

STEPHANIE, EX-CATHOLIC, SOUTH AFRICA (PART 1 OF 6)

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Description: How her search for the truth begins.

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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.

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