afrāḥ* (Cairo: 1962), 250 ff. Also see Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 94–5.

9. One apparent exception is Michael Muhammad Knight, a Muslim whose 'leaving Islam' testimony may be found in Ibn Warraq's *Leaving Islam*, which we will discuss below. According to a recent article, he has returned to Islam, "but on [his] own terms." Mark Mackintosh, "Underground Online: 'Meet Michael Muhammad Knight: Muslim Mayhem Maker,'" *Muslim Wake Up* (February 2004), <http://www.muslimwakeup.com/info/archives/000565.php>.

10. According to Jamal, the local Muslim community, which he has found to be welcoming, has not been a factor in his conversion out of Islam.

11. Prominent but not included here are Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Wafa Sultan. Ali is an atheist, feminist, and politician of Somali heritage who acquired her reputation while in the Netherlands. She is also the author of *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam* (Free Press, 2006), and was the writer for the controversial film *Submission*. The status of women in Islam and the character of the Prophet have been the foci of much of her criticisms of the religion. Sultan is an atheist of Syrian heritage who now lives in California and works as a psychologist. She became especially well-known after an interview by al-Jazeera on February 21, 2006, in which she argued that Islam is inherently opposed to modern values.

12. The challenges encountered in practicing Islam is a theme shared by other former Muslims. For example, in his autobiography, Christopher Alam, a Pakistani convert to Christianity, highlights the great guilt he felt for not being able to fulfill Islam's requirements. See Christopher Alam, *Through the Blood and the Fire: A Muslim Fanatic Becomes a Fiery Evangelist for Jesus Christ* (New Wine Ministries: 1994). This is to be contrasted with Köse's finding that British converts to Islam generally did not find Islamic practices to be difficult. (Köse, *Conversion*, 129).

13. Nonie Darwish, "Escaping 'Submission,'" *Nonie Darwish* (August 2004), <http://www.noniedarwish.com/pages/745443/index.htm>.

14. Little is known of Ibn Warraq, but there is good reason to believe that he is an actual individual, as evidenced by various interviews and presentations that he has given.

For example, he was formally interviewed by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on a national radio broadcast on October 10, 2001. Lyn Gallacher, "Ibn Warraq: Why I Am Not A Muslim," *The Australian Broadcasting Corporation: The Religion Report* (August 2004), <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/relrpt/stories/s386913.htm>.

15. Ibn Warraq, *Why I am not a Muslim* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus, 1995), 2.

16. "Meet the Apostates," *Apostates of Islam* (August 2004), <http://www.apostatesofislam.com/apostates.htm>.

17. <http://www.secularislam.org>.

18. For example, Ibn Warraq cites data obtained from the 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 (9%) were former Muslims. Ibn Warraq (ed.), *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2003), 99.

19. According to Ibn Warraq, there is good reason to believe "that many Muslims in India are reverting to the religion of their ancestors." He also cites the work of Australian anthropologist Thomas Reuter of the University of Melbourne, who claims that there have been mass conversions from Islam to Hinduism in the Indonesian archipelago, particularly in Java, with estimates in the tens of thousands over the last twenty years. (*Ibid.*, 101).

20. As for atheism, agnosticism, deism and humanism, Ibn Warraq argues that there is a high percentage of second-generation Algerian immigrants living in France who claim no association to religion, with estimates in the 20–30% range. (*Ibid.*, 103) He then cites a 1980s census taken among Iranian exiles living in the Netherlands which showed that 50 percent of them "declared themselves agnostics or atheists." (*Ibid.*, 105).

21. *Ibid.*, 137.

22. Jeffrey Lang, *Losing My Religion: A Call for Help* (Beltsville, Maryland: Amana, 2004), 154.

23. *Ibid.*, 468.

24. *Ibid.*, 474.

25. "Truth, Love, and Newness of Life: Why Muslims become Christians," *Answering Islam* (August 2004), <http://www.answering-islam.org/Testimonies/index.html>.

26. "Meet the Apostates." Incidentally, this website also includes testimonies by six individuals who are referred to as "Famous Ex-Muslims": Ibn Warraq, Taslima Nasrin, Nonie Darwish, Ali Sina of Iran (an atheist), Parvin Darabi of Iran (an atheist), and Tahir Aslam Gora of Pakistan (who is listed as a non-Muslim Sufi). (*Ibid.*).

27. Köse, *Conversion*, 20.

28. Karin van Nieuwkerk, "Gender and Conversion to Islam," *International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) Review* 12 (June 2003), 10.

29. See Selim Deringil, "'There is No Compulsion in Religion': On Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire: 1839–1856," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 42, no. iii (2000), 547.

30. See G. Baltanov & R. Baltanov, "Islam, Christianity, and New Religious Trends in Tatarstan: The Issue of Conversion," *Christian-Muslim Frontier: chaos, clash, or dialogue*, ed. Jørgen S. Nielsen (I. B. Tauris: 1998).

31. See G. Jozami, "Identidad Religiosa e Integración Cultural en Cristianos Sirios y Libaneses en Argentina, 1890–1990," *Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos*, no. 9 (1994), 95–113.

32. See Dominique-Sila Khan, *Conversions and Shifting Identities: Ramdev Pier and the Ismailis in Rajasthan* (Delhi: Manohar, 1997).

33. See D. González, "La Iglesia de Argelia: Arraigo, Pruebas y Conversiones desde 1830 Hasta Nuestros Días," *El Cristianismo en el Norte de Africa*, Colección El Magreb, 6 (Madrid: MAPFRE, 1993), 101–19; Also see Karima Direche-Slimani, "Orphelins et Convertis:

Le Discours des Missionnaires sur la Formation des Nouvelles Élités au Sahara à la Période Coloniale,” *Nomadic Peoples* (1998), 76–83.

34. S. V. Bhajjan, “Identifying Barriers in the Church’s Reception of Muslim Converts,” *The Bulletin of Christian Institutes of Islamic Studies* 3:3 (1982), 94.

35. “Widespread *riddah* in Bangladesh,” *Muslim & Arab Perspectives* 3:1–6 (1996), 51–2. According to the report:

An estimated two million Bangladeshi Muslims have reportedly opted Christianity during the last 25 years . . . Christian missionaries became active in Bangladesh during the last three decades in the wake of its emergence as a State. They rushed in first to ‘alleviate’ the tragedies of the Civil War . . . Their main target are the poor and the rural illiterate in general . . . [According to the] Director General of Bangladesh Islamic Foundation . . . the main causes of this conversion are poverty, illiteracy and non-availability of adequate medical facilities. (*Ibid.*, 51–2).

36. “Meet the Apostates,” *Apostates of Islam*.

37. *Ibid.*

38. “Truth, Love, and Newness of Life,” *Answering Islam*.

39. “Meet the Apostates,” *Apostates of Islam*.

40. Eight individuals cited in *Leaving Islam* are ambiguous regarding whether they had become atheist or agnostic (though it is clear that they had become one of these two).