

La Bianca, Ex-Christian, Australia



This article is based on an interview with Sandra La Bianca, a Muslim revert who lives in Perth, Western Australia.

La Bianca is a country girl; she was brought up on a farm in Western Australia. When she was a child, she had a pet kangaroo and helped with taking care of the cows and sheep. She used to go hunting rabbits and foxes. There was not much religion in her upbringing, but she believed in God and she was taught traditional Italian morals. In an Italian household, girls are protected and quite sheltered.

She used to go to church with her family on Sundays, but it was superficial; she didn't really understand anything. When she thought about Holy Communion, all she knew was that she would get a white dress and have to recite some words — it was all expected of her and she did it. As far as La Bianca was concerned, Jesus and Mary (peace be upon them) were just statues in the church. Still, she used to pray to God.

While she was growing up, she had no knowledge of Islam or Arabs; she did not even see a city until she was 16 years old! She acknowledges the fact that she was gullible and naïve. Of her own admission, the positive part of this is that it has made her more open and natural; she says that she wears her heart on her sleeve. She has found that city people are emotionally tougher and are often more stand-offish and critical, whereas country people tend to take people as they are.

In the country, men mostly stay on the farm and enjoy the country life. With its trucks, motorbikes, shooting, and horses, the country life is a man's paradise! Young women usually look for the city life — pursuing fashion, being hip, getting excitement, and partying. La Bianca left the country when she was 16 years old looking for the bright city life. Having a big Italian family spread

throughout Australia, La Bianca had no difficulty finding an aunt with whom she could stay in the city.

La Bianca got her first job working as a receptionist, and there she met a Muslim girl named Tasneem, a South African Muslim, albeit not a practicing one. Tasneem did not wear hijab or pray but always made sure that the meat she ate was according to Islamic dietary regulations. Even though she was not unchaste nor drank alcohol, Tasneem would still go clubbing, and she was allowed to by her parents as long as she came home early. The main thing La Bianca learned from Tasneem was fasting in Ramadan.

La Bianca reminisces that she always felt attracted to Muslims because the people she met were warm, friendly, and accepting with gentleness, directness, and a love of family. She enjoyed socializing with her Muslim friends and the atmosphere in the family reminded her of her country girl upbringing (good food and hospitality). She comments that she feels comfortable with people who are comfortable in their own skin. She further observes that people often pick on others a lot because they do not like themselves.

She especially likes African people because of their warmth and sociability. but finds European culture to be quite cold with a lot of barriers between people. She observes that when she was growing up she and her siblings loved the Aboriginal people more than the Europeans. Her father respected anyone who worked hard and did the right thing. He was not at all racist. However, La Bianca's mother was racist and thought that Europeans were superior to others, and she easily criticized other people.

As La Bianca mixed with more and more Muslims, she learned that Muslims pray five times a day, but it was not until she met her husband that she really learned what Islam was all about.

La Bianca remembers that as soon as her husband met her, he took her home to meet his mother (his father had died some years before). Both he and La Bianca wanted a long-term commitment — the whole package; marriage and family. She started going to Islamic classes and changed the way she dressed. She donned long skirts and loose shirts. She observes that as she was learning about Almighty God, everything made sense; everything was beautiful and harmonious.

She comments that she liked the idea that there are consequences for what people do; that every one should try to do the right thing. This was unlike the Catholic religion whose teachings she was raised upon: People can do anything and that Jesus will cover for them.

Every one has a test, and La Bianca's big test was wearing *hijab*. She reveals that it was changing her image that affected her most. At home, in the country, on

the farm, or in the workplace, people would ask her why she was wearing “that.” Nevertheless, La Bianca wore long dresses and a scarf.

At first, her Dad felt she was not respecting his friends if she did not dress in a way that would please them. She admits that in the beginning, she felt guilty for making him feel disrespected, but her growing consciousness of Almighty God made her realize that she wanted to please God more than she wanted to please any human being.

She had told herself that she did not want to make any concessions, because she knew she was doing the right thing and she knew that if she started to make compromises, it would never stop and she would be left with no Islam at all! She certainly did not want that to happen.

Despite her initial difficulty in wearing it, *hijab* made so much sense to her. She found that after she started to cover up, she was not approached by men and she felt much more respected. It just felt right in her heart. La Bianca observes that she loves the idea that women are a treasure and that they should be protected and seen only by those who deserve to see them.

La Bianca pronounced the *Shahadah* (testimony of faith) in the company of a small group of friends. She felt that Islam was the truth, and she was hungry to learn more. Her husband and his family encouraged her to wear hijab, but it took some time for her to wear it properly because she had to wean herself from being defined by how she looks to the outside world.

When asked about the reaction of the Muslim community to her conversion, she said that at first she was “flavor of the month” simply because she was a new Muslim.