

STEPHANIE, EX-CATHOLIC, SOUTH AFRICA (PART 3 OF 6)

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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.***

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