

MARCH 3, 2016

RELIGION: ISLAM, CHRISTIANITY, AND THE ROLE  
IT PLAYS IN MEN'S LIVES BEHIND BARS.

BTB FANS,

I BEGIN THIS LETTER WISHING EVERYONE LOVE, HEALTH AND HAPPINESS. ALSO, I INTEND TO GET A DISCUSSION GOING FOR NOT ONLY OURSELVES, THE MILLIONS ON TOP OF MILLIONS ON MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN INCARCERATED, BUT ALSO, THE COMMUNITY WE ARE COMING HOME TO. HOPEFULLY, BY THIS LETTER'S END, IF NOT WE HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING, EVEN IF A LITTLE MORE THAN WHEN WE BEGAN, OF WHAT MEN THINK AND FEEL AFTER BEING PLACED IN CUFFS AND CARTED OFF TO SERVE OUT A PRISON SENTENCE.

THIS ALL CAME ABOUT AFTER LISTENING TO A DISCUSSION HAPPENING OVER THE TIER BY A BROTHER WHO CLAIMS TO BE HOLIER THAN THOU', BUT THE ONLY TIME JESUS' NAME COMES OUT OF HIS MOUTH IS WHEN HE'S RECEIVING SOMETHING HE HAD ASKED FOR AND RECEIVED IT. IT ALL GOT ME TO THINKING ABOUT WHAT RELIGION MEANS TO US AND WHAT DO OUR FAMILIES SEE WHEN WE COME TO PRISON AND ALL OF THE SUDDEN, FIND GOD. IS IT REAL, OR IS IT JUST SOMETHING WE' CLUNG ON TO TO MANIPULATE AND GET WHAT WE WANT JUST LIKE THE BROTHER I MENTIONED EARLIER? HERE'S MY TAKE ON IT ALL.

I CAN ONLY SPEAK FROM MY EXPERIENCE, AND WHAT I'VE SEEN OVER MY EIGHT YEARS ON INCARCERATION. I CAN REMEMBER ENTERING PRISON AND JOINING VARIOUS ORGANIZATIONS (MANY OF THEM WERE GANGS) TRYING TO FIND SOMEONE TO HIDE BEHIND. AFTER THAT PHASE PASSED, THEN I SIGNED UP FOR CHURCH. WHY? I CAN'T EXACTLY SAY WHY. BUT I WILL SAY THAT IT WAS BASICALLY THE ONLY GOD THAT I HAD EVER KNOWN. MY FAMILY ARE CHRISTIANS. MY FRIENDS WERE CHRISTIANS. ANYTIME THAT I FOUND MYSELF IN A JAM, WHETHER IT WAS RUNNING FROM THE POLICE, DODGING BULLETS OF AN ENEMY'S FIRE, OR SITING IN THE BACKSEAT OF A COP'S CAR, I TURNED TO JESUS. A GOD THAT I HAD NEVER KNOWN EXCEPT IN TIMES OF PERIL. SO JOINING THAT CHURCH GROUP SEEMED LIKE THE OBVIOUS CHOICE FOR ME.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, I WENT WHEN THEY POPPED MY CELL DOOR ON SUNDAY. UPON ENTERING THE CHURCH AND SEEING THE THINGS THAT WERE TAKING PLACE, I KNEW THAT I COULD NO LONGER BE A PART OF IT. THE GANG MEMBERS, PEOPLE I WERE TRYING TO GET AWAY FROM, TOOK UP THE BACK TWO ROWS. THE HOMOSEXUALS TOOK UP THE MIDDLE, AND THE SO-CALLED SERIOUS CHRISTIAN BROTHER'S WERE SCATTERED THROUGHOUT. IT WAS HARD TO TELL WHO WAS WHO BECAUSE I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT I WAS LOOKING FOR. LIKE MANY

PAGE:2

OF US, WHEN WE DECIDE TO TAKE A NEW PATH OR BEGIN ANEW, WE HAVE NO WAY OF KNOWING HOW TO GO ABOUT GETTING TO WHERE WE WERE TRYING TO GO. WE DON'T WRITE ANYTHING DOWN. WE DON'T PUT IN THE HOURS TO SAY THIS IS HOW I'M GOING TO GET HERE AND IF THIS HAPPENS, THEN I'LL DO THIS, THIS, AND THIS. NO! INSTEAD, WE JUST GO BLINDLY, WHICH IS WHAT I DID. SO INSTANTLY, MY FAITH IN CHANGE WAS ALREADY IN SHAMBLES.

THE ONE THING(GOD) THAT I THOUGHT I'D TURNED TO, HAD FAILED ME BEFORE I HAD EVEN BEGUN. SO WHERE WAS I TO GO, NOW? AS MANY MEN FIRST ENTERING PRISON, I TURNED TO THE MUNDANE LIFE OF FINDING ALL HIGHS TO ESCAPE FACING MYSELF. I TURNED TO DRUGS, PORNOGRAPHY, AND STARTING STUFF JUST TO GAIN A NAME FOR MYSELF IN THE CONFINES OF THESE FOUR WALLS. THE VERY FOUR WALLS THAT I HAD PLANNED TO SPEND THE NEXT EIGHTEEN YEARS OF MY LIFE. I WAS IN AND OUT OF THE HOLE. I WAS IN, THOUGH. PEOPLE LOOKED AT ME AS BEING SOMEONE. NEVER TELLING ME THAT I WAS LOSING OUT ON LIVING A FULL LIFE.

FAST FORWARD A COUPLE OF WASTED YEARS, AND THEN I START TO SMARTEN UP. I TAKE A TRADE IN THE WAY OF WOOD TECH. I JOIN A COUPLE OF GROUPS. I MADE MY MOTHER AND FRIENDS PROUD. HOWEVER, THROUGHOUT ALL OF THIS, I MYSELF WASN'T PROUD. EVEN THOUGH I HAD MADE A LOT OF STEPS FORWARD, I STILL FELT LIKE THERE WAS SOMETHING MISSAING. WHAT THAT SOMETHING WAS, I DIDN'T KNOW. ALL I KNEW WAS THAT NO MATTER HOW HIGH ON THE MOUNTAIN I CLIMBED, I STILL FELT LIKE I WAS STUCK IN THE MIDDLE. LIKE WAS WAS CAMPING OUT. JUST WAITING FOR THE SUN TO COME UP, REVEALING A PATH FOR ME TO TAKE TO FINALLY CLAIM MY PRIZE. NOT RECOGNIZING THAT THE SUN HAD BEEN SHINING ALL OF MY LIFE, I HAD JUST BEEN MISSING THE SIGNS. I HAD BEN WAITING ON MY BIG 'AHA!' MOMENT, WHEN SPECKSOFF 'LOOKIT HERE' HAD BEEN FLYING RIGHT ON PAST ME.

MY FIEST EXPERIENCE UPON ENTERING JUMU'AH (MUSLIM FRIDAY SERVICES) WAS ONE OF AWE AND REVERENCE. PEOPLE WERE HUGGING AND GREETING ONE ANOTHER. LAUGHING AND WORKING TOGETHER. IT WASN'T LIKE I HADN'TR SEEN THIS FROM CHRISTIAN BROTHERS, BECAUSE I HAD. IT WAS SIMPLY THAT IT WAS SOMETHING NEW. I HAD NO CLUE WHY I HAD DECIDED TO COME OTHER THAN THAT I MET A BROTHER IN THE HOLE WHO HAD WHAT I CALLED DISCIPLINE. SOMETHING I DRASTICALLY LACKED. I HAD ALWAYS FELT THAT I HAD COMMON SENSE, BUT LACKE DTHE DISCIPLINE TO DO THE RIGHT THING WHEN IT COUNTED. BUT THIS BROTNER HAD IT. EVERYTHING, FROM THE WAY HE WALKED TO THE WAY HE TALKED TO HOW THE GUARDS LOOKED AT HIM. I HAD NO CLUE THAT HE WAS A REFORMED GANG MEMBER. THAT HE HAD GROWN UP BEHIND THESE WALLS AND THEY HAD EXPERIENCED THE VERY BAD OF HIM. AND NOW THE VERY GOOD.

I GUESS YOU CAN SAY THAT IT WAS THE SAME EXPEIENCE MALCOLM X HAD WHEN HE

PAGE:3

HAD FIRST COME INTO CONTACT WITH BROTHER BAINES DURING HIS STINT IN PRISON. YES, IT TRULY WAS SOMETHING OF THE SAME NOW THAT I THINK ABOUT IT.:) AFTER THE FIRST COUPLE OF WEEKS, I WAS WORN OUT. OR AS A SHRINK WOULD SAY, "THE HONEYMOON STAGE HAD WORN OFF." AND NOW I WAS BATTLING INTERNALLY ON WHETHER I WOULD MOVE ONTO THE NEXT HYPE LIKE I HAD BEEN DOING ALL OF MY LIFE. JUMPING FROM ONE EXCITED THING TO THE NEXT WHEN THE LURE OF IT ALL DWINDLED DOWN. I'M STILL NOT EXACTLY SURE HOW I MADE IT THROUGH OTHER THAN BY THE GRACE OF ALLAH, BUT I DID.

SO FOR ME, ISLAM HAD BEEN A LIFE SAVER. WITH BOTH MY PHYSICAL SELF AND MY SPIRITUAL SELF. IT HAS MANY OF THE SAME TEACHINGS AS DOES CHRISTIANITY. BUT THE TWO ARE NOT THE SAME. I LOVE MANY CHRISTIAN BROTHERS AND WOULD LAY DOWN MY LIFE FOR MANY OF THEM. BUT THE FACT REMAINS THE SAME; I AM MUSLIM AND THEY ARE CHRISTIAN. I SPEAK TO JEFF ALL OF THE TIME. HES A CHRISTIAN BROTHER I HAVE NO DOUBT, UNLESS ALLAH DECREES DIFERENTLY, WILL BE IN JENNEH(HEAVEN) WITH ME. HE'S THAT BEAUTIFUL BOTH SPIRITUALLY AND UNSELFISHLY. I ASK HIM ALL OF THE TIME WHY ISN'T HE MUSLIM AND WHAT DOES BEING A CHRISTIAN MEAN TO HIM RIGHT NOW.

AND HE SAYS MANY OF THE THINGS THAT I FEEL. LIKE, IT HAS MADE HIM A BETTER PERSON. THE TEACHINGS ARE REAL. AND A PLETHORA OF OTHER COMMENTS THAT I CAN'T HELP BUT FEEL. THO' I'M THINKING ABOUT ISHAM WHEN I SAY THEM. THE GROWTH IN MYSELF HAS BEEN UNEXPLAINABLE. MANY OF THE POEPLER IN MY LIFE HAS SAID SO ON MANY OF OCCASIONS. I MYSELF HAVE SEEN IT. BUT WITH MY FAMILY, THEY HAVE SEEN SO MANY OF MY COUSINS WHO HAVE COME IN AND OUT OF PRISON DURING MY LIFE, FIND GOD DURING THEIR TIME BEHIND BARS, ONLY TO DISCARD IT LIKE A RELEASE OUTFIT UPON STEPPING FOOT BACK INTO THEIR OLD STOMPING GROUNDS. I HAVE DONE IT. ESPECIALLY AS AN INSECURE TEEN. I WOULD GET PICKED UP FOR A SMALL SACK OF WEED AND PROMISE MOMS, AMYSELF, GOD, AND WHOEVER WOULD LISTEN ALL KINDS OF THINGS THAT I NEVER INTENDED TO HOLD ONTO. NO, I TAKE THAT BACK. IN THE MOMENT, I DID. BUT AS SOON AS THE STREETS CAME A'KNOCKING, I WAS RIGHT BACK IN LIKE I HAD NEVER LEFT.

SO I CAN UNDERSTAND WHERE THEY ARE COMING FROM. I REMEMBER, BEFORE I GOT SENTENCED, TELLING MY MOMS THAT IN MY CELL THAT NIGHT I HAD PRAYED. I ONLY SAID IT BECAUSE I KNEW IT WOULD MAKE HER HAPPY. BUT TRULY I HAD PRAYED. NOT BECAUSE OF THE PEOPLE I HAD HURT, BUT BECAUSE I WANTED THE LEAST AMOUNT OF TIME POSSIBLE FOR THE HORRIBLE, LIFE-ALTERING, CRIME THAT I HAD COMMITTED. MY VICTIMS WERE THE LAST THING ON MY MIND. THEIR TREPIDATION IS WARRANTED. BUT BY MOST OF MY FAMILY NEVER GETTING TO SEE ME, THEY STILL SEE ME AS THE

HELL RAISING TEEN, BOY, CHILD THAT I WAS GROWING UP. AND IN SOME WAYS, I STILL AM. BUT NOT IN THE WAY TO WHERE I WOULD EVER USE RELIGION TO EVER BENEFIT IN A MATERIAL WAY. I HOPE THAT WHEN THE TIME ARRIVES, WHICH IT HAS ALREADY MANY OF TIMES, I WILL BE STRONGER THAN SHAYTAN (THE DEVIL) TO STAY STRONG AND PROSPER THOSE DARK TEMPTING TESTS THAT I AM SURE WILL COME IN ABUNDANCE.

FOR CHRISTIANS, THEY SAY THAT TAKING GOD AS THEIR SAVIOR RELIEVES THEM OF THE CHORE OF HAVING TO ATONE FOR THE SINS THAT THEY NOT ONLY COMMITTED, BUT ARE STILL COMMITTING. I SEE THIS EVERYDAY. WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE DEATH, MAIMING, OR PAIN THAT THEY CAUSED, IT'S SAID THAT 'JESUS DIED ON THE CROSS FOR THAT, SO I'M FORGIVEN.' HOW DOES THAT CHANGES ONE? THERE'S NO WORK PUT IN ON CHANGING THET YEARS UPON YEARS OF PATTERNS IT TOOK TO CREATE A SELF THAT COULD HURT SOMEONE ELSE OVER A DOLLAR OR A PAIR OF SHOES. OR IN MY CASE, BECAUSE I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO DEAL WITH MY EMOTIONS, I WENT OUT AND CAUSE OTHERS PAIN TO MAKE MYSELF FEEL BETTER. I MEAN, IN ORDER FOR SOMEONE TO EVER DO THAT, IT TAKES YEARS AND A REAL DEEP PROBLEM THAT NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED.

AS FOR MUSLIMS, WE BELIEVE THAT JUST BECAUSE YOU ARE MUSLIM DOESN'T MEAN THAT HEAVEN IS YOURS. AT LEAST NOT RIGHT AWAY. ALLAH SAYS THAT HEAVEN IS FOR THE PURIFIED. SO EVEN THO' WE ARE MUSLIM AND HAS DECLARED TO THE WORLD THAT ALLAH IS GOD, WE STILL HAVE TO PUT IN WORK. WE MUST FIGHT DAILY WITH SHAYTAN. EVEN WHEN WE FALL, WE MUST FALL UPON OUR KNEES AND SEEK FORGIVENESS. EVEN IF IT'S FOR THE SAME SIN FIVE AND TEN TIMES A DAY. ALLAH SAYS IN THE QUR'AN THAT HE MADE MEN WEAK. SO HE KNEW THAT WE WERE GOING TO SIN.....

I DON'T WANT TO GO TOO DEEP ON THAT SUBJECT, BUT I THOUGHT THAT I WOULD GIVE YOU A SHORT EXPLANATION OF ISLAM AND RELIGION BEHIND BARS. I'M SURE I'VE LEFT OUT MANY THINGS INCLUDING THOUGHTS, VIEWS AND OTHER PERSPECTIVES FROM CHRISTIANS. BUT THAT ISN'T ~~THE~~ WHAT THIS MISSIVE WAS FOR. I WANTED TO JUST START UP A DIALOGUE. WHERE IT GOES FROM HERE IS UP TO YOU, MYSELF, AND ANYONE ELSE YOU THINK WOULD BENEFIT FROM THIS DISCUSSION. AGAIN, I DON'T CARE WHETHER YOU WERE BLACK, BLUE, BROWN; CHRISTIAN, MUSLIM, OR ANYTHING ELSE FOR THAT MATTER. ALL PEOPLE ARE LOVED, AND BLESSED BECAUSE YOU WERE CREATED BY GOD IN YOUR OWN LIGHT. YOUR OWN TRUTH. HOW YOU DECIDE TO LIVE YOUR LIFE AFTER THAT IS TOTALLY UP TO YOU. I JUST CHOOSE TO LIVE MINE IN ACCORDANCE TO ISLAM. PEACE AND LOVE Y'ALL. YOU'RE ON A DAY IN THE LIFE WITH ME:

