

Katherine Bullock, Ex-Christian, Canada (part 1 of 2)

Description: An educated woman struggles between what she has heard of Islam and what is really Islam, as well as the actual existence of God.

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What am I doing down here? I wonder, my nose and forehead pressed to the floor as I kneel in prayer. My kneecaps ache, my arm muscles strain as I try to keep the pressure off my forehead. I listen to strange utterings of the person praying next to me. It's Arabic, and they understand what they are saying, even if I don't. So. I make up my own words, hoping God will be kind to me, a Muslim only 12 hours old. OK. God, I converted to Islam because I believe in you, and because Islam makes sense to me. Did I really just say that? I catch myself, bursting into tears. What would my friends say if they saw me like this, kneeling, nose pressed to the floor?...They'd laugh at me. Have you lost your mind? They'd ask. You can't seriously tell me you are religious. Religious...I was once a happy 'speculative atheist,' how did I turn into a believer and a Muslim? I ask myself. I turn my mind into the past and attempt a whirlwind tour through my journey. But where did it begin? Maybe it started when I first met practicing Muslims. This was in 1991, at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

I was an open-minded, tolerant, liberal woman. 24 years old. I saw Muslim women walking around the International Centre and I felt sorry for them. I knew they were oppressed. My sorrow increased when I asked them why they covered their hair, why they wore long sleeves in summer, why they were so ill-treated in Muslim countries, and they told me that they wore the veil, and they dressed so, because God asked them too. Poor things. What about their treatment in Muslim countries? That's culture, they would reply. I knew they were deluded, socialised/brainwashed from an early age, into believing this wicked way of treating women. But I noticed how happy they were, how friendly they were, how solid they seemed. I saw Muslim men walking around the international centre.

There was even a man from Libya - the land of terrorists. I trembled when I saw them, lest they do something to me in the name of God. I remembered the television images of masses of rampaging Arab men burning effigies of President Bush, all in the name of God. What a God they must have, I thought. Poor things that they even believe in God, I added, secure in the truth that God was an anthropomorphic projection of us weak human beings. But I noticed that these men were very friendly. I noticed how helpful they were. I perceived an aura of calmness. What a belief they must have, I thought. But it puzzled me. I had read the Koran, and hadn't detected anything special about it. That was before, when the Gulf War broke out. What kind of God would persuade men to go War, to kill innocent citizens of another country, to rape women, to demonstrate against the US?

I decided I'd better read the Holy book on whose behalf they claimed they were acting. I read a Penguin classic, surely a trustworthy book, and I couldn't finish it, I disliked it so much. Here was a paradise described with virgin women in it for the righteous (what was a righteous woman to do with a virgin woman in Paradise?); here was a God destroying whole cities at a stroke.

No wonder the women are oppressed, and these fanatics storm around burning the US flag, I thought. But the Muslims I put this to seemed bewildered. Their Quran didn't say things in that way. Perhaps I had a bad translation?

Suddenly the praying person I am following stands up. I too stand up, my feet catching on the long skirt I wear; I almost trip. I sniff, trying to stop the tears. I must focus on praying to God. Dear God, I am here because I believe in you, and because during my research of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism, Islam made the most sense.

Bending over, my hands at my knees, I try hard to reassure myself. God. Please help me to be a good Muslim. A Muslim! Kathy, how could you - a white western woman who is educated - convert to a religion which makes its women second class citizens!

But Kingston's Muslims became my friends, I protest. They welcomed me into their community warmly, without question. I forgot that they were oppressed and terrorists. This seems like the start of my journey. But I was still an atheist. Or was I?

I had looked into the starry night, and contemplated the universe. The diamond stars strewn across the dark sky twinkled mysterious messages to me. I felt hooked up to something bigger than myself. Was it a collective human consciousness? Peace and tranquility flowed to me from the stars. Could I wrench myself from this feeling and declare there is no higher being? No higher consciousness? Haven't you ever doubted the existence of God? I would ask my believing Christian and Muslim friends. No, they replied. No? No? This puzzled me.

Was God that obvious? How come I couldn't see God. It seemed too much a stretch of my imagination. A being out there, affecting the way I lived. How could God listen to billions of people praying, and deal with each second of that person's life? It's impossible. Maybe a First Cause, but one who intervened? And what about the persistence of injustice in the world? Children dying in war. A just, good God couldn't allow that. God didn't make sense. God couldn't exist. Besides, we evolved, so that disposed of a First Cause anyway.

We kneel down again, and here I am, sniffing, looking sideways at my fingers on the green of my new prayer mat. I like my prayer mat. It has a velvety touch to it, and some of my favourite colours: a purple mosque on a green background. There is a path leading to a black entrance of the mosque and it beckons me. The entrance to the mosque seems to contain the truth, it is elusive, but it is there. I am happy to be beckoned to this entrance.

When I was much younger I had a complete jigsaw picture of the world. It fell apart

sometime during the third or fourth year of my undergraduate study. In Kingston I had reminded myself that I had once been a regular churchgoer, somewhat embarrassed, since I knew that religious people were slushy/mushy, quaint, boring, old fashioned people. Yet God had seemed self-evident to me then. The universe made no sense without a Creator Being who was also omnipotent.

Leaving church I had always had a feeling of lightness and happiness. I felt the loss of that feeling. Could it be that I had once had a connection to God which was now gone? Maybe this was the start of my journey? I tried to pray again, but found it extraordinarily difficult. Christians told me that people who didn't believe in Lord Jesus Christ were doomed. What about people who've never heard of Jesus? Or people who follow their own religion? And society historically claimed women were inferior because Christianity told us it was Eve's punishment; women were barred from studying, voting, owning land. God was an awful man with a long white beard. I couldn't talk to him. I couldn't follow Christianity, therefore God couldn't exist.

But then I discovered feminists who believed in God, Christian women who were feminists, and Muslim women who believed Islam did not condone a lot of what I thought integral to their religion. I started to pray and call myself a 'post-Christian feminist believer.'

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