

# *Subjection and Escape: An American Woman's Muslim Journey, Part 2*

Lisa Bauer

**T**he alarm clock awakens me with its annoying buzz. Half-consciously, I smash down the snooze button. I peep out at the time: 5:32. I really must get up and shower. Then I can do my *wudu'* (ritual ablutions) and pray before the time for *fajr* (the dawn prayer) expires at sunrise, which according to my prayer-times chart is a few minutes past six. As the year progresses, the time for *fajr* gets ever earlier; after the longest day of the year, it reverses course and begins coming ever later. You can't just assume you know the time for prayer because you know what it was yesterday.

I roll out of bed and stamp off to the shower. I should be grateful, I remind myself. Allah has seen fit to grant me a job. I'm living in America, not the slums of Dhaka in Bangladesh. I have a car. My parents and siblings are still alive. I'm healthy. Well, maybe I have some problems, since I've been struggling with depression and I'm so incredibly shy, but at least I'm not crippled.

Not crippled? This shyness, timidity, whatever it is, has been as crippling to me in my life as having an arm or a leg cut off, I think bitterly as I begin shampooing my hair. Why has Allah made me thus? Why must I suffer so?

No, that's not the right way to think about it. Perhaps there is a reason for it all, one that will become clear as time goes on. Allah has His reasons—at least I hope He does. I wish I had more faith that He knows what He's doing, but I have a lot of doubts. And I should be careful about thinking I'm better off than people in the slums of Dhaka, because I don't know that either. Perhaps some of them are happier and more content than I am—only Allah knows.

I rinse off. Having completed *ghusl* (bathing that removes major ritual impurity), I should be pure enough to pray.

No such luck. Now I have to pee. Urination, along with defecation, flatulence, and bleeding, are causes of minor ritual impurity and require *wudu'* before you can pray. So does sleeping. Sex, menstruation, and sexual discharge, male or female, render one *junub* (having major ritual impurity) and require *ghusl*.

I sigh. I put on my robe and head to the sink. I turn on the water, murmur "*Bismillah*" ("In the name of Allah"), and begin rubbing my hands under the water. It's quite complicated. You have to wash your hands up to the wrists three times, starting with the right hand. Then you wash the mouth three times by gulping a little water, rinsing a bit, and then spitting out the water. Then you clean the nose by putting a bit of water into the nostrils and blowing it out, three times. Then you wash the face from the hairline to the chin and all the way to the ears, three times. And then you wash your arms, from the wrists to the elbow, starting with the right arm, three times. Then you wipe your head with wet hands, from the front to the back, and then wipe your ears—this is done only once. Finally, you wash your feet up to the ankles, starting with the right foot.

That's the tricky part. The first actions are straightforward and can be performed in rapid succession. But I have to put my feet in the sink in order to clean them, which can be daunting. I'm fairly limber, but I've heard stories of people slipping and falling as they are trying to clean their feet in the sink while doing *wudu'*. This is why it's better to have a foot bath like they have at the mosque—or use the bathtub, if you have one. (The toilet is considered “filthy” and cannot be used, if you're wondering.) Also, it's messy. The first steps of *wudu'* can be done with minimal water, but once I start washing my feet, I tend to get water all over the place.

My *wudu'* complete, I go back to my bedroom and dress myself in my usual loose black slacks, loose blouse, and a pair of black socks. I cover my hair with a two-piece Al Amirah *hijab*, a style popular among young people because it's easy to put on—no pins or intricate wrapping to deal with. Also, I like it because it is very effective at hiding every last strand of hair, which elastic holds in place around your head.

I step over to the horrible blue shag rug that I have set up as a prayer mat in a corner of the bedroom. My floor is tile, not carpet, and a regular prayer rug was not comfortable, especially when I put my forehead to the ground in *sujood* (prostration). So after considering the available choices, I bought a thick shag rug, about four feet by three feet. Nothing says you can't use any clean piece of cloth as a prayer mat; I'd used a towel in the early days.

I step onto the rug, facing northeast, the *qibla* (direction to Mecca). I take a deep breath, lower my eyes to the edge of the rug, and raise my hands to my ears, palms facing outward. “*Allahu akbar*” (“Allah is great”), I murmur softly. I fold my arms in front of me, the right hand grasping the left wrist, and start reciting the familiar Arabic phrases I'd memorized years ago.

Afterward, I think back to the me I was five years ago: the quiet American girl who had newly embraced Islam, who still lived in her parents' home, who had no idea what lay ahead. One of the early attractions of Islam—in addition to the desire to experience Islamic culture from the inside—was that by setting up my prayer rug, *qibla* finder, Qur'ans, and other accoutrements of Islam in my room, I could put myself on the other side of the world without leaving the house. The daily rhythm of prayers, the Arabic phrases and ritual movements that went with them, even facing Mecca—all of this connected me with the daily lives of millions of people on the other side of the world. The Arabic words I labored to read in the Qur'an, admittedly mostly in transliteration since my Arabic reading skills were so limited, were simultaneously being repeated by millions of Arabs, Iranians, Turks, Pakistanis . . . the list went on. By being Muslim, I could step outside the banal familiarity of life in America and become part of a very different world. Pakistani peasants and Arab sheiks were no longer foreign creatures. I had something important in common with them: according to Islam, they were all my “brothers” and “sisters,” and as such we were enjoined to help each other no matter how far apart we lived. This is why Muslims feel such solidarity with, say, the Palestinian cause even if they're not Arab, can't understand Arabic, and live thousands of miles away. These are their *brothers and sisters* under attack. The notion of being part of a world *ummah* (nation) composed of all Muslims of all different races, cultures, and languages greatly appealed to me.

Much, much later, I would form the nagging suspicion that my taste for the exotic simply reflected a compulsion to root myself *anywhere but here*. I wonder how much of that feeling had to do with not just wanting to be *somewhere* else but also to be *someone* else. Converting to Islam allows you to reinvent yourself and even take a new name if you desire. I had chosen a Muslim name, although I admit I almost never used it, not even among other Muslims, all of whom knew me as Lisa. It was a name I could hide behind when I didn't want to reveal my iden-

tity. "Layla" means "night" and referred, in my mind, both to the romantic tale of the ill-fated lovers Layla and Majnun (which means "crazy" or "possessed") and, being the music lover I am, Eric Clapton's famous song "Layla." I took "Nasreddin" because it means "victory of faith," and I liked the concept. Also, it is the name of Mullah Nasreddin, a famous comic character in Middle Eastern folklore.

Yes, I could take a new name of my choice, but otherwise Islam has a rule for everything. It seems bizarre in retrospect that I chose to embrace a religion with so many rules governing every aspect of behavior. I used to detest arbitrary rules. My school career was marred by my bitter resentment of seemingly pointless rules. I had felt the same toward my parents' attempts to lay down rules at home. I suppose I've always had issues with authority figures, although I was never openly rebellious.

Given that, why on earth would I tolerate the nitpicking rules of Islam? Why did I become obsessive-compulsive about the finer points of ritual cleanliness, worrying about whether I'd done my ablutions right? Why did I concede to faceless imams and sheikhs, many long dead, the authority to dictate to me what was and was not permissible? I suppose part of the answer is that during my childhood I never felt that religion was forced on me, while the petty rules of school and home were.

Whatever the reasons, I submitted myself utterly to the rules of Islam. There are no rules more arbitrary than those of Allah, the cosmic dictator. Why should He care if men wear gold or silk, both forbidden in Islam? Why would He be so concerned that a believer not face Mecca while answering the call of nature? Why, indeed? In fact, not just Muslim but also Orthodox Jewish thinkers have answered this question in the same way: it is precisely *because* the rules are so arbitrary that devout believers feel compelled to obey them. *Of course* the rules are (seemingly) completely pointless and arbitrary! This means that when you make the effort to obey them, you are truly showing Allah your love and your willingness to obey. Think of it as unfakeable evidence of one's submission.

Still, the *hijab* was difficult for me. Being very timid, I was frightened at the prospect of being so instantly identifiable as a Muslim (if less identifiable as myself). But I'd been told that I didn't have to take up all the sartorial rules all at once. I could dress "modestly" at first—which meant long, baggy clothes at all times, even in the boiling hell of the desert summers where I lived—and then move on from there once I felt that I was ready. In addition, there has been an ongoing debate between conservative and more liberal Muslims over whether covering the hair is really mandated. It's definitely required for women while praying, but at other times many Muslim women, even some who are quite pious, just don't bother. Some argue that Islam enjoins modesty and not drawing attention to oneself, and since the *hijab* draws so much attention in the West, wearing it here may actually be counterproductive. I was sympathetic to this line of thought, but I figured I would wait and see. Still I experimented, going so far as to acquire my own full-length Saudi *abaya* and some *niqabs* and even a full-size authentic Saudi *burqa*, which conceals everything but the eyes and has a flap so that you can cover them, too, if you want. I liked the idea of hiding myself completely. I even worked up the courage to wear this getup a few times in public at the huge communal Eid prayers, just to see what it was like. I knew I wouldn't look too out of place there, since I'd seen fully covered women at such gatherings before. Admittedly, I only put the veil over my face right before I joined the crowd, since I was too self-conscious to walk around in public with my face covered. Being concealed was an interesting sensation to experience for a little while, but as soon as the time came to leave, I took off the veil, happy to be able to breathe normally again instead of through a piece of cloth. Eating, as I also found out, is also extremely difficult

when wearing a *burqa*. I don't know how completely veiled Saudi women do it, since they will not even remove their coverings in a restaurant to eat.

I think it's important to describe how my conversion affected my family relationships. When I started to think about converting, I slowly isolated myself from my family—in fact, everyone I knew. I figured they wouldn't understand—this was right after September 11, 2001, remember—and I really was in no mood for arguments. I'd already studied all the ugly aspects of Islam, the things I expected they would throw in my face. Contemplating the prospect of being challenged just made me more steadfast in my intention to convert. After I actually converted, I assumed that sooner or later I'd at least tell my family but was not eager to do so. I knew they would take it badly. I wanted to spare them anger and disappointment; I wanted to spare myself bitter confrontation; I actually feared I might be disowned. No, announcing my new identity around the family hearth could wait. When I discussed this with other Muslims, they agreed with me and said that I should only self-disclose when I felt ready.

That day never came, and consequently I cut myself off emotionally from my family members. We still spoke regularly and sometimes did things together, but the fact that they knew nothing about what I now considered the most important thing in my life had a profoundly alienating effect on my relationship with them. This was perhaps the worst thing that could have happened, since it meant I now had nobody at all to talk to about my deepest feelings, about what was really going on in my life.

Surely I had no one to talk to about my deepening, twisted sexual relationship with the imam who had converted me.

Our pattern of almost daily petting to orgasm (his, at least) at a remote house owned by the mosque in the desert could not continue indefinitely. I don't remember exactly how long it was after we'd started, perhaps a month or two, but one afternoon as we were fooling around, he asked me to recite some words in Arabic after him, which I did.

Then he told me that I was now his wife.

There is something in Islam called *misyar*, or traveler's marriage, in which sexual activity between the parties is legitimized, but the woman gives up her right to support from the man and does not live with him. It is a new form of marriage that has become popular in the Sunni world over the past ten years, probably taking its cue from the Shi'ite *mu'tah*, or temporary marriage, in which a couple is married for a specified length of time, anywhere between a few minutes to ninety-nine years. Both *misyar* and *mu'tah* marriage are popular—not just among poor young people who lack the money to set up house in the traditional way but also among married men who want to have one or more additional wives without having to let Wife #1 know about it. This, of course, was the reason for the imam's "marriage" to me. Now he no longer had to feel guilty about what he was doing with me; it was "legal" in the eyes of Islam. Unbelievably (from my perspective today), I accepted all of this. Compounding the absurdity, he gave me, as the *mahr* (the gift a man gives a woman when they marry) the regal sum of \$35 so I could purchase a bus pass. (Earlier, I'd told him I really needed one for the month and had no money.)

We became lovers fully then, and what followed I'd just as soon forget. Though he knew well that I'd never been intimate with anyone else, he didn't consider me a "true" virgin because I wasn't completely "intact," which is to say that I hadn't bled during intercourse. I'd certainly heard about such an attitude but had never experienced it up close, and it frightened me. I recalled tales about the disgrace and shame heaped upon Middle Eastern girls who failed to bleed on their

wedding nights even if they were in fact virgins—hence the popularity of hymen reconstruction surgery in that part of the world.

Although we were engaging in sexual intercourse, our habits remained about the same. Almost every afternoon, the imam and I would go back to that shabby little house out in the desert. He would pick me up in his car at some obscure location far from the mosque so nobody would see us, then have me ride lying down on the back seat. At first, all we had was a towel on the floor of one of the bedrooms, but the imam soon managed to acquire a “bed” for the house, really just a mattress on a cot. This he set up so that it directly faced the mirrored doors of the closet that covered half of one wall because he enjoyed watching himself possess me. The only exceptions to this pattern were when I was menstruating, at which time Islam forbids intercourse, so we would either restrict ourselves to heavy petting or not go to the house at all.

How could a cleric justify this behavior? He explained to me that Islam, in its infinite wisdom, allowed a man up to four wives because so often, a man's desire exceeded what one woman could satisfy. Therefore Allah permitted polygyny, which was far superior to what he said Western men did, which was to have mistresses. The fact that I possessed exactly the same status as a mistress, save for the fig leaf of a *misyar* marriage that could not be substantiated because nothing had been committed to writing, never seemed to enter his mind.

A few times when his family was away, the imam actually took me to his own house, and we'd have sex in his bed—where he and his wife slept, I couldn't help thinking uneasily. She was a jealous woman, he had told me countless times before, so it was imperative that she never find out. I must never tell anyone. I acquiesced, of course. I was so lonely and desperate I didn't want to lose him. I think I even convinced myself that I loved him.

I didn't recognize it at the time, but he was treating me as something indistinguishable from garbage. Perhaps that was just how he was used to treating women given his conservative Jordanian background. To be sure, not all Muslim men treat women like that: some men are better than their religion. Of course, it never occurred to me that I had a right to be treated with respect and courtesy. The imam rarely complimented me and never took much interest in what would please me; he focused only on what I could do to please him. When we talked, which wasn't often anymore, he would remind me that the nature of our “marriage” was just a matter of his giving me a “good time,” nothing deeper—and that I should be grateful to have that much. He always insisted that he “wanted to take care of me” and was concerned for my welfare” and about looking after me in an Islamically acceptable way (though he would have phrased the last two more clumsily since his English wasn't that good). He would tell me that I should be grateful that I had “half a husband” as opposed to a “full” one because he knew many women who had none at all. The word *love* was never spoken, nor did I derive real pleasure from our sleazy assignations. When we were finished, he would drop me off somewhere near the mosque with a brusque goodbye.

I should have known that I wouldn't be the only one. There was a girl in a nearby city whom he knew in every sense of that word, and there was at least one other somewhere else, but I never knew for sure how many such relationships he had. One time, he took me to see one of other girls. I ended up, at his insistence, involved in a *ménage à trois*, and it was very uncomfortable for me. I was never jealous, though; I just felt glad that I had part of him and that he sometimes paid attention to me.

I hesitate to disclose these details, but they really capture the imam's whole attitude toward me. Although I was on the pill (which he said he “didn't trust”), he preferred to try to avoid conception by

engaging in anal sex. This particular act, I knew, was *haram* (forbidden) under Islamic law, even for heterosexual married couples, and he knew this as well as I did. I put up a couple of feeble protests, and he admitted that it wasn't allowed, but that didn't stop him. It was awful and very painful. He didn't seem to notice at all how much it hurt me, and he had absolutely no notion about how to make it hurt less. He acted the same way he did the rest of the time—he just went right to it without any preparation whatever, and I pretended to enjoy it. I still shudder at the thought. He told me on numerous occasions that he enjoyed being penetrated anally, and I wondered what this sprang from. Apparently it is not uncommon for men in conservative Muslim countries to engage in homosexual relations before marriage since social contact with the opposite sex is so thoroughly discouraged.

This story captures another grim aspect of our relationship. When I was with the imam, I lacked all ability to stand up for myself, to say no. I submitted to almost anything he asked, no matter how degrading or painful, and even acted like I was having a good time. It was absolutely insane.

About a year or so after we first met, the imam left his job at the mosque and moved to another city about an hour and a half away. I was devastated. I suppose I shouldn't have been since he was using me so shabbily, but at the time all I could think about was how lonely I would be without him. This was ridiculous, of course—I was lonely *with* him—but I was hardly thinking clearly. He constantly warned me that if anyone found out about us, he would cut me off forever and deny he knew me, and that was enough to guarantee my silence. Through all the years of our sordid encounters, I told no one.

We continued to meet from time to time after his move. In the early days, he would travel to my city and stay at a motel. Later on, when I finally got a job and a car, I would travel to see him whenever and wherever he asked and pay for a motel room myself. It was really quite awful. He would usually ask me, once he got in the room, if I had been with anybody else. He knew I hadn't, but he had to hear me say it. After that, there would be a couple of hours of mechanical, joyless, often painful sex. Invariably he would turn on the television and proceed to pay more attention to whatever was on than to me, even while we were supposedly in the throes of passion, and I would impatiently wait for him to finish sodomizing me—that was one taste he never gave up. After two or three hours of this, sometimes less, he would shower, get dressed, pray (usually the afternoon or evening prayer), and ask me if I needed anything. I would say no, and he would either leave or direct me to leave before him so we wouldn't be seen together.

He also liked phone and online sex. He had many opportunities to indulge this taste since he was frequently on the road as a professional fund raiser. I really didn't care for it, especially when he asked me to strip for him, but as always I acquiesced. In time, he acquired yet another secret "wife," not the one he and I had visited together, and even spoke with her on the telephone while we were having video calls. By that point, I was far past caring—I just wanted the conversation and what followed to be over quickly.

Our "relationship" dragged on for years, devastating me emotionally. I hated the sneaking around, the lies. I felt terrible and worthless: I was violating everything in my ethical and moral codes, every teaching of my newfound faith—and for what? Our encounters were nothing more than meaningless physical workouts to assuage his lust, void of emotional depth and warmth. Sure, what we were doing was "legal" according to Islam, but my whole being objected to it. As time passed, we saw each other less frequently. As disgusted with the arrangement as I was, I still couldn't bring myself to end it. I constantly questioned myself: Why did I put up with this? Why was I so shy? Why couldn't I just break it off? To this day I can't believe I put up with it all.

The only good thing, I suppose, was that I didn't have to live with him!

How did all of this affect my religion, the thing that had led me to the Imam in the first place? Through it all, I went on following Islam as obsessively as my circumstances allowed. I attended Friday prayer regularly and tried to keep up with the five daily prayers. I worried about my large student loan, more specifically the interest it carried (*riba*), which Islam forbids. Someone told me that since I'd taken that on before being a Muslim it wasn't blameworthy, but I was never wholly convinced. Still, lacking the money to pay it off, I could only hope Allah would see that I was trying the best I could.

There were a couple other problems. For one thing, I owned a dog, which I had no inclination to give up. Under Islamic law, dogs are unclean; if you are licked by one, you are supposed to wash the area seven times, once with dirt. This was impossible for me, given my circumstances and my dog's keen friendliness. Fortunately, I discovered an alternative school of Islamic jurisprudence that said it was enough to wash the affected area with water. Another issue was music, which many Muslim scholars consider *haram*. This was one opinion I knew I could not honor: I loved music and had thousands of songs in my collection. Asking me to give up one of the few things in my life that gave me any kind of joy was just too much. No, I thought (however blasphemously), I'm not really sure that Allah exists; I certainly don't know for sure that he forbids music; but I *do* know that I love music and it makes me happy. Allah will understand—or so I hoped!

Speaking of Allah, what did I really believe? I think I had convinced myself on some level that I believed, or at least was willing to give Allah the benefit of the doubt and live as if He existed—even if my doubts never stilled and I struggled with them constantly. I managed to turn them off while I was at prayer; at those times I strove to give myself over to the experience of worshiping Allah. I peppered my speech with stock Islamic phrases like "*in sha' Allah*" ("if Allah wills") and "*Alhamdulillah*" ("praise be to Allah"). If I couldn't say them around my family, I said them in my mind. I trained myself to believe that all things were the will of Allah and that he would take care of me, and that's when I came closest to real belief. When I was really desperate or depressed or fearful, I would mutter a prayer for Allah's help. It was never more complex than a couple of words, yet just afterward I might feel a warm presence or at least a lifting of my mood. I suppose that when I prayed, I let go of the conflicted feelings that were overwhelming me, if only for a moment, which in turn engendered the peaceful feeling. Even so, the trick worked only when I was especially upset or frightened.

My ongoing relationship with the imam eroded my initial enthusiasm for Islam after the first year or so; between that and the waning of interest often seen among new converts, I began to slack off in my observance. At first I felt terrible when I couldn't do all my prayers on time; eventually I felt all right if I managed to do at least one almost every day. (I later learned that enormous numbers of supposedly observant Muslims have trouble managing to perform all their prayers—it's probably the most difficult of the five pillars of Islam to observe fully.)

But I always fasted during Ramadan, continued reading the Qur'an on a regular basis, and kept up my Islamic studies. Still, I could not help wishing that there was a Reform Islam, along the lines of Reform Judaism, where you could shuck off all those onerous rules while still affirming the core tenets of the faith. My reading habits during this period were no less incongruous; I devoured secular books that cast doubt on traditional Islamic history and the authenticity of the Qur'an without weakening—consciously, at least—my belief in Islamic tenets. I had developed a knack for compartmentalization back in my early days when I would read something like Ibn Warraq's *Why I Am Not a Muslim*, take a break to pray, and then return to the book. I could read

books spelling out all the textual problems with the Qur'an and the historical worthlessness of the *hadith* collections and the traditional account of Muhammad's life, *agree with them*, and then turn a switch in my brain and go back to being a more or less faithful Muslim. Needless to say, this was completely untenable, and on some level I knew it, but I couldn't admit it to myself. I suppose I wasn't emotionally ready to leave Islam.

In 2006, I even went through a period of religious revival. I attended an Eid prayer that year and vowed that I would try much harder to fulfill my religious obligations. I would pray five times a day, even if circumstances were not perfect or I wasn't absolutely sure I was following all the rules. If I still couldn't bring myself to wear my *hijab* to work, I would find a way to pray there sometimes. I would study the Qur'an in Arabic and go to the mosque more often. I joined a small group of female American converts that had just formed at the mosque, and we would meet together and discuss our difficulties being Muslim in American society, as well as study more about Islam. It would be all right, I thought. I'd find a way to harmonize Islam with my life and beliefs.

Looking back, I suspect this whole effort was an attempt to still my uneasiness and my growing doubts. They'd always been there, as I've mentioned, but they felt sharper now. It seemed my mind was being torn apart by trying to hold onto belief while simultaneously accepting the legitimacy of the feminist, historical, and other critiques of Islam I'd been reading. I couldn't make it all fit together. I knew all about the rampant sexism in traditional understandings of Islam and deplored its misogyny, but at the same time I had to admit that it was inherent in the sources, the Qur'an and *hadith*. I felt similarly conflicted with hell-fire-and-brimstone attitudes toward nonbelievers and heretics, as I did with traditional Islam's stance on any number of subjects ranging from slavery to *jihad* to the position of religion [LB: OTHER RELIGIONS?] in Islamic countries. Yes, moderates could try to explain them away, but fundamentalists could easily demonstrate that the positions I found abhorrent were fully supported by the texts.

I'm not sure when I first seriously considered leaving Islam. I'd always had doubts and difficulties, but I dreamed I would finally stumble one day onto the perfect synthesis of Islam and my own liberal ethical and moral inclinations. But as time went by and I learned yet more about the texts and the way Islam had been interpreted by almost every scholar, imam, sheikh, mufti, mullah, and ayatollah, my hopes for finding a "liberal Islam" dimmed. What right had I, a female Western convert of no great learning, to contradict 1,400 years of tradition and challenge the most knowledgeable Muslim scholars?

As my hopes for salvaging anything out of Islam began to wither, I had to confront the fact that my faith had *always* been built on sand. Had I ever really believed, or had I been fooling myself? The longer I agonized, the more I suspected the latter was the case. Yet I could never fully admit that to myself. I clung to what was left of my faith, a last-gasp effort to keep something I'd been a part of for six long years.

Once real cracks appeared in my resolve, they didn't take long to spread. I found myself beginning to frequent freethinker, ex-Muslim, and atheist Web sites, even while I was struggling desperately to hold on to my tattered faith. I realized that some part of me *liked* the infidels' attitudes; when it came to Islam, they said the things I longed to say. They denounced outrages like Islamic misogyny wholeheartedly without having to qualify their statements with remarks like, "but that is only because Islam has been misinterpreted or misused." No, they denounced the whole rotten thing, root and branch, and I found that refreshing. Imagine being able to denounce the Qur'an for the atrocious verses it contained without having to pretzel one's brain trying to reconcile the "perfect" Word of Allah with modern notions of human

rights. Imagine being able to condemn certain of Muhammad's actions unreservedly (assuming they actually happened as claimed, mind), without simultaneously trying to defend the Prophet's honor and "perfect" example through some treacherous appeal to relativism. How bracing it would be to leave all that nonsense behind.

Finally, I just snapped. With a lot of help from people online, I realized that I couldn't keep up the masquerade. I admitted to myself that I really didn't believe—that in all likelihood, I never truly had. Maybe I'd been fooling myself for the past six years. The hurdle that remained was the most difficult: giving up Islam for good.

One of my last acts as a Muslim was *salat al-istikhara*, the prayer asking Allah to show his guidance on a matter. Paradoxical as it may sound, I asked Allah whether I should give up my faith. It probably helped that after I said the prayer I went to sleep; often, people think more clearly after a good rest.

I guess Allah decided that I should give up Islam because that's what I did. The Qur'an says that only those whom Allah wills believe. Apparently, that group does not include me! I was one of those whom Muhammad said would leave the religion as an arrow goes through game.

Levity aside, the last year or so has been quite difficult. I've had to wrestle with a cascade of feelings, even as I face the fact that I spent so many years driving myself crazy over something so utterly ridiculous.

I've started reading the Qur'an again, curious how it would seem now that I no longer believe. I am now flabbergasted at how pedestrian and banal it truly is. I've been through the text so many times that its words hold no surprises; what strikes me now is how little is really new or impressive. Set aside the dire depictions of hellfire and the pretty pictures of paradise, pass by the constant invocations of the Last Day when humankind will stand before Allah and be judged, and there is really not much left. Some retold stories from the Bible, some stereotyped retellings of the legends of the prophets, some legal matters, some aphorisms and proverbs that seem profound yet encode no more than common sense, some exhortations to give thanks to Allah and perform prayers and give charity and fight in the way of Allah—it is all thuddingly repetitive, surely nothing that a seventh-century Arab speaker could not have come up with on his own without divine assistance. So much for the notion that the Qur'an is so perfect that it simply *must* be the very word of Allah!

It's astonishing what exorbitant and extravagant claims are made for this text by Muslims. Even in the original Arabic, which contains some nice poetry, there is nothing in the text to warrant it.

The more time passes, the more perplexed I become about why exactly I chose to convert to Islam. That's one of the reasons I wrote this lengthy account: I'm trying to sort it all out in my own mind. It's been a very draining process. Perhaps I have learned a few things about myself. One thing is sure—after reviewing the unhappy history of my past several years, there is absolutely no chance whatever that I will ever return to Islam. There is no way I will put myself through that torture again.

No, I've decided that I'm happy as I am, without religion. I can only hope that my experience will prove interesting or useful to somebody. I believe far fewer things than I once did, but I truly believe that no experience is wasted if I, or you, or someone else can learn from it. □

## PULL QUOTES

Lisa Bauer now attends graduate school. In the third and final part of the story of her encounter with Islam, which will be published in the next issue of *FREE INQUIRY*, she explores Islam's effects.

*“The daily rhythm of prayers, the Arabic phrases and ritual movements that went with them, even facing Mecca—all of this connected me with the daily lives of millions of people on the other side of the world.”*

*“It seems bizarre in retrospect that I chose to embrace a religion with so many rules governing every aspect of behavior. I used to detest arbitrary rules.”*

*“More liberal Muslims . . . argue that Islam enjoins modesty and not drawing attention to oneself, and since the hijab draws so much attention in the West, wearing it here may actually be counterproductive.”*

*“When I started to think about converting, I slowly isolated myself from my family—in fact, everyone I knew. I figured they wouldn't understand.”*

*“The imam . . . asked me to recite some words in Arabic after him, which I did. Then he told me that I was now his wife.”*

*“He would tell me that I should be grateful that I had ‘half a husband’ as opposed to a ‘full’ one because he knew many women who had none at all. The word love was never spoken.”*

*“I felt terrible and worthless: I was violating everything in my ethical and moral codes, every teaching of my newfound faith—and for what?”*

*“I had developed a knack for compartmentalization. . . . I would read something like Ibn Warraq's Why I Am Not a Muslim, take a break to pray, and then return to the book.”*

*“What right had I, a female Western convert of no great learning, to contradict 1,400 years of tradi-*

*tion and challenge the most knowledgeable  
Muslim scholars?"*

*"One of my last acts as a Muslim was  
salat al-istikhara, the prayer asking Allah to show  
his guidance on a matter. Paradoxical as it may  
sound, I asked Allah whether I should give up my  
faith."*

ABSTRACT

*After bewilderment and sexual abuse, an  
American convert to Islam finally discards her  
faith.*