

## Stephanie, Ex-Catholic, South Africa (part 1 of 6)

**Description:** How her search for the truth begins.

By Stephanie

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My name is Sadiqah Ismat (otherwise known as Stephanie by my family and other Christian loved ones) and I live in Cape Town, South Africa. My journey home has been an extremely complex one, with many layers being revealed one by one, and I wanted to write in detail about my trials after reversion so others may be helped thereby - so be warned: my story is rather long! By the sheer grace and mercy of Almighty God, I have come home! It has been an exciting and *very* surprising journey - if you were to tell me three years ago that I would leave Christianity and become a Muslim, I would have freaked out and thought you were absolutely crazy, as I was a *very* happy Catholic Christian back in 2008.

### My Background

I come from a suburban, middle-class South African family of Dutch/Afrikaans origin, who are wonderful, loving Protestant Christians. I was born in 1984, and grew up rather alone as I was over a decade younger than my sister and two brothers. My mother was (and still is) a very active and devout member of the Pentecostal church, but my dad, although a good Christian man, didn't attend church. He was a very open-minded person, and I was much more comfortable speaking to him about religion than my mom.

I was raised on rather fundamentalist Christian teachings, which meant I was taught from an early age that if you didn't believe in Jesus Christ (may God praise him) and accept him as your Saviour, you would go to hell. Other religions, even Catholicism, were taboo. Their souls were believed lost, their God was seen as another God besides the Christian God. Not surprisingly, I grew up with a great fear of God and of Hell. I said my prayers every day, so that I would be safe from the evil one. Subjects like the devil and deliverance from demonic spirits, were discussed in the house by my mom and her friends, whether on the phone or in the lounge/kitchen. She was in the healing ministry, and very well-versed in the Bible; the spiritual matriarch of the family who inspired fear and respect in me. I was a very timid and anxious child, and believed what she said was God's law, so I followed it - or else.

When I was 12, I accepted Jesus Christ, may God praise him, "in my heart as my Lord and Saviour" as all Protestant Christians do, but don't remember much about what happened after. At the same time, I had a Catholic friend I loved dearly. Many a time I visited her house, and saw the pictures, statues, Rosaries, and crucifixes, and I was fascinated. I learned about the Christian practice of fasting (Lent) as well. I loved tradition and order, and wondered why my own family did not teach me about Lent and

the Saints. Then she invited me to her church. It was beautiful inside, quite different to the plain, modern churches I had been to, and I was amazed. My heart was touched deeply, and it was the start of a long fascination and love for Catholicism. (It took ten years to muster the courage to explore it, as I was afraid I would go to Hell if I converted.) It was about this time that my friend gave me a Catholic devotional object. When I brought it home, I was told by my mom that I must give it back. I feared God would be upset if I kept it, so I obeyed. I worried continuously about whether I was saved or not. From then until I was 21, I went to church very rarely. The churches my mom went to had very emotional worship services where people fell down when prayed over, and I was freaked out. So I stopped going, occupying myself at home with hobbies like astronomy and painting, and loved going to my friend's house. After High School we went our separate ways. I moved away to another suburb. At this time I was ill with severe depression and anxiety, which lasted for about three years, and which I needed psychiatric treatment for. I was confused and lacked a sense of purpose and direction in my life. This was the darkest part of my life in which my mother was heroic in her support.

## My Search Begins

My mother had believed from when I was in her womb, that God had a special plan for me. I was raised to believe I was destined for high and extraordinary things, and yet I had a very low self-esteem and wanted to be normal. It was very painful for me knowing I was "different". In high school I was a loner and some of my peers thought I was weird, which didn't make things easier. I lived in my own fantasy world.

In 2005 when I was 21, I began to search for a church to go to, and after exploring Methodists, I went to an Anglican church where I got baptized and confirmed. It was also at this time that I had a strong urge to become a nun, as I loved the other-world, counter-cultural dedication they had, and also soon after saw this as a confirmation of my mother's hopes for me. I committed myself to Jesus as a celibate. It was about this time, in 2006, that I began to be interested in wearing a veil like nuns do. I started with a small rectangular scarf which I wore all day, and as the time went on, I wore bigger scarves.

In Cape Town, there is a good Muslim history, beginning with Malay slaves brought here in the 17th century, so we had a fair amount of local Muslims (mostly Malay/coloured), even though Muslims only make up about 2% of South Africa's population compared to 80% Christian. I was drawn to the *hijab*, which covers the neck as well as the head, but my mom said I would "look like a Muslim" and this put me off, even though it began in me a deep fascination and respect for Muslim women. (It was funny, but, despite her remarks, she - and all my family - accepted me veiled and were not ashamed to go out with me. I think it was hard for her, but she allowed me freedom after I turned 21.) I was also drawn to dressing modestly in long skirts, which I began to sew myself (at first with my mom's help). This was because I could find anything long enough in the shops - I am 5'11" tall! My desire to be a nun led me on a journey to discover the dignity of my womanhood, the blessings of modesty and love for the veil. It also sowed the seeds of my interest in dressmaking and fashion design.

**Description:** Her life as a Catholic.

By Stephanie

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### Life as a Catholic

In 2007, I began to attend the local Catholic Church and began a year-long initiation into Roman Catholicism. The day I became Catholic, March 23<sup>rd</sup> - 2008, was one of the happiest days of my life, and I still look back on it with fondness.

*I was never to know that it wasn't yet the end of the road...*

As a new Catholic, I was enamoured with the Church and felt I was home at last. The following year (2009) I got involved in the ministry of sacristan (those who set the altar for Mass and get things ready for each celebration), which I loved dearly with all my heart; I had done it as an Anglican, too. But I soon started to be dissatisfied with the way things were done in the Church, which I had once believed was so strict and traditional. I was particularly upset at the modern and casual attitude to worship, and felt an oddity in my Church as I was the only woman who covered her head. I didn't accept the modern explanation that it was not necessary anymore; it didn't make sense. I believed that the Bible verses of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 were valid for all times and cultures.

Because there was a decline in modesty and head covering for women after radical Feminism came in the 60's, I blamed all of it on Feminism which I hated. I believed that it stripped women of their modesty and dignity, so I defended the Church position as written in Scripture and Church tradition, about women being subordinate to their husbands and that they should remain silent in Church. I was as faithful to these teachings as I could be, I refused to accept roles traditionally designated for men. In doing so, I got into arguments with my feminist lady friends and felt terrible, because I seemed like a woman-hater. I was constantly at odds with the Church letting women take leadership roles, and anything that reeked of Feminism set me off writing unpopular letters to the local Catholic paper! If these teachings about women were in the Bible, why were they not being followed? In the end, I realized it was because some of them were not reasonable. I also defended modesty (which was reasonable), but kept on feeling isolated, surrounded by women in Church, who were dressed in an indecent fashion. I was confused about why nothing was being taught by the Church about modesty. The Catholic Catechism was so clear, and at the same time, so vague; it spoke of modesty generally, but gave no guidelines at all, leaving it up to us to decide. I was an unhappy and bitter woman, defending a lost cause. It was ironic, but the Catholic name I took was "Dolores" which meant "sorrow"!

Every time I saw a Muslim woman in *hijab*, I envied her and wished I could be one, too. I felt a kinship with them that I never felt with Catholic women, and longed to be in their company. I smiled at every woman in *hijab* when passing them by. Not surprisingly I was also mistaken for a Muslim myself, but it was better than being mistaken for a nun! I would be embarrassed when strangers greeted me "Hello Sister" even in the supermarket, and my priest scolded me for dressing like someone I was not. So I wore my veils Muslim style, adding a crucifix so they wouldn't mistake me for a Muslim close up. When I did this people did not confuse me for a Muslim, but I was still aware I looked like a Muslim. This didn't bother me, as I had such a love for them, and defended them when they were criticized, but I sometimes felt like a two-faced fraud. *Who am I? A Catholic? Or a Muslim?* I read novels set in the Middle East and about Muslim characters, watched all the TV programs and films I could find, even Al-Jazeera news, just to see veiled women and prostrating people, and my interest was piqued further.

Around the same time to converting to Catholicism, I had tested my call to be a nun five times at four convents: The first four attempts were September 2006 at an Anglican convent, November-December 2008 at a Carmelite Catholic convent, January 2009 at another Catholic convent, the Poor Clares, and again at the same Carmelite convent from October 2009-January 2010 - all without success.

I still remember an incident in the Carmelite convent. I was staying in the guest quarters; it was about Nov/Dec 2009, and I was forbidden to wear my veil in the convent, which made me very sad. The convent was located in a suburb with a Mosque, and I heard the beautiful and haunting call to prayer on many an occasion, especially when I stood in the bathroom with an open window. When I heard it, I stood in front of the mirror, and took my square scarf I used for a curtain for the window, and put it on my head, fantasizing that I was a Muslim! I wondered what it would be like.

Another venture as a Catholic, was as an aspiring thinker and writer. After I developed a rich prayer life from 2007, I had some spiritual experiences and wrote about subjects like the Eucharist, the Trinity and the Incarnation (as well as womanhood, modesty and the veil aforementioned). I was deeply devoted to these Christian mysteries and although the Trinity was difficult to understand at first, I felt that it made sense in some spiritual way incomprehensible to the mind. (I saw there being two types of logic - the logic of reason and the logic of faith. The former was our human intellect, and the latter was a higher intellect which dwelt in our spirits, and which only made sense when we had blind faith in some doctrine. The problem was, that "blind faith" could easily be distorted into personal opinions...) The doctrine that calls Mary, peace be upon her, the Mother of God also seemed strange, but also made some logical sense - if Jesus, peace be upon him, was seen as God. Out of these doctrines, I developed this notion of God as being the "state of supreme Being/Happiness." Catholics taught that Mary is an example for the Church, so we all share in her Motherhood of God. This would mean that we can, in a mystical sense, "give birth" to God in the world! With this understanding I had of God, I felt afraid, because I felt like I was limiting God dangerously to mere concepts. This could lead to thinking that we humans had some sort of power over Him.

I accepted Christian doctrines unquestioningly (until recently when I felt compelled to question them due to my unhappy situation). Because of my writings, I felt I was blessed with much knowledge, so I would be held more accountable on the Last Day for leaving this faith behind. This made me believe I could never turn back on Christianity. I wouldn't have dared! What! Leave this faith behind and lose my soul to Hell? Abandon Jesus as God? No, I was truly convinced I would remain Catholic, my faith was unquestioned and strong! And my mom, I didn't even want to think of what she would say! I trembled at the very thought of leaving Jesus behind. Yet I couldn't deny my increasing interest in Islam, as much as I tried my best to push it away.

In August 2010, I discovered another Catholic convent, Dominican enclosed contemplative nuns, quite far from home, which met and even exceeded my expectations. Their spirituality fitted mine - they focused on Truth and Purity, the two values I most highly esteem. After a two month visit, I remained on and entered officially on the 7<sup>th</sup> November 2010 (at all the other convents I was just a visitor). I truly thought I found my home at last, but still something dissatisfied me, particularly that I was cut off from the world around me and still didn't feel *free*. After another two months I left and returned home without regret. By this time, my five-year desire to be a nun was over for good. It was January 2011.

## Stephanie, Ex-Catholic, South Africa (part 3 of 6)

**Description:** Her inner struggle.

By Stephanie

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### THE INNER STRUGGLE

To illustrate my internal struggles, here follows excerpts I recently collected from various emails to friends over the last two years.

**2 July 2009 :** *Actually I love Muslims, because of their strict views and sometimes I watch a Muslim program on TV just to get a glimpse of their beauty. Their practice of modesty is called "hijab". They have a lot to remind us Christians of!*

**1 Feb 2010:** *To be honest, I am going through a crisis in my faith, my identity and my vocation. So my crisis, is that **I am Muslim on the outside and Catholic on the inside!** I cannot bear to forsake Jesus, but I cannot help liking the Muslim way of life! I like both, and that seems to put me on the margin between Christianity and Islam.*

**16 Feb 2010:** *I have had an increasing attraction over the last year to the Middle-Eastern/Muslim culture. **I can personally say that if I would have to choose my***

**religion according to my present feelings, I would convert to Islam!**

**2 Mar 2010:** ...I have become somewhat angry and disillusioned at the worldliness seeping in the Church and obscuring its light. ... **Sometimes I look at Muslims and dearly wish I could be one, as I have been fascinated with Islam for the last year or two, but then I know I cannot, because I am attached to Jesus so much.**

I watch two Muslim programs every week, just out of interest. On the one program there was a man who became Muslim. He said what he liked about the religion was its simplicity, and that he loved how Muslims are faithful to showing their faith in the way they live and dress; you can practically see a Muslim by the way they look. These are the very reasons why I am fascinated with it as well. I spoke to a middle-aged Muslim lady at the local material shop I go to for my sewing needs. The shop is run by Muslims, and I spoke to that lady before, because she asked why I also wear the veil. I said to her that although I am not a Muslim, I am a "friend of Muslims". The young man behind the counter once said to me last year that I look nice in my scarf. I was overjoyed at the compliment. **Here were people who understood me!** It made me so happy!

**It was quite funny, but once, quite a while back when I was shopping...with my mother, I was dressed in my veil like a Muslim, and my mom said to me offhand: "You should have been born a Muslim!" I said to her with a smile: "I know!"** I certainly didn't want to convert, but as I find my interest in Islam growing, I worry that I will lose my Christian faith anyway, despite all this ... My beliefs concerning women (and even some on marriage) are the same as the Islamic ones and **I sometimes feel like I fit in better with them than I do amongst Catholics. I don't feel that belonging so much as I do amongst Muslim women.**

**3 Mar 2010:** She said I must try and find the cause of my love for veiling and I was frustrated when she brought that up. I felt vexed when she said that the "Catholic head covering" is not enough for me so I naturally adopt the "extreme form of Muslim veil." What is a "Catholic head covering" anyway? I can use a mantilla for Mass, yes, but I can't go out in public with it, so that is why I don't use it! **Do I have to be Muslim to like veiling?**

**5 Jun 2010:** I must confess some other things, **I have a strong interest in Islam, I see too many options in Christianity.** Islam seems so timeless and changeless, and Christianity seems to have changed so much that it has become unrecognizable.

**18 Jan 2011:** I have told you before that I have had a fascination for Islam, which grew up until I put a stop to it as I was afraid it would take me down the wrong path. Soon after that, I went to the convent. When I returned, the interest returned, and indeed, it is drawing me so much that I decided to investigate Islam further.

This religion draws me a lot, because **I find myself behaving more like a Muslim than a Christian; it is as if my personal views on many things (especially on modesty and the veil) are reflected in Islam. This situation I am in now is actually following the very same pattern as my interest in Catholicism** - I was too afraid to tell mom at first; I was too afraid to explore Catholicism for fear of damnation; I was secretive in studying it and at first; and practised it before I decided on any possibility of conversion.

**As a Christian, I feel increasingly lonely, because I am alone in some of my convictions, whereas as a Muslim I would be one of many who believe and would find solidarity and support. Islam has actually drawn me by the very thing that Catholicism first drew me - Oneness which it displays more visibly in practice. This interest in Islam worries me as I am afraid (as I was before I decided to become Catholic) that if I changed my faith I would be doomed for Hell. I cannot see how God would condemn other religions to Hell just because they don't follow Christ directly. However as a Christian I am told that if I abandon Jesus I would be lost. I cannot accept conversion now, but the way I am going with my interest in it, it seems to be becoming more feasible. This scares me, and yet what can I do? Must I deny that Islam attracts me a lot?**

**11 February 2011: I am going through the faith crisis again... It returned even more than before. I am feeling disillusioned with Christianity again. My heart is going back and forth, being pulled to and fro. I am terrified of going to Hell, and at the same time I am sick and tired of hearing I would go to Hell if I choose to change my faith.**

**13 February 2011:** [in reply to my friends who were rather concerned about me by now] **It is hard enough trying to fit in with Christians when I fit in more with Muslims. And it is not only because of the way I dress or believe about modesty. It also touches on how much I love the way they worship using bows and prostrations, taking their shoes off, all in unison, men and women separate, and how their lifestyle is so simple and down to earth, their amazing pilgrimage unlike any other. Even the way they bury their dead is the way I want to be buried. I have even found a Muslim name I like! - Saadiqah (meaning lover of truth, modesty). "What is going on with me? How do I dare to go in this direction?" I ask myself.**

When I go to Mass I feel like a peculiarity and I crave to be around Muslims. I can't feel a connection with many other Christians, particularly women, and it hurts.

What would be better?

To martyr myself by continuing in this lonely way being a peculiarity and not fitting in, for the sake of being a light, teaching modesty - and yet feeling bitter and exclusivist and lonely?

Or

To find a niche, where who I am will find a sense of belonging in a community, not helping others as much (although I still will be sewing), but being happy and peaceful inside?

What would be more important than avoiding the path of sin in my own soul? I cannot bless other souls if I am not happy in my own soul first.

I can assure you that I am praying to God. I am sure He wants both for me to be myself and also for me to feel a belonging with others. I cannot think of God as angry with me just because I search and explore. **I am just speculating; nothing is definite, but I feel torn two ways.**

## Stephanie, Ex-Catholic, South Africa (part 4 of 6)

**Description:** She finally then embraced Islam.

By Stephanie

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**13 February 2011:** *I have been raised so long with this fundamentalist Christian mentality that is afraid of other religions; that if I explored them I would upset God. And I am so terrified of what my mom would think. **Even though she remarked a few years back in the shopping mall: "You should have been born a Muslim," she said the other day when I told her of my interest in Eastern prayer: "Just as long as you don't become Mohammedan!" I thought: "Oh, God, Mom, guess what... I like Islam!"** I ended up saying something like this to her - that my choice of religion is my issue, not hers.*

*When I think back on why I loved the cloistered life of a nun, and what I loved in Catholicism, I see in Islam all these things, especially the oneness, that's why it draws me. **It is the religion that is probably closest to my own outlook of life.** I have to explore it, otherwise it will keep on coming back more intensely. I feel that if I explore it, it may lose fascination for me and I can return to Christianity. **Part of me wants to convert, part of me is TERRIFIED. "What if I go to Hell?" is my worst concern. And yet, I felt that same fear in coming to Catholicism.** This evening I burst into tears as I am so torn up about the whole thing. I have been researching about Islam a lot recently and reading stories of conversions and I even tuned my radio to the Muslim station. **I said to God how part of me hates Islam for interesting me, and sure, it is a love-hate relationship.** I have to learn to live with my interest. But as I said I am afraid of offending God - and what does Jesus think? I feel like a hypocrite at Mass, but I still go.*

**14 February 2011:** *I am often too afraid to tell Christian loved ones of my interest in Islam for fear that they will say I am going down the wrong path away from the truth and will harm my soul. I find Islam to be a very stark, simple, strong and austere [religion], unlike Catholicism which is more complex and even somewhat sentimental at times.*

**Many things - their set prayers where they prostrate, their simplicity, their separation of men and women in worship, praying barefoot, their WONDERFUL emphasis on modesty and the veil, their view of women (I have considered myself a bitter anti-Feminist, but when I see Feminism through Islamic glasses, I actually make peace with it, because women don't compromise their modesty and femininity). I also love their Ramadan fasting, the pilgrimage they do, the cleanliness of ritual washing, their abstinence from alcohol, their dislike for dating - preferring chaperoned and chaste meetings between men and women, arranged marriages, and so on.**

**When I look back on my life, I seemed to be Muslim the way I kept myself.** *I hardly ever dated - I met my two boyfriends at my house or theirs, or went out with them along with another friend or my parents, etc. From 17 I dressed modestly and loved covering my head, I was never*

partial to alcohol, I liked the challenge of fasting and set prayers (hence my past love for the cloistered life).

***It is not that I wanted to reject Christianity, but I found something which I feel I could identify more with, belong in.***

## Coming to Islam

By then I couldn't resist it anymore and did loads of research, reading lots of conversion stories of women, and I began to believe it was possible to let go and let God lead me. As my heart was already long won over, all I had to do was convince my mind... So I read internet articles and the English translation of the Quran, I began to pray in the Muslim way, doing Isha at first, using a little mat to pray on, and doing wudhu (ritual ablution) the prescribed way. It was hard to win my mind over, but I prayed to Almighty God, Most gracious and Merciful, that He guided me. I asked Him for a breakthrough and the next day I read some articles

Nothing seemed to hit me smack bang in the head, until I read an article on [www.defending-islam.com](http://www.defending-islam.com) called "The Miracle of the Quran" by Khalid Baig. He said the following:

*"Prominent scholar Dr. Hamidullah tells of an effort in Germany by the Christian scholars to gather all the Greek manuscripts of Bible as the original Bible in Aramaic is extinct. They gathered all manuscripts in the world and after examining them reported: **"Some two hundred thousand contradictory narrations have been found... of these one-eighth are of an important nature."** When the report was published, some people established an Institute for Quranic Research in Munich with the goal of examining Quran the same way. By 1933, 43000 photocopies of Quranic manuscripts had been collected. While some minor mistakes of calligraphy were found, **not a single discrepancy in the text had been discovered!**"*

Wow, wow, WOW!!!... It really IS a miracle! How could it be otherwise possible??? I was so impressed that there was only one version of the Quran. As a Protestant Christian I had searched for the most genuine Bible and took the King James Version as it was "authorised". Then when I became Catholic I realised it wasn't the most original. I bought a New Revised Standard Version Bible, but looked to the Douay-Rheims version as the most authentic, as it was based on St. Jerome's Vulgate - the closest I could get to the early Bible. Unfortunately it was too expensive to buy. I loved the Jerusalem Bible as well, which was used in the Liturgy, but then there were two versions of that, too! It was so confusing! But with the Quran, besides there being various language translations, there is only one version - the original Arabic - and not only that, but every Muslim has access to learning to read Arabic, and can benefit from the true version. A far cry from the Christian history when the Bible was read only by some people, mostly priests, who could have easily taught the people their own opinions instead.

It was then that I decided to submit myself to God. How happy I was! Not only that, but Islam's views on women put an end to my struggles in the Catholic Church. I could reconcile the good things in Feminism with modesty and the veil. At last, I found a

niche! My bitterness dissolved like dew in the sun.

This had happened shortly after another event - after all the years struggling to discern a vocation to a convent, I decided it was about time I got a proper job so I could eventually move out of my parents' home and become independent - and with the way things were moving, it was now essential! I mentioned in a letter above (March, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2010) that I regularly went to a fabric shop for my sewing needs, as I knew the owners well by this time, (and because they were Muslim!) I decided to ask for a part-time job there. The next week I popped in to buy some dress trimming as an excuse to ask about the job and share my interest in Islam. When I purchased the trimmings, I got into a conversation about Islam with a wonderful lady working there, who gave me her sister's contact number. Her sister knew someone who worked in a Madrassah (Muslim School) and who would be willing to teach me. To my joy, I got the job, (however I was retrenched soon afterwards). Then the lady did something which touched me deeply - she said to the man that they mustn't greet me with "hello" anymore, but "Salaam Aleikum!" (peace be upon you) I then replied: "Wa Aleikum Assalaam! (and peace be upon you too)!".

## Stephanie, Ex-Catholic, South Africa (part 5 of 6)

**Description:** Her Jihad and joy.

By Stephanie

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I went home, weeping with joy. I phoned the sister of the lady I spoke to (nervously, when I felt my mom was out of earshot!) and arranged with her, and she said she would get back to me in the following week. That was a Friday, and the very next day, I felt confident enough to take the *shahada* if I had the chance. As I knew I couldn't turn back, I prayed that I would have the strength in the time to come...

It was so difficult, because when I went to church that Sunday, I felt quite guilty and got so scared that I was doing wrong - and with almost everyone I know being Christian and having misunderstandings over Islam, I don't have much support at all. Apart from them thinking wrongly that the Muslim God is a different than the God of Christianity, someone in my family also thought (shock, horror!) that Muslims pray to and worship Mohammad (may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him)! No wonder I was afraid to tell them, fortunately God strengthened me soon afterwards.

After that blessed day when I decided to trust almighty God, I was tense and restless all the time, because I knew it was a big step and feared what my parents would think. To admit the truth, I was also really impatient to take the big step after I decided I wanted to. Why wait? What happened if I died before I had a chance to revert? So I phoned the

man at the shop and asked if I could have him and another as witnesses for me to take the Shahada. After two delays - sent from God to teach me patience! - I met him and his wife and their young son in a car at a local shopping centre in the evening three days later. The reason for this funny meeting place, was so I could get there myself without my parents (as I couldn't drive). I sat in their car and they explained some things to me and lent me some books before I pronounced the Shahada (the Testimony of Faith). At first I was getting so tongue-tied! Even today, when I think back to where I became a Muslim, I laugh at the thought that I became a Muslim in a parking lot! What a metaphor for my journey - I found a place to park at last! It was the 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2011; the 18<sup>th</sup> Rabi-ul-Awwal 1432. What a glorious day!!!

## Jihad and Joy

When I got home, it hadn't yet sunk in. The tests started as I came home - I almost got into trouble with my parents, as I took so long and the sun had set by then. I apologised profusely to them, trying to cover up my fears. But I would need to tell them soon - gradually. And so I did - that very night.

I spoke to my mother first. But I didn't tell her outright that I was actually Muslim already; I just told her that I am in the process of learning about Islam, and that I kept it from her as I was scared what she would think. She acted exactly as she did when I became Catholic - she didn't approve, but said I am old enough to decide for myself - just that I must be "careful". At first, she said: "No, no, no, Stephanie, no, no...." But then later after I said a few things about Islam to try and help her over the misconceptions, and that I would still be the same person and love her as her daughter, she was calmer. She could see I was serious about it. I felt so sorry for her; it was too much for her to take in at once, and my heart went out to her. My dad was also upset: "You can dress like them, but to take on an entirely different *religion*...!" It was hard, because I always saw him as open-minded.

I went to mosque for the first time, six days after my reversion, and was welcomed warmly to the family of Islam by the Imam. Praying for the first time with others in union, being led by the imam, was an *incredible* experience, even though I was nervous at first!

I struggled at first, with doubts about my judgment in reverting to Islam. A week after my reversion when I started learning at *madrasah*, I started to feel overwhelmed with all these new things to learn and this new change in my life, and old feelings of depression (which attacked me in each big change in my life) came back. How could I make it as a Muslim? Islam was so foreign to my background! And what about trying to explain to my parents how I cannot have ham or bacon or pork anymore? Why I have to wash the utensils before using them? Or why our dog is "unclean" and is not allowed in my room anymore? A new sense of isolation threatened to creep in. I worried about my spiritual life. How could I connect to God if I didn't quite yet understand the Arabic prayers? The "Muslim" God seemed to be so distant and formless compared to the personal, familiar and picture-depicted "Christian" God, even though He was the same God. I was used to being surrounded by crucifixes and images of Jesus, Mary and the Catholic saints, whom I

chatted to - and now my room had empty walls. It was scary.

More trials with loved ones came - I received a phone call from my ex-godmother. Then I received emails from an old e-acquaintance from a Catholic internet group I used to belong to, and from my ex-priest, who said there was a certificate waiting for me at the church, saying I was a trained sacristan! The Superior of the convent I had been in also emailed to my mother, saying she prays I don't lose my Catholic faith! When I told the acquaintance that I reverted, she tried to re-proselytise me by manner of saying that Jesus (may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him) was wounded on the cross and now I wounded him more. I was not surprised at these guilt-trips, as I had it from two others as well. But it still made me feel really negative! It took two days to muster the courage to email my priest, but he appreciated that courage, even though he said it is hard for him as a devout Catholic to understand why I reverted. Fortunately we parted amicably. My sister also found out from my mom that I had become a Muslim, and was stunned, but seemed to accept it when I emailed to explain. (It became obvious now that my mom knew I actually already left the Catholic Church, which made me feel relieved; I can now admit I am Muslim in front of her!) It was hard for my sister, too, but we are still in a good relationship, alhamdulillah. It was my decision when reverting, to not speak about religion yet to my family, but to just be a daughter/sister/aunt to them. This is definitely the same advice I would give to other reverts: be yourself!

## Stephanie, Ex-Catholic, South Africa (part 6 of 6)

**Description:** Finally her joy returned.

By Stephanie

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In the midst of these trials, I went to the mosque a second time and, after a week of having had practice, prayer came much easier and I wasn't nervous anymore. That evening, I felt so strengthened and said to God that I commit myself to Him as a Muslim; that I want to be faithful in this Path. Since then, I have felt new strength. I needed this strength, for I was about to go through a very grave trial which threatened to tear my heart in two.

I had just watched a TV program about *dhikrs* and felt such joy within. Then when I went to my mom's room, she told me that a woman, whom she didn't know, came up to her after church and told her that she had a dream about her - but it wasn't for her, it was for her younger daughter - me. This woman said that in the dream she was warned that I must stop what I am doing (that is, practicing Islam). Growing up Pentecostal (and being overprotected somewhat) I was terrified to do anything my mom did not approve of - or her church. (It was hard enough becoming Catholic; becoming Muslim was even more

so!) This dream deeply disturbed me, because knowledge of it attacked my very depth where I am most vulnerable - my fear of Hell.

I started to get angry at my mother, who wasn't to blame, but she said she had to tell me or she felt that God would hold her accountable. This made me even more scared: was Islam really bad for me? How could it be; I was so happy and alive! I told this to my mom and she said just talk with God about it. So I went to my room, send text messages to two friends to make *dua's* for me, and pleaded with God to help me. I said that if He wants me to go back to Christianity, I would be willing, but He must put that desire in me, or keep my desire to be Muslim if He wants me on this road. I submitted to Him completely (this in itself making me Muslim), sobbing, my heart torn in two at the idea of leaving Islam - and with resurging resentment towards the Pentecostals. I felt as if I was being emotionally manipulated by them. All my life it was an issue; hence I never felt secure to make choices unless others agreed with me. I felt all that they said was from God and it was hard to think that the devil could use them to attack me, but I really also felt this was the case now. I recited the *Fatiha*, *Shahada*, *Ta'awwudh* and another *du'a* over and over and over again until I calmed down.

The next day, still feeling miserable, I contacted a friend who fetched me and she took me to see the Imam at our Mosque. There was a learned sheikh who happened to be there too and they sat and listened to me as I related this trial, giving me advice. I was strengthened once more, and joy returned. This is what every revert needs - lots of support! If it wasn't for these wonderful brothers and sisters in Islam, I would have found it very hard to go on. More trials will inevitably come, but as I grow in Islam, my courage will be greater and this will indefinitely help me face these trials.

It is amazing how much of my life I had taken for granted or not noticed. Simple little things like whether what I eat (or eat from) is *halaal* or not, how I clean, groom, and purify myself, whether my clothes are clean when I pray, how I must constantly remember to step with my left foot into the lavatory and out with my right foot, and keep our dog out of my room...etc, etc. What a different life Islam brings, and how beautifully attentive to every detail of living! It is like being born again into a new life! And although it is presently a lonely journey, I must give my mom and dad credit for letting me have my freedom. Although they were unwilling to take me to Islamic places, they let me go with my friends. May God bless them for that; I am truly fortunate!

If there is one thing which I could ask Christians, it would be this: Why would there be another major religion and Scripture sent after Christianity, if the latter was the final revelation? Also: Why would the Quran be sent and preserved from corruption if the Bible was the final word of God? Finally: Why would God ask us to believe in something blindly and not use our reason? If beliefs are reasonable, then people could not deny them. These are truly witnesses to the truth of Islam!

I became Muslim because I felt Islam aligned with my heart and shows us the best way to live. It was truly my heart's choice. If I ever had to raise a family in this chaotic world, I wouldn't want to raise them any other way. In fact, if I couldn't raise them Muslim, I wouldn't want a family at all! Islam has set me free to be myself and to belong. It set me

free from an inordinate attachments to images which had plagued me for 15 years, and simplified my life. It gave me new friends, who rallied around me, lending me books, and giving me embraces and encouragement, more books, a Quran, kitchen utensils and even their spare underscarves and robes - one so smart I would keep it for Eid! It removed my bitter hatred for Feminism, because it embraced and purified it, retaining the modesty and dignity, whilst letting women take her place at the side of men. It made me feel more loving, and less critical. It gave me a healthy and pure view of God. And although my journey is only now beginning, my life is finally aligned.

My hijab and my identity match. No more mistaking me now. I am a Muslim.  
Alhamdulillah!!! (Praise be to God)

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