

'Just as how there are many ways to meet and fall in love with people, there are many ways to meet and fall in love with God. For some, it's love at first sight, and for others it is a gradual experience of tenderness and a growing and deepening relationship.'

Lewis R. Rambo, professor of psychology and religion at the San Francisco Theological Seminary



STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS

Islamic convert Michelle Kimball and her sons pray at Santa Barbara's Masjid al-Tawhid Mosque.

The Path Now Taken

Armando Quiros was a Catholic priest for 25 years. Now he is a Jew.
Sister Christine Bowman was raised in a home with a Methodist father and Mormon mother. Now she is a Catholic nun.

Michelle Kimball was raised in a non-religious household, with an Episcopalian father and Jewish mother. At 17, in the midst of her "teenybopper" phase, she proclaimed faith in Allah (God) and is now a Muslim.

Looking back, each of these Santa Barbarans can see that the search for a new religious identity began long before he or she became a religious convert. These weren't sudden religious changes — like the conversion of St. Paul on the road to Damascus — but a process that occurred over time.

And so it is with most conversions, which are fairly common in the United States,

Three Santa Barbarans recount their own roads to religious conversion

research shows. One poll by the Princeton Religion Research Center in 1989 showed that 71 percent of Americans have experienced a change in faith in their lifetime and one-third reported having a spiritual awakening of some kind.

Yet so many social and personal factors are at play in religious conversions that scholars have found it nearly impossible to characterize the experience in any one particular way.

"The metaphor of falling in love is used by a

lot of theologians," to describe the variation in conversion experiences, said Lewis R. Rambo, a professor of psychology and religion at the San Francisco Theological Seminary in San Anselmo.

"Just as how there are many ways to meet and fall in love with people, there are many ways to meet and fall in love with God," he said. "For some, it's love at first sight, and for others it is a gradual experience of tenderness and a growing and deepening relationship."

Rambo notes that even the word "conversion" is fodder for debate. For some people, the term has a negative connotation relating back to the coercive conversions of native peoples by Christian missionaries in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Today's evangelical Christians, however,

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Story by Rhonda Parks Manville

About one half of Americans change religion

■ CONVERSION

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use the term exclusively to describe the act of submitting to Jesus Christ as lord and savior. By this definition, more people convert to Christianity in the United States than any other group: In a 1989 Gallup poll, 38 percent of respondents — representing 10 million Americans — reported having a "born again" experience, in which they committed themselves to Jesus.

Yet while 85 percent of Americans claim the Christian faith, only about half of Americans die in the denomination they were born in, according to a report on religious diversity by the Los Angeles Times. The Roman Catholic Church remains the largest Christian denomination in the country, but the fastest growing religious communities include Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals.

For some religious groups, conversion is viewed as a foreign concept. Some Muslims say the term isn't used in their religious tradition because the Koran recognizes the truth of all prophets — including Abraham, Moses and Jesus — and teaches that all seekers of God belong to the family of faith.

As definitions go, scholars prefer to define conversion as a significant religious change in a person's life, in keeping with the root of the word from the Greek, Latin and Hebrew, which means "to turn" or to "return" to God.

For Michelle Kimball, the search for God led to Islam.



Michelle Kimball cradles her children, Ahmadou Bamba, left, and Muhammad.

For the last 30 years, she has devoted her life to the rituals, practice and study of Islam. Married and the mother of three children, she prays five times a day, holds interfaith spiritual chanting sessions at her home on Sundays, and heads the local branch of International Peace Project.

At the heart of it all is her faith in God. Distinctions between one religion or another are not important, she said. Therefore, a term like "conversion" doesn't mesh with her Muslim world view or the teachings in the Quran, holy scriptures revealed by God to the prophet Muhammad.

"Reverting to one's true nature, to follow the will of the divine, might be a better way to describe" what leads a person to a particular religion, she said. "I believe there is one eternal religion, and that people just follow different prophets. I feel like a sister to anyone in the faith."

Muslims follow the teachings of the Koran but they also revere the prophets of other religions. So instead of asking "What religion are you?" a Muslim might ask "What prophet do you follow?"

Kimball's embrace of Islam was accepted by her father, but her mother, a non-practicing Jew from France, still has trouble understanding it.

"I would say that is partly because of personality," said Kimball, noting that her mother was never interested in religion.

Kimball herself yearned for a spiritual path early in life.

"Essentially, you could say that I just got back onto the path of God" by becoming a Muslim, she said.

WHO CONVERTS?

Some people may be more psychologically prone to religious conversion than others, according to Westmont professor Ray Paloutzian, an expert in the psychology of religion and conversion. For example, people in their teens and 20s who are in the midst of shaping their identities are frequently seen as being of the "ripe age" for conversion, which is why many churches focus intently on youth ministries. Research also shows that converts to so-called "new religious movements" such as the Hare Krishnas, typically join as young adults.

Some acts of sudden conversion — such as the highly emotional type that sometimes brings people to their knees at revival meetings — are often preceded by periods of repressed emotional difficulty, guilt over misdeeds, and internal conflict, according to researchers.

But sudden conversions also seem to come out of the blue — like the experience of St. Paul, who at the time was focused on persecuting Christians, not becoming one. His change was so dramatic it was accompanied by a name change,

from Saul to Paul.

Yet even sudden conversions are usually prompted by some internal yearnings, Rambo said. "It's my view that there is often some sort of preparation for conversion, but that it is often some cataclysmic event that brings it all together."

But most conversions take place over time. Some gradual conversions are also based on frustration or conflict regarding personal, societal or moral issues, but the person makes a conscious, methodical effort to resolve them by choosing a religion, scholars say.

Slow conversions are often motivated by a search for meaning or purpose in life. These seekers are frequently looking for a belief system that suits them intellectually, morally and ethically, as well as providing spiritual sustenance.

That's how it was for Armando Quiros, whose journey from priest to Jew took 60 years.

SEMINARY TO SYNAGOGUE

Quiros went to seminary at age 13 and was ordained in the Franciscan order in 1951 at age 25, a calling that brought considerable pride to his large Mexican-American family.

He embraced the rigors of religious life wholeheartedly, and he was rewarded for his efforts by church leaders. He loved the sacred music, the contemplative life and the Franciscan emphasis on study. He became a professor at Santa Barbara's theological seminary and relished working with young people. He later studied canon law in Washington, D.C. and then shifted gears and explored the world of psychotherapy and human relationships.

But over the years, Quiros, trained as a therapist, increasingly found himself torn between obeying church doctrine and ministering with compassion.

When Quiros officiated at the marriage of a former Franciscan who had not been formally dispensed of his obligation to celibacy, church officials stripped him of the right to function as a priest in the Los Angeles Archdiocese. In the eyes of the church, Quiros had been reckless in performing an illicit marriage ceremony. And yet he wasn't at all sorry for helping a couple sanctify their love.

As his awareness of human behavior and suffering grew, he began to see the church as increasingly rigid,

judgmental and at times inhumane.

After 25 years, with dismay and disappointment, Quiros in 1974 requested a release from his vows.

Between then and now, he became a Jew. Two years ago, at the age of 74, he was welcomed into the Jewish community.

His venture into Judaism began 10 years ago when Quiros met his future wife, Ruth Glater. He began attending Friday night services with her at Temple B'nai B'rith and he realized that in Judaism he had found his spiritual home. He chronicled the tale in a new book, "Spiritual Homecoming: A Catholic Priest's Journey to Judaism."

The teachings of Judaism, he said, made his heart sing.

In his view, there was a religion that encouraged people to question authority — rather than to adhere to it blindly, as he had once done. Here was a religion that encouraged sex on the Sabbath as a way of resting with God — rather than viewing the body as a threat to the soul, as he was taught. Here was a religion that was concerned with doing good in the world here and now — not with being saved in the hereafter.

"I am so grateful that I found an institutional religion that encouraged a different way of life."

hibition of birth control, and the refusal to ordain women.

His transition from priest to Jew was not easy, particularly the calls and letters he made in advance to family members and friends. But in the end, he believes that most people have supported him.

"Some of the more conservative people will be praying for me with love," he said. "Some will simply wish me well. But others will be proud, because I have followed my heart."

BENEFITS AND MOTIVATIONS

If conversion experiences are as unique as the people who have them, so too are the motivations for committing to a new religious life.

Some people choose a religious community for a sense of belonging and stability while others seek improvement in relationships or health. Some are looking for a pathway to the sacred and tools to tap the mystical and transcendent realms of life.

Westmont scholar Paloutzian cites religious conversion as among the most profound and perplexing of human events, noting that conversion frequently changes people in dramatic ways.



STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS



News-Press earns awards

Top honors include general excellence

By **JANE HULSE**

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The Santa Barbara News-Press picked up a first place for general excellence and nailed top honors in five other categories Saturday at the California Newspaper Publishers Association annual convention.

Competing against newspapers with circulations of 25,001 to 75,000, the

News-Press received the general excellence honor based on an analysis of the entire newspaper, including such elements as news coverage, graphics, advertising and editorial writing.

"It's a reflection of the incredible talent and dedication of our employees in every department, from the newsroom to the pressroom," said News-Press Publisher Will Fleet.

The newspaper association announced the winners at its 2001 Better Newspaper

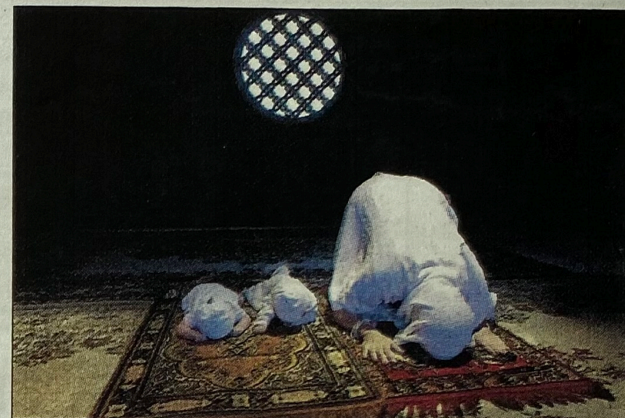
Contest awards luncheon in San Diego.

The Los Angeles Times took home 15 awards, the most of any daily newspaper, including first place for overall excellence for a newspaper with a circulation of 200,001 and up.

At the News-Press, reporter Scott Hadly took two first-place awards. His story detailing how corporate money influences academic research and education at UCSB was deemed best business-financial story.

He and reporter Joshua Molina also took a first for spot news based on a story they

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STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS FILE

Steve Malone won a first-place award for his photo of a woman and her two children praying in a mosque.

State publishers' group hands out awards

■ HONORS

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wrote the day after David Attias slammed his car into five people in Isla Vista, killing four.

The team of reporters, editors and graphic artist who put together Friday's Scene magazine garnered a first place in arts and entertainment coverage.

Photographer Steve Malone also picked up a first in the photography feature division for his poignant photo of a woman and her two children praying in a mosque.

The News-Press also took a first in the category of page layout and design, and City Editor Andy Rose, who writes a weekly column, placed second in the column-commentary-criticism division.

"Journalism is a team sport," said Executive Editor Jerry Roberts. "These awards honor not only

individual journalistic talents but also the depth and breadth of excellence in every area of our newsroom — reporting, writing, editing, photo, layout and design."

The entries were judged by a panel of nine editorial executives from outside California. Of the News-Press general excellence entry, the panel said the paper "is a clear and well laid out newspaper with good news coverage and two pages of op/ed," and that "it would compare favorably with any paper its size in the U.S."

Other big winners around the state included the Fresno Bee, which took home 11 awards, including first place for the best front page. It competed against daily newspapers with a circulation of 75,001 to 200,000.

Other first-place winners in the general excellence division were The Press Democrat in Santa Rosa, circulation of 75,001 to 200,000; The Reporter in Vacaville, 10,001 to 25,000

circulation; and The Dispatch in Gilroy, 10,000 and under.

Locally, several other newspapers scooped up awards. The Santa Barbara Independent nailed two firsts for lifestyle coverage and special issue. Firsts also went to the San Luis Obispo Tribune for sports coverage

and lifestyle coverage. And the Ventura County Star netted three firsts: local spot news, columns, commentary, and criticism, and environmental/agriculture resource.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

