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# Dreaming in Christianity and Islam

Culture, Conflict, and Creativity

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## Conversion Dreams in Christianity and Islam

PATRICIA M. DAVIS AND LEWIS RAMBO

This chapter addresses the unusual characteristics of dreams that are instrumental in religious conversions, focusing on two cases studies of conversions to Christianity and on two case studies of conversions to Islam.

Conversion may be understood as a multistage process involving context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences.<sup>1</sup> Not infrequently the catalyst for the conversion is a mystical experience.<sup>2</sup> For example, in Ali Kose's study of conversion to Islam of native Britons, he found that 14 percent of the converts reported having a mystical experience before embracing Islam.<sup>3</sup>

The stages of conversion are interactive and iterative. However, in this chapter we are concerned with significant dreams that occur early in the conversion process and are a catalyst for the initial religious commitment. Therefore we focus on the initial context and crisis surrounding the time of the dream and the images in the dream that resolved the crisis in favor of the new faith.<sup>4</sup>

Two scholars have proposed theories of dreams in the conversion process. The anthropologist Anthony Wallace has proposed a theory of cultural reformulation in times of crisis based on visionary dream experience. Kelly Bulkeley, a scholar in the field of religion and psychology, has proposed a theory of personal symbolic restructuring in times of crisis.

Wallace has proposed that cultures contain internal mechanisms that enable them to renew themselves when they are beginning to collapse. He calls the process "mazeway reformulation," in which the culture's core myths, rituals, and symbols are broken down and reconstituted to provide new options. The process is initiated when an individual has a vision, a conversion experience, or both in which the old way is modified. Wallace

theorizes that this can happen because the culture's myths, rituals, and symbols are deeply embedded in individuals. A crisis may trigger an individual to have dreams or visions that reconstitute the cultural material in a new way.<sup>5</sup>

Bulkeley has proposed that some dream experiences should be categorized separately from ordinary dreams. He uses the terms "big dream" and "root metaphor dream" for these experiences. "Big dream" relates to the quality of the experience, and "root metaphor dream" relates to the thematic content. He explains the term "big dream" in his discussion of Muhammad's "Night Journey":

One common feature of these intense, highly memorable dreams is that when people describe them they often report a strong feeling that "it wasn't like a normal dream"; in many cases people say they're not even sure it was a dream, although they can't offer a better name for it. This is reminiscent of our earlier discussion of Mohammed's "Night Journey" and the traditional Islamic debate about whether or not it was a dream or a physical transportation to heaven. I suggest the ambiguity of the Qur'anic text reflects the possibility that Mohammed experienced a type of "big dream"—an experience that began in the physical state of sleep and ordinary dreaming but then soared away into the transcendent realm of revelation, inspiration, and divine presence.<sup>6</sup>

Bulkeley's root metaphor dreams are based on the same premise as Wallace, that "a religious or cultural tradition can be seen to revolve around a distinctive cluster of root metaphors."<sup>7</sup>

Bulkeley has identified three aspects that distinguish root metaphor dreams:

- (1) They arise in times of crisis, "when the dreamer (and often his or her community) is experiencing a profound threat to his or her ordinary, accustomed life or world view."
- (2) They "help the dreamer to adapt effectively to the given crisis."
- (3) They "bear an impulse towards a moral response—the dreamer frequently feels a strong need to express gratitude, to help others, to contribute to the community's welfare."<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the theories of Wallace and Bulkeley are complementary and would seem to describe very similar processes. However, Bulkeley's work is at the level of the individual dreamer, while Wallace's work is at the cultural level. The theory of maze way reformulation is applicable only to those rare dreams that are instrumental in cultural conversion.

We have selected four case studies of powerful dream narratives related by converts to Christianity or Islam to search for possible shared recurring themes. To allow for possible relationships to Wallace's maze way reformulation theory, we have selected two Christian conversion dreams that were known to have been instrumental in the conversion of many. These two dreams are from the same approximate time period and location. The two Islamic conversion case studies were selected to provide variety of location and time period.

### Four Case Studies

We begin with two dreams that were instrumental in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons from paganism to Christianity in the seventh century. We then present accounts of dreams of two converts to Islam, one from the twelfth century and one from the late twentieth century.

#### *King Oswald of Seventh-Century Northumbria*

The Anglo-Saxons were Germanic tribal peoples who came to England in the fourth and fifth centuries as warrior adventurers and as farmers. The Anglo-Saxon ruling class was converted to Christianity by missionaries from both Ireland and Rome. The Irish monk Columba established a monastery at Iona in 565, and the Roman missionaries came in 596 under the guidance of Pope Gregory. Despite the conversion of the ruling class, the population remained pagan.

King Oswald and twelve of his men had been baptized when he was in exile among the Irish. In 633, he was back in Northumbria, fighting for his life and land against pagan warriors. On the eve of battle, he had an experience that contemporary scholarship would refer to as a dream because it is described as having occurred during sleep. However, the hagiographer refers to it as a vision seemingly because it is a visitation that is verified by subsequent events.

One day when King Oswald was encamped in readiness for battle, sleeping on his pillow in his tent he saw in a vision Saint Columba, radiant in angelic form, whose lofty height seemed with its head to touch the clouds. The blessed man revealed his own name to the king, and standing in the midst of the camp he covered it with shining raiment, all but a small remote part; and gave him these words of encouragement, the same that the Lord spoke to Joshu ben Nun before the crossing of the Jordan, after the death of Moses, saying: "Be strong, and act manfully; behold I will be with you," and so on. Thus

in the vision Saint Columba spoke to the king, and added: "This coming night, go forth from camp to battle; for the Lord has granted to me that at this time your enemies shall be turned to flight, and your adversary Catlon shall be delivered into your hands. And after the battle you shall return victorious and reign happily."<sup>9</sup>

Upon awakening, Oswald discussed this vision with his council and all agreed to accept baptism if the vision proved true. Oswald did succeed in this battle, and afterward he sent to Iona, the monastery founded by Columba, requesting Christian missionaries for his kingdom. Although Oswald himself was not directly converted by his dream, the dream and its fulfillment were the key events that converted the people under his rule.

### ***Caedmon of Seventh-Century Northumbria***

The conversion of Caedmon is related in the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, which was compiled by the monk Venerable Bede in 736. Based on the location and historical figures in the story, we can date the events to approximately 680. The monk Bede presented the story of the conversion of Caedmon as the story of a gift on two levels. On one level, it is the story of the conversion of Caedmon himself and his receipt of the gift of song. On another level, it is the story of the conversion of the English people through the gift of the songs of Caedmon.

Caedmon was a herdsman who could not join in the bawdy singing in the hall in the evening. When the harp was passed, he left the hall. A ninth-century manuscript with an Anglo-Saxon translation of Bede's original Latin text adds the words "in shame" to the sentence in which Caedmon leaves the hall. This is valuable evidence regarding how the narrative was understood at the time.

Retreating from the bawdy singing in shame, Caedmon went to care for the cattle and slept in the cattle shed. That evening in a dream Caedmon was visited by a stranger who called him by name and instructed him to sing of creation. Although Caedmon at first refused because he knew he could not sing, when the stranger repeated his command, Caedmon found himself singing a new song of creation in the Anglo-Saxon language:

Praise we the Fashioner now of Heaven's fabric,  
 The majesty of his might and his mind's wisdom,  
 Work of the world-warden, worker of all wonders,  
 How he the Lord of Glory everlasting,  
 Wrought first for the race of men Heaven as a roof-tree,  
 Then made he Middle Earth to be their mansion.<sup>10</sup>

Caedmon was taken to the abbess of Whitby, Hilda, and she proclaimed his new gift a miracle. Caedmon became a monk, was educated in Christian traditions, and produced further Anglo-Saxon songs that were instrumental in the conversion of many.

### ***Samau'al, Twelfth-Century Iraq***

Linda Jones's scholarship provides a focused analysis of the function of dreams and visions in the narratives of medieval converts. Jones finds that the narratives place dreams or visions as the locus of power in the process of conversion: "The author's placement of the dream within the conversion narrative demonstrates that he is aware of its pivotal function. Structurally it marks the transformation of the former self into a new spiritual individual."<sup>11</sup>

Jones's analysis provides three examples of dreams and visions in narratives of medieval converts to Islam as well as dream narratives of converts to Christianity. One of the Islamic conversion dream accounts concerns Samau'al al-Maghribi, the son of a Jewish rabbi in twelfth-century Iraq. Samau'al had been deeply conflicted between his desire to convert to Islam and his reluctance to hurt his father. In her analysis of the autobiography of Samau'al al-Maghribi, Jones notes that two dreams are presented "as the catalyst for and climax of his conversion" (122). Jones summarizes the first dream as follows:

In the first dream, Samau'al encounters his namesake the Prophet Samuel sitting beneath a mighty tree. The prophet greets him and passes him the Torah from which he reads the following passage: "I will raise them up a prophet from among their brethren like unto thee; in him they shall believe" (Deut. 18:15). Initially he "misinterprets" the verse according to the Jewish exegesis that it was a revelation to Moses foretelling the coming of the Prophet Samuel. However, the Prophet rebukes him, saying that the verse alludes to: "a prophecy that will be revealed . . . on the mountains of Paran," which he "correctly" interprets as a reference to Muhammad's prophetic mission "because he is the one sent from the mountains of Paran, i.e. . . . Mecca." (123)

Thus a holy man has come to Samau'al in a dream and provided a revision to Samau'al's Jewish religious faith that integrates it with Islam. The teacher shows that Muhammad has been foretold in Jewish scripture. The legitimacy of the dream teaching is the acknowledged holiness of the teacher, Samau'al's own namesake, the Jewish Prophet Samuel.

A second dream sealed the conversion, after which Samau'al was committed to Islamic prayer practice and eager to make his conversion known publicly. In this second dream a Sufi led Samau'al into a house to a meeting with the Prophet Muhammad:

"I walked behind [the Sufi], following in through a long corridor which was dark, but only slightly so. When I reached the end of the corridor and realized that I was about to meet the Prophet, I was overawed; . . . it seemed to me that most of [the Sufis here], though young, seemed to be preparing for travel. . . . Then I met the Messenger or God standing between two chambers. . . . When I entered and saw him, he turned to me, saw me, and came toward me smiling and benevolent. In awe of him I . . . addressed him with an individual salutation saying: 'Peace upon thee, O Messenger of God, and God's mercy and blessing,' thus excluding the company, as my vision and my heart turned exclusively to him. He then said: 'And upon thee peace, and God's mercy and blessings.'" Samau'al was overcome with emotion when the Prophet took him by the hand and he recited the Muslim testament of faith to him, pointedly changing the indirect statement that "Muhammad is the Messenger of God" into a direct proclamation that "thou art (annaka) the Messenger of God." The Prophet responds by inviting Samau'al to participate in the campaign to conquer Ghumdan in China. (124)

The invitation to the military campaign is understood to refer to the conversion of others to Islam, so Samau'al is commissioned by the Prophet Muhammad to convert the Jews to Islam. Jones notes that at the end of the dream Samau'al notices that he does not find the darkness in the corridor anymore. "The absence of darkness following his profession of the faith intimates that he has grasped the light of Muhammad's prophethood" (125).

The second dream is like the first in centering on the authority of a holy person. In the first dream the holy person was recognized by Samau'al's Jewish religion, but in the second dream the holy individual is the Prophet of Islam. While the setting for the first dream is outdoors under a tree, the second dream is set inside a house. On one level of interpretation, the tree may be understood to represent the lineage of Judaism and the house may represent the Islamic faith. Thus the first dream resolves the relationship between Samau'al's Jewish religious background and his new Islamic faith. The second dream locates Samau'al within his new Islamic faith. On another level, the house may represent the self. On this level, the second dream may provide an individual interior centering of Samau'al within his new Islamic faith.



### ***Kathleen, Late Twentieth-Century British***

Kose published a major study of contemporary British converts to Islam, among them Kathleen, a woman who described two important dreams in her conversion process. Kathleen had married a Muslim man who was not practicing his religion at the time of their marriage. However, her husband had changed after the marriage and turned to religion. This created a crisis for Kathleen.

One day during the month of Ramadan she prayed in church for an answer. The following day, she had this dream:

I had a very strong dream. I saw myself in the middle of a field. It was very dark and there was so much rain. And I was crying, feeling that all the pain in this world was with me. Then I heard a voice that said, "Oh, human beings why are you so bad, making me very sad? I have created you because I love you. Why are you doing this to me?" I woke up finding myself crying. So what happened that night, in my opinion, was I washed off my sins of the past.<sup>12</sup>

In the dream, Kathleen heard the voice of the creator, which could fit within Christianity or Islam. However, she responded to the dream by deciding to follow the Ramadan fast with her husband despite not being a Muslim.

On the final day of Ramadan, Kathleen had another mystical experience; this one caused her to choose to become Muslim.

I woke up at six o'clock in the morning and I heard the *adhan* (call to prayer) in X where there is no mosque around. So that was it. I said, "This is for me, this is a sign." I woke my husband up and said that I wanted to become a Muslim. That was the happiest time of my life because you feel you've done it, and you are one person, no conflicts. Because the conflict is constantly with you unless you find God.<sup>13</sup>

Kathleen had prayed to God in a Christian church for the resolution to her crisis. The resolution was that she profoundly "heard" the Islamic call to prayer. It is interesting to note that Kathleen's cleansing dream and the subsequent mystical call to prayer both have a significant auditory component.

The night of Kathleen's mystical call to prayer is particularly significant within Islamic tradition, as Hidayet Aydar explains:

The Night of Qadr (Laylah al-Qadr) is an important night full of blessings, being the night when the Qur'an first started to be revealed. . . . According to the reports, one group of companions lay down to sleep in order to determine which night was the Night of Qadr through

their dreams. . . . They went to Prophet Mohammad to tell him about their dreams. As they all told him their different dreams, he said, "I can see that your dreams have told you that the Night of Power is in the last seven nights of Ramadan. So look for the Night of Power in the last seven nights of Ramadan."<sup>14</sup>

So it may be particularly appropriate that Kathleen had her experience on the Night of Power, Laylah al-Qadr.

### **Recurring Themes**

In these four case studies, there are noticeable themes in the precipitating crises, the unusual qualities of the dreams, the root metaphors in the dreams, the emotions felt during the dreams, and the motifs in the dreams.

#### ***Precipitating Crisis***

Scholars of conversion generally acknowledge that some form of crisis usually precedes conversion, whether the crisis is religious, political, psychological, or cultural in origin.<sup>15</sup> There is debate within the scholarly community over whether a crisis is required to precipitate a conversion. Stark and Lofland found that conversions occurred after a crisis they described as a "felt discrepancy between some imaginary ideal state of affairs and the circumstances in which these people saw themselves caught up."<sup>16</sup>

Whether or not such a crisis is necessary in all conversions, it does appear to be present as a precipitating factor in the conversion dreams in these case studies. In the two Christian conversions, there is a profoundly disturbing emotion. For Oswald on the eve of battle, it is fear of defeat and death. For Caedmon, it is shame. The two Islamic conversions share the distress of family conflict.

For both Samau'al and Kathleen, there was a conflict between a key family member's religious commitment and the predominant culture. Samau'al's father was a Jewish rabbi, but the dominant religious culture was Islamic. Kathleen was a Christian; her key family member was her husband, who was Muslim. Kathleen could not maintain her Christian religious practice and her marriage with a practicing Muslim husband. Although she and Samau'al faced similar crises, Samau'al resolved the crisis in favor of the dominant religion and Kathleen in favor of her key family member.

While on one level, the dreams in the case studies resolve the crises, on another level the dreams can be seen as creating crises that can be resolved only by conversion to the new religion. For example, Samau'al's first dream provided a new interpretation of a key piece of scripture, allowing

TABLE 14.1  
**Precipitating Crisis**

<i>Crisis</i>	<i>Cases Cited</i>
Fear of defeat/death	▪ Eve of Battle: Oswald
Shame	▪ Bawdy drinking culture: Caedmon
Family/culture/conflict	▪ Rabbi father vs. Muslim Iraq: Samau'l ▪ Muslim husband vs. Christian Britain: Kathleen

an integration of Judaism and Islam. However, the implication of this new integration was that he must embrace Islam.

### ***Qualities of Dreams***

The dream reports show that these converts' dream experiences differed from ordinary dreams. We suggest that the difference in quality of these types of dreams can be explored on three dimensions: the intensity of the experience, its occurrence in a dreaming or waking state, and the emotion of joy or awe.

Three of the four dreamers either specifically describe the dream as strong or intense or state that they are not sure if it was a dream or really happened. Kathleen presents her first dream as "very strong" and her second experience as actually happening.

Religious traditions often make a distinction between dream and vision based not on a sleeping versus a waking state but rather on the confirmed holiness of the experience. For example, in historical Christian religious texts, the word "dreams" is used for ordinary dreams and the word "visions" is used for holy dreams during sleep and waking-state visions.<sup>17</sup> This distinction is necessary because persons having holy dreams are often unable to say themselves whether they were asleep or awake and whether the event actually occurred or not. Thus, Kathleen describes her second experience, the mystical call to prayer, as having occurred in the early morning as she had just awakened.

The third recurring quality of the dreams is the resulting emotion of awe or wonder. In his recent study of this emotion, Bulkeley notes that these experiences can be joyful but also can involve tears:

Moments of wonder can be *terrible*. They are not always happy, uplifting experiences; sometimes they are absolutely horrifying, intensely painful, and suffused with feelings of loss, despair and alienation. . . .

TABLE 14.2  
**Qualities of Dream**

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Case Studies</i>
Intensity of dream	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Presented as really happened: Oswald</li> <li>▪ Presented as really happened: Caedmon</li> <li>▪ “Very strong,” really happening: Kathleen</li> </ul>
Possible waking state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Woke up prior to hearing call: Kathleen</li> </ul>
Emotions of joy and awe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Awe,” “overcome with emotion”: Samau’al</li> <li>▪ Tears, “Happiest time of my life”: Kathleen</li> </ul>

Indeed, *every* experience of wonder involves loss—the loss of one’s previous center, the shedding of old ideas, the overthrow of one’s previous sense of self and world.<sup>18</sup>

In our case studies, Samau’al described his experience with the words “awe” and “overcome with emotion,” Kathleen woke up crying from the first dream and described the result of the second dream as “the happiest time of her life.”

### **Root Metaphors**

The root metaphors in the dreams in the case studies are even more tightly related than are the precipitating crises. Experiencing a holy person in a dream is central to all four. In three of the four cases, the holy person gives the dreamer a sign. All four cases also allude directly to one or more holy text. The interpretative strategy of the most famous of the early Islamic dream interpreters, Ibn Sirin, was to relate the dream motifs to the language, characters, and themes in the Qur’an.<sup>19</sup> The fruitfulness of this strategy in relating Christian spiritual dreams to Christian scriptural sources was recently examined for the case of the early Christian martyr Perpetua.<sup>20</sup>

Samau’al had a holy person in both dreams, the Prophet Samuel in the first and the Prophet Muhammad in the second. Kathleen had the most holy of all, the Creator, speaking in her first dream. It is also possible that we can credit a holy person with the mystical call to prayer in her second dream or auditory “vision.”

It is appropriate to note a possible relationship to the Islamic scriptural sources in the dream of rain in Kathleen’s conversion. The dream of

TABLE 14.3  
**Root Metaphors**

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Case Studies</i>
Holy person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ St. Columba: Oswald</li> <li>▪ Mystic night visitor: Caedmon</li> <li>▪ Prophet Samuel, Sufi, and Muhammad: Samau'al</li> </ul>
Sign	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Creator: Kathleen</li> <li>▪ Success in battle: Oswald</li> <li>▪ Gift of song: Caedmon</li> </ul>
Parallel with scripture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Mystical call to prayer: Kathleen</li> <li>▪ Joshua crossing the Jordan: Oswald</li> <li>▪ Hymn of God's creation: Caedmon</li> <li>▪ Both Hebrew Bible and Qur'an: Samau'al</li> <li>▪ Cleansing rain: Kathleen</li> </ul>

spiritually cleansing rain presents a primary Islamic scriptural source, the Qur'an, Surah 8, verse 11: "[Remember] when He allowed slumber to overcome you as an assurance to Him, and sent you water down from heaven so as to purify you, relieve you of the Devil's temptation, fortify your hearts and steady your feet therewith."<sup>21</sup> Kathleen's dream becomes intimately related to Islamic tradition when viewed in this context.

### Conclusion

The dreams that inspire religious conversions have both unique particular content and many similarities. Although the dreams were selected before the analysis, all the dreams selected for this study were experienced by the dreamers as profoundly different from ordinary dreams, had the direct experience of a holy person providing leadership toward the new religion, and are related to the holy scriptures of the religion.

For Christian conversions, the dreamer experiences a Christian holy person and relationship to Christian scripture. For Islamic conversions, the dreamer experiences an Islamic holy person and relationship to Islamic scripture. In one of the Islamic case studies, Samau'al, the dreamer, experienced holy persons and holy scripture from his old religion, Judaism, and

from Islam. In Samau'al's case, we could most clearly see how the dreams provide a process of integrating the old with the new.

Wallace's maze-way reformulation theory seems to fit the dreams of both Oswald and Caedmon. The individual's dream provided a way of understanding the new religion for many. Bulkeley's theory of root metaphors and big dreams is similar to Wallace's theory and can be seen to explain individual conversions that do not spread to the larger community.

#### NOTES

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10. Bede, c. 731/1990, 248
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12. Kose, *Conversion to Islam*, 104.
13. *Ibid.*
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16. *Ibid.*, 48–49.
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18. Kelly Bulkeley, *The Wondering Brain: Thinking about Religion with and beyond Cognitive Neuroscience* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 124.
  19. Bulkeley, "Reflections on the Dream Traditions," 9.
  20. Patricia M. Davis, "The Weaning of Perpetua: Female Embodiment and Spiritual Growth Metaphor in the Dream of an Early Christian Martyr," *Dreaming* 15, 4 (December 2005): 261–270.
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