

SHOULD I CHANGE MY NAME?

Rating:

Description: A brief discussion about changing one's name upon conversion to Islam.

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Published on: 24 Dec 2012

Last modified on: 04 Dec 2016

Objective:

- To discuss the benefits or merits of choosing a new name.
- To understand when it would be preferable to take a new name.
- To identify any drawbacks to changing one's name.

Arabic Terms:

- Hajj* - A pilgrimage to Mecca where the pilgrim performs a set of rituals. The *Hajj* is one of the five pillars of Islam, which every adult Muslim must undertake at least once in their life if they can afford it and are physically able.
- Ka'bah* - The cube-shaped structure located in the city of Mecca. It serves as a focal point towards which all Muslims face when praying.
- Surah* - chapter of the Quran.
- Umrah* - A pilgrimage to the Holy House of Allah in the city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Often referred to as *the lesser pilgrimage*. It can be performed at any time of the year.

Many people who convert to Islam make an active choice to change their name to denote the beginning of a new life, a new start and a new religion. We must remember however that it is not obligatory for a person to change their name except under very specific circumstances. A person is in no way obliged to change their name unless it denotes servitude to someone or something other than Allah or has a forbidden meaning. However, Islam tells us that every person will be influenced by the meanings and connotations associated with his name, and therefore we should name our children with



“good“ names. This is equally true when a person converts to Islam. They should at the very least consider the meaning of their name and what it denotes or calls to mind. Whether we like it or not names do carry meanings and they evoke images or preconceptions about the person so named. This was the main reason why Prophet Muhammad suggested that some people change their names. Let us therefore take a closer look at choosing and changing your name upon conversion to Islam.

Forbidden Names

It is forbidden to choose names belonging only to Allah. These include names such as Al-Ahad (The One), As-Samad (The One whom all depend upon for their means of sustenance), Al-Khaaliq (The Creator), Al-Razzaaq (The Provider), and Al-Jabbaar (The Compeller).^[1] It is forbidden to use any name which implies enslavement to anything or anyone besides Allah, such as ‘Abdul-’Uzza (slave of al-’Uzza – a pagan goddess), ‘Abdul-Ka’bah (slave of the *Ka’bah*), ‘Abdul- ‘Ali (slave of ‘Ali), ‘Abdul-Husayn (slave of Husayn). It is also forbidden to use names belonging to idols or deities, or a name that has obvious pagan origins.

Disliked Names

There are a number of categories of names that are very much disliked even though they are not outrightly forbidden. These include names that have bad or distasteful meanings, or which sound odd, or would cause embarrassment. Names such as these are contrary to the guidance of Prophet Muhammad who taught us to choose good names. It is also not recommended to use names that are provocative or sexy or that convey any sense of sin and disobedience to Allah. There is also some difference of opinion among the scholars of Islam as to whether believers should use the names of angels or *surahs* of the Quran.

Arabic or Non Arabic Names

Islam came to the Arabs and the non-Arabs, thus it is not essential for a new Muslim to take an Arabic name, rather what is important is that the name should not be ugly or

have a meaning that goes against Islam. If the non-Arabic name has a good meaning, there is nothing wrong with using it. Many Persians and Byzantines embraced Islam and kept their names, and did not change them. Indeed many of the Prophets had names that were not Arabic because they were not Arabs. Yet the Prophets all had good names and gave good names to their children, which they took from their particular customs and traditions. Examples include Ishaq (Isaac), Musa (Moses) and Haron (Aaron).

Good Names

Prophet Muhammad made it very clear that parents (and thus those who change their names upon converting to Islam) should use what he termed good names. The parents should choose a good name for their child, and it should not be weird or odd in the society in which they live, because having an odd name may cause the name or its owner to be teased or ridiculed. Prophet Muhammad's beloved wife Aisha told us that he used to change bad names^[2] and a daughter of Prophet Muhammad's companion Umar was called 'Aasiyah (disobedient) and the Prophet renamed her Jameelah (beautiful).^[3]

There are five distinct categories of good names. The first consists of the names Abdullah and 'Abd ur-Rahman. It was reported that the Prophet Muhammad said, "The most beloved of names to Allah are Abdullah and 'Abdur-Rahman."^[4] The second category is all the names which express enslavement to and worship of Allah, such as 'Abdul-Azeez, 'Abdur-Raheem, 'Abdul-Malik, 'Abdus-Salaam, etc. The third category is the names of Prophets and the fourth, the names of the righteous particularly the companions of Prophet Muhammad. Finally, the fifth category is any other name which has a good and pleasant meaning.

Changing One's name Officially

If changing one's name in official documents and records poses a great inconvenience, it would suffice to change it amongst his family and acquaintances. In such a situation he or she is called by his or her new name by friends, acquaintances, and the general public, while official documents would retain the original given name. This does not cause problems and is perfectly acceptable. Many people worry unnecessarily that non-Arabic or non-Muslim sounding names will interfere with the ability to do *Hajj* or *Umrah*. This is not the case. The validity of a person's *Hajj* or *Umrah* has nothing to do with their name. When apply for the *Hajj* or *Umrah* entry visa, it should be sufficient to obtain a certificate from the local Islamic centre proving that the person has embraced Islam.^[5]

Preserving Lineage

It is essential that a person attributes his or her lineage to their biological father, whether he is Muslim or not. Prophet Muhammad said that, "Whoever claims knowingly to belong to someone other than his father will be denied Paradise."^[6] Thus even if a

person decides to change their name to one more befitting their new religion they would not change the second or what is called in the west, the surname.

Of course there may be some drawbacks to changing one's name, every person and their circumstances are different, however the religion of Islam is designed to be easy. From the above outlines it is possible to see that compromise is almost always possible. Except when a name has a forbidden meaning, each situation can be judged on its individual merits.

Lists of names are very easy to find on the internet and you could begin with the following sites:

<http://www.islamicity.com/Culture/Names/default.htm> male

<http://www.islamicity.com/Culture/Names/female.htm> female

Footnotes:

[1] Sh. Ibnul Qayyim in *Tuhfat al-Mawdood*, p. 98

[2] *At Tirmidhi*

[3] *Saheeh Muslim*

[4] *Ibid*

[5] Please contact the Saudi Consulate or Embassy in your country for confirmation (or visit their website) and for other *Ha* and *Umrah* requirements.

[6] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*

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