

**Losing My Religion: A Call for Help**

*Jeffrey Lang*

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Jeffrey Lang is a well-known Muslim convert and professor of mathematics at the University of Kansas. *Losing My Religion* is his third book. In

many ways, it surpasses the first two in the relevance and urgency of its subject matter.

While the book shares its title with a 1991 song by the popular rock band REM, its central theme is almost as old as religion itself: bridging the chasm that seems to separate religious beliefs and practices on the one hand, and contemporary rationality and secular culture on the other. Perhaps because of his background in mathematics, Lang is confident that human reason, if properly used, can and will affirm the truths of divine revelation. The idea is by no means new, though its application has always called for the most rigorous efforts by the most sophisticated human intellects.

Writing as a lay theologian, Lang makes some interesting points in *Losing My Religion*, which is primarily aimed at the general North American Muslim community. The main impetus behind this book is the alienation experienced by young Muslims and converts who are confronted with the traditional and conservative forms of Islam presented (and vigorously defended) by the immigrant-dominated mosque culture. This alienation accounts for the facts that the majority of second- and third-generation Muslims tend to stay away from mosques and that it is generally the older immigrants or very recent arrivals who seem to be active in these institutions. Lang rightly argues that the young people's absence from the mainstream of the Muslim community's religious and social life represents a serious threat to Islam's survival and growth in North America.

According to the author, there is a veritable confusion among many western Muslims who are either unwilling or unable to differentiate between Islam's essential imperatives and the cultural norms of the immigrants' home countries. Consequently, beliefs and practices that are actually specific to Egypt or India or Lebanon are projected onto Islam and seen as eternally valid divine teachings. As a result, North American mosques end up being dominated by the narrowest and most conservative interpretations of Islam. This state of affairs exaggerates the divergences that already exist between Islamic teachings and certain aspects of western culture, making it extremely difficult for new generations of Muslims to experience a satisfying religious life while actively participating in a western society. Despite the alarming absence and/or withdrawal of young people from the mosques, the author laments that "there is hardly a ripple of concern within the Muslim religious establishment" and attributes this indifference to "a combination of denial, fatalism, embarrassment, and defeatism" (p. 10).

Lang dedicates some 500 pages to cataloguing the concerns, questions, and dilemmas of North American Muslims on how to remain loyal to Islam

without becoming social outcasts. These are the misgivings, reservations, and doubts raised by young Muslims and converts who have not yet lost their religion, but who are unlikely to get any help from the local imam either. Many of these issues are theological in nature, relating to conflicts between faith and reason. Others are related to skepticism about individual hadiths or the authenticity of Hadith literature in general, which has already been exacerbated by western (or “Orientalist”) scholarship on the reliability of classical Muslim sources. Another major area of concern is the status of Muslim women and how they are treated by the larger community, including their role (or lack thereof) in the mosque.

Lang makes a coherent and commendable effort to respond to these concerns in a way that takes contemporary realities into account, but without discarding past religious scholarship (the so-called “tradition”). He issues a forceful wake-up call to the Muslim community: Stop rejoicing because “Islam is the fastest growing religion” and consider instead the predicament of those who are rapidly losing their faith in its relevance and divine origin.

One has to agree with Lang that the process of transmitting religious knowledge to new generations of North American Muslims is suffering from major deficiencies. Obviously, mosques and Islamic schools are not doing what needs to be done in order to maintain a healthy continuity in the transmission of religious knowledge and in the proper guidance of a new generation facing a world that is vastly different from the one in which its parents and grandparents were raised.

Lang’s focus in this book, however, is relatively narrow. On deeper reflection, the alienation and disenchantment of young Muslims that he notes appears to be just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. The deficiency of mosques and Islamic schools is only a symptom of a larger crisis. To the extent that *Losing My Religion* directs the reader’s attention to that crisis, it represents a very serious indictment of the inadequacy of the entire body of modern Muslim scholarship.

Virtually every problem raised by the troubled Muslims who sent emails to Lang represents some aspect of the intellectual task of “reconstruction,” the significance of which has been pointed out repeatedly during the past 150 years. These and innumerable other questions are not new, nor is the appreciation of the need to provide adequate and contemporary answers. What is also not new, unfortunately, is the general failure of Muslim scholarship to tackle them in an adequate and successful way.

The need to reconstruct Islamic theology, ethics, and jurisprudence has been voiced again and again all over the Muslim world. This book is the lat-

est reminder of the inevitable consequences of the failure to meet that challenge. A religion survives and grows by maintaining its relevance to its adherents' social and intellectual conditions, and by continuously fulfilling their changing spiritual and psychological needs. Acknowledging the relative and open-ended nature of religious tradition is an essential prerequisite for recognizing such a challenge; belief in a static, reified, and "perfect" Islam, however, precludes any effort to renew, revive, and reconstruct its temporal manifestations in every generation. The symptoms of this larger crisis are what Lang portrays so accurately.

*Losing My Religion* not only accentuates the need for understanding the legacy of the Islamic tradition, but also underscores the necessity of keeping that tradition alive and continuously updated. In this context, Lang's book is much more important as regards the questions it raises than the answers it provides.

Ahmed Afzaal  
Ph.D. Candidate, Religion and Society  
Drew University, Madison, NJ