Finding an End in the Beginning: Eschatological Trends among ex-Muslim Christians

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Introduction

Ex-Muslim studies are a new and emerging field of studies, calling on a number of different disciplines, ranging from sociology and anthropology to political science, psychology, and Islamic jurisprudence. When individuals or communities leave Islam they generally head towards either some form of atheistic or agnostic secularism, or towards Christianity. This article primarily focuses on the latter groups.

In this article I will seek to describe some general theological trends that I have identified among ex-Muslim Christians. The word ‘trends’ is chosen carefully, as ex-Muslim Christians are a diverse and heterogeneous group. It is therefore not possible to speak of core eschatological doctrines which are common to all (or most) ex-Muslim Christians. The word eschatological is used in its most inclusive form, encompassing the signs of the end times that are understood as preceding the Messiah’s parousia, as well as the question of eternal beatitude with God v. eternal separation from God or damnation.

The term ‘ex-Muslim Christian’, or its equivalent, Christian from a Muslim background (CMB), is also used quite specifically. People familiar with the recent debates within the world of evangelical missiology will be familiar with a host of contested and debated terms like C5 and Messianic Muslim and Insider Movement. These terms usually refer to one of two things: 1) a specific strategy regarding how to missionize Muslims,597 or 2) an allegation598 that such a movement among specific people in a specific place, existing apart from Western missions, is being objectively and dispassionately described.599 Can a family of Muslims continue to

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believe in Jesus and the Cross and the Bible while also continuing to (in some manner) honor the Qur'an while their community becomes a church, though they do not call it a church, and while they call themselves Muslims and eschew the label Christian? And can this all be salvific?

I am very glad to ignore the above question in this article. Instead, this article is about people who identify themselves clearly as having been Muslims, and then having undergone a process of religious conversion or ‘transfer of tradition’600—whether sudden or, as is more often the case, over many years—converted from Islam to Christianity qua religio, which includes not only the attractive person and message of the Messiah but also his troublesome yet somehow indispensable bride—the Church.

Historical background

The field of ex-Muslim studies, of which this theological inquiry is part, is emerging and of recent vintage. Religious conversion between Islam and Christianity has been occurring since the days of the Prophet Muhammad, as when Ubaidah bin Jash left Islam for Christianity while in Ethiopia.601 There are Christian Saints, like Abo of Tiflis (Tbilisi) who was martyred on January 6th of 786, or St Ahmed the Calligrapher who was martyred on May 3rd of 1682, who were converts from Islam. We have, recently translated into English, an autobiography of John Avetaranian,602 a Turkish convert, from as early as the 19th Century. But these conversions were sporadic and individual. It is not until the latter half of the 20th Century that we can speak not only of individual converts here and there, but entire families, communities, or towns converting from Islam to Christianity. The first large movement was in Indonesia in the 1960’s and the 1970’s among the Javanese.603 After the Iranian Revolution in 1979 tens or, more likely, hundreds of thousands of Iranians, both in the country and in the Diaspora, have converted. There are today Iranian Christian congregations worshipping in Farsi throughout Iran and in major cities throughout the West. Other movements have taken place in Bangladesh, Algeria, Turkey, Kazakhstan, and significant conversions have been seen in countries as traditionally resistant to Christian conversion as Pakistan and Egypt.

Research has already been published on the reasons given by these converts as to why they convert.604 Some of the main reasons given
are the attractiveness of Jesus, Christian community, a supernatural experience (like a healing or dream), and just being disappointed in some way with Islam, the Qur'an, or the prophet. These conversion motives often build on each other and work synergistically. Underlying almost all conversion narratives is the conviction that the Christian deity loves unconditionally and reveals this love in Jesus, while the deity of Islam loves conditionally and cannot be relied upon.

Why now? That is another question that surfaces regarding this rather sudden increase in conversions in relation to the very small numbers of known converts in the past. It appears that several characteristics set the latter half of the 20th Century apart from other ages, and in that context multiple factors coalesced which made such movements a possibility. These factors include developments in media from radio to satellite to the internet; an increase in the number of dreams and visions reported by Muslims; greater creativity and innovation in relation to missionary and ministry strategies; advances in translation made possible by the PC and the internet; and increased migration whereby many Muslims have migrated to lands with a Christian heritage, where they are more likely to meet Christians, read a Bible, attend a church, or, broadly speaking, in some way encounter and understand the Christian message.

In sum, the field of ex-Muslim studies is unexplored because the communities being studied did not exist in numbers that would permit systematic and structured scholarship until recently.

**Sources of Theological Knowledge and ex-Muslim Christians**

Studying the theology of ex-Muslim Christians is not like much other theological research. If one wanted to study eschatological trends among African Anglicans or German Lutherans one could presumably find a number of books or journal articles to be a guide. With ex-Muslim Christians though, there is very little in the way of published, explicitly theological books or articles. There are published materials, but they strongly tend towards apologetics or conversion narratives (or a combination of those two genres in one book). This manner of research entails the sometimes-difficult project of extracting from a personal narrative the traces of a theology. If this seems overly ambitious, it is worth remembering that we do this often with the Scripture, and thus one can extract
from 1 and 2 Samuel a theology of kingship, or from Luke-Acts a theology of baptism. I do not mean to imply that all conversion narratives have the same intentionality and complexity as one finds in Luke-Acts or Samuel, but the point of contact holds—that theological truths can be communicated through narratives. Such texts are one source of theological reflection for ex-Muslim Christians, but I have also done numerous interviews and attended worship events and meetings that included ex-Muslim Christians among a few groups. This includes a number of Arabic-speaking people in/from the Middle East, as well as groups of Iranian Christians in the UK and the USA. Beyond believers from Arab and Iranian backgrounds, I have also interviewed some converts from Azerbaijan, Turkey and South Africa.

Conversion narratives, interviews, participation in their liturgies (loosely defined)—these have been the main sources I have accessed to try to discern some eschatological trends among the ex-Muslim Christians I have studied. Due to the scarcity of the material and the newness of the field, though, I cannot claim to make quantifiable evaluations, e.g. percentages of converts who believe in this or that specific teaching.

Eschatological Trends

Ushering in the Kingdom: Praxis and Justice

The West has a strong tradition of systematization in theology, and of understanding theology as ‘certain knowledge,’ which has the appearance of, in some way, being supra-cultural and universal. When Calvin wrote his Institutes or Aquinas wrote his Summas there was the appearance, if not the intention, of laying down the true essence of theological reality—certain knowledge about God in the light of Christian revelation that applied to all people at all times. In other words, it had the appearance of making universal and non-contextual truth claims and ‘...often attempts have been made to impose the methods and results of theology as sure knowledge in cultural contexts where they do not fit...’

But there are other ways of envisioning what theological knowledge is (and is not). Robert Schreiter outlines some of these in his dense 1985 book Constructing Local Theologies. He argues that in some cultures theological knowledge is more properly understood as wisdom. Wisdom is understood as ‘the ability to
discern the divinely ordained pattern within nature and experience, and then to follow the prescribed way of living well so as to be in right relationship with God.\textsuperscript{610} A wisdom theology is concerned with finding the underlying order in the universe—in the midst of persecution, alienation, solitude, prison, how can one locate the presence and activity of a loving God? While this sort of God-knowledge is not the supra-cultural metaphysical claim one might be familiar with in the field of systematic theology, we do have it in the West in the writings of St John of the Cross\textsuperscript{611} and St Teresa of Avila\textsuperscript{612} and, more recently, in the Anglo-Catholic tradition, TS Eliot's 'Four Quartets'.\textsuperscript{613} Wisdom theology is also taught in our colleges and seminaries, but normally under labels like pastoral theology or applied theology.

The conversion narratives of these believers contain a great deal of God-knowledge in relation to such pragmatic but important questions: How should one break the news to his family that he has become a Christian? How should one relate to the Islamic government after conversion? How can one form a relationship with a local church? To what extent should the CMB engage in Islamic activities and feasts? And so on. The theology may not be systematic, but rather applied, pastoral and pragmatic.\textsuperscript{1} It is still Christian theology though, in that it claims to communicate something about God in the light of his self-revelation in his Messiah. In relation to eschatology, we do not find a great deal of insight in these texts when interpreted as wisdom theology. But when viewed from the angle of liberation theology we do.

Another form of theological knowledge identified by Schreiter\textsuperscript{614} is praxis. Praxis is the logical and necessary outcome of theological reflection. Praxis leads to liberation. It is not the economic liberation sought by the Latin American Catholics of yesteryear, but a liberation whose telos is a reality wherein ex-Muslim Christians will be tolerated within their own Islamic countries, rather than forced into exile, quietism, or prison, or, at worse, executed.\textsuperscript{615} The call for human rights and acceptance is present in a number of the texts composed by ex-Muslim Christians. Because of this, I believe (and have argued at length elsewhere)\textsuperscript{616} that some of these believers are engaged in a certain type of liberation theology. The

\textsuperscript{1} Ed: Terms that might also be applied to the theology of Paul in his epistles, for example. The point is not that Paul's writings are in any way haphazard or lacking in depth and structure, but they are almost entirely 'occasional' in nature.
Christian message confronts the realities of Islamic shari'a (and especially the law of apostasy, but also the treatment of women and non-Muslims) and finds the latter to be unacceptable given the proclamation of God’s just reign entering into human history. The opening up of the Kingdom, the present partial coming of the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, is in itself an eschatological sign; it is also a reminder that the fullness of the Kingdom (and thus of the eschaton) is not yet here. This Kingdom is understood to be centred around the concept of sacrificial power, and ties together eschatology and ethics in that it requires action. The praxis itself is the theological artifact.

The actual praxis takes place in at least two different manners. One is through social activism. An example of this is Hannah Shah’s campaign to protect British ladies from an Asian background from being forced into marriages and from the unjust habits that emerge from the honor-shame culture she experienced growing up as a Pakistani girl in the UK. Fatima Al-Matayri was a convert in Saudi Arabia, martyred by her own family for her faith in 2008. We have some of her writings from an online forum which she used to communicate with others, both Christians and Muslims. These writings include a poem (originally in Arabic) that defends the mutanaasirin or converts from Islam to Christianity. Multiple arguments are being made by the author of the poem. These include the insistence that by leaving Islam the converts have not betrayed their country of Saudi Arabia, and an appeal for tolerance and freedom:

You see Jesus is my Lord and he the best protector
I advise you to pity yourself and clap hands [in resignation]

And see your look of ugly hatred
Man is brother of man, oh learned ones!!!!
Where is the humanity, and love, and where are you
And my last words I pray to the Lord of the worlds
Jesus the Messiah, the light of the clear guidance,
That he changes your notions and set right the scales of justice

And spreads love among you oh Muslims.

On the one hand in this poem we have an appeal for tolerance and understanding and the hope that Jesus will someday ‘set right the scales of justice’. But we also see a second strategy unfolding that will achieve the goal of transforming an Islamic society into a just one in accordance with God’s loving will—evangelism.
Evangelizing Muslims is seen by many Muslims as being a deeply subversive act, and in some places it is against the law. So when Al Matayri prays that Jesus himself would change their notions, and spread love among them, this can easily be seen as a prayer for their conversion as well. Many of the conversion narratives by ex-Muslim Christians include explicit invitations to Muslim readers to convert, like those of Christopher Alam and Saiid Rabiiipour, converts from Pakistan and Iran, respectively. Other writers, like Daniel Ali, a Kurdish convert to Catholic Christianity, emphasizes that folks in the West need to start to actively evangelize Muslims around them. All in all, evangelism is a way of ushering in the eschatological just rule of God. In these cases, political change is sought, but by means of deploying spiritual resources and rhetoric, never by using coercion or violence against the political structures. Such a manner of achieving political change would be too close to what they had seen in the prophet’s life and in Islam in general, a way of interpreting and applying power which they intentionally have left behind as they turned from the old and incorrect of Islam to the new and correct of Christianity. This new conceptualization of power which she has learned from Jesus empowers Al Matayri to make the paradoxical claim in that same poem, ‘Your swords do not concern me at all.’

The eschatological significance of this liberating praxis as preparation for the parousia should not be pushed to the extreme though. There is no statement here that once religious freedom has been achieved among Muslims that Jesus will return, like some evangelicals envision, say, the reconstruction of the Temple on Mount Zion. But there is a pronounced trend in relation to eschatology which we can identify: the eschaton, the righting of the wrong in the world, is something which must be actively worked for here and now. A complete justice will not be achievable by our own efforts, but substantial justice is possible, as is improving the lot of converts from Islam, even if only incrementally and with great difficulty. Even if the earthly city can never become the City of God, the students of Messiah are the salt of the earth, and thus enrich that earthly city, though it is not their home. Moreover, the reality that the reign of God is at hand compels such a praxis. In other words, though they may not have an over-realized eschatology, they do insist on some realization. They express the already of the ‘already and not yet’ in social activism and kerygmatic effort.
Within the evangelical tradition

Inculturation is a useful framework for describing and analyzing the emergence and maturation of these Christ-ward movements from Islam. The definition of inculturation given by Aylward Shorter is ‘...the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures’. He clarifies later ‘...we really are speaking of a dialogue between a [...] Christianized culture of the missionary and the hitherto un-Christianized culture to which he comes’. What is sometimes overlooked is that every instance of the Gospel embodied in a community is already embodied in a specific cultural setting. In the words of Bp Lesslie Newbigin, There is no such thing as the gospel pure and simple. Every statement of the Gospel, and every exercise in the living out of the gospel, is culturally conditioned. And yet the gospel exercises and will always exercise a critical function within any culture in which it plays a part.

This is true for the Christianity we encounter in the Bible itself—Jerusalemite Christianity and Antiochian Christianity and Corinthian Christianity each appear to have shared a core kerygma and leitourgia, but each community in each city was developing and living out their faith in a specific, contextual manner.

This is significant here because the Christian message as it has been encountered by most ex-Muslim Christians in the world today is itself already embodied (I hesitate to use the word ‘incarnated’—I feel it has been overused so much as to have become almost meaningless, unfortunately) within a (broad) cultural setting. That cultural setting is global evangelicalism, itself larger than, but disproportionately influenced by, American evangelicalism. There are groups of ex-Muslims who have encountered the Christian message as already clothed in a distinctive manner, like some of the converts to Orthodoxy in Albania or Indonesia, or families who have converted to Roman Catholicism in Kosovo.

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1 In previous articles I have used the tentative term Islamic Christianity to refer to movements towards Christ originating in Islam. This term would include also individuals who continue to identify themselves as Muslims who follow Jesus. This article is dealing only with ex-Muslim Christians.

2 Liberal Protestantism seems to be the exception—perhaps because the dangerous step of converting from Islam to Christianity is seen as unnecessary or illogical by pastors and leaders in those churches who tend towards universalism. This would make conversion superfluous.
Christopher Alam near the end of his book, states that 'Time is short, and Jesus is coming back to the earth soon. The harvest is plenteous, but the laborers are few. We have preached the gospel to millions, yet millions are still unreached'.

Evangelism as an action fulfills two roles simultaneously: it transforms society into one that more resembles the contours of the reign of God (as mentioned above), but evangelism also prepares the world for Messiah’s return and the final judgment.

As inculturation has taken place, ex-Muslim Christians have at different times moved away from evangelical orthodoxies (as with the soteriology of penal substitution). In spite of this, on the whole the default position for eschatology will tend to be one of the positions within global evangelicalism, with a strong tendency towards some form of dispensationalism popularized by Americans.

Signs of the Parousia

Trying to predict when Jesus is going to come back is not a key concern for the ex-Muslim Christians I studied. They all believe that he will return, it will be visible, and he will return in bodily form. Nonetheless there is a minor trend that sees the ingathering of Muslims into the Christian faith as a sign of the end times and the immanent return of Messiah.

Once I attended a daylong conference in Scotland that was sponsored by and mostly attended by local Iranian Christians. While most of the teaching was done in Farsi I was able to read the PowerPoint presentation and had partial translation. One of the issues that can cause divisions among Iranian Christians (and ex-Muslim Christians in general) is the topic of the gifts of the Spirit. Are they all still active today, or have some of them (like tongues and prophecy) disappeared for some reason?

The speaker that day was an Iranian priest from the Church of England who ministers to Iranian Christians in the U.K. During a Q&A period one of the young men, a relatively new convert, asked if the age of miracles had passed, that is, had certain gifts (like working miracles) gone away? Taking a strong position either way on this topic may well have occasioned an extended argument as each side on the issue referenced the biblical verses which they felt bolstered their position. The teacher answered that in fact the greatest miracle of the Holy Spirit and sign of his presence was that Muslims in large numbers were coming to faith in Christ. In other words, the ingathering of Muslims into the Church is an indication that the Spirit is present and active in a unique and special way not yet encountered in human history. As these evangelicals are aware, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit is a sign of the immanent return of Christ (according to Peter’s interpretation of Joel in Ac. 2:17-21).

The most extended and clear example of connecting the conversion of Muslims to an eschatological sign of the immanent parousia is found in the book *Here Comes Ishmael* by Pentecostal Pakistani ex-Muslim Faisal Malick. While the book is not very long (124 pages), it is the only book by an ex-Muslim Christian, that I am aware of, which is entirely concerned with eschatology. Therefore a summary of the content of the book is appropriate.

The purpose of the book is to ‘define and clarify the season we are in, and to bring understanding and create awareness of the significance of Ishmael and his role in provoking Israel to salvation’. The second section of the book title, written on its cover, is *the kairos moment for the Muslim people*. Kairos, he writes, is a Greek word that points to ‘...a moment when a portal is opened between time and eternity so that an event can take place in its fullness, as appointed by God, to forever change the destiny of man’. He sets the stage by explaining how Ishmael is a representative of Islam today, and how God knew Ishmael before he was born and named him, and had a special plan for him which is only today being unfolded in this kairos moment.

What is this special role for Ishmael in the end-times? One role is that many of the sons and daughters of Ishmael will convert from Islam to Christianity. Jesus will not return until people from every nation come into the Church, and since the world is 42% Muslim (most population statistics suggest the proportion of Muslims around the world is half this figure), this obviously includes a large number of Muslims. One consequence of this is that nominal and lazy Christians throughout the world will become stirred up as they see the zeal of these new ex-Muslim Christians. But the conversion of many Muslims is going to provoke something else—the conversion of the Jews: ‘The glory of God revealed to the Muslim people will anger Israel to seek the face of God. When Israel sees the Shekinah glory they rejected on the mount [sic] manifested among the Muslim people, they will be angered and seek the face of God’. This, he says, will fulfill the Pauline prophecy in Romans that in the end, all Israel will be saved. And the salvation of the Jews
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is the *sine qua non* of signs of an imminent *parousia*: "When Israel says, “Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord” (Matthew 23:39), the Lord Jesus shall return."

This eschatological role for Ishmael does not mean every Muslim will be saved though. Nor does it mean that one should deny the reality and scope of a violent, terroristic community within Ishmael. Where does this come from? Continuing with his allegorical reading of Genesis, Malick points out that Esau married his cousin Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael (Genesis 28:9). Since then, ‘...Esau and Ishmael have been mingled together in covenant’.

This inclusion of a spirit of Esau explains the contemporary reality of terrorism among some of the children of Ishmael. Esau struggled against Jacob in the womb, he was a man of the sword, and at one point proposed to kill Jacob. The increase in Islamic terrorism represents a waxing of this spirit of Esau among the children of Ishmael, even though the spirit of Ishmael is itself one that is blessed by God. In other words, the two tendencies or spirits are fighting against each other for predominance among Muslims today. As to conversion, it is the *true* children of Ishmael*¹* (to whom ‘God listens’) that will in turn listen to God and turn to Christ. The spirit of Ishmael cries out as the child did in the Genesis narrative, even today:

We, the Church of God, must intercede for Ishmael like a mother would for a dying child. [...] Today, when God hears the cry of Ishmael, He will use another lady, the Church, to give him water from the well of everlasting life.

Malick then goes on to give some details of how it is that Ishmael will hear and enter the Kingdom. For instance dreams and visions, television and media, the Glory of God expressed in the righteousness of believers and the Church, miracles, signs, and wonders, raising the dead, and Christians’ power over witchcraft. Moreover, God himself will ‘give creative ideas to the Body of Christ that will position believers in places of financial dominion in times of famine in the world’. And as the sons and daughters of Ishmael turn to Jesus in large numbers, and gain a vision for the end-times harvest of evangelism, they will contribute their own substantial wealth to that evangelistic effort: ‘God blessed Ishmael unconditionally [with petroleum] with the intention to fund the

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¹ Ed: Akin to the Pauline concept (Romans 2) of the ‘true Jew’. 

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end-time harvest in part'. And so the Church will be blessed with 'Wealth and substance coming into the Kingdom...'. In this he sees a fulfillment of Is. 60:1-3 wherein 'Gentiles shall come to thy [ie, the Church's] light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.' And Is. 60:5-7 wherein gifts and wealth are brought to Israel (presumably replaced by the Church?), including the camels of Midian and Ephah, gold and frankincense of Sheba, the flocks of Kedar, and the rams of Nabaioth. In the end, 'When Ishmael is revived in the presence of God, he will lay his treasures at the feet of Jesus and embrace his destiny'.

This is, one might say, evangelical eschatology at its best and its worst. Its best, because it offers hidden insights into otherwise inscrutable or complex issues. This is what makes so much of evangelical eschatology attractive to the masses and quite marketable in a way that, say, Joseph Ratzinger's fine book *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* will never be. Thus, Muslim terrorism is born from the spirit of Esau within the community of Ishmael, which also explains handily the protracted Arab-Israeli conflict. How to make sense of the vast oil wealth of the fundamentalist and intolerant House of Saud? God has foreseen and planned that in this *kairos* it will be used for the mission of his Church. And so on. The best of evangelical eschatology is very marketable and explains in a very simple way complex and difficult issues (though of course, it may not invariably be correct), and that the apocalyptic interpretation (even if incorrect) is related to a call for greater activity in relation to mission and evangelism.

Nevertheless, we also see the worst of evangelical eschatology because there is no unity to his method for engaging the biblical text within its context, and so the author can jump from a typological exegesis of Genesis, to an eschatological reading of Isaiah wherein the promises of Israel become the promises of the Church, to wherein 'all Israel' (Romans) is once again the Jewish people and related to the secular State of Israel born in 1948! Any one of these hermeneutical methods *may* be correct and fitting and fruitful for understanding Scripture, but to jump between very different passages and interpret them each according to a different standard without explaining why—this is not a very good example of biblical scholarship and reminds us why evangelical eschatology is so often held in disdain (unfairly, at times, to be sure) by other Christians.
Regardless of what one might make of Malick’s eschatology or the Iranian priest’s opinion that the Spirit was doing its greatest work in drawing Muslims to Christ, we do see a trend among some ex-Muslim Christians linking the recent and historically unprecedented influx of Muslims into the Church to an eschatological-pneumatological sign indicating the proximity of the parousia. Not only is this eschatological writing (i.e. about the End or Destiny of mankind), but it is also more Apocalyptic than anything else in this paper, because it deals with unveiling what was otherwise inscrutable, and frankly involves a pretty fantastic sequence of latter-days signs.

*Discontinuous with Islamic eschatology*

According to the model of inculturation outlined above, it is also possible for a community to bring forward cultural elements from their original context. In other words, there are treasures old and new. New symbols, concepts, words, rites and doctrines from the (global evangelical) Christian faith meet people within a certain cultural matrix, which already has its (old) symbols, meanings and rites. In the case of Muslims, it is worth noting that often-times culture and religion are construed as being inextricably intertwined. That is, to be a Turk is to be a Muslim, or, to be Malay is to be a Muslim. When a person leaves the ‘religious’ identity of Islam, their former co-religionists understand them to also be leaving their ethnic identity as a Turk or Malay or Gulf Arab, etc.

One way for converts to disarm critics who charge them of being traitors to their people would be to emphasize the continuity with the beliefs, practices, symbols, and norms of their previous community. Sometimes ex-Muslim Christians do exactly this. Thus, Iranian Christians continue to celebrate the Persian new-year (Nowruz), employ Farsi in their liturgy (songs, preaching, poetry), and often prefer to give their children Persian names rather than Arabic names, which are understood to be superior by many Muslims. Similarly, among Arab converts I have known, some have recommended keeping the Ramadan fast. The fast is kept *not* in relation to soteriological merit, but in reference to intercession for the conversion of other Muslims, especially family. Theology aside, fasting when your Muslim family fasts is, regardless of motive, a way of respecting their customs and community by maintaining some sort of continuity. Trying to find forms of continuity between
Islam and Christianity is not something foreign to the ex-Muslim Christian community.

In the area of eschatology, though, I have found no effort at all to draw on the previous, Islamic concepts in order to emphasize continuity. For instance, it seems possible to find some sort of parallel between the image of the Qur’anic paradise or al janna, with the image of the garden-city of God which descends from heaven in Revelation 21. One might elaborate on this and note that both the Qur’an and the Bible place humans in fellowship with the Creator in a garden both at the beginning of the metanarrative, and at the end as well, forming a meta-historical chiasm. Also, both faiths teach a bodily resurrection, which, for someone seeking common ground or continuity between Islam and Christianity, is an obvious starting point.

But rather than seeking or emphasizing continuity or commonality, among ex-Muslim Christians eschatology appears to be a locus of discontinuity—an arena wherein the community can emphasize the newness of what they have encountered in the Christian message as superior to the old and ‘incorrect’ doctrine they had learned in Islam. An example of this was seen above in the answer from ‘John’, who saw in the word paradise not eschatological felicity, but only a reference to Eden.

Christian ex-Muslims tend to find the eschatological promises of Islam to be carnal, dangerous, and chauvinistic. The Qur’an makes numerous claims about the abode of the elect:

Paradise has an eternally moderate climate (76.13), shade is everlasting, grapes and pomegranates abound, rivers of wine, milk, honey and fresh water flow through it (47.15), recalling the four rivers of paradise in Genesis 2.10–14. The believers can call for every kind of fruit (44.55), they receive ‘what their souls desire’ (43.71), they are clad in silk and brocade, they wear golden bracelets and recline upon ‘close-wrought couches’ (56.15). Immortal youths offer flesh and fowl, they serve wine out of’ goblets, ewers and a cup from the spring (56.18). 633

Heaven also promises for the elect (males) huris, who according to traditional Islamic exegesis are beautiful, perfectly formed, spotless virgins (Q 44:54, 56:35-38, 55:56).

1 Literally, ‘the garden’.
One of the main accusations formed against this image of the eschatological garden is that it has no place for women, or that women are merely sex objects there.\textsuperscript{1} Abu Atallah,\textsuperscript{634} an Egyptian convert, educator and missionary, answers a question about heaven from a Muslim by making three points. First, he says, in heaven we will see God and live with him, we will relate to him there, and so, he tells his Muslim enquirer, 'This is why we [Christians] say that if you do not have a relationship with God you are dead spiritually'. The second point is that heaven is a state of being wherein there is no suffering or sorrow (citing Rev 21:4), and that there the believer will 'enjoy [God] to the fullest.' The implication is that it is \textit{not} wine or \textit{huris} that are enjoyed in the afterlife. His final point is based in Isaiah 11:2-9, wherein nature itself is transformed. This is why the lion can rest with the lamb in the afterlife, and similarly sexuality also is transformed: 'Another important point to emphasize here is that in heaven there will be no marriage', which is based on Mt 22:30. The author does not need to mention that this is in opposition to the unlimited sex available to the man living in \textit{al-janna}. Each point contradicts in some way the popular image that many Muslims have of the afterlife. No attempt has been made at finding continuity with Islam, but rather in emphasizing how different the Christian teaching is.

Another reason for discarding the Islamic tradition of the afterlife is that it is seen as being intertwined with violence. Nonie Darwish recalls her Islamic education as a child:

\begin{quote}
Moslem children at a very early age undergo horrific indoctrination to hate Jews and Christians. We all had to go through Islamic education breeding fear, anger, Jihad and extreme criticism and rivalry of other religions. We were told stories beyond belief about Jews. We were told Jews were hated by God and should be exterminated. They killed Arab children and pregnant Arab women, break treaties with Arabs! Hearing this about other human beings made me extremely scared. I listened day in and day out to religion teachers who only spoke of an angry God, Hell and Heaven, the battles that Mohammed won and the booty his soldiers got. Jihad and martyrdom was the center piece of Moslem education and the certain road to heaven.\textsuperscript{635}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{1} Ed: See Moyra Dale's chapter on women and Islamic eschatology.
In this passage, Darwish is implying that the terroristic violence of jihad is directly connected to the eternal felicity of *al-janna*. That martyrdom in Islam is seen as being related to military jihad, which itself is said to be a guarantee of entry into *al-janna*, is an insurmountable pollution for many ex-Muslim Christians. This repudiation of relating violence to entry into the eschatological garden is related to the conviction that the power of God, the Father of Jesus Christ, is intimately bound up with *agape* and self-sacrifice. This is set in contrast to a 'love' demanding obedience and which will resort to coercion or violence in order to obtain it, which is how ex-Muslim Christians tend to understand the deity of Islam. This theory of power is what enables someone like Fatima al Matayri to tell her Muslim compatriots in Saudi Arabia that, 'Your swords do not concern me at all'.

The concept of the afterlife, though it remains rather nebulous in the writings of ex-Muslim Christians, is not like the Islamic concept of *al-janna*. Whatever the details surrounding eternal felicity may be, Bilquis Sheikh summarizes the relational core of what eternal beatitude is: 'To know You is joy, to worship You is happiness, to be near You is peace. This is heaven!' In sum, whatever the afterlife is like, it is *not* like *al-janna* of Islam, which is seen as being male-centered, carnal, and even as a motive for terrorism.

**Conclusion: 'In my beginning is my end’**

T S Eliot wrote, 'In my beginning is my end,' and this verse (taken totally out of context from Eliot’s complex philosophy of time and redemption in *The Four Quartets*) comes to mind as we examine some eschatological trends among ex-Muslim Christians. I say this because many of these trends have some parallel in various facets of the contexts wherein these people left Islam and—whether suddenly or gradually—became Christians. That is, the beginning of their faith (conversion) has helped to form their vision of the end or goal of their faith.

One trend was related to working for justice and liberation. Khalil and Bilici, in studying conversion narratives of ex-Muslims, identified two categories of motivations given for why people left Islam:

**Intellectual/Ideological Motivations**

1. The status of women in Islam.
2. The contradiction between *Shari'ah* and human rights.

3. The problematic nature of the Qur'an.

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'an and Hadith.

**Social/Experiential Motivations**

1. Encounters with bad, cruel Muslims.

2. Muslims as oppressive.

3. Muslims as backward.


6. Muslims in a state of illusion regarding their own religion.639

The desire to work for justice and liberation as a trend is in part related to the fact that some had left Islam due to their experiences of Muslims being bad, cruel, oppressive, chauvinistic, and intolerant. Because this is what they had experienced in the past (their beginning), it has influenced what they want to change about the future (their end).

That the eschatologies are largely evangelical by default is likewise not surprising. Historically, it was for the most part evangelicals, both local and foreign, who took the initiative to reach out to Muslims in the first place. This is another way of speaking of the beginning: aside from the abortive effort of Bl. Ramon Lull (c. 1232-c. 1315), which was centuries ahead of its time, it was evangelicals from different countries and traditions who first formed a vision for coordinated, organized, long-term missions that had the goal of converting Muslims and even forming churches made up of such
Christians. This beginning of mission helps to form the vision of these believers in relation to the things of the end.

The discontinuity with Islamic eschatology is also explainable because many of the reasons why these Christians left Islam, such as the perceived poor treatment of women and non-Muslims, and the incompatibility of *shari'a* and Human Rights, are seen as revealing not only the inferiority of Islam to Christianity here and now, but also in the future. For many ex-Muslim Christians these questions related to justice influenced them in their decision to leave Islam, and so they also inform their critique of the Islamic vision of eternal felicity.

For these believers, Islam and Christianity offer two differing perspectives that cannot be reconciled. These perspectives differ regarding how to work for a just society even though it will never be completely achieved, they differ regarding the signs of the return of the Son of Mary, and they differ regarding the joys and pleasures of the afterlife.