

Aaminah Hernandez, Ex-Christian, USA (part 1 of 2)

Description: Reflections of an American woman. Part 1.

By Aaminah Hernandez

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Growing up in the U.S. in the 1980s, my knowledge of Islam was flawed and minimal. My father taught my brother and I to be aware of the world, interested in other cultures, and well-read. At that time, the media portrayed Islam on the basis of the Iranian Revolution and the conflict in Palestine. Portrayals of women's issues were limited to the "Not Without My Daughter" variety. Though I never saw the movie or read the book, my understanding at that time was that Muslim women were slaves to their husbands, there were no limits to the number of rival wives, wives were beaten or even killed if they gave birth to a daughter, and neglected if they did not give rapid birth to sons. The sight of women in full black coverings, that we were led to believe were very heavy and contained several layers, including veils over their faces, was frightening to a girl raised in the era of Madonna and Cyndi Lauper. In addition to these greater problems, we were taught in school that Middle Eastern women were not allowed to leave their houses and lived in great poverty, sharing their rooms with their rival wives and all the children, rarely seeing their husbands. In our rare and minimal instruction on the history or culture of Islam, no distinction was made between the variety of cultures in the Middle East and Islam as a religion. I did not realize that anyone other than Arabs and some African Americans were Muslim, and I did not realize that not all Arabs were Muslim.

Because my father told me that the best education I would ever receive was the education I could give myself by reading, I became a serious reader. I spent more time in the library than anywhere social, and I read so much that when it was necessary to punish me, my parents knew the only effective way was to take my books away. *Alhamdulillah*, this love of books has remained with me and though I never expected it to happen, this love of learning guided me to Islam. I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* when I was in the fifth grade and although it did not open my mind to Islam, I did refuse to eat pork after that. Even if it did not cause a deep change in my thinking, in later years I would realize that it planted something in my mind and heart; I just was not ready to accept it or put much thought into it.

Over the years I was abused, molested, and otherwise used by many people in my life. This led me to move out of my parents' home when I was 16 years old. My brother remained in the home and struggled with his own issues, including gang activity. I finished high school on time and went on about my life, proud that I could handle so much responsibility on my own. I did not put much thought into God at this time. I became mildly involved with Wicca (white witchcraft), but was only playing with it and realize now how blessed I was that I did not cause serious damage to myself or others with my games. I also began to pick up bits and pieces of religious cultural practices, such as

traditional Celtic and Native American spirituality (I am Native American and Irish) and Hinduism and Buddhism—without actually understanding any of it or connecting it properly with a Higher Power.

I lived a fairly wild life of sex, mild drug use, clubbing and partying. I "loved" everyone and enjoyed myself in every hedonistic way I could, with no concern for my future on this earth or in the Hereafter. I also suffered major depressions; in fact, the depressions began when I was very young, partly in response to the restrictions I felt that my Christian parents placed on me. At times I was suicidal and it was only through the grace of Allah that my attempts did not do any permanent damage to my body or mind.

Although I professed a social conscience and was the first to support all kinds of causes, I actually lived my life very irresponsibly. I did not hold jobs on a regular basis, lived hand-to-mouth, and tried to have little cares. While living with very little, I was in fact very materialistic and self-absorbed. I did nothing truly valuable for society and was a drain on my family and friends.

It was during this time that I met one of my brother's fellow gang members and became seriously involved. Although because of our relationship both my brother and his friend left the gang, there were still many trials awaiting all of us. My new man had a serious drug habit that I was not experienced enough to deal with and could not do anything about. We ended up in all kinds of legal troubles and ran away to a different state to avoid them. During this time, I hit a low point, living in the park, nearly starving to death, suffering miscarriages, and doing things for money that I never would have thought I would do.

Upon our return to our home state my boyfriend was arrested and I discovered I was pregnant again. By some miracle of Allah, my child was healthy and strong and I managed to carry him to term. In between time, my brother had been to jail and converted to Islam but upon release had moved out of town and we had no contact. After my son was born my brother came to visit the family. He told me a lot of what he was learning, and I was impressed with the changes to his personality and manners. It seemed that the strictures of Islam were a very good thing for him. He had previously been diagnosed (I believe correctly) with Schizo-Affective Disorder (Schizophrenia, including hallucinations, with acute depression) but since his conversion he exhibited no symptoms and needed no treatment. My brother had become a gentle and soft-spoken man, dressed in traditional clothing and carried himself with great respect. He shared the basics of Islam with me and I was happy for him that he had found this belief, but had no interest in changing my own life.

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