

RACHEL PIEH JONES



**How Muslim Friends
Led Me Closer to Jesus**

FOREWORD BY ABDI NOR IFTIN

Eboo Patel, author of *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*

This is a beautiful story, beautifully told. It's much more than the memoirs of a Christian American living in Africa and exploring Islam with devoted Muslims; it's about learning how to be a good neighbor to the people around you, wherever you might be in the world. This is the kind of book we need right now.

Amy Peterson, author of *Dangerous Territory: My Misguided Quest to Save the World*

Filled with hard-won insights of a mature faith lived in long community with Muslim neighbors, *Pillars* refuses sentimental calls for the kind of peace that glosses over differences. Instead, Jones finds her faith unraveled and rewoven, stronger for what she's learned in the Horn of Africa and from her Muslim friends. Anyone whose faith has been challenged by life experiences will find a helpful model for spiritual growth here.

Marilyn R. Gardner, author of *Between Worlds: Essays on Culture & Belonging*

As an American raised in a Muslim country, I have waited for a book like *Pillars* all my adult life, a personal book that discovers similarities and honors differences between Christianity and Islam, a book that, pillar by pillar, builds bridges of greater understanding across what are often chasms of disconnect. Read and savor this book, which shows what can happen when we connect rather than collide.

Matthew Loftus, MD, AIC Litein Hospital, Kenya

There are many books written about engaging with Islam theologically. This book is not like that, although you can learn a lot about Islam from it. It's about something more important: Rachel tells stories about her encounters with Muslims as friends that can help us learn to be more faithful followers of Jesus and neighbors to people who need them.

Tom Krattenmaker, author of *Confessions of a Secular Jesus Follower*

In a time when many Christians view their faith as a political identity and view other faiths with fear and hostility, Rachel Pieh Jones provides a stirring counter-narrative that shows what it's like to follow Jesus earnestly, idealistically, and courageously to places few of us go and into the kind of friendships too few of us make. May hers be the form of Jesus-following that comes to the fore in our society.

Jordan Denari Duffner, author of *Finding Jesus among Muslims*

Through engrossing prose and personal stories, Rachel Pieh Jones takes readers along on her journey of Muslim-Christian friendship and interreligious exploration, offering a window into how Islam is lived in the Horn of Africa and how one's faith in Jesus can be reshaped by encounters with those who believe differently. Readers from all denominations will find in Rachel – and in her Muslim friends – fellow pilgrims for their own journeys of faith.

Pillars

How Muslim Friends
Led Me Closer to Jesus

Rachel Pieh Jones



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This is a preview. Get the entire book here.

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*For Awo.
Thank you.
Waad mahadsantahay.*

This is a preview. Get the entire book here.

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Foreword

AS A MUSLIM SOMALI IMMIGRANT to the United States, I am honored to recommend this book. It's not often that we learn about Somalia and Islam from the perspective of an American who has lived through the real experiences of Somalis. The way Rachel's story connects the dots is just what we need to start mending the relationship between Westerners and Somalis and, more generally, between Christians and Muslims.

For as long as I can remember, we Somalis have been defined not by our human stories, our resilience, and our deep sense of connection to the world but by media portrayals of Somalia as the land of warlords, terrorists, and pirates. As a result, Somalis often feel abandoned by the world, their stories forgotten. With this book, Rachel restores some of that lost faith. She and her husband wanted to work in Somalia, leaving behind the comfort of their home in Minnesota despite the horror stories they had read. Their move coincided with very difficult times for Somalia following 9/11 and the rise of al-Shabaab. In fact, while Rachel and her family were fleeing extremists, I was hiding from US military reconnaissance planes.

A few years ago, when I started to write my own memoir of surviving the civil war in Somalia and seeking a new home in America, I was reminded of the huge gap between living in a civil war and living in a civil society, and thus the disconnect between the world I once lived in and the world I live in now. Even though I have never visited the specific places Rachel has lived, I immediately connected with many images in her book and with moments in her experience. In my book, *Call Me American*, I describe the first day of the civil war in Somalia, the day we lost our sense of community, our house, and our

neighbors. I cried for our home and asked when we would go back, not knowing that it was gone forever. Forced to abandon Somalia, Rachel's children also asked when they would return home. Her reaction brought back memories for me. She said exactly what my mother would say.

Later, as I was adjusting to daily life in America, Rachel was continuing to connect deeply with the people she landed among in neighboring Djibouti. The majority of the Muslims she met were what my mother would be: friendly, curious about other faiths, and definitely not a threat. Over time, what started as a narrow view of a people and their religion changed into lasting love and friendship between people of different faiths – hopefully a change that will extend to every reader of this book.

Like almost every child in Somalia, in addition to regular school I attended a madrasa, or Islamic school, where I learned about the five pillars of Islam. I have practiced these pillars my whole life, except for the hajj to Mecca, which I have not yet had the money and time to complete. Before reading *Pillars*, I never realized how much common ground my religion shares with Christianity. Like Rachel's first exposure to Islam, before I left Somalia my view of Christianity was based entirely on negative stereotypes.

The best way to fight such stereotypes, of course, is to get to know individuals, as Rachel has. Ideally, everyone should get a chance to travel, to broaden their horizons and break down the barriers that separate us. But for those who aren't able to travel to East Africa, Rachel's book is an opportunity not to be missed. For every Muslim and Christian, it charts a hopeful and encouraging path, one that chips away at the walls of misunderstanding until one day they are gone.

Abdi Nor Iftin

January 2021

Author's Note

MOST OF THE MUSLIMS who have befriended me and aided my informal study of Islam are Somalis in the Horn of Africa. There is no single Islam, and Muslims across the globe are not a monolith. I have done my best to make note of Somali culture or individual interpretations of faith as people shared them with me, and certainly do not intend for this book to “explain” Islam in any broad way.

In this story, I use both “Djiboutian” and “Somali” to refer to my community. Djibouti is home to people of Somali, Afar, and Yemeni heritage, all of whom are Djiboutian by nationality. Because my life in the Horn began in Somalia and because I speak Somali but not (yet) Afar or Arabic, my cultural experiences have been largely Somali and it is through that lens that I tell my story. Djiboutian and Somali can be complicated to parse, so I made the choice to use them interchangeably, except when referring exclusively to Somalia and Somaliland, a northern region that has declared independence from Somalia but is not internationally recognized.

This is my story, told to the best of my ability. I relied on journals, emails, essays, blog posts, letters, videos, photos, and interviews to recreate scenes. Many names have been changed and some timelines condensed. The phonetic spelling of Somali and Arabic words varies; I've checked the spelling with several Somalis with an aim at consistency as well as readability, but any errors are mine.

I recognize that some readers may be uncomfortable with, or disagree with, conclusions I come to in this book. I simply ask that you read with an open and curious spirit. What I love about sharing personal stories is the way they promote dialogue. Let's talk. Let's keep talking.

This is a preview. Get the entire book here.

Introduction

TEN MONTHS IS LONGER than a pregnancy, longer than a school year. Ten months is longer than winter, spring, and summer combined. But ten months is not long enough to change the world. Ten months is not long enough to see an educational system graduate leaders and thinkers, which was what we had been invited by Somali leaders to accomplish. Ten months was not even long enough for me to master a grammatically correct past-tense Somali sentence.

My family's ten months in Somaliland ended with three bullets and a phone call. The first bullet came on October 5, 2003. Annalena Tonelli – Italian, Catholic, “Mother Teresa of Somalia” – had devoted thirty-four years to treating and preventing tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. She ran a hospital in Borama (the village where we spent those ten months), started schools for the deaf, partnered with Somali leaders to eradicate female genital mutilation, and organized eye surgeries to restore sight. Now, dead.

The next two bullets came on October 20. A British couple, Richard and Enid Eyeington, had worked at the SOS Sheikh Secondary School for just over a year. Dead and dead.

MY HUSBAND AND I KNEW NOTHING about the Eyeingtons' murder when Tom drove to Amoud University the next morning. I prepared lunch and kept our three-year-old twins from falling into the water cistern. We had no electricity during the day, and my computer battery had died,

so I couldn't rely on movies to distract them while I worked. Instead they picked limes, filled their pockets with marble-sized *gobe* fruits, and tormented the neighbor's goats that wandered into our yard to munch down weeds.

Our director, an American based in Hargeisa, Somaliland's capital, called around eleven a.m. This is how I remember the phone conversation, how I have replayed it over the years.

"Sit down," he said. "Where's Tom?"

"At school."

"Get him home. Now. Keep the kids inside."

"OK," I said.

"Lock the door. No one leaves, no one comes, except Tom."

"What happened?" I whispered.

"Richard and Enid Eyeington were murdered last night." All I heard was "murdered."

"Who?"

The Eyeingtons had been shot while watching television. Their housekeeper found them in the morning—the remote control still in Richard's hand, the television still on. Enid had been shot so many times that a coworker barely recognized her in the morgue and had nightmares for months.

I couldn't think. My breath caught in my throat.

"Everyone is leaving: UN, Red Cross . . . Most are already at the airport. You're on a flight to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia." He said we had one-way tickets for a plane that left in two hours.

It was a two-hour drive to the airport.

He said our work at Amoud University was finished. No one knew who would be next, if there would be a next.

I LOOK BACK NOW on that woman in Somali clothes who had finally learned how to keep her headscarf from slipping, finally learned to make spaghetti without a jar of Ragu, finally earned invitations to weddings and dinner parties. I look back

and see myself go through motions, barely comprehending what was happening.

I move to the bedroom and grab clothes, not thinking, not folding. In the kids' room, I scoop up toys and books and the special blankies they'd had since birth. I brush my fingertips over objects that must remain. The dollhouse Tom had built from flimsy plywood. Our rock-hard couch cushions. The bookshelf with three novels, a Bible, a Quran, and language books waiting to be filled with new vocabulary. I need to keep packing. But even more, I need Tom to come home. I tell the twins to find their favorite toys and put them in a shared backpack. My voice is calm, my fingers tremble. I am afraid. I don't acknowledge it. I won't for years.

I lose track of how many times I try to call Tom. Cell phone coverage is spotty at Amoud. Would someone else tell him to run? Was he safe? What if he doesn't come? What if the people who killed Annalena and the Eyeingtons are on their way here? What if our guard's gun isn't for protection but for aggression? What do I tell the kids? What happens to faith when fear takes over? I didn't stop to pray but let it beat with my heart and breath. "Come home. Come home. Come home."

I SHIFTED THE CONTENTS of my bag. Diapers, water bottle, can of tuna. Cash, identification documents, photo album, computer. I had to fit clothes inside too – and anything else I could squeeze in. What would we need? How long would we be in Ethiopia? When would we next have access to food?

One bag. One backpack. We might never return. What could I leave behind? I needed to move more quickly.

I heard the front gate crank open, and a Toyota Surf entered our compound.

Alhamdulillah. Praise God. Tom was home. Alive. With me.

I ran outside and Tom jumped from the vehicle.

“Get the kids into the car,” he said.

“I only have one suitcase packed,” I told him.

“We’re leaving.”

He said he would turn off the water pump and lock the generator. Henry and Maggie had their bag ready, the fuzzy white head of a stuffed bunny sticking out the top. I walked them through the house and told them to say goodbye. Goodbye mosquito nets. Goodbye lime tree. Goodbye chickens. They thought it was a game and laughed. I left dishes in the sink and bananas on the counter. We had planned to eat tacos that day – with no cheese and no sour cream, no lettuce and no guacamole, no tortilla chips and no taco seasoning; but ground beef inside homemade tortillas counted as tacos.

Henry and Maggie climbed into the car. I paused on the front stoop and scanned the yard. Damp clothing hung from the line. Habone, our housekeeper, had left right after the phone call. She’d understood the danger and hadn’t even said goodbye.

I told our guard, Gudal, he could have the meat and tortillas. He stood beside the car with one hand on the roof and one hand in his pocket. Gudal, who had taught me how to shoo goats from the yard with the bristly end of a stick broom, who had played tag with the kids and made sure they didn’t touch the AK-47 rifle under his bed. I loaded our bag into the car and turned to him.

I had never touched a man in Somaliland, other than Tom. I didn’t even speak to men, besides our guard, or look them in the eye.

“*Nabad gelyo*, Gudal,” I said. Go in peace.

“*Nabad gelyo*,” he replied.

I wanted to pull his bony body into my arms and tell him thank you. Thank you for the vocabulary words. Thank you for protecting us. Thank you for being my first friend in

Somaliland. Thank you for pretending to enjoy tacos. He had been so kind. I didn't understand enough about Islam yet to know if that counted as charity for him, as *zakat*. But I wondered. Did giving affection to lonely foreigners fulfill the obligation to show generosity, one of the five pillars of Islam?

I thrust out my right hand and half-smiled. He gripped my fingers and put his left palm over his heart. I never saw him again.

As we drove off, I said goodbye to every house we passed. It hadn't been an easy place, but it had been our first home in Africa, and this wasn't the way I wanted to leave. Forced out. Afraid. A trail of blood behind us.

We left behind the wet clothing, the bananas, and a pitcher of fresh-squeezed lime juice from our tree. We left behind all our furniture, books, and kitchen supplies. We left behind most of our clothes and toys. We left the tiny shelter where a baby deer had died after refusing the milk we tried to feed it.

I left behind our first international home and all the idealism poured into it, both by us and by a welcoming Somali community. I left behind the lie that nothing bad or dangerous would happen to my family, that we were protected by a magical spiritual force because we had taken the risk of moving to this country. I left behind the chimera that home equaled refuge.

THE ISLAMIC CREED, THE FIRST PILLAR—known as the *shahadah*—begins, “There is no god but God.” As a Christian, I believed that much too. Before leaving the United States, ten months earlier, I had flippantly remarked that the safest place for a Christian was in the center of God's will, how it was better to move across the planet to a potentially hostile location than to spend three days in the belly of a whale. I hid behind clichés and stories and left no room to grapple

with visceral fear. Later I would understand God's will as an inherently unsafe place to be. It hadn't been safe for Jesus; it led him straight to torture and death. God never promised safety, no matter how I craved it.

What did safe mean? People in the United States get shot in schools, in movie theaters, in office buildings. Drunk drivers hurtle down country roads. Lightning flashes, levees break, dogs bite. Pandemics rage, cancer strikes. Safety is a western illusion.

So here I was, unsafe and scared, wrestling with what that meant about my faith. Along with the commandments to not be afraid come the words of the psalmist, "When I am afraid, I will trust in you." What is faith for, if not to cling to when storms rage and fear swallows me whole?

I couldn't face this, not yet. I wasn't ready to look at the phrase, "*when* I am afraid." Fear still felt like weakness.

AS WE DROVE out of Borama, memories of the last ten months washed over me. The smell of the market after rain. Raw meat hanging from wooden stalls. Fried sambusa. Squashed tomatoes. Fresh watermelon. Cumin and cilantro. Camels spitting and stomping when they came in from the bush. The women who had endured my broken Somali and painted henna on my hands. My neighbor, who had me teach her to make American pancakes for Ramadan, the month Muslims focus on the pillar of fasting.

We jounced down the cratered road. I clung to my door handle to keep from banging my head against the window. In the back, without car seats, the twins bounced around in their seatbelts, laughing.

After all the rushing, we waited in the airport for two more hours. Other shell-shocked foreigners shared the small lounge area. Twenty of us, maybe twenty-five – all the foreigners brave

or foolish enough to work here. I wondered if any of them knew the people who had been murdered.

We sat, silent, on wobbly chairs and waited for the ECHO (European Community Humanitarian Office) flight to arrive and rescue us. We didn't talk about fear or death or the belongings, people, life, or dreams we were leaving behind.

When our flight took off, the roar of engines drowned out the *adhan*, the call to prayer. We flew away. And down below, back where I wanted to be, Somalis were performing *wudu*, ritual washing, in preparation for *salat*, prayer, the second pillar of Islam.

TOM AND I HAVE NOW LIVED eighteen years in the Horn of Africa. Tom worked for almost a decade as a professor at the University of Djibouti, just across the border from Somaliland. I have a degree in Linguistics; Tom earned his PhD in Education Development from the University of Minnesota. Staff in the Djiboutian Ministry of Education and the president's office eventually asked him to develop an English-language pre-K through twelfth grade school, and that's what we did in 2016. We still live and work in Djibouti. But in the middle of fleeing Somaliland, in October 2003, I had no way of knowing how things would turn out.

That night, in a cramped Ethiopian guesthouse, I felt pinned to the lumpy mattress by overwhelming emotion. Grief – for the victims and for the nation; in the space of a few bullets, doctors, teachers, business developers, and aid organizations had abandoned Somaliland. Anger – that a minority within Islam would yet again define Muslims and Islam, the religion that I was coming to perceive very differently from what is presented on the news, or in churches, in the United States. Disappointment – that we had been in Somaliland so briefly.

Fear – that the people I trusted might not be who I thought they were.

I latched onto the word “pilgrimage,” the fifth pillar of Islam. The *hajj* called to mind the travels of Muhammad – and before him, of Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Hagar. Pilgrims were people uprooted and transplanted, but they were not people without hope.

THE NEXT DAY, Maggie wanted to talk.

“When are we going home?” she asked.

“We aren’t,” I said.

“We aren’t going home?”

I shook my head and glanced away so she wouldn’t see my tears.

Maggie sighed. “When can I go play at Deeqa’s house?” Deeqa was my friend Basha’s daughter; the kids had played several afternoons a week and briefly attended a Somali preschool together.

I sank to the floor and rested my forehead on my arms. “I don’t think you’ll ever see Deeqa again,” I said.

Maggie put her hands on my head and tugged her fingers through my frizzy hair. “That makes me sad,” she said. “I want to go home.”

“Me too,” I said, surprised at how quickly we had all attached to Somaliland. Living a life of faith in the Horn of Africa was turning out to be a lot more complicated than I’d anticipated.

“DON’T CRY FOR US,” I remember writing in an email to friends and family in Minnesota. “Cry for Somalis who no longer have professors at school, for the people who lost jobs, the people who died.”

I was trying to be stoic, to stick by my claims of being safe in the center of God's will, to prove I was unafraid. People loved that email and heaped spiritual praise on me. I wasn't brave enough to tell them that I was crying myself to sleep.

I was not excited about the direction this journey was taking my family. I hadn't planned on evacuation, loss of property, homelessness, an uncertain future. I had come with specific ideas about what life in Africa would look like, about home and family, and especially about faith.

But perhaps the best way to grow roots here was through loss, grief, and the stripping of material goods, even the leaving of friends and family, work and routine, that had contributed to my sense of identity. Left bare, I had to start piecing things back together. What good is home, if it can't be rebuilt, again and again? What good is faith, if it can't be transplanted – and in the transplanting, be transformed?

Tom had read the Somaliland constitution before we moved to the Horn of Africa.

"It says there is freedom of religion," he read to me from the computer screen. "All Somalis are free to be Muslims."

It didn't say anything about non-Somalis. Tom told immigration officials we were Christians. He wanted to be sure it wouldn't cause problems. The officials said, "No problem, no problem." But there were problems – not with the Somali community who knew us, but problems of regional violence. And then there were my personal problems of faith, which began when ideas I had been certain of my entire life bumped up against Islam.

It isn't entirely accurate to use the word "problems," but in those early days, that's what it felt like. Now I know that faith grows when refined in fire, when tested by contrast.

AFTER A FEW DAYS IN ETHIOPIA, we went to Nairobi, Kenya, where we received trauma counseling, took Somali language courses, and sought direction for the next step. Three months later, in January 2004, we landed in Djibouti, our fourth country in the Horn.

This is the story of how, living in the Somali Muslim world, an American Christian questioned her religion and found faith. Trying to follow Jesus in Muslim countries, I find that he now looks, acts, and talks more like the people around me. In contrast to the Midwestern Evangelical Jesus I packed to bring to Somalia, this Jesus is Jewish and Palestinian. I used to picture him with blond hair and a mid-summer tan. Now Jesus appears in my mind in a red-and-white turban and goat-skin sandals, with a beard he could measure against a member of the Taliban's. He has a shepherd's staff across his shoulders. Not the smoothly curved oak staff he is pictured with in Western children's Bibles, but a warped staff with a knobby tip like an old woman's gnarled knuckles. His feet are dusty, his eyes are brown, he doesn't speak English. When he says God, it comes out in Aramaic as *Elah*. It sounds like *Allah*.

And I've discovered that Islam's five pillars—*shahadah*, or confession of faith; *salat*, prayer; *zakat*, alms-giving; *Ramadan*, fasting; and *hajj*, pilgrimage—are basic to Christianity too. Although some of these practices are understood differently, or ignored, by my Evangelical branch of Christianity, they are an integral part of my religion's foundation. The journey that took me to Africa led back to this heritage through newfound curiosity about my own spiritual roots, global and historic. As I describe this journey I'll be as honest as I can. I'm still on the way. I hope you are too.



PILLAR 1 ~ SHAHADAH

There is no god but God

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.
Love the Lord your God with all your heart and
with all your soul and with all your strength.*

Deuteronomy 6:4-5

*There is no god but God and Muhammad is the
messenger of God.*

The shahadah, the universal Muslim creed



This is a preview. Get the entire book here.

1. Who Names God?

THE BAPTIST CHURCH PARKING LOT where I lost the diamond from my engagement ring has been transformed into a new playground. Before I was born, the four-story church building had been an elementary school. When I was a child, it filled with Sunday school classrooms. As the church and I aged, the classrooms fell mostly empty. The building was recently sold, and the new owner knocked it down. I watched a video of a wrecking ball swinging into its walls. I watched and remembered. The smell of musty, silverfish-ridden carpet in faded orange and brown 1970s stripes. The echo of basketballs off the gym walls. Blueberry cheesecake ice cream in five-gallon pails, after the children's Christmas pageant. Going back for seconds. Thirds.

My parents dedicated me to God in this church when I was an infant, holding me while the pastor prayed. They committed to raising me with their best efforts, by the grace of God, to know and love the way of Jesus. Twelve years later, I was baptized here by Pastor Smith. Sixteen years later, I sat in the parking lot, crying over the shame of my first speeding ticket. Twenty years later, Tom Jones proposed in front of the pulpit in the sanctuary; we were married by Pastor Law that same summer on that same spot.

For years this church building towered like a guard, silently observing potlucks and baptisms, funerals and conversions. It loomed as a buffer between me and the wide wicked world,

between me and the punishment of hell. Inside there were elderly church ladies who taught me how to make flowers out of cake frosting, and youth pastors who stayed up all night playing air hockey and four-on-a-couch. Outside – well, outside were other people.

In the childhood tendency to see life in black and white, anyone outside my church community, or with different ideas, was “other.” I cried when my grandmother voted Democrat, because she was going to hell. My friend’s mother was going to hell because she smoked cigarettes and lived with a man who wasn’t her husband. I saw my older sister skip communion once. She, too, would be going to hell. When I heard my mom say “piss” for the one and only time in my life, I thought for a moment that she might be going to hell – but she was my mom, so she probably wasn’t.

I became a Christian, officially, at age four. A brother of my communion-skipping sister’s friend had died in a tractor accident. He was twelve. I figured if twelve-year-olds could die, four-year-olds probably could too. My sister told me that when you die, there are two possible destinations. Heaven or hell. Heaven is singing songs with Jesus forever. Hell is being inside a crib and all your toys are outside the crib forever. I decided for heaven and prayed to invite Jesus into my heart.

According to the Sunday school flannelgraph board, Jesus liked fish. I liked fish too. He healed people, even little girls. He liked children. It was easy to relate to this one-dimensional Jesus, and I interpreted that as love. I also loved Mickey Mouse and Papa Smurf and invited them along too. They could do cool things like make broomsticks come alive and dance, or live in colorful mushroom houses. The more the merrier, and if anyone could save me from hell, surely this trifecta of Jesus, Mickey Mouse, and Papa Smurf was the ticket.

I don't remember any of this, but that is the story of my conversion as my parents tell it. What I do remember is that I was basically always a Christian. What I am no longer certain about is which description my sister gave is more hell-like. Singing songs forever or sitting in a crib with no toys.

I was really good at being a Christian. I like structure and rules. I like to know what expectations are, the clearer the better. Christians didn't drink or smoke or swear. They didn't wear bikinis. Bikinis led to sex and Christians didn't have sex. Christians were in church on Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Wednesday evening, Friday night, and sometimes Saturday morning for cleaning days. The best Christians' parents had keys to the church building even though they weren't the pastor. They prayed with their eyes closed, heads bowed, hands folded. They highlighted their Bibles, even the words of Jesus, already printed in red.

By high school, I had long outgrown belief in Mickey Mouse and Papa Smurf, but the categories and rules defining me, my faith, and how to express it remained firmly entrenched in cultural religion. I used this culture to build walls between "us" and "them." Like the Somali proverb that says:

Me and Somalia against the world,
 Me and my clan against Somalia,
 Me and my family against my clan,
 Me and my brother against my family,
 Me against my brother.

I WAS A GOOD CHRISTIAN, chosen, and legalism became my creed. How else could I know who was in and who was out?

It would be easy to interpret this rigidity as cold, but it was a beautiful way to grow up. I was safe and loved. I knew where

I belonged and to whom I belonged. I am profoundly grateful for my family, my church, my roots.

The first person recorded in biblical texts as naming God was a foreigner, not one of the “chosen people” but an Egyptian, a household slave, a woman. She gave birth to a son after sexual exploitation. She had no right of parentage until her owner rejected both mother and child and discarded them to die in the desert.

She is called Hagar in Genesis, but some scholars speculate that Hagar was not her name but a generic term meaning “foreign thing.” Hagar was stripped of her identifying family-given name, which scripture does not reveal, and stripped of her homeland as she wandered the desert with Abraham’s people.

Somehow Hagar had become the property of Sarah, the patriarch Abraham’s wife. Maybe Hagar was born into slavery. Maybe she was purchased. Maybe she was stolen. Maybe her people were conquered.

Sarah had no children, though God told her husband he would be the father of many nations. After years – then decades – of infertility, Sarah took matters into her own hands. She gave her slave to her husband. He was to impregnate Hagar, and Sarah would claim the child as her own. This, the child of a human attempt to accomplish a divine purpose, was to be the promised one, the start of the mighty nation as numerous as the sands on the seashore and the stars in the sky.

Abraham did what Sarah suggested.

When Hagar became pregnant, she “despised” Sarah. The Bible isn’t clear what she did to demonstrate this attitude. Scripture does say Sarah abused Hagar to the point that the slave ran away. Hagar was already a slave, had been sexually used, and was pregnant, knowing the child she bore wouldn’t belong to her. What could Sarah have done that was so bad, Hagar felt her only recourse was to flee?

She headed for a spring beside the road to Shur, and an angel of the Lord approached. He did not tell her not to be afraid, the standard angelic greeting in the Bible. Maybe Hagar was too thirsty, too near death, too weary, too distraught to feel fear. Somehow, she knew this was a divine messenger. He called her by the name she was known by, and by her position. Hagar, slave of Sarah. He knew her.

She admitted that she had run away. Rather than liberating her, the angel sent her back, with a promise that her descendants would be too numerous to count.

According to the New International Version, the angel also told Hagar that her son, Ishmael, would be a wild donkey of a man whose hand would be against everyone and who would live in hostility toward his brothers.

Or, as other interpretations of Genesis 16:12 suggest, the angel said her son would live a free nomadic life, like a wild donkey. In the cultural context, this would connote strength and autonomy – a powerful promise to a slave woman. The remainder of the promise could be interpreted to say her son’s hand would be *upon* everyone, as in the Judaica Press Tanach, and that he would live to the *east* of his brothers, as in the New American Standard Bible.

Was Ishmael a son of blessing, of promise? Or of curse?

Hagar’s response shows how she, at least, interpreted this prophecy. She became the first person in scripture – and the only woman – to name God.

“You are the God who sees me,” she said. “I have now seen the One who sees me.”

El Roi. The One Who Sees.

She responded with awe and worship, not dread or apprehension. She returned to Abraham and Sarah, bearing the son of a promise in her womb.

In my childhood, Ishmael was presented as one of the bad guys in the Bible. He was not the son of *the* promise; that honor would belong to Isaac, born thirteen years later. The stories I heard showed Ishmael as antagonistic, uncontrollable, cut off from the spiritual family tree. He became a key figure in the historic narrative of Islam.

What if Hagar had died from dehydration or been killed by wild animals when she fled to the desert, instead of encountering the angel?

If only she had. The thought horrifies me now, but in the recesses of my mind, I can hear a whisper of the fear and resentment many Christians feel toward Muslims. No one in my Evangelical childhood actually voiced this, but the message was there as subtext. If Hagar had died, or miscarried, the world wouldn't have Islam. There wouldn't be religious hostility.

How easily we forget that Christians can be cruel too. That if Muslims weren't the enemy, human nature would create another. That we find a false sense of strength in being united against a common foe. I never heard the words explicitly expressed, but I know some people thought the world would be better off without Hagar and Ishmael's Muslim descendants. Not that anyone needed to kill them now that they were here, but that things would have gone a lot smoother had they not existed in the first place.

God was not coerced into the promise to Hagar, and he did not have to bless Ishmael. God chose this son for a purpose, and his descendants too.

Three religions share Hagar: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Without Hagar, we would not have this naming story of the One Who Sees. The God who sees human desperation, need, and brokenness. The God who responds with provision and promise and presence.

I NEVER THOUGHT ABOUT MUSLIMS when I was growing up. I didn't know any. But if I had, I would have said Muslims were violent, culturally backward, and just plain wrong. The true people of God did not wear headscarves, use the word Allah, pray facing a certain direction, or pray memorized words, at structured times. Christians fasted, but not during a set month. They never told anyone and never fasted in community, which would nullify their fast.

Never mind that Christians in Syria cover their hair. Ethiopian Orthodox Christian women cover their hair. Mennonites in Pennsylvania cover their hair. One of the few things Christians around the planet agree on is the Lord's Prayer, memorized and recited by rote. Lent is a global practice of fasting, done in community – no secret fasting there. The vast majority of Muslims, like the vast majority of Christians, are not particularly violent, and are well-educated. And I'm not sure what "wrong" or "right" mean exactly anymore, because all of us are a little of both.

But I didn't know anyone who covered their hair back then, I didn't know about Lent; my church didn't corporately recite the Lord's Prayer. My perspective was small, and my viewpoint ignored what Jesus said when asked about the greatest commandment: love God and love people. I didn't understand global or historical Christianity; my emphasis was on myself and my ability to adhere, or not, to my own list of proper behavior. It barely left room for Jesus. There was no room for Catholics, Orthodox believers, or Democrats in my concept of people of faith. There was certainly no room for Muslims.

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