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I was raised in a sadly dysfunctional family. My father was anti-religion (all religions) and my mother was a non-practicing Southern Baptist. On my father's side of the family, religion was something to ridicule while one was "straight" and to adopt when one was drunk or high. On my mother's side of the family, religion was "understood" but never talked about. My mother's father had been a Southern Baptist minister at one time, but faith was something only for Sunday sermons.

At a very young age (as young as nine or ten years old), I started to have an interest in "going to church". I was allowed to go to Vacation Bible School during the summer as long as it kept me out of my parents' hair, and I was allowed to go to church on Sundays as long as they served a hot lunch afterward. I learned to sing songs like "Jesus Loves Me" and "This Little Light of Mine". It was good as it was fun. By the time I reached the age of 12 my father started to forbid me to go to church. Lessons in Sunday school were getting too serious. I had started to learn about morals. Don't drink! Don't smoke! Stay away from drugs! Never talk about what happens between husband and wife! I brought those morals home and tried to teach them. That's when the Church was banned. Fortunately, I had learned enough to strengthen my desire to learn more.

My parents divorced when I was 12 ½ years old. I stayed with my mother and it was then that my search for the true religion began. I started attending a Pentecostal church every Sunday. I learned how to dress – no pants, no makeup, don't cut your hair – and how to sing. I learned how to quote the Bible. I learned how to worship Jesus. *May God forgive me!* The idea of God's mercy was intriguing, it was the first truly important lesson that I learned in my search for guidance. The more I looked into it, the more I found that something was fundamentally wrong with the concept. According to this belief, I was saved and no matter what I did, I couldn't go to Hell! This didn't seem right; furthermore, the Bible wouldn't talk about punishment for our sins. There wouldn't be commandments to follow. Where was the incentive?

I left that church and started studying other faiths. I stuck with the monotheistic religions by pure instinct. I knew in my soul that God was the key and that Jesus had to fit in there somewhere. I studied Judaism but the fact that they discounted Jesus altogether ruled that religion out very quickly. I moved on to the different Christian denominations. I tried Baptist, but there was no mercy there. If you did anything wrong, you went to Hell! No chance. No hope. I studied Catholicism, but something about praying to saints (Mary included, God be pleased with her) didn't sit well with me. Methodist and Presbyterian weren't much help either. Eventually I went back to the Pentecostal churches for no other reason than that they offered hope of redemption.

There were two big questions that kept me confused much of the time. The first was, if Jesus was God's son, then how could he also be God? The second was much the same as the first. If Jesus was God, then whom was he praying to in the Garden of Gethsemane? I asked these two questions of my pastor and was told, "If you ask those questions, you'll go to Hell for lack of faith." I was shocked! To quote Galileo, "**I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason and intellect has intended for us to forego their use.**" I left the Pentecostal church never to return.

At the age of 19, I opened my door to a pair of Mormon missionaries. My search for the true religion was on again. I let them in and promptly began studies. Here was a religion that made sense! They told me that Jesus and God were not the same personage. They told me that those who truly strove to live the true religion would be rewarded with Heaven and that those who made big mistakes but who still had faith would only be punished a little while. Hell was not forever for believers. They told me about Prophets and how Moses wasn't the last, after all. They explained that, even though they loved Jesus and considered him their eldest brother, they only prayed to God. I liked what they told me and it rang true. I joined their church and remained a member for 16 years.

During those 16 years, I found myself going through rough times. There were many times when I stopped practicing my religion altogether. I became an alcoholic and did the things alcoholics do. I divorced my husband and started "dating". I degraded myself. There was always the belief, though. I always believed what the Mormons had taught me. I deluded myself into thinking that it didn't matter what I did. Hell was only for people who didn't believe. I could just go to the spirit prison after death and repent and then eventually make my way to Heaven.

There were times during those 16 years when I cleaned myself up and went to church. As one progresses through the lessons at the Mormon church, one begins to hear things that are kept quiet from "investigators" into the religion and from new converts. It was somewhere in late 2003 or early 2004 when it was "revealed" to me that God had been a human man on a different planet and that He

had worshipped yet a different god. It was also revealed that any human from earth could become a god in his/her own right, if only he/she did the right things. This bothered me a little. Still, Mormonism was the closest I had come to anything that felt right both spiritually and logically. I tried to explain away those ideas of other gods by telling myself that they actually meant something else. I wasn't quite sure what that other something might be, though.

In May of 2004, after having remarried and again left (for the last time) my previous husband, I stayed up late one night, playing on the Internet. I visited a chatroom that looked like the conversation was halfway decent and there met a very nice young man from Egypt. His name was Samy. Samy was very nice and always discussed appropriate topics. That was a first in my experience, so I sought him out online very often. We talked about his home, my home, family. We shared our hopes and dreams for the future. We also talked about God in a very general sense. We talked about Him a lot. I discovered that our basic beliefs about God were the same. In August of 2004, we began discussing marriage. It was then that I decided to study his religion – Islam.

It was never my intention to convert. After all, I was a Christian – a Mormon, at that – and to deny Jesus or the Holy Ghost was instant damnation. (In fact, I believed it was the only thing a person could go to Hell forever for.) My only intention was to learn enough of his religion to avoid offending him with mine.

Samy turned my studies over to his friend Ahmed, who is very knowledgeable about Islam. He said he didn't want our relationship to influence me. Too many women convert just to please their husbands. I began by learning the nature of God. There is only One God. He needs nothing from his creation, but all of creation needs Him. He neither begets nor is begotten. And there is nothing like Him. That was easy to accept. My soul clung to that information for dear life. Still, I couldn't convert. There was the whole idea of Jesus and the Holy Ghost. I didn't dare deny them.

Then I learned about Prophets. I learned that all the prophets were equal, and that Muhammed, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, was the last prophet. I also learned that Jesus, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, was a prophet, not the son of God. I had a little trouble with this one, so Samy's friend showed me a number of places in the Bible where other prophets than Jesus had been called God's begotten son, His only son and His firstborn son. He also showed me where Jesus himself forbade his disciples to call him the Son of God and pointed out that Jesus called himself the son of man. That cleared up part of my problem, but there was still the issue of the Mormon prophets. That was a little harder to clear up, but it came down to differences instead of similarities. The prophets in the Bible had a message for all of mankind, and that message was always the same. Worship God alone, with no partners. The Mormon prophets had a message only for the Mormon Church, and it usually had

to do with things like food storage and self-reliance. Once it was pointed out, I wondered how I could have missed that one.

We went on and on like this, learning a new point, disproving another point (of Mormonism), for seven months. All the while, I insisted that I was not going to convert and Samy and Ahmed both said, "I know." I demanded proofs in the Bible for what they were saying, and they produced them, including an obscure revelation about Muhammed. They even showed me where Muhammed's name had been in the Bible at one time and had been edited out. The name given was Ahmed, which equals Muhammed the same way John and Jack are often used interchangeably. Only the name was removed. The rest is still in there. He was foretold by Jesus, himself, as well as by Moses.

In March of 2005, I learned the final lesson that allowed me to shake off the fear of Hell and to accept Islam with all my heart, mind and soul. I learned about the Holy Ghost. As a Mormon, I believed that, if I denied the existence of the Holy Ghost, I would instantly be condemned to everlasting hellfire. There was no chance of repentance, no matter what. Thankfully, I don't have to, and in fact never can, deny such existence. I learned that the Holy Ghost, also known as the Holy Spirit, is also known in the Old and New Testaments as the Spirit of the Lord. Again, they proved it with the Bible. We all know the story. The Spirit of the Lord appeared to Mary.... The Holy Spirit, or Spirit of the Lord is none other than the Angel Gabriel – and Muslims know about the existence of the angels. It was Gabriel who revealed the Quran from God to Muhammed.

The next day, I spoke with an online friend and told her I wanted to convert. I had a surprise in mind for Samy and Ahmed. She contacted my local masjid (mosque) and arranged for a sister and two brothers to come to my house so I could say shahadah. It was very easy. They guided me first in English and then in Arabic, and I repeated after them, saying, "I testify that there is no god but the One God (Allah, in Arabic) and I testify that Muhammed is His messenger." The sister gave me my first headscarf (hijab) and helped me put it on as a symbol of my conversion.

That night, I met Samy and Ahmed online, where we always chatted. They were both very pleased to see that I had converted, but they weren't surprised. And I found out why they always said "I know" when I said I wouldn't convert. You see, a Muslim is one who willingly submits his or her own will to the will of God. All children are born in that state of submission and are pulled away by outside forces. Still, our souls seek the "face of God" and a return to that submission. My soul began that search in 1978, and in March of 2005, at the age of 34, I did not convert. I reverted.

Incidentally, I totally cleaned up my act the moment I converted. The incentive is there. God sees all and knows all. Samy and I were married in July of

2005 and he has taken over the responsibility of teaching me about Islam. There is always something to learn.