

## "I am both Muslim and Christian"

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Shortly after noon on Fridays, the Rev. Ann Holmes Redding ties on a black headscarf, preparing to pray with her Muslim group on First Hill. On Sunday mornings, Redding puts on the white collar of an Episcopal priest.

She does both, she says, because she's Christian *and* Muslim. Redding, who until recently was director of faith formation at St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral, has been a priest for more than 20 years. Now she's ready to tell people that, for the last 15 months, she's also been a Muslim — drawn to the faith after an introduction to Islamic prayers left her profoundly moved.

Her announcement has provoked surprise and bewilderment in many, raising an obvious question: How can someone be both a Christian and a Muslim? But it has drawn other reactions too. Friends generally say they support her, while religious scholars are mixed: Some say that, depending on how one interprets the tenets of the two faiths, it is, indeed, possible to be both. Others consider the two faiths mutually exclusive.

"There are tenets of the faiths that are very, very different," said Kurt Fredrickson, director of the doctor of ministry program at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif. "The most basic would be: What do you do with Jesus?" Christianity has historically regarded Jesus as the son of God and God incarnate, both fully human and fully divine. Muslims, though they regard Jesus as a great prophet, do not see him as divine and do not consider him the son of God. "I don't think it's possible" to be both, Fredrickson said, just like "you can't be a Republican and a Democrat."

Redding, who will begin teaching the New Testament as a visiting assistant professor at Seattle University this fall, has a different analogy: "I am both Muslim and Christian, just like I'm both an American of African descent and a woman. I'm 100 percent both." Redding doesn't feel she has to resolve all the contradictions. People within one religion can't even agree on all the details, she said. "So why would I spend time to try to reconcile all of Christian belief with all of Islam?"

"At the most basic level, I understand the two religions to be compatible. That's all I need." She says she felt an inexplicable call to become Muslim, and to surrender to God — the meaning of the word "Islam." "It wasn't about intellect," she said. "All I know is the calling of my heart to Islam was very much something about my identity and who I am supposed to be. "I could not *not* be a Muslim."

Redding's situation is highly unusual. Officials at the national Episcopal Church headquarters said they are not aware of any other instance in which a priest has also been a believer in another faith. They said it's up to the local bishop to decide whether such a priest could continue in that role.

Redding's bishop, the Rt. Rev. Vincent Warner, says he accepts Redding as an Episcopal priest and a Muslim, and that he finds the interfaith possibilities exciting. Her announcement, first made through a story in her diocese's newspaper, hasn't caused much controversy yet, he said. As much as she loves her church, she has always challenged it. She calls Christianity the "world religion of privilege." She has never believed in original sin. And for years she struggled with the nature of Jesus' divinity.

In March 2006, she said her *shahada* — the profession of faith — testifying that there is only one God and that Mohammed is his messenger. She became a Muslim. Before she took the *shahada*, she read a lot about Islam. Afterward, she learned from local Muslim leaders, including those in Islam's largest denomination — Sunni — and those in the Sufi mystical tradition of Islam. She began praying with the Al-Islam Center, a Sunni group that is predominantly African-American.

Aside from the established sets of prayers she recites in Arabic five times each day, Redding says her prayers are neither uniquely Islamic nor Christian. They're simply her private talks with God or Allah — she uses both names interchangeably. "It's the same person, praying to the same God." In many ways, she says, "coming to Islam was like coming into a family with whom I'd been estranged. We have not only the same God, but the same ancestor with Abraham."

### **A shared beginning**

Indeed, Islam, Christianity and Judaism trace their roots to Abraham, the patriarch of Judaism who is also considered the spiritual father of all three faiths. They share a common belief in one God, and there are certain similar stories in their holy texts.

But there are many significant differences, too. Muslims regard the Quran as the unadulterated word of God, delivered through the angel Gabriel to Mohammed. While they believe the Torah and the Gospels include revelations from God, they believe those revelations have been misinterpreted or mishandled by humans. Most significantly, Muslims and Christians disagree over the divinity of Jesus.

Muslims generally believe in Jesus' virgin birth, that he was a messenger of God, that he ascended to heaven alive and that he will come back at the end of time to destroy evil. They do not believe in the Trinity, in the divinity of Jesus or in his death and resurrection. For Christians, belief in Jesus' divinity, and that he died on the cross and was resurrected, lie at the heart of the faith, as does the belief that there is one God who consists of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. She does believe that Jesus died on the cross and was resurrected, and acknowledges those beliefs conflict with the teachings of the Quran. "That's something I'll find a challenge the rest of my life," she said.

She considers Jesus her savior. At times of despair, because she knows Jesus suffered and overcame suffering, "he has connected me with God," she said. That's not to say she couldn't develop as deep a relationship with Mohammed. "I'm still getting to know him," she said.

### **Matter of interpretation**

Some religious scholars understand Redding's thinking. While the popular Christian view is that Jesus is God and that he came to Earth and took on a human body, other Christians believe his divinity means that he embodied the spirit of God in his life and work, said Eugene Webb, professor emeritus of comparative religion at the University of Washington.

Webb says it's possible to be both Muslim and Christian: "It's a matter of interpretation. But a lot of people on both sides do not believe in interpretation. "

Ihsan Bagby, associate professor of Islamic studies at the University of Kentucky, agrees with Webb, and adds that Islam tends to be a little more flexible. Muslims can have faith in Jesus, he said, as long as they believe in Mohammed's message.

Frank Spina, an Episcopal priest and also a professor of Old Testament and biblical theology at Seattle Pacific University, puts it bluntly. "I just do not think this sort of thing works," he said. "I think you have to give up what is essential to Christianity to make the moves that she has done. "The essence of Christianity was not that Jesus was a great rabbi or even a great prophet, but that he is the very incarnation of the God that created the world.... Christianity stands or falls on who Jesus is."

Spina also says that as priests, he and Redding have taken vows of commitment to the doctrines of the church. "That means none of us get to work out what we think all by ourselves." Redding knows there are many Christians and Muslims who will not accept her as both.

"I don't care," she says. "They can't take away my baptism." And as she understands it, once she's made her profession of faith to become a Muslim, no one can say she isn't that, either.

While she doesn't rule out that one day she may choose one or the other, it's more likely "that I'm going to be 100 percent Christian and 100 percent Muslim when I die."

### **Deepened spirituality**

These days, Redding usually carries a headscarf with her wherever she goes so she can pray five times a day.

On Fridays, she prays with about 20 others at the Al-Islam Center. On Sundays, she prays in church, usually at St. Clement's of Rome in the Mount Baker neighborhood.

Being Muslim has given her insights into Christianity, she said. For instance, because Islam regards Jesus as human, not divine, it reinforces for her that "we can be like Jesus. There are no excuses."

Doug Thorpe, who served on St. Mark's faith-formation committee with Redding, said he's trying to understand all the dimensions of her faith choices. But he saw how it deepened her spirituality. And it spurred him to read the Quran and think more deeply about his own faith.

He believes Redding is being called. She is, "by her very presence, a bridge person," Thorpe said. "And we desperately need those bridge persons."

In Redding's car, she has hung up a cross she made of clear crystal beads. Next to it, she has dangled a heart-shaped leather object etched with the Arabic symbol for Allah.

"For me, that symbolizes who I am," Redding said. "I look through Jesus and I see Allah."