

Maria, Ex-Catholic, USA

(part 1 of 2): Early Life Setup



My name is Maryam al-Mahdayah - I was not born with this name, but chose it when I converted to Islam (in 1992). My Christian birth name is Maria (Mary in English, Maryam in Arabic). I would like to share with you my personal story of converting to Islam, with the hope that this story might bring with it a better understanding of Islam.

My story is organized into different life-periods:

- Growing up Christian (early years)
- Turning away (teen years)
- Searching for Truth (the twenties)
- The Opening (the thirties)
- Coming Home (the forties and forever)

Growing Up Christian -- Early Years

I was raised in the Catholic tradition. I went to Catholic elementary school, learned my Catholicism, received my First Communion, received my Catholic name (after a saint), went to confession, all the important steps to growing up Catholic. I tried my best to be good, and I was (I was too afraid of some terrible retribution from God if I wasn't) and throughout these years I developed a substantial feeling of guilt (for what, I wasn't sure, but I knew I was guilty of something). The nuns who taught me seemed harsh, and I couldn't understand why these 'brides of Christ' were so tense and angry. In the summers I would travel south to visit my mother's family - my grandfather was at one time a Baptist minister, and my mother was raised in the Baptist tradition. (Because my father

was Catholic she had to convert to Catholicism in order to marry him). So, when I went south, I went to church and Bible school, and sang Christian songs around the antique organ - my aunt would play, and my cousin and I would sing with great feeling. These were good times, and this part of my Christian upbringing was more enjoyable and comfortable. And so the years passed. I spent the school year at home, and summers in the south. My religious life was much of a double life. Looking back, it seems that the only thing the Catholic and Baptist traditions had in common was a foundation in Jesus (peace be upon him). Beyond that, they were two different worlds for me.

Turning Away -- Teen Years

I didn't have an easy childhood, and the family problems grew in severity to the point where one day, I came to the conclusion that there is no God (or, at the very least, if there was a God, He wasn't there for me). I remember that day, laying in my bed at night, waking up to that reality. I suddenly felt a great vacuum within myself, but, I told myself, if that's reality, then I have to accept it. At my level of understanding, that was my reality. As my teen years progressed, I started searching. By this time, I was no longer required to go to church (in our family religious practice was non-existent by then), so I decided to seek the truth myself. I remember reading about Jesus (peace be upon him). I had a very strong feeling about him, and even felt connected to him in some way. But I could never accept his manner of death (how could someone so special and close to God die like that??). That seemed a tragedy beyond description. And so I developed my own opinion and belief that Jesus was in fact a real person, did in fact live on this earth, was in fact a very special person with a very special mission, but beyond that, I didn't know. Eventually I gave up on the idea of Christianity entirely, because too many things didn't make sense.

Searching for Truth -- Twenties

As I entered my twenties, I felt a tremendous need to find the truth, to still the restlessness in my heart and soul. I was introduced to Buddhism, and since it seemed to come close to what I was looking for (at least there was a clear logic to it), I joined. In many ways it did help me feel better, but to me it seemed to be missing something (what, I didn't know at that time). Over the years, I drifted away from Buddhism as well. It was becoming more of a burden than a comfort in my life. During this time I traveled to Egypt for business, where I met my husband, who was raised in the Muslim tradition. Still involved in Buddhism, I tried to convert him. He patiently listened, and I believed I was succeeding, but I know now that he would never have converted.

The Opening -- Thirties

So I continued, became more uncomfortable with Buddhist practice, went back to Egypt to get married, came back to the USA alone and eventually returned to Egypt to live with my husband. We were there together for a year, a wondrous, healing and unforgettable year. By now I was in my early thirties. I had just arrived in Egypt to really start married life, stressed out to my limit, feeling very much that I had arrived with my last breath. I had been separated from my husband for over a year (my job kept me in the USA, other concerns kept him in Egypt). We kept in touch all during this time, but it was so difficult and stressful that I lost a great deal of weight. I was described as looking anorexic. I wasn't aware of this until one day I happened to see myself in the rearview mirror of a taxi. I saw my neck, with bones extending. At first I didn't realize that was me - when I did, it was quite a shock. I looked at myself with new eyes - my hands were bony - I was beginning to look like a living skeleton. During this time my husband was talking to me - quietly, patiently - explaining not about Islam, but about believing in God. He told me that it didn't matter which religion I chose to practice, as long as I believed in God. I argued with him over and over that there was no God (and Buddhism supported this belief) and over and over he explained that there Is a God and gave me details of the signs of God, the qualities of God. He explained how God is very much with me (by His knowledge, hearing, seeing and other attributes), and talked to me about God from the perspective of Islam, emphasizing throughout that I did not have to be Muslim - just believe in God. Being a stubborn person, I still resisted outwardly, but inwardly, a small window of hope began to open....

My husband asked a friend to bring me some books about Islam. I was surprised he would do so, because I was still "not interested in hearing about God" - sometimes emphatically so. So he left me with the books: an English translation of the Quran and a book about all facets of Islam. My interest was slightly piqued, but I dismissed it. I put the books aside, and later went to bed. That night, I had a dream. In this dream, I was somewhere, surrounded by glorious white light. In the background, I heard beautiful music that sounded like Quranic reading. Behind me was a golden, spiraling staircase. All these images were suspended in this wondrous white light. This light was brighter than anything I had seen in waking life, but the brightness didn't hurt my eyes. It was pure, heavenly whiteness. Then I looked down, and became aware that I was covered all in white, in the Muslim fashion; beautiful white flowing dress and head covering. All the while, I kept feeling a tremendous joy pouring out from inside me, and I was filled with this same white light from within. In front of me to my left was a child, about 5 or 6 years old, facing forward so I could not see the face. I didn't know if it was a boy or girl, but I knew this was my child. (At the time, I was physically unable to have children). This dream had a profound

impact on me. Although it was 7 years ago, I can still remember it vividly in detail. When I awoke, I related this dream. Not knowing its significance, I told my husband about it because it was so vivid in my mind and didn't make sense to me. I had never had this kind of dream before. When I finished telling it, my husband said, "This is the kind of dream every Muslim wishes to have". But why me? I didn't believe in God, denied His existence (passionately at times), and had no interest in Islam or becoming Muslim. He explained that God was informing me something in this dream and I was very lucky. That surprised me. (Interestingly, this dream did not have a dreamlike quality, but in fact gave me the feeling that I was looking at things to come.) After this dream, I decided to open the books about Islam, and find out more about this religion.

(part 2 of 2): Islamic Experience

Coming Home -- Forties and Forever

I read about the principles of Islam. They made sense to me, with no contradiction. The descriptions of the Islamic way of life, the roles of men and women in society as complimentary rather than competitive were so logical. After reading this I understood that what I felt instinctively about myself as a woman was, in fact, true to my real nature. Rather than feeling demeaned, I felt uplifted, not only as a woman, but as a member of the human race. I started to feel my true self, for the first time in my life. I began to have the sense that I was coming home. I read the Quran. Although not in the Arabic original, I found that just reading the verses in English filled me with a tremendous sense of peace and quiet, in a most gentle way. The verses themselves answered many questions I had throughout my life, but could never get a clear answer to. Reading the Quran, I began to realize that this book must be the work and the word of God, because of its impeccable logic and its effect on me. I learned that this is one of the qualities of the Quran, a certain "barakah" or grace that has a very calming effect on the human soul.

Shortly afterward, I had surgery with the hope that I may be able to have a child. The surgery went well, but my chances for having a child were still slim to none. By this time I was reading the Quran regularly and trying to learn more about Islam. I asked questions constantly and immersed myself in the atmosphere of Islam - I loved hearing the daily prayer calls on every street and one day asked my husband to take me to Al-Azhar, world-renowned center for Islamic learning, to visit the mosque. I had seen this mosque on TV and felt curiously drawn to it. So one day we went. It was quiet; I walked around, read the Quran, sat quietly for a while. It was a nice peaceful time, and we left. About halfway down the street, I stopped and looked down - I wanted to make sure my feet were touching the ground, because I couldn't feel the sidewalk underneath my

footsteps. I truly felt I was walking on air....this is the effect of Islam on me - the feeling of lightness was translated literally.

I had so many unusual experiences during this time, many just momentary things, that I truly began to believe in my heart that God was, indeed, with me and close to me. The best of all in the human sense was that the following year we had a beautiful daughter - truly a gift from God. Even the doctor who had performed the surgery was amazed. This was the first time ever for her to do this kind of surgery, and she had no way of predicting the outcome, except that the chances were small. (God was with me even then).

We moved to the USA and our daughter was born in the autumn, 4 months after our arrival. The following year we went back to Egypt so my husband's family could meet this wonderful addition to our family. Before we left, I decided it was time to officially become Muslim - God had shown me so many signs, that I knew this was the clear path for me. And so, back in Egypt, I went to Al-Azhar to declare, "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his Messenger." Now I'm in my forties and looking back through my life, particularly the last 10 years, I see the hand of God in all the hundreds of incidents and events along the way. As one always searching for the Truth, whether good or bad, I have found, through personal experience, that God is THE ONE REALITY. We need only to open our eyes, ears and hearts to recognize the Truth:

"We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves, till it is clear to them that it is the truth. Suffices it not as to thy Lord, that He is witness over everything? Are they not in doubt touching the encounter with their Lord? Does He not encompass everything?" (Quran 41:53-54)

Discovering Islam has been like discovering treasure - a treasure of unlimited value. Because of Islam I have found myself. Through concrete experience I have found that God does exist; that He is kind, loving, merciful and ever-watchful over me. I have found clarity, meaning and clear direction in my life. God has given me so much, including a family beyond my dreams, a family that resonates perfectly with the deepest desires of my heart and soul, as only He can provide in the most perfect way. I have peace of mind and spirit only when I drink deeply of Islam and the Quran, a wondrous healing drink that only God can provide in the most perfect way. The greatest gift from God to me is that He has touched my soul and let me feel His gentleness, loving kindness and mercy. By the grace of God, I am becoming al-mahdayah, the rightly guided one. In order to become the best, the most productive and most compassionate human beings we can be, God has sent us His final message to mankind in the most perfect way - the way of Islam, the way of peace. My personal experience with Christianity left me feeling empty for so long that I could not acknowledge its value. However, Islam teaches us that Judaism, Christianity and Islam all come from God, each with a message

sent from God, and therefore all are worthy of respect. Although born into Christianity, Islam is the true path of my soul. Because I am now firmly grounded in my relationship to God, I find that I can appreciate other traditions as well, from the perspective of Islam. There is no more conflict within, because I have come home.

**“In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate
Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being,
the All-Merciful, the All-compassionate,
the Master of the Day of Doom.
Thee only we serve; to Thee alone we pray for help
Guide us in the straight path,
the path of those whom Thou hast blessed,
not of those against whom Thou art wrathful, nor of those
who go astray.” (Quran 1:1-7)**