

Anne Collins, Ex-Christian, USA

Description: After a long journey, a once devote Protestant, Anne Collins, finds Islam and forgiveness from God.

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Category: [Articles](#) > [Stories of New Muslims](#) > [Women](#)

I was raised in a religious Christian family. At that time, Americans were more religious than they are now—most families went to church every Sunday, for example. My parents were involved in the church community. We often had ministers (Protestant "priests") in the house. My mother taught in Sunday school, and I helped her.

I must have been more religious than other children, although I don't remember being so. For one birthday, my aunt gave me a Bible, and my sister a doll. Another time, I asked my parents for a prayer book, and I read it daily for many years.

When I was in junior high school (middle school), I attended a Bible study program for two years. Up to this point, I had read some parts of the Bible, but had not understood them very well. Now was my chance to learn. Unfortunately, we studied many passages in the Old and New Testament that I found inexplicable, even bizarre. For example, the Bible teaches an idea called Original Sin, which means that humans are all born sinful. I had a baby brother, and I knew that babies were not sinful. The Bible has very strange and disturbing stories about Prophet Abraham and Prophet David, for example. I couldn't understand how prophets could behave the way the Bible says they did. There were many, many other things that puzzled me about the Bible, but I didn't ask questions. I was afraid to ask—I wanted to be known as a "good girl." Al-hamdulillah (Thanks to God), there was a boy who asked, and kept asking.

The most critical matter was the notion of Trinity. I couldn't get it. How could God have three parts, one of which was human? Having studied Greek and Roman mythology at school, I thought the idea of the Trinity and powerful human saints very similar to the Greek and Roman ideas of having different so-called "gods" that were in charge of different aspects of life. (Astaghfir-Ullah!) (I seek the forgiveness of God)The boy who asked, asked many questions about Trinity, received many answers, and was never satisfied. Neither was I. Finally, our teacher, a University of Michigan Professor of Theology, told him to pray for faith.

I prayed.

When I was in high school, I secretly wanted to be a nun. I was drawn to the pattern of offering devotions at set times of day, of a life devoted entirely to God, and of dressing in a way that declared my religious lifestyle. An obstacle to this ambition, though, was that I wasn't Catholic. I lived in a mid-Western town where Catholics were a distinct and unpopular minority! Furthermore, my protestant upbringing had instilled in me a distaste

for religious statuary, and a healthy disbelief that dead saints had the ability to help me.

In college, I continued to think and pray. Students often talk and argue about religion, and I heard many different ideas. Like Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens), I studied the Eastern so-called religions: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Hinduism. No help there.

I met a Muslim from Libya, who told me a little about Islam and the Holy Quran. He told me that Islam is the modern, most up-to-date form of revealed religion. Because I thought of Africa and the Middle East as backward places, I couldn't see Islam as modern. My family took this Libyan brother to a Christmas church service. The service was breathtakingly beautiful, but at the end, he asked, "Who made up this procedure? Who taught you when to stand and bow and kneel? Who taught you how to pray?" I told him about early Church history, but his question made me angry at first, and later made me think.

Had the people who designed the worship service really been qualified to do so? How had they known the form that worship should take? Had they had divine instruction?

I knew that I did not believe in many of the teachings of Christianity, but continued to attend church. When the congregation recited pieces I believed to be blasphemous, such as the Nicene Creed, I was silent—I didn't recite them. I felt almost alien in church, almost a stranger. I knew that I did not believe in many of the teachings of Christianity, but continued to attend church.

Horror! Someone very close to me, having dire marital problems, went to a curate of our church for advice. Taking advantage of her pain and self-loathing, he took her to a motel and seduced her.

Up to this point, I had not considered carefully the role of the clergy in Christian life. Now I had to. Most Christians believe that forgiveness comes through the "Holy Communion" service, and that the service must be conducted by an ordained priest or minister. No minister, no absolution.

I went to church again, and sat and looked at the ministers in front. They were no better than the congregation—some of them were worse. How could it be true that the agency of a man, of any human being, was necessary for communion with God? Why couldn't I deal with God directly, and receive His absolution directly?

Soon after this, I found a translation of the meaning of the Quran in a bookstore, bought it, and started to read it. I read it, off and on, for eight years. During this time, I continued to investigate other religions. I grew increasingly aware of and afraid of my sins. How could I know whether God would forgive me? I no longer believed that the Christian model, the Christian way of being forgiven, would work. My sins weighed heavily on me, and I didn't know how to escape the burden of them. I longed for forgiveness.

I read in the Quran:

"...nearest among them in love to the Believers you will find those who say,

'We are Christian': Because amongst them are Men devoted to learning, and men who have renounced the world and are not arrogant. And when they listen to the revelation received by the Messenger, you will see their eyes overflowing with tears, for they recognize the truth. They pray, 'Our Lord! We believe. Write us down among the witnesses. What cause can we have not to believe in God and the truth which has come to us, seeing that we long for our Lord to admit us to the company of the righteous?'" (Quran 5:82-84)

I saw Muslims praying on the TV news, and wanted to learn how. I found a book (by a non-Muslim) that described it, and I tried to do it myself. (I knew nothing of Taharah -- ritual purity -- and did not pray correctly.) I prayed in my own strange, desperate way, secretly and alone, for several years. I memorized some parts of the Quran in English, not knowing that Muslims memorize the Quran in Arabic.

Finally, after eight years of reading the Quran, I found this verse:

"This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favor for you, and chosen Islam as your religion." (Quran 5:3)

I wept for joy, because I knew that, way back in time, before the creation of the Earth, God had written this Quran for me and for others. God had known that Anne Collins, in Cheektowaga, NY, USA, would read this verse of the Quran in May 1986, and be saved.

Now, I knew that there were many things I had to learn, for example, how to offer the formal Muslim prayer. The problem was that I didn't know any Muslims.

Muslims are much more visible in the US now than they were then. I didn't know where to find them. I found the phone number of the Islamic Society in the phone book, and dialed it, but when a man answered, I panicked and hung up. What was I going to say? How would they answer me? Would they be suspicious? Why would they want me, when they had each other and their Islam?

In the next couple of months, I called the mosque a number of times, and each time panicked and hung up. Finally, I did the cowardly thing: I wrote a letter asking for information. The kindly, patient brother at the mosque phoned me, and then started sending me pamphlets about Islam. I told him I wanted to be Muslim, but he told me, "Wait until you are sure." It upset me that he told me to wait, but I knew he was right, that I had to be sure because, once I had accepted Islam, nothing would ever be the same again.

I became obsessed with Islam. I thought about it, day and night. On several occasions, I drove to the mosque (at that time, it was in an old converted house) and circled it many times, hoping to see a Muslim, wondering what it was like inside. Finally, one day in early November 1986, as I was working in the kitchen, I suddenly knew, knew that I was Muslim. Still a coward, I sent the mosque another letter. It said, "I believe in Allah (God), the One True God, I believe that Muhammad was his Messenger, and I want to be counted among the witnesses."

The brother called me on the phone the next day, and I said my shahadah^[1] on the

phone to him. He told me then that God had forgiven all my sins at that moment, and that I was as pure as a newborn baby.

I felt the burden of sin slip off my shoulders, and wept for joy. I slept little that night, weeping, and repeating God's name.

Forgiveness had been granted. Alhamdulillah!

Endnotes:

[1] The statement a person makes when accepting Islam (and many times a day thereafter: I testify that there is no deity other than God, and I testify that Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, was a messenger of God.

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