

Lynda Fitzgerald, Ex-Catholic, Ireland (part 1 of 4)

Description: Feeling lonely and wanting something new in life, Lynda accepts a job offer in Saudi Arabia.

By Lynda Fitzgerald

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Introduction

Lynda Fitzgerald, now known as Khadija, is an Irish girl from a town called Wicklow, close to Dublin. She hails from a very strict Roman Catholic family, comprising of nine children. Her father is an Electrician and her mother a Housewife.

Lynda was educated in Wicklow and then went on to Secretarial College. She has worked in Dublin for nine years.

Khadija, as she is now called, reverted to Islam, after having come to Saudi Arabia. She relates, in this article, the sequence of events that brought her to this Holy Land and introduced her to the right path. May God Bless her.

How I Came To Saudi Arabia

I was in a young people's club. We would meet every Monday and then go to the pub afterwards. Sometimes I went, but mostly I went home after the meetings. One night, a new girl had started in the club, and I decided to go to the pub to talk to her and make her feel welcome. It turned out that she worked for a recruiting agency that recruited for Saudi Arabia. She started to tell me all about it. I was fascinated. I had hardly even heard of Saudi Arabia before that. As the night went on I got more and more interested and by the time I left the pub I really wanted to go to Saudi.

I applied for a job that year, 1993 but I didn't get it. So, I didn't think about it for a while. I went home for Christmas and was very bored, and I decided I just had to do something different with my life. All my friends had boyfriends or were married and had moved on to different things. I suddenly found myself with no ties. When I went back to the city after Christmas, I rang that girl in the recruiting agency and asked her to put me forward for any job that came up in Saudi Arabia. She said 'You won't believe it. I just got a fax from the Security Forces Hospital looking for a secretary'. I was here by 15 March 1994.

My First Impressions of Islam

When you come to Saudi Arabia the first thing the other Westerners will tell you is how terrible the Muslims are, how badly they treat their women, how they all go off to pray and don't come back for hours, how they all go to Bahrain to drink and pick up

women. You're prejudiced right from the start...and you think that's Islam. But it's not Islam. Unfortunately the majority of westerners fail to see that.

How I Changed That View

For me, I was curious from the start. I'd see the people praying in the mosque, and I thought it was great to have such strong faith to worship God so much. I would see leaflets lying around and pick them up to read them, but then my Western friends would say "what do you want to read that for, they're only trying to brainwash you," and I was embarrassed and I stopped doing it. Then I started taking Arabic lessons and the Arabic teacher, an Egyptian guy, really impressed me. He was so different from a lot of the Muslims I'd met. His faith was so strong. I got friendly with him because I was having some trouble with a Muslim guy in work and I needed someone to talk to about it. I would get all upset and blame it all on Islam, and he would be really patient and explain things to me, and he helped me to see that it wasn't Islam and that not all Muslims behaved like this.

Another thing the Westerners will tell you is that all the Muslims want to do is revert you, and that they'll try and brainwash you. So, of course, you're very wary if anyone tries to talk to you about Islam, and you put up a wall between you and them, and you won't listen to anything that they tell you. So, with Khaled, he never talked about Islam unless I brought up the subject first, or I incorrectly blamed something on Islam; and sometimes I would practically attack him unfairly about something that had nothing whatsoever to do with Islam. He always remained calm and was very patient and it was very clear that he just wanted me to know the truth, he just wanted me to see that I was being unfair and I had been misinformed.

Then it was Ramadan. A lot of the Saudi guys in work were moaning and complaining "we can smell food, you guys shouldn't be eating in your offices, you should have more respect for us". I couldn't understand why I couldn't even have a cup of water on my desk, after all they were supposed to be making a sacrifice for God, they shouldn't care if I had a cup of water on my desk. The following extract from my diary shows how I felt at the beginning of Ramadan.

"It's Ramadan. My goodness, what a month. It's so annoying. You can't even mention the word food. They're all going around like mega martyrs and most of them aren't even working. They only have to do six hours a day so they just stay up all night and eat and make the rest of us feel like complete pagans during the day."

My friend, Khaled, tried to explain some of it to me. He explained about praying late at night and trying extra hard to be good and not use bad language or [complain] or backbite and how you had to give more in charity. He said that some westerners tried fasting to see what it was like, and some of them liked it so much that they did it every year. One morning I woke up and I decided, I'm going to fast. So I did. I didn't tell anyone about it, not even Khaled, at first, but he realized it himself eventually.

One day, I went to see him and he said he had something he wanted me to read. He

brought a copy of the Quran to show me a passage about Jesus (PBUH) and when he put it in my hands it was like he had given me a precious piece of crystal. I felt awed. I didn't want to give it back to him, but I felt stupid and I was afraid he'd laugh if I told him how I felt. So I gave it back to him but it burned inside me for days until finally he actually said it to me himself "why don't you read the Quran" and it was like a weight was lifted from my shoulders and I brought it home and started reading it that night.

Lynda Fitzgerald, Ex-Catholic, Ireland (part 2 of 4)

Description: After reading the Quran, Lynda starts to struggle with the notion of accepting Islam and leaving her prior beliefs and way of life.

By Lynda Fitzgerald

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The Quran

Two things happened to me while I was reading the Quran. Firstly, I was reading the following Surah (Surah II (Al Baqara - 21) and I just stopped reading. I shut my eyes and I thought about God. Suddenly I got a feeling of the oneness of God, of the superiority of God. I could see that he would have no reason to have a partner. I just couldn't see anyone there with him on the same level with him, why would he need anyone. He wouldn't, I was so sure of that. A strange peace came over me and I felt really sure that there is no God but God. I just wanted that feeling to last forever, but it went within a couple of minutes.

The second was when I was reading Surah Al Hajj (22-5). Again I closed my eyes and I had a picture of the world, barren and new born. I saw a mound of earth and a seed growing into a tree and I thought. "Where did that seed come from?" Where did all the beautiful variety of plants that you find all over the world come from. It could only have come from God. Again I felt peace, and I felt the wonder of God.

The Months Before I Reverted

These had to be the hardest and the best months of my life. Sometimes I was on a high and sometimes I felt utter despair. This is an extract from my diary in April:

"Something weird is happening to me and I just don't know how I feel about it, whether it's a good thing or a bad thing, whether my imagination is running away with me or whether I'm just letting myself be brainwashed. Then again, it could be what's right and what's meant to be.

The thing is, I've been studying Islam and I'm really thinking of reverting - God help

me. At the moment, I just don't know what to think, the whole thing scares the living daylights out of me. I never thought this kind of thing could happen to me. I certainly didn't want to be reverted. I always considered myself a catholic, I always believed in God and I always believed that Jesus was the son of God. Now I'm questioning all that, I'm questioning everything I was brought up to believe in and my whole way of life."

I would think about Islam from the time I got up in the morning until I went home in the evening. After a while, when I'd hear the adhan, I would get a really strong desire to pray, and in the beginning I would pray in the old Christian way. Then, I asked one of the guys in work for a book on how to pray and he gave me one. I read that book, I watched the people praying on TV, and I asked a lot of questions. Then I started praying. Still, no one knew about it except two guys at work. The Egyptian guy and another Jordanian guy who is also a really good Muslim.

In the beginning, I would pray without covering my hair. I didn't know that I was supposed to, and when someone finally did tell me I just couldn't figure out the reason why. I had a long argument about it with Khaled one day in work, and I still couldn't fathom it. Then, when I was going home that evening, I was walking up to catch the bus and I got a feeling of the superiority of God and how small and insignificant I was compared to him, I felt as small as an ant with the whole world stretched out before me, and I knew that I should cover my head when I was praying, because he could see every movement that I made, and I had no right to be proud, and I should do everything I could to please him. I never doubted again that I should cover my head whilst praying.

My diary 23 April 1995

"Well, I'm still not sure what I'm doing. Some times it seems so clear and I think 'Yes, I believe and I want to shout it out.' Then other times I feel really unsure and doubtful and afraid, and I just don't know what I'm doing. The thing is though. Besides anything else, it is a really good religion. The Quran is quite beautiful and everything is in there - how to behave, how to pray, what to do, what not to do. There's none of that in the Catholic church, besides the fact that they change it from time to time to suit themselves. If you follow this religion you can't be bad, not to anyone. You can only be kind and patient and tolerant and you can never forget God because you are worshipping him five times a day. I love to pray, I always did. It helps you to remember all the good things you have in life and where they came from and you should be grateful for that always. It brings peace in to your life."

Sometimes, I was really glad that I had found out about Islam, and sometimes I wished I'd never heard of it, because now that I knew the truth, I realized that I had no choice but to revert, but I was still hanging on to the old life; even though I had given up drinking and going to parties, I was afraid of losing my western friends and the prejudice I would have to face once I started covering my head. I talked about it to Khaled so many times, and each time I said, 'I'll never have the courage to wear the hijab' and each time he said, 'when God wills it, you'll have the courage.'

My diary: My problem is I'm a natural born coward. I dread the thoughts of people's

reaction when I start covering my head. How could I ever tell my mother or Liz in Australia. How can I go to Australia or even Ireland and cover my head - I don't think I can face it you know. God give me strength.

Lynda Fitzgerald, Ex-Catholic, Ireland (part 3 of 4)

Description: Lynda discusses her internal battle about wearing the Hijab.

By Lynda Fitzgerald

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Changing My Job

There had been a freeze on recruitment at my hospital, and then in June they suddenly opened up for recruitment, and there were two jobs that I could go for. One was in the Personnel Department, and the other was in the Education and Training Department. I had a choice of both jobs, and both Directors were really pushing me to take their department. If I went to the Personnel Department I would be right in the middle of things, and I would know everything that was going on in the hospital, and I would have more chance of getting a pay rise in the future. If I went to Education, I knew there was more chance that people would find out about me being a Muslim, and I would have to start covering my head. For weeks I worried and fretted about what to do. Suddenly it became very important for me to be in the middle of things and to know what was going on in the hospital and to be in such a strong position, but still something was stopping me. Finally my Jordanian friend told me to say two extra Raka's after my prayer in the evening and to ask for God's guidance. I did that for days and it just didn't seem to be working. I think I knew that I had to go to Education but there was a constant battle going on inside me, I was afraid of people finding out, I was afraid of having to face them and thoughts kept creeping into my head about what a powerful position I'd be in if I went to Personnel. Then, one night I was reading the Quran, and it occurred to me that all those things didn't mean anything to me, money, gossip, power. They never had. So why had they suddenly become so attractive and I thought, it's Shaytaan trying to convince me, because he knows if I go to Education, then I'd have more support, because there were more Muslims in the department, and I'd get more involved in the religion. And it was like a cloud had lifted, and I made up my mind, and I couldn't wait for the next day to come so that I could tell my boss my decision. Of course, I went to Education.

Wearing the Hijab

After that things moved pretty rapidly. I started going to the mosque to pray and I had a lot of support in the Education department. Then my boss, who is (strictly

religious), found out and started pressing me to cover my head. So I had to think about it seriously. I didn't want to do it for the wrong reason. I wanted to do it because I was ready and when I knew that I could put it on and never take it off again. Then my boss went on Holidays, and I felt the pressure was off me, but still I was thinking about it all the time. I had constant arguments with my friend about wearing it and the reason why and I still wasn't convinced.

One weekend, I was at a friends house on the compound, and some new girls had arrived and I got talking to them. They were really nice, and I felt I could be friends with them, but then I thought, 'OK, new people are coming and it is only going to get harder and harder. Maybe if they see me with the hijab from the start, then they will accept it and not question it as much.' I decided to start wearing it the next day. Here's an extract from my diary:

"So I think I'm going to cover my head tomorrow. One half of me feels it's the right time, the other half is screaming at me not to. I'm trying to ignore that half. It's just so hard to know what to do. What if I hate it after a day, or a week; or I realize I made a mistake after a week or a month. There's no turning back, not unless I want to lose all respect. When am I ever going to be 100% sure, when will I ever be any more sure than this. I have to take that chance, I have to believe that if it's what God wants, then I'll get through it.

I'm having a panic attack now. Help! Do I really believe in this religion? Do I really want to live my life like this? Do I want to spend every night and every weekend alone? Help! Help! Help! Oh God, why is this so hard? Why am I such a wuss? 29 years of age and still acting like a 5 year old. How have I made decisions in the past when I can't seem to get it together on this one at all? I'm not even a really good person, I have to work hard at being even half way good. Right now, I'd like to get out of this country, go to a disco, dance wildly, get drunk, scream, shout, and sing. Can I face the rest of my life knowing I can't drink, can't have a boyfriend, and can't go outdoors without covering my head. If Kate was here right now, I think I'd ring her and ask her to make me a margarita. But she's not! I think the Devils working overtime on me right now. And people think I'm a sensible person you know. It'd make you laugh, wouldn't it?

I'm determined I'm going to do it. I've got to do it. At least, if nothing else, I might come to my senses and realize what a fool I am, at most I'll realize that I made the right decision, and I'm on the right track - enshallah [God-willing]."

I didn't sleep a wink that night. Right up to the last minute I didn't think I'd have the courage to do it. But just before I went out the door I put it on. I never looked back.

It was like all the doubts were gone. It was like Shaytaan had left me. I felt proud. I felt like I was walking ten feet tall. I wanted everyone to know that I was a Muslim. I was proud to be a Muslim. I knew that I had made the right decision and I would never regret it. Subhan Allah [May God be glorified], He made it very easy for me.

Lynda Fitzgerald, Ex-Catholic, Ireland (part 4 of 4)

Description: Lynda finally accept Islam and tells of some internal conflicts she struggled to overcome after doing so.

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Reverting

Two weeks later I went to the Dawa center. I was really frightened and I was afraid I would say something wrong. My friend Khaled and his wife brought me and it was very emotional. At the end, all of us had tears in our eyes. I cried all the way home in the car.

Up to Date

Still, everything wasn't as it should be. In changing my lifestyle, I had become a complete TV addict. My whole life now revolved around prayer and TV in the evening. I wasn't happy about it, but I was too lazy to do anything about it. I would try to read my Islamic books, but I just felt that I couldn't take in any more. Then rumors about me were going around the hospital, and they started to get back to me. This really upset me, because I hated my life to be the subject of every ones curiosity, and I hated to be the brunt of backbiting and rumors. I went home from work one evening, and I felt that I just couldn't face it any longer. I hated coming in and watching TV all night and seeing and talking to no one, and the weekends had become a nightmare. I might not see anyone all weekend. I felt lost and alone. It came time for Isha prayer that night and I just didn't want to do it. This had never happened to me before and it really upset me. I cried solidly for two hours.

The next day my eyes were really swollen and I cried on and off all day. Khaled kept asking me what was wrong and at first I just couldn't tell him, because I felt so ashamed, even though I had done the prayer because I knew I had to. Eventually I told him and he reassured me that even he felt that way sometimes and not to feel bad about it or get upset about it. What I needed was to change my lifestyle, play tennis, go shopping, read a book. I kept arguing that that wouldn't help because I still needed people to talk to, I would still be lonely.

That night I went home, and I felt I was really loosing it, I felt I just couldn't go on. After my prayer I prostrated myself and I prayed really hard "Please God, don't let me loose you, please don't let me loose you." I sat up and turned to the short verses in the back of the Quran and I found Al-Taakathur, and after reading it I realized that I had to let go of all these things I was still attached to, like the TV and worrying about people and what they thought about me. I had to learn to let go. And I felt all my worries leaving me as if they were coming out of my back and floating away.

The next day at Fajr, when I finished my prayer, I got a feeling that I should put my hands in front of me while I was saying my Du'ua. I had seen people doing this but I never understood what it was for. I put out my hands and I prayed for God to help me to let go and to try harder to be a better person. Then I put my hands up to my face and I felt a tingling sensation and a sense of well being and peace and for ages. I was afraid to move in case it went away. But it didn't.

That day at work, I had a visit from a guy in the Computer department - Anwer. I had never met him before but he had heard about me. He told me about the Rajhi mosque, and that there were lectures in English on a Friday. I decided that I would go that Friday. That week I didn't watch any TV, and I played tennis and then I asked one of our limo drivers that I trusted to bring me to the mosque.

Friday morning, I got very nervous and at the last minute, I felt that I didn't want to go. What if I went to the wrong Mosque, what if I did everything wrong. Just as I was going out the door, I prayed to God to guide me and to let everything turn out OK. And, everything did turn out OK. I met the Sameers', an expatriate family from Sri Lanka, living and working in Saudi Arabia, my new family, and they took me in to their home and treated me like one of their own. May God bless them and reward them and I thank Him every day for choosing them and for letting me meet them.

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