

Molly Carlson, Ex-Christian, USA (part 1 of 2)

Description: She was searching for what turned out to be already a major part of who she is: Islam.

By Molly Carlson

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

I remember it so well. I remember the exact moment when my entire life changed, and I realized that I was no longer thinking "if I became Muslim", but that I had at some point begun thinking "when I become Muslim." It was no longer optional for me. It had become inevitable.

When it hit me, the realization was like cold water over my head. It was like that moment when you realize you had forgotten something important at home and your stomach flops and you can't breathe.

At that moment, I realized that I was no longer the American girl I wanted to convince myself I was, and that I had not been that girl for a long time. I remember the sun on the snow. I remember the road in front of me. I remember forgetting, for a second, where I was driving to. And I remember being scared, unequivocally and irrationally scared.

This realization, this conversion of self, had been decades in coming. When people say □ when the religion says □ that we are born Muslims by the will of God, I do not doubt it. I certainly was and I knew I was, although exactly what I was, I didn't know at that time.

Still I knew what I was not. I was not a Catholic Christian no matter how many Hail Mary's I prayed, or crosses I wore, or Church services my mother brought me to. I studied and I prayed and I searched for the final answer to the questions that plagued me, while all the time the little voice in my heart gnawed at the strings of my soul.

There was a series of events throughout my life, legends, memories of my own, and dreams that made no sense in the moment I dreamed them, but have become clearer in reference to all that I know now.

My first brief introduction to Islam came in the form of a book called *King of the Wind*, by Marguerite Henry, which chronicles the story of a small Moroccan stable boy and his special foal. I was an avid reader at a young age.

Even though I don't recall how old I was at the time, I do remember vividly the part about him fasting in the month of Ramadan. I kind of consider this to be the original awakening of my heart to what I really was, but without any other serious exposure to Islam in the years after reading that book, I lost it all again.

Some time later, assuming I was around the age of eight when I read *King of the Wind*, when I was around the age of twelve I was plagued by mysterious dreams that I didn't quite understand of things that I didn't know anything about. They weren't scary, they

were more of the sub-conscious reflections of the yearning I had inside.

In the one I remember most vividly I was standing inside a perfectly square, wood-paneled room with patterned carpet laying in one direction. There were burning lanterns to light the room.

Off to my left side there was a carved wooden screen behind which was another room, a room I knew in this dream to be the room that women used. I also knew that a woman like I was not allowed to be in the room I was standing in.

Not only was I standing in this forbidden room, the room for men, but I was also standing there with nothing covering my head.

As a twelve-year-old Christian girl, the concept of separate rooms for men and women and the concept of covering your head was something I quite literally had never been told about nor exposed to. Yet in this dream I knew what I was doing wrong, what I needed to do right, and there was no question in my heart as to why.

I felt the love and concern of the merciful God watching me stand in the room and I felt like I had let my Creator down. This sense of shame and sadness are what stand out to me the most vivid of the dream, although I could draw the room and the carved panel. I remember them so well.

I also remember the old-fashioned dress I was wearing. Even though in the dream I did not go into it, I even remember what the women's section looked like. I consider this dream to be the reason I feel so strongly about wearing hijab, I feel like God was making me ready for the things I would need to do just one decade later.

There were other dreams, fleeting glimpses of things like Sunnah beards that made no sense at the time. It was a decade later, maybe five months or so before I converted, that my last dream came. This was not so much as dream as it was an unbidden vision.

I had just ended a phone conversation with a Muslim acquaintance of mine in which he had teased me about converting. I was adamant that while I respected Islam, I did not believe it and I was fighting hard to keep myself in denial. I was so scared that I didn't want to acknowledge what I already was. But God had a different idea.

The moment after I ended the call, I lay back on my bed, closed my eyes, and was instantly lifted into another level. Before me stood a woman covered in black from head to toe, and on her face was what looked like a ninja mask: a veil that covered the lower half of her face, but was connected to the top by a thin strip that ran up her nose and between her eyes.

I was fascinated and terrified by her. I drew closer to look, and in that moment I realized that it was me behind the veil and that I was looking back at myself with an I-told-you-so look in my eyes, as if I were simply looking in a mirror.

I recoiled in horror, jumped almost straight out of my bed, and threw my phone across the room. I was terrified, I was shocked, and inside a little part of me knew that this was the beginning of the end of all I was comfortable with. I knew I had seen a glimpse of my

own future.

Molly Carlson, Ex-Christian, USA (part 2 of 2)

Description: Finally, how she felt that Islam was part of who she was long ago.

By Molly Carlson

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

My initial explorations into Islam began right after September 11, 2001. I was in my first semester of college and I was 18 years old.

I worked with a girl from Saudi Arabia. I tutored a Pakistani girl with a face veil, and I was friends with a guy from Palestine. All Muslims, of a varying degree, and all people I had never really questioned before, regarding their beliefs.

The girl I tutored, since then, became one of my closest friends on earth, and I would talk about her culture all the time. However, after 9/11, I began to question her more deeply about Islam and its beliefs.

My reasoning was that I knew these Muslim people, and none of them were terrorists, none of them were extremists. And I felt sorry that because of their religious affiliation, they were the targets of immense amounts of hatred; especially in the initial months after the attacks.

I wanted to know more in order to counsel my family and friends against hatred, and I wanted to know more because when you don't understand something you fear it.

I even went to the length of borrowing an abaya, hijab, and niqab from my Pakistani friend and wore them to both school and work to know exactly how differently I would be treated in these clothes than I was treated as a normal American girl on any other day.

The difference was extreme. It was harsh, and in some instances, even brought me to tears. My respect for my friend grew, and has not wavered at all in these years since. She was, and still is, my hero.

She and another very close friend of mine □ a man who is a convert himself and grew up in somewhat similar circumstances to my own □ were two of my biggest influences.

I would sit for hours upon hours with my convert friend talking about Islam □ why he converted, and how he converted, and all of the information he had to give to me, he gave freely.

He had asked the same questions I was asking and he knew their answers. If it were not for him, I would not be the Muslim I am today. My understanding of Islam grew steadily at a snail's pace over the next three and a half years.

I respected Islam, but I had never gotten to the point of actually thinking that I myself would become Muslim. And in the end, it would be the hardest decision of my life.

Here I enter into a point of my story that I sometimes tell and sometimes do not. It matters in the grand scheme of how I became Muslim, but when it comes to the bare bones of why I converted, it matters not at all. However, since I want to be honest with you, my readers, I feel that it is important to tell.

The very first question I get from other Muslims when they see my hijab is: "Are you Muslim?" And then 99% of the time the second question right after it is: "Are you married to a Muslim man?" The meaning being that I married a man who was Muslim and converted later under his influence.

To this I always say no, but to say that a man had nothing to do with it would be a lie. The final step towards my conversion was to become involved with a Muslim man. For his privacy, and out of respect for him, I will not talk much about it, but I feel it must be addressed.

This is because people who look at a woman or a man who has converted while either married or involved with a Muslim person, think that they did it for their significant others. I want to be a standing example that no, this is not always automatically how it is.

If I had converted for him, I would have married him when he came to me with a proposal, but I did not, and that was the second hardest decision of my life. He was not my destination, he was the door through which I needed to step. It was through him that I met some of the people who are the most important in my life, both as a person and as a Muslim.

The Osman family took me in without a second word. They didn't even reproach my boyfriend for bringing me to them, and I respect them for that and many other things. I remember the first night I met them, how "at home" I felt within their family, and how much a part of them I already was.

I think that the father knew, that God put the knowledge in his heart, that I was someone they needed to embrace. I can tell you, beloved readers, with 100% conviction that had I never known the Osman family, I would have never become the Muslim woman I am today, and that I would possibly never have embraced Islam.

Bhai-ji and his family were and are my greatest heroes, my greatest loves, my greatest influences, and my greatest teachers. To them I owe everything.

Four months after meeting them, sometime in early March 2005, and not long after that moment while driving in which I realized who I had become, I took Shahadah in their living room surrounded by people who loved me more than I will ever understand.

The feeling inside of me the moment after I swore to the truest belief I have ever had: "I testify that there is no God but God, and I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of God," is a feeling I will never be able to describe in words.

It felt as if I were glowing so brightly from the inside that I would explode into tiny bits

of light. I felt the hand of God inside me taking away my sins and making me new. The supreme happiness of that moment will live in me forever because I glimpsed paradise in that eternal second.

I remember the moment I knew that everything had changed. I remember the moment in which everything did change. Throughout my life I was always the person that I am now, by the will of God, it just took me 22 years to get to where I could realize it.

Since that day, since that decision, I have never looked back. I have never regretted what I did because I have found more meaning and more pleasure in my life this past year and half, than I did in the 22 years leading up to it.

I would never be anyone other than who I am now. And that, my friends, is the true conversion of my soul.

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