

NICHOLE AREL, EX-CHRISTIAN, USA

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Description: The search for the true religion led her to Islam.

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Often I find myself reflecting upon how blessed I am. The life that I lead now is a world away from the one I expected to lead just a year ago: my first thoughts upon waking in the morning, my imagined path in life, and especially my heart and soul. I would never have dreamt that in less than a year my life would take such unexpected turns. Not only that. The path I now take has led me to roads I never knew existed. Indeed where you start your journey is in no way indicative of where you end up.

As a child, I longed to be taken to church. The feeling of community and worship held my mind in fascination. I longed for the feeling of drawing close to God even before I could formulate such thoughts in my own mind. Something incomprehensible held my young soul in awe, so much so that I made a habit of waking my father every Sunday by begging him to take me to church.

Unfortunately my family was much like average American Christians, content to call themselves religious based on their twice-yearly attendance to Catholic Mass: on Christmas and Easter Sunday. Thus I grew accustomed to hearing the phrase, "not today, maybe next week." Dejectedly, I would sulk back into my room and wait for next Sunday to arrive, only to repeat the disappointing process all over again.

As I grew older, I learned to stop asking since my attempts had all been in vain. I became content to spend all my free time in solitude reading, usually books on world cultures and religions. As I learned more about the history of my religion, Catholicism, I was repulsed by its condemnation of questioning the doctrine. "Surely this cannot be the right sect of Christianity," I thought.

Time ticked by and still I had not found the religion that seemed to speak to my heart. Perhaps I was expecting to find something to stir the same feelings that I felt as a child in church, although I knew this was a naïve wish. The alienation from religion occurs only when one begins to understand religions' claims and contradictions.

I couldn't wrap my mind around the claim of the Trinity no matter how hard I tried. I couldn't understand how I was supposed to believe in concepts that were incomprehensible. I was angry that reason was assumed to have no place in

Christianity and the act of questioning doctrine was considered a sign of weak faith. What then could be the reason God gave man the ability to rationalize?

Eventually I gave up altogether and assumed that I would never find the truth. I was resigned to believe that there was a God but that humans would never be able to know God's nature or the true religion for man until we met Him one day.

I lived many years with this belief until very recently when it seemed that something inexplicable was urging me back to my quest for the truth. This urge was almost a voice but not in the normal sense. It was an insistent nagging that never left me alone no matter what I did to drown it out.

So naturally I bought a Bible to read, thinking that the truth must be hidden between the pages. Maybe I just missed it all those years ago. This was closer to the truth than I could ever have guessed.

During my reading of the Bible I happened to be obsessed with the current events of the world. I found myself spending all my free time alternating between writing letters to my government's officials pleading for the rights of the Palestinians and the Sudanese as well as against wars that are so commonplace around the globe, and reading about sects of Christianity.

I planned on volunteering in Palestine if I could gather the money to travel there. Naturally, given the turmoil in the region and my travel plans, it seemed necessary to read about Islam and understand the faith of the people that I yearned to help.

I was enthralled by what I read about the Muslim faith. The concept of One God not a trinity, the reverence for all of the prophets which I found lacking in the Bible, the scientific aspects of the Qur'an, the all-encompassing facets of Islam, the respect for mothers, the sanctity of family. This was the only religion that I had ever happened upon which made sense to a rational mind yet was still filled with the mystery of God.

But Islam had to be an Arab religion, right? It can't be the faith that young American women gravitate to, can it? I soon discovered that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world, that the majority of Muslims are not Arab, and that some of the most rapid growth of Islam in the West is among my demographic group of young white women.

The thought of actually turning away from Christianity, no matter how little sense the religion itself made to me, was terrifying and confusing. I decided to attend a non-denominational church on Sundays and devote more time to reading the Bible. I prayed that I would find what I was searching for but all I came away with was more confusion. I still couldn't accept the Trinity and I was shocked that I couldn't find one passage in the Bible where Jesus claimed to be God.

How could we propose to think that God would come to earth to die for our sins? How could I explain the shocking parallels of Christianity's doctrine with the Pagan myths at

the time of Christianity's rapid spread during the Roman Empire? What about Christianity's claim that we can live the life we want and still go to Heaven as long as we believed in Jesus? What could it mean when Jesus supposedly cried out that his God had forsaken him if Jesus was claimed to be God incarnate? Who did these passages refer to when it said that Jesus would send "a Comforter" after him? Who was the "Spirit of Truth" that was foretold to come after Jesus?

I was crushed by the questions that plagued me so I did the inevitable. As I sat at work, I prayed that God would show me the religious path that I should follow. If I was supposed to be a Muslim would God send me a sign?

Then I grabbed my purse and headed down to my car in the parking lot. To my astonishment, there was a Muslim woman standing next to my car while she searched for her keys. Could this be the sign I prayed for? "Impossible," my mind said, but I decided not to waste this opportunity so I approached her.

"Miss, may I ask you something? You are Muslim, right?" She seemed to flinch as she awaited the typical ignorant comment that is so common among people who, on average, have no knowledge of different cultures or religions. "Yes, I am," she replied. I asked her if she attended the masjid I knew of. I told her briefly that Islam seemed to be the only religion that made sense to me. She insisted that I go to the masjid on the way home but I claimed that I wanted to read the Qur'an first.

As I drove home I found myself parked in front of the masjid. I momentarily thought that this could be another sign but, again, my mind refused to believe it. I walked up to the door shaking like a leaf while I told myself to get back in my car and go home as fast as possible. But instead my legs carried me forward, paying no attention to the commands of my brain.

As I found my way to the women's section I was met by the most cheerful face I had ever encountered. This Muslim woman was my age and an American convert! Not only that, but she and I had the same name and when we compared our pasts and family life there were undeniable similarities. Needless to say, I declared my Shahadah then and there, not knowing that my future husband was in the masjid that very minute, al-hamdu lillah.

A couple of months after declaring my Shahadah, I felt educated and firm enough in my religion to finally break the news to my father and stepmother. My father responded by saying that as a clear-headed Christian he could tell me that I was making a mistake. I didn't bother to point out that he doesn't practice his religion and that his anger at Islam and prejudice against Muslims are sorely misguided. I just bit my tongue for the sake of God.

My father didn't contact me again after that, but when I emailed him a month later to tell him that I had gotten married, he told me that I was dead to him and not to contact him again. I still email my stepmother to keep in touch with the family but my brother, father,

and my old friends have severed their contact with me.

I have spent the following year growing in my new religion, gaining knowledge from wherever I can, and trying to convey the message that has brought me such peace and contentment. I am in the process of learning Arabic and the recitation of the Qur'an, and trying to become a good Muslim wife.

My life has no resemblance whatsoever to the life that I lived before. I spend my days studying God's commands, the Prophet's life, and what is required of me in order to be a good Muslim. As a Muslim, I find such peace in every day, so much so that even if Paradise was not the reward for such deeds, I would still be thankful for the joy that comes with living a life dedicated to God.

I said in the beginning that the road you travel does not indicate where you end up, and that life is not merely full of surprises but can altogether change beyond recognition. Sometimes these changes can bring trials but often enough the person who survives these trials is blessed with more than what is ever dreamed possible. In my case, I was blessed with Islam and not only a better life but also a hope for the hereafter. God is the Most Generous and the Most Merciful.

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