Karla, Ex-Christian, USA

Description: Karla explains how her theological dissatisfaction with the doctrine of Jesus as God and her discovery of the rights given to women in Islam led her to become a Muslim.
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My conversion process to Islam was a long one (it took 20 years!). It started when I was twelve. I went to this overpriced private school, very Anglophile and we were made to wear uniforms. We studied in Forms as opposed to grades, etc. Anyways, it was in a class where we were studying the major religions of the world, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, each being presented in a booklet format that my fascination with Islam began. I don't know why, but my first impression of Muslims was that they weren't hypocrites like the Christians I knew. I remember two things really standing out for me; one, being the focus on one God alone. This was very important for me, for ever since I remember, I've had questions about the doctrinal aspects of Christianity, especially the points that talked about Jesus being God. To me this went against the first commandment.

The second item that stood out was Salat (prayers). Not just praying five times/day, but how the majority of the prayer focused on worshiping God alone. In Christianity, our prayers tended to be "gimme prayers", i.e., "God, give me this...God give me that."

I went to college in Washington DC, which had a pretty large Muslim population. My interest in Islam was still definitely there, although I was way too shy to openly pursue a deeper understanding of it. Instead, I would settle for what I called, "drive by mosquings", which was simply to drive around the Islamic Center on Mass Ave., while being too shy to go in. Once I called to see if they had classes for people interested in Islam, but I never received a call back. I did buy myself a copy of the Qur'an, and began to read it. It was amazing. It just kind of went into my heart, y'know? The thing that really amazed me about Islam from the beginning, were the rights given to women. I know many people today would laugh at me for such a statement, but as somebody who has read the Bible--I saw rights given to women in Islam that were never given to women in the Bible. Women were given the right to refuse a partner in marriage; whereas, in typical Christian Western Culture at the time (600s CE), women were basically viewed as their father's property, to be married as he saw fit. Women were guaranteed a portion of their father's and husband's inheritance; whereas, in the West, that inheritance typically went only to the eldest son. Women had the right to own property and enter into contracts; a right that women in the United States did not obtain until the mid-Nineteenth Century. The Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, preached against female infanticide--a common practice of the time, and one that is still a problem in India and China. Of course, today it is a high-tech female infanticide--abortions done after an ultrasound to determine the sex of the child. Both men and women were admonished to

seek knowledge from "the cradle to the grave." Unfortunately, culture seems to interfere with some of those rights nowadays.

During my senior year, I found a dawa program on TV called, "Islam." It featured a western looking woman anchor who would interview people on various topics regarding Islam. I believe it was put out by the Islamic Information Service, but I'm not sure. I became totally addicted to this show and I would set my VCR to tape it if I was going to be out. I don't remember which channel it was on--just that it was shown on Fridays, and that each show began with "In the name of God, Most Merciful, Most Gracious." When the Shahadah show came on, I knew I believed so I said it with my TV. Unfortunately, I did not know any Muslims to talk to about Islam. I was also very worried about what my friends and family would think. Sometime following graduation (I think this was 1990 or 1991), the Saudi Embassy sponsored an Islamic Art exhibit downtown. I remember asking one of the exhibitors if they had any additional information on Islam--and the guy said, "No." I was crushed. I just didn't know where to turn to find out more about Islam or who I could turn to, to have my questions answered. I was just too shy to go into a mosque. I didn't even know if I could go in, as a woman. I didn't know if I'd be properly dressed, or if I'd be the only non-Arabic speaking person there. I just kept reading my Qur'an, and asking God the questions. Hoping God would answer my prayers.

My hunger for God did not cease, so I decided to go with a more conventional religion, and became a Christian sometime during my mid-20s. The problem was, I always had questions/doubts regarding Christianity mainly about the concept of the Trinity/Divinity of Jesus. Jesus as God just didn't make sense to me as it would go against the First commandment and what Jesus himself seemed to practice. He always focused on God the Father, so to speak. When asked, he said that the Greatest Commandment was to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. God--singular. That's something I've always strived to do, and hope to improve at still. I asked a few different pastors about my doubts, and the response I would get would be, "You simply need to have faith." I remember in one Bible study class this guy started saying all these lies about Muslims. I spoke up, and said, "That's not true!" and began to tell the people in my Sunday School about what Muslims really believed. Even then I couldn't deny the Shahadah. I still believed that there was only one God and that Muhammad was the Prophet of God.

While at grad school in Tennessee, I contacted the Muslim Student Association on campus. Two sisters met me at a local bakery for tea. Unfortunately, they didn't really understand that I wanted to convert and the whole meeting was rather bizarre. I decided that I would just consider myself a Monotheist, and call it a day. I would read on all of the major Monotheistic faiths Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. I became more and more uncomfortable with Christianity, though. If I went into a church and there was a crucifix on the wall, "it would weird me out!" It seemed like an idol that people were worshipping. I did enjoy learning more about Judaism and found it to be the closest to Islam.

I joined my current company almost two years ago. Coincidentally during my HR orientation, there was a guy who I would work a lot with there. He ended up working for

me on numerous projects, and we became friends. He was just out of college, and was a "rebel". I would ask him many questions, such as how he could drink, if he was a Muslim. I even threatened to tell his Mom! I also asked him why he didn't go to Jummah (Friday) prayer? etc. Over the course of a year, I realized that in talking to him, I was really talking to myself. (Just to make things clear, I have never drunk!)

So around last February, I went to the local Islamic Center's New Muslims class on a Wednesday night, and to surprise there was nobody there. I was about to go back home, but one of the brothers kept saying, 'just wait for Isha (the evening prayer)...the Imam (religious leader) will be here'. Even though I felt tempted to stay and wait, I was a bit uncomfortable, so I left. About four weeks later, I tried again, and to my delight there was a class going on that night. I first said the Shahadah in DC in front of a TV set, and now after 10-11 years I was saying it once again in front of the Imam, a Muslim sister, and a whole bunch of people interested in Islam. Since that time, I've learned to pray (something I had tried to teach myself through the Web and videos for years!) and begun to study Arabic. Insha'Allah (God willing), one day I'll be able to read and understand the Qur'an in Arabic. I'm totally amazed that I can already read certain bits of the Qur'an; although, my vocabulary does not allow me to understand much...yet.

Monday, October 8th 2001, was a momentous day in my life as a Muslim as well. I wore hijab (Muslim head covering) for the first time ever to work as part of the "Scarves for Solidarity Campaign". I was the celebrity at work-- people kept walking by my office door, as I had posted articles about "Scarves for Solidarity" as well as a note on Islam on my door. People asked me, "Are you one of them?" or "Are you a Muslim?" I said, "Yes." So now I'm out of the "Muslim-closet" at work. I guess people just assumed that a blonde-haired, blue-eyed person could not be a Muslim. The main question people seem to ask, is "How could you, an educated American woman convert to Islam--a religion that oppresses women?" They are quick to equate the rights of women in Afghanistan with the rights of Muslim women everywhere else. Basically, what I tell them is that the Qur'an gives women more rights than the Bible does. Once again, this was one of the things that first drew me to Islam.

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