

TRUEING

Many people who have a conversion experience do not see it as leaving anything, rather of trueing experience and language and the conceptual systems of a religious tradition. Many Muslim converts talk about the relief they felt when they could drop the concept of the Trinity, since that wasn't true to their felt experience of God, nor could they reconcile it with their understanding of monotheism. Others loved not having to make a distinction between belief and practice, practice was now belief. To be a Muslim was to regularly perform certain practices. This integration of inner experience and outer practice and system of belief, the need for it, the search for it, the enormous joy and relief when these two came into congruence was echoed again and again. In an anthropologist who found trance resolved her sense of incongruity between her inner and outer worlds. Or in a nun who woke up one morning hearing a voice that said it was now time to leave the convent but not her faith. Or in a woman who was studying spiritual direction in a Catholic college but found in the writings of Baha'u'llah and the Baha'i faith a congruity that reflected her own experience of many faiths.

One question I asked of Sister Mary Salaam—whose journey has included practice as a devout Methodist, a Pentecostal, and then a Muslim—whether God had changed for her, she said, “Of course not. Our conversation has been constant.” Ken Muschewicz, who converted from Catholicism to Islam, said, “Wonderful question. Not at all.” And a Zen abbess in Asheville, said, “Oh, I consider myself a Catholic and a Buddhist.” A comment I heard repeated by Peggy Rowe, a follower of Thich Nat Hanh, who encourages people to understand themselves continuously inside the frame of their original religious training.

To hold conversion stories in imagination, it is important to get a feel for what is being trued and *how* it is being trued. Sometimes there are needs—for compassion, or intellectual coherence, or symbolic fluency, or coherence of language and practice, that are not being fed. Sometimes it is a

need for community. I think here of how powerful the experience of reading signs that included quotes from Confucius and Thomas Jefferson was to Fred Tregaskis—the experience of finding a community where his heart-rich need to doubt could be embraced.

To have a feel for the trueing involved in people's choices of how to *express* their religious experience requires that we separate the experience itself from the explanatory system and also stand in awe of that part of each of us that knows wholeness for us, how important and ruthless and exact it is. How it can say, suddenly, “I don't want those words in me.” Or can recognize that the rhythms of Islamic body prayer create a conversation with God and with others that they can't experience in any other way, even if God has not changed for them at all.

SISTER MARY SALAAM

A young man in a grocery store stopped and watched Sister Mary Salaam and then asked, “M'am, are you saved? Because I see a halo over your head.”

It isn't the only time she has had someone say something similar. Another man said to her, “I don't mean to be fresh, but you just light up.”

Sister Mary is seventy-one. She still works as a charge nurse at a nursing home. She teaches Arabic at the Atlanta Masjid and regularly attends meetings of interfaith groups in Atlanta, such as the Children of Abraham and the Interfaith Sisters. She is small, elegant, and wears a wonderful collection of hats and head scarves, which she wraps tightly around her head, their ends tied into a rose above her ear, so it looks like she is wearing an elegant cloche from the Roaring Twenties. She is very down to earth, as careful with her speech as she is with her dress.

There is, as these strangers observed, something about her that lights up a room. I found her spiritual journey one of the most interesting of all that I heard during this project. What struck me was its continuity, although in her life Sister Mary has moved from being a non-professed Baptist, to Methodist, to Pentecostal evangelist, to Muslim.

In a follow-up interview, I asked, “Mary, when you changed religions, did God change for you?” Not at all, she told me. Her personal relationship with God remained unchanged—intimate, all-absorbing.