

JENNY, EX-CHRISTIAN, AUSTRALIA (PART 1 OF 2)

Rating: 4.6

Description: An Australian Protestant teenager, troubled by the concept of Trinity, who embraced Islam following a year at a Buddhist High school in Japan.

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Often when people ask me 'How did you come to Islam?', I take a deep breath and try and tell them the 'short version'. I don't think that Islam is something that I came to suddenly, even though it felt like it at the time, but it was something that I was gradually guided towards through different experiences. Through writing this piece I hope that somebody may read it, identify with some things and may be prompted to learn more about the real Islam.

I was born in 1978 in Australia, was christened and raised 'Christian'. As a child I used to look forward to attending church and going to Sunday School. Even though I can still remember looking forward to it, I can't remember much about it. Maybe it was getting all dressed up in my best clothes, maybe seeing the other children, maybe the stories, or maybe it was just that I could look forward to my grandmothers' famous Sunday lunch when I got home. My family wasn't strict about religion at all – the bible was never read outside church from what I knew, grace was never said before eating. To put it simply I guess religion just wasn't a major issue in our lives. I can remember attending church with my family sometimes, and as I got older I can remember getting annoyed when the other members of my family chose not to come. So for the last couple of years I attended church alone.

At the time that I attended primary school 'Religious Education' was a lesson that was given weekly. We learned of 'true Christian values' and received copies of the bible. While I wouldn't admit it at the time, I also looked forward to those classes. It was something interesting to learn about, something that I believed had some sort of importance, just that I didn't know what.

In my high school years I attended an all girls high school. We didn't have any sort of religious classes there, and I guess to some degree I missed that because I starting reading the bible in my own time. At the time I was reading it for 'interest sake'. I believed that God existed, but not in the form that was often described in church. As for the trinity, I hoped that maybe that was something I would come to understand as I grew older. There were many things that confused me, hence there seemed to be 'religious' times in my life where I would read the bible and do my best to follow it, then I would get

confused and think that it was all too much for me to understand. I remember talking to a Christian girl in my math classes. I guess that gave me one reason to look forward to math. I would ask her about things that I didn't understand, and whilst some explanations I could understand, others didn't seem to be logical enough for me to trust in Christianity 100%.

I can't say that I have ever been comfortable living with a lot of aspects of the Australian culture. I didn't understand for example drinking alcohol or having multiple boyfriends. I always felt that there was a lot of pressure and sometimes cried at the thought of 'growing up' because of what 'growing up' meant in this culture. My family traveled overseas fairly often and I always thought that through travelling I might be able to find a country where I could lead a comfortable life and not feel pressured like I did. After spending 3 weeks in Japan on a student exchange I decided that I wanted to go again for a long-term exchange. In my final year of high school I was accepted to attend a high school in Japan for the following year.

Before I left Australia to spend the year overseas I was going through one of my 'religious stages'. I often tried to hide these stages from my parents. For some reason I thought that they would laugh at me reading the bible. The night before I flew to Japan my suitcase was packed however I stayed up until my parents had gone to sleep so I could get the bible and pack it too. I didn't want my parents to know I was taking it.

My year in Japan didn't end up the most enjoyable experience in my life by any means. I encountered problem after problem. At the time it was difficult. I was 17 years old when I went there and I think that I learned a lot of valuable lessons in that year. One of which was 'things aren't always what they seem'. At one stage I felt as though I had lost everything - my Japanese school friends (friends had always been very important to me, even in Australia), my Japanese families, then I received a phone call saying that I was to be sent home to Australia a couple of months early. I had 'lost everything' - including the dream that I had held so close for so many years. The night that I received that phone call I got out my bible. I thought that maybe I could find some comfort in it, and I knew that no matter what, God knew the truth about everything that everybody does and that no amount of gossip and lies could change that. I had always believed that hard times were never given to us to 'stop us', but to help us grow. With that in mind, I was determined to stay in Japan for the whole year and somehow try and stop the ridiculous rumours. Alhamdulillah I was able to do that.

From that year I came to understand that not only is every culture different, but they both have good points and bad points. I came to understand that it wasn't a culture that I was searching for.. but something else.

I attended an all girls Buddhist school in Japan. We had a gathering each week where we prayed, sang songs and listened to the principal give us lengthy talks. At first I wasn't comfortable attending these gatherings. I was given a copy of the song book along with the beads that you put over your hands when you pray. I tried to get out of going to them at the start, but then decided that I didn't have to place the same meaning

to things as others did. When I prayed, I prayed to the same God that I had always prayed to – the One and Only God. I can't say that I really understand Buddhism. Whenever I tried to find out more I met with dead ends. I even asked a Japanese man who taught English. He had often been to America and he said that in Japan he was Buddhist, and in American he was Christian. There were some things about Buddhism that I found interesting, but it wasn't something that I could consider a religion.

In a lot of ways I picked what I liked out of religions and spiritual philosophies and formed what I considered to be my 'Jenny Religion'. I collected philosophical quote after quote in high school, read into things such as the Celestine Prophecy and Angels when I returned to Australia, and still held onto the Christian beliefs that made sense to me. I felt like I was continually searching for the truth.

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