

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

Description: Her Jihad and joy.

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Published on 11 Apr 2011 - Last modified on 10 Nov 2013

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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 22nd February 2011; the 18th 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 *madrassah*, 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!

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