

Islam Our Choice: Portraits of Modern American Muslim Women

Debra L. Dirks & Stephanie Parlove, eds.
USA: amana publications, 2003. 298 pages.

This book is a delightful read. The somewhat unoriginal title (compilations of conversion accounts under the title *Islam Our Choice* have been around for several decades, including stories that date back to the mid-twentieth century) belies the original and unique stories told within. However, these words might be rather startling for many non-Muslims, and thus pique their curiosity enough to pick up the book and inquire further.

Islam Our Choice, aimed primarily at non-Muslim Americans, tells the stories of fellow Americans who have chosen to follow a different path but who are still Americans. The authors express the hope that “each non-Muslim American reader will probably be able to relate to and identify with the pre-Muslim background of at least one of the authors” (p. 2). The inclusion of family photos and illustrations adds to the book’s visual appeal and shows the contributors as ordinary Americans who are at home with their new identity as Muslims.

Although the contributors cover a wide range of geographical locations, levels of education, and career paths, their ethnic and religious backgrounds cover a narrower range. Most of the respondents were former Christians of varying denominations, and most are white; one African-American woman also contributed her story. It is now well known that there are Jewish, Latinos/Latinas, and Native American converts, and, hopefully, their stories will be told in the near future in order to present a fuller picture of how Islam is reaching all sections of American society.

The book opens with a brief overview of Islamic faith and practice, Islam in America, and a comparison between the position of women in modern America and in Islam. This sets the scene, as it were, for readers who may be unfamiliar with the Muslim world and with Muslim communities in the West.

Written according to the introduction’s general outline, each chapter relates the story of an American woman who has come to Islam. All contributors offer insight into their childhood worlds, whether they were cozy and relatively uneventful, or dogged by poverty and such family troubles as alcoholism. Debra L. Dirks introduces the Mennonite culture from which her family comes, and Khadijah R. Beruni sheds light on the two worlds of her childhood in an extended African-American family: living

with her family in Philadelphia in the integrated North, but spending summers with grandparents in the rural towns of the segregated South.

Several of the authors traveled a circuitous path to Islam, following such other paths as born-again Christianity, the Nation of Islam, and occultism. Their narratives make for interesting – and in the latter case, alarming – reading. They were introduced to Islam through its various aspects, ranging from the intellectual to the mystical, and became acquainted with the faith through their husbands, friends, and work colleagues or contacts.

It is heartening to read of the cases in which both husband and wife came to Islam together, and of the ties that have remained strong with family members who have remained Christian. Unfortunately, hurtful experiences are also described, such as harsh reactions both from the Muslim community and local American communities. Saddest of all, perhaps, is Carema Cook's description of how some Muslims reacted when her non-Muslim father died: They chose not to offer condolences and commented on his "fate" as a "kaafir" instead, at a time when loving sisterly support was all that the bereaved sister needed and was all that was required of the Muslim women as an Islamic duty.

The stories told here, as well as being accounts of conversion to Islam, are also testimonials to friendship and sisterhood between the women who worked together to produce this book. It is a cheering example that adds to the book's charm. While aimed primarily at non-Muslims, Muslims also will benefit from reading this book. It is an effective *da`wah* tool, and copies placed in libraries and given to friends will enable others to see what some Westerners see in Islam and what they experience as they travel the road of conversion. It is also an uplifting reminder, to those of us who have been in Islam for a decade or two, of the heady excitement of new faith.

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