

Sophie Jenkins, Ex-Catholic-Protestant, UK

Description: Fed with many misconceptions about Islam, Sophie finally decides to see for herself.

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I was born into a lower middle-class English family; my mother was (and is) a housewife and my father worked at an electronics firm (he is now a lecturer in electronic engineering). My father came from a Catholic background, and my mother from a Protestant one. They had both shared a short spell in the Quaker church in the early 1970's, but by the time I came along, they were strong atheists and religion was never mentioned in our house, let alone practiced. My parents had decided that if we wanted to be religious when we grew up, they would support this.

From a young age, I believed in God, despite not being brought up with this belief, but still I got the feeling that what they were teaching in the Christian school I went to was not right, somehow. I didn't believe in Jesus or the Holy Spirit, it all seemed false, but at school they told us this was the only right way, all other religions were wrong, so I was VERY confused. When you're a small child, you assume adults are always right with no exceptions: what they say, goes. Still, I could not let this go, so I probably, quite wisely, decided to keep my belief in only one God private. I felt guilty for believing something that was 'wrong'. I felt ashamed and I hoped and prayed that I would stop being a heretic soon. When I was young, I was exposed very much to the fear of 'Islamic Fundamentalism', especially with the Salman Rushdie affair at the front of people's minds, I was very frightened of the Muslims in general. There were two Muslim children at my primary school, but they kept their beliefs to themselves, except for the fact that the younger child Ali refused to pray in Assembly.

I had always prayed for God to show me the right way, I always turned to God for help. There was no doubt in my mind that God existed by the time I was 11 or 12 years old, and in high school I began to realize that perhaps my belief in one God wasn't wrong. At this time, I had not really heard of Islam, all I 'knew' about it was that it was a violent religion that treated women like dirt. We were actually taught in SCHOOL that Islam was spread by the sword (in other words by violent and forceful means), that women in Islam were chattels symbolized by their dress, and that Muslims worshipped Mohammed (Salalah Alaihi Was Sallam). I was really disgusted, every time I saw a Muslim lady when shopping in Manchester (there are few Muslims in my area) I thought, 'how can you do that to yourself?? I was really incensed. They did teach us one true thing though, that Muslims believe in only one God, which was something I honestly did not know before then.

I looked into all manner of other religions, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism, but they

all appeared so man-made and contradictory. However one day, I don't know what hit me, but I just felt I had to check whether what I had been taught was true or not. I was also curious because I had been told Muslims believed in one God, and I wanted to see if it were true or not. I saw a book called 'Elements of Islam' in the local library, and secretly I took it out. I turned straight to the section on Muslim women, and I was absolutely astounded by what I read. It was contrary to what I had been taught about Islam and women, and better than anything else I had ever heard of. I didn't doubt what I read, I knew it was true, I knew deep in my heart that all of my prayers had been answered. Islam was the truth that I had been searching for all of my life! Still I felt bad for feeling this, the old guilt from my primary school days came creeping back; how could I believe in this 'wrong' religion? I tried to find evidence to 'prove' to me that Islam was not the truth, but it was impossible: all books that said negative things about Islam, I already knew they were lying. All books that said positive things about Islam, I knew they were telling the truth.

I decided I must be a Muslim, although I couldn't come to terms with it, and I didn't tell anyone. I read every book I could get my hands on, I got a translated copy of the Quran from the library but I couldn't understand it, it was all in Middle English. This didn't put me off - I knew it was only a translation, and what I did gather from it, I liked very much. I knew Islam was for life, that there was no turning back, so I really had to make sure. I ended up studying for two and a half years before chancing upon a chat room in January 1997 that was to change my life. It was the chatroom at [a Muslim website], and the people there were very helpful. The second time I went there I took Shahadah (declaration of faith that makes One a Muslim) in front of people from all over the world.

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