

READER COMMENT:

I received a message on Facebook a couple of weeks ago from a person who has been proselytizing to me about the Muslim faith. This has happened a few times with others on your FB page. I guess that's what they do. Anyway, the other day I asked him if he was on your blog. He responded with a yes. Then he said that we (the members) were going to get a surprise from you soon. I asked him how so, and he said that you would be reverting to the Muslim faith. Apparently, reverting is something like converting according to him. I asked him how he knew this information, and he said a friend of his (a friend that he only knows through FB) that is a neighbor of yours said you were very impressed with the Quran and that you haven't made it public about reverting, but you would be soon. It took me a couple of days to find out the name of this person who is supposedly your friend, and he sent me a link to a YouTube video. A man by the name of Yusha Evans was on there. I've never heard of this person before, and have no clue if you know him or not, but I thought I would pass the information along to you.

RESPONSE:

This would strike me as totally outrageous if it weren't so funny. Really??? I'm soon to announce that I have become a Muslim?!?

So let me squelch this rumor and so that the answer is absolutely not. I am about as likely to become a Muslim as I am to join the Hari Krishnas or to become a Jainist or an orthodox Jew or ... pick your religious preference. From where I sit now, the likelihood of any of the above is somewhere close to, or below, zero.

It's not that I don't respect each and every one of those faiths - and all the other great religions of the world. And it's not that I don't admire many of their moral principles and theological views, and that I don't think highly of their sacred writings. I simply am utterly, completely, and thoroughly satisfied with what I am: a 21st century academic specializing in early Christianity who is personally (and perennially, I imagine) an agnostic when it comes to knowledge (do I think I know whether there is a greater power in the universe? Of course not - how could I possibly know?) and an atheist when it comes to belief (do I believe in a greater power - God, Yahweh, Allah, Krishna, Zeus, or pick your divinity? No.)

When this reader first sent me this comment, my first reaction was different from my second and my second from my third. So just to set the record straight, before explaining each reaction, let me state definitively: I have never, ever talked with a neighbor of mine in my entire life about my views of Islam in general or the Qur'an in particular. I'm not averse to having that conversation, but when I'm talking to neighbors, it is always about something else. Like the next block party. So the statement is not true. Further, I've never even heard of Yusha Evans, so how he imagines (if he imagines? I don't know that he does) that he has inside information about my religious predilections and the direction I'm heading in my spiritual life is beyond me. (He certainly is not a neighbor of mine!) The whole thing is false. Fabricated. Made up.

And so my FIRST reaction was: this person doing the proselytizing is simply telling a bald faced lie in order to try to convert someone to Islam. That's disgusting.

Now, it's true, that may in fact be the case. But as I thought about it (for, like, 10 seconds)

I realized that it's a bit ungenerous. I don't know who this person is and know nothing about his moral character or missionary zeal. And so my SECOND reaction was that maybe *he* didn't make up a lie, maybe he genuinely heard this information from someone else who was telling a bald-faced lie.

But then I thought about it for a bit more (another 10 seconds) and I thought, wait a minute: I've just written an entire book on oral traditions and how they change and alter and get invented and transformed and so on over time (that's the book coming out March 1, Jesus Before the Gospels). Maybe I should think about this ill-founded rumor in light of what I actually know about the process of oral transmission of traditions.

This then was my THIRD (and current) reaction. The reality is that the way rumors start is sometimes, but not always, and in fact not all that often, because someone comes up with a lie that s/he tells to someone else. But more often a rumor starts because someone misunderstands something they heard, or unwittingly exaggerates what they heard, or unknowingly alters what they heard. This happens ALL the time. A falsehood does not have to be a lie. If a claim is false, well, then it's false. But a lie involves a falsehood that someone tells while knowing full well that it's false. That's different.

And when it comes to such things as rumor and gossip (there is actually a whole field of scholarship that specializes in such things!), lying is rarely the culprit. So I'm not sure that this Muslim proselytizer, or his source of information, or that person's source of information was lying. Rumors like this just start. Happens all the time.

When it comes to the historical Jesus, some conservative Christian scholars argue that you could not have rumors about him floating around that were not true while there were still eyewitnesses available in order to verify or disverify them. So, according to this widely held (but highly problematic) view, no one could say that Jesus did x, y, or z or that he taught x, y, or z or that he experienced x, y, or z during his lifetime, since the disciples were there to correct the false information.

That is absolutely and demonstrably WRONG. The rumor about me that I've been discussing has been floating around for a while, and anyone on the planet, Muslim, Christian, Jew, Buddhist, Hindu, Jainist, whatever could ask me if it's true. Has anyone? Just one person. And we're in the age of electronic communication. Imagine what it was like in the first century Roman empire! There is no way to check or prevent or circumvent rumor and gossip, even about people who are alive at the time. Even if you can ask them, or someone who knows them. That applies not just to me today but (even more) to Jesus 2000 years ago. That's what this next book of mine is about.

But before you go off to buy the book, let me assure you: in it I do not announce that I have decided to become a Muslim.

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