

Aaminah Hernandez, Ex-Christian, USA

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Growing up in the U.S. in the 1980s, my knowledge of Islam was flawed and minimal. My father taught my brother and I to be aware of the world, interested in other cultures, and well-read. At that time, the media portrayed Islam on the basis of the Iranian Revolution and the conflict in Palestine. Portrayals of women's issues were limited to the "Not Without My Daughter" variety. Though I never saw the movie or read the book, my understanding at that time was that Muslim women were slaves to their husbands, there were no limits to the number of rival wives, wives were beaten or even killed if they gave birth to a daughter, and neglected if they did not give rapid birth to sons. The sight of women in full black coverings, that we were led to believe were very heavy and contained several layers, including veils over their faces, was frightening to a girl raised in the era of Madonna and Cyndi Lauper. In addition to these greater problems, we were taught in school that Middle Eastern women were not allowed to leave their houses and lived in great poverty, sharing their rooms with their rival wives and all the children, rarely seeing their husbands. In our rare and minimal instruction on the history or culture of Islam, no distinction was made between the variety of cultures in the Middle East and Islam as a religion. I did not realize that anyone other than Arabs and some African Americans were Muslim, and I did not realize that not all Arabs were Muslim.

Because my father told me that the best education I would ever receive was the education I could give myself by reading, I became a serious reader. I spent more time in the library than anywhere social, and I read so much that when it was necessary to punish me, my parents knew the only effective way was to take my books away. *Alhamdulillah*, this love of books has remained with me and though I never expected it to happen, this love of learning guided me to Islam. I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* when I was in the fifth grade and although it did not open my mind to Islam, I did refuse to eat pork after that. Even if it did not cause

a deep change in my thinking, in later years I would realize that it planted something in my mind and heart; I just was not ready to accept it or put much thought into it.

Over the years I was abused, molested, and otherwise used by many people in my life. This led me to move out of my parents' home when I was 16 years old. My brother remained in the home and struggled with his own issues, including gang activity. I finished high school on time and went on about my life, proud that I could handle so much responsibility on my own. I did not put much thought into God at this time. I became mildly involved with Wicca (white witchcraft), but was only playing with it and realize now how blessed I was that I did not cause serious damage to myself or others with my games. I also began to pick up bits and pieces of religious cultural practices, such as traditional Celtic and Native American spirituality (I am Native American and Irish) and Hinduism and Buddhism—without actually understanding any of it or connecting it properly with a Higher Power.

I lived a fairly wild life of sex, mild drug use, clubbing and partying. I “loved” everyone and enjoyed myself in every hedonistic way I could, with no concern for my future on this earth or in the Hereafter. I also suffered major depressions; in fact, the depressions began when I was very young, partly in response to the restrictions I felt that my Christian parents placed on me. At times I was suicidal and it was only through the grace of Allah that my attempts did not do any permanent damage to my body or mind.

Although I professed a social conscience and was the first to support all kinds of causes, I actually lived my life very irresponsibly. I did not hold jobs on a regular basis, lived hand-to-mouth, and tried to have little cares. While living with very little, I was in fact very materialistic and self-absorbed. I did nothing truly valuable for society and was a drain on my family and friends.

It was during this time that I met one of my brother's fellow gang members and became seriously involved. Although because of our relationship both my brother and his friend left the gang, there were still many trials awaiting all of us. My new man had a serious drug habit that I was not experienced enough to deal with and could not do anything about. We ended up in all kinds of legal troubles and ran away to a different state to avoid them. During this time, I hit a low point, living in the park, nearly starving to death, suffering miscarriages, and doing things for money that I never would have thought I would do.

Upon our return to our home state my boyfriend was arrested and I discovered I was pregnant again. By some miracle of Allah, my child was healthy and strong and I managed to carry him to term. In between time, my brother had been to jail and converted to Islam but upon release had moved out of town and we had no contact. After my son was born my brother came to visit the family. He told me a

lot of what he was learning, and I was impressed with the changes to his personality and manners. It seemed that the strictures of Islam were a very good thing for him. He had previously been diagnosed (I believe correctly) with Schizo-Affective Disorder (Schizophrenia, including hallucinations, with acute depression) but since his conversion he exhibited no symptoms and needed no treatment. My brother had become a gentle and soft-spoken man, dressed in traditional clothing and carried himself with great respect. He shared the basics of Islam with me and I was happy for him that he had found this belief, but had no interest in changing my own life.

(part 2 of 2)

With my son's father in prison, I tried to become more responsible and put my life in order for my son's sake. I began to attend church with my mother. A few months after my brother came home to visit, he returned with a wife in full veil, and months later she was pregnant with their first son. I wanted to like my new sister-in-law, but I think in retrospect that I was ashamed of my own ways and for that reason could not accept her modesty. May Allah bless her for her patience and willingness to continue to share Islam with me despite my attitude towards her. My brother also brought a friend home to talk with my mother about Islam. This was the first Muslim man besides my brother that I met and I remember his visits brought out a side of me I had not known existed. This Muslim man always struck me as bright white. I know now that it was because he had nur (light, shining) in his face, though I was too shy to look at him directly. Every time he visited, I found myself running to cover my half clothed body. To this day I make du`aa' (supplication) for this brother's safety and well-being as he made such an impression on me, but I have never seen him since. I had by that time met a man who seemed nice and responsible and I was dating him. My brother and his wife moved in with my mother, son and I, and my new fiancé visited every day. A few months before my nephew was born my brother and his wife moved to their own apartment and I had thoroughly worked my poor sister-in-laws nerves to the point that we could no longer maintain contact. I then married my fiancé and moved from my mother's house as well.

After my nephew's birth and my marriage, I began to visit with my brother and his wife. I was moved by the peacefulness of their home and family life. My sister-in-law sought to make my son and I comfortable when we visited, and began to tell me a bit more about Islam. My husband did not like my brother and made disparaging comments to his face and behind his back that shamed me. This caused strife in my marriage and I began to spend a lot of time at my brother's house since my husband did not allow me to work. Over time I found myself interested in my sister-in-law's covering and began to understand the comfort she must feel, maintaining her privacy. I was also able to determine that the fabric

used was not oppressive or hot as I had always expected. When I suggested to my husband that I might like to cover, he scoffed at me. He had always encouraged me to wear revealing clothing, and I think it made him feel good to have a “sexy” wife, but I did not feel respected. After only a few months of marriage, and only a week after our baptism in the church, he revealed to me that he was having an affair and no longer wanted to be married. Again, my life was in shambles and I moved my son and I back to my mother’s house.

Of course, I then spent even more time with my sister-in-law. My brother and his wife were the only people supportive of me after my husband kicked me out. The church we attended told me there was always a reason that a man would have an affair and that it was a shortcoming of the wife. They also told me that I should not look for work or leave his home, even though he had told me to leave, as I was sinning by creating a life without him instead of being patient waiting for him to return. The church did not offer to pay for my son’s food or clothing or diapers so that I could wait for “God to move my husband’s heart”, they only judged me and this made me very cynical. My brother and his wife understood that I needed to look after my son and that my marriage was over. They offered their home to me and my sister-in-law offered to babysit so that I could work. They took the time to explain to me the Islamic views on marriage, divorce and women’s rights. I was greatly surprised to discover that this so-called masochistic religion was in fact more realistic and understanding of my plight than my church had been.

Unfortunately, before I could tell my brother that I was ready to live with him, he and his family were forced to leave town very unexpectedly. After they settled down, my sister-in-law wrote to me and we began to maintain contact. After only a few more months, with my life still a complete mess, I decided that I was fed up trying to live my own way. I found my brother’s former employer, who was Muslim, and begged him to take my son and I to my brother’s home. He happily complied, also giving me a Qur’an to read on the way. This brother was so kind and respectful to me, and very thoughtful of my son. He offered to marry me, but I was shocked by this and asked for time to be with my brother. He delivered me to my brother with no hard feelings and went back to his business.

Living with my brother and his wife proved to be more of a challenge than I expected and we were terribly poor. But I took my shahadah (Testimony of Faith) and lived in a town where I heard the adhan (call to prayer) called five times a day and was surrounded by Muslims. There were a lot of problems too, but I always remember how beautiful it was and I miss those days. My brother and his wife taught me how to make wudu' (ablution), how to pray, how to be mindful of God., and nearly everything else I needed to know to begin to live as a Muslim.

Eventually, I had to come home to find work and provide better life for my son. I stopped wearing hijab and niqab (face veil) and did what I had to do to find

work. I had made some basic moral improvements and proudly stated that I was a Muslim, but I found it very hard to live as one. My town does not have a tight-knit community, and unfortunately, my pre-Islam past was leaked out and sisters were not willing to speak to me. *Alhamdulillah*, I found a job where I had access to the internet and began to look up information about Islam and purchase books. This also led to me purchasing hijabs, and eventually niqabs, although my employer refused to allow me to wear hijab. On-line I made many Muslimah friends and built my own little community. I also found a new husband. Due to my own impatience and particularly strict views, that marriage also quickly failed and I left him. After leaving my husband, I again gave up hijab and niqab and began to live a little wildly. I hid it well, but I did not live Islamically at all for a time. To this day, I wonder what better turn my life might have taken if I had stayed with that husband, but Allah apparently had other plans for me.

Again, I met a man. He was kind and gentle and generous and I fell in love. But he was not Muslim. I was honest with him that I was Muslim and could only marry a Muslim. I began to wear hijab again and he accepted this. He was willing to accept Islam and took his shahadah and we married. After some time, I again was blessed to find a job with internet service and built up a community of sisters again. I finally began to do what I had always wanted to do: write. With the support of sisters on-line, I even began to write Islamic stories and articles. My employer also appreciated the Islamic viewpoint that I brought to our social service work, as well as the integrity I brought to the office. They were pleased that I wore hijab and supported me, in-as-much as non-Muslims can.

Although I continue to strive hard, it is not always easy. I struggle like anyone else and my faith sometimes seems like it may falter. But I try to remember that everything is in Allah's Hands and that as long as I am struggling against my own nafs (human self) and obeying Him, He protects me. I am blessed to have a lot of Muslimah friends all over the world, and hope, insha'Allah, to someday move to a stronger community of believers. It is impossible for me to forget that Allah used my own younger brother to bring me to the truth, and I recognize this blessing is unique. Although my parents are unwilling to hear about Islam, I know that I am blessed to have family that I can share this gift with. I make du`aa' that through my writing I glorify Allah and encourage others to seek His Path—the only true path to happiness and a good life—Islam.