

## Katherine Bullock, Ex-Christian, Canada

(part 1 of 2)



What am I doing down here? I wonder, my nose and forehead pressed to the floor as I kneel in prayer. My kneecaps ache, my arm muscles strain as I try to keep the pressure off my forehead. I listen to strange utterings of the person praying next to me. It's Arabic, and they understand what they are saying, even if I don't. So. I make up my own words, hoping God will be kind to me, a Muslim only 12 hours old. OK. God, I converted to Islam because I believe in you, and because Islam makes sense to me. Did I really just say that? I catch myself, bursting into tears. What would my friends say if they saw me like this, kneeling, nose pressed to the floor?...They'd laugh at me. Have you lost your mind? They'd ask. You can't seriously tell me you are religious. Religious...I was once a happy 'speculative atheist,' how did I turn into a believer and a Muslim? I ask myself. I turn my mind into the past and attempt a whirlwind tour through my journey. But where did it begin? Maybe it started when I first met practicing Muslims. This was in 1991, at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

I was an open-minded, tolerant, liberal woman. 24 years old. I saw Muslim women walking around the International Centre and I felt sorry for them. I knew they were oppressed. My sorrow increased when I asked them why they covered their hair, why they wore long sleeves in summer, why they were so ill-treated in Muslim countries, and they told me that they wore the veil, and they dressed so, because God asked them too. Poor things. What about their treatment in Muslim countries? That's culture, they would reply. I knew they were deluded, socialised/brainwashed from an early age, into believing this wicked way of treating women. But I noticed how happy they were, how friendly they were, how solid they seemed. I saw Muslim men walking around the international centre.

There was even a man from Libya - the land of terrorists. I trembled when I saw them, lest they do something to me in the name of God. I remembered the television images of masses of rampaging Arab men burning effigies of President Bush, all in the name of God. What a God they must have, I thought. Poor things that they even believe in God, I added, secure in the truth that God was an anthropomorphic projection of us weak human beings. But I noticed that these men were very friendly. I noticed how helpful they were. I perceived an aura of calmness. What a belief they must have, I thought. But it puzzled me. I had read the Koran, and hadn't detected anything special about it. That was before, when the Gulf War broke out. What kind of God would persuade men to go War, to kill innocent citizens of another country, to rape women, to demonstrate against the US?

I decided I'd better read the Holy book on whose behalf they claimed they were acting. I read a Penguin classic, surely a trustworthy book, and I couldn't finish it, I disliked it so much. Here was a paradise described with virgin women in it for the righteous (what was a righteous woman to do with a virgin woman in Paradise?); here was a God destroying whole cities at a stroke.

No wonder the women are oppressed, and these fanatics storm around burning the US flag, I thought. But the Muslims I put this to seemed bewildered. Their Quran didn't say things in that way. Perhaps I had a bad translation?

Suddenly the praying person I am following stands up. I too stand up, my feet catching on the long skirt I wear; I almost trip. I sniff, trying to stop the tears. I must focus on praying to God. Dear God, I am here because I believe in you, and because during my research of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism, Islam made the most sense.

Bending over, my hands at my knees, I try hard to reassure myself. God. Please help me to be a good Muslim. A Muslim! Kathy, how could you - a white western women who is educated - convert to a religion which makes its women second class citizens!

But Kingston's Muslims became my friends, I protest. They welcomed me into their community warmly, without question. I forgot that they were oppressed and terrorists. This seems like the start of my journey. But I was still an atheist. Or was I?

I had looked into the starry night, and contemplated the universe. The diamond stars strewn across the dark sky twinkled mysterious messages to me. I felt hooked up to something bigger than myself. Was it a collective human consciousness? Peace and tranquility flowed to me from the stars. Could I wrench myself from this feeling and declare there is no higher being? No higher consciousness? Haven't you ever doubted the existence of God? I would ask my

believing Christian and Muslim friends. No, they replied. No? No? This puzzled me.

Was God that obvious? How come I couldn't see God. It seemed too much a stretch of my imagination. A being out there, affecting the way I lived. How could God listen to billions of people praying, and deal with each second of that person's life? It's impossible. Maybe a First Cause, but one who intervened? And what about the persistence of injustice in the world? Children dying in war. A just, good God couldn't allow that. God didn't make sense. God couldn't exist. Besides, we evolved, so that disposed of a First Cause anyway.

We kneel down again, and here I am, sniffing, looking sideways at my fingers on the green of my new prayer mat. I like my prayer mat. It has a velvety touch to it, and some of my favourite colours: a purple mosque on a green background. There is a path leading to a black entrance of the mosque and it beckons me. The entrance to the mosque seems to contain the truth, it is elusive, but it is there. I am happy to be beckoned to this entrance.

When I was much younger I had a complete jigsaw picture of the world. It fell apart sometime during the third or fourth year of my undergraduate study. In Kingston I had reminded myself that I had once been a regular churchgoer, somewhat embarrassed, since I knew that religious people were slushy/mushy, quaint, boring, old fashioned people. Yet God had seemed self-evident to me then. The universe made no sense without a Creator Being who was also omnipotent.

Leaving church I had always had a feeling of lightness and happiness. I felt the loss of that feeling. Could it be that I had once had a connection to God which was now gone? Maybe this was the start of my journey? I tried to pray again, but found it extraordinarily difficult. Christians told me that people who didn't believe in Lord Jesus Christ were doomed. What about people who've never heard of Jesus? Or people who follow their own religion? And society historically claimed women were inferior because Christianity told us it was Eve's punishment; women were barred from studying, voting, owning land. God was an awful man with a long white beard. I couldn't talk to him. I couldn't follow Christianity, therefore God couldn't exist.

But then I discovered feminists who believed in God, Christian women who were feminists, and Muslim women who believed Islam did not condone a lot of what I thought integral to their religion. I started to pray and call myself a 'post-Christian feminist believer.'

**(part 2 of 2)**

I felt that lightness again; maybe God did exist. I carefully examined my life's events and I saw that coincidences and luck were God's blessings for me, and I'd never noticed, or said thanks. I am amazed God was so kind and persistent while I was disloyal. My ears and feet tingle pleasantly from the washing I have just given them; a washing which cleanses me and allows me to approach God in prayer.

God. An awesome deity. I feel awe, wonder and peace. Please show me the path. But surely you can see that the world is too complex, too beautiful, too harmonious to be an accident? To be the blind result of evolutionary forces? Don't you know that science is returning to a belief in God? Don't you know that science never contradicted Islam anyway? I am exasperated with my imaginary jury. Haven't they researched these things?

Maybe this was the most decisive path. I'd heard on the radio an interview with a physicist who was explaining how modern science had abandoned its nineteenth century materialistic assumptions long ago, and was scientifically of the opinion that too many phenomena occurred which made no sense without there being intelligence and design behind it all. Indeed, scientific experiments were not just a passive observation of physical phenomena, observation altered the way physical events proceeded, and it seemed therefore that intelligence was the most fundamental stuff of the universe.

I read more, and more. I discovered that only the most diehard anthropologists still believed in evolution theory, though no one was saying this very loudly for fear of losing their job. My jigsaw was starting to fall apart.

OK, so you decided God existed. You were a monotheist. But Christianity is monotheistic. It is your heritage. Why leave it? Still these questioners are puzzled. But you must understand this is the easiest question of them all to answer. I smile.

I learned how the Quran did not contradict science in the same way the Bible did. I wanted to read the Biblical stories literally, and discovered I could not. Scientific fact contradicted Biblical account. But scientific fact did not contradict Quranic account, science even sometimes explained a hitherto inexplicable Quranic verse. This was stunning.

There was a verse about how the water from fresh water rivers which flowed into the sea did not mix with the sea water; verses describing conception accurately; verses referring to the orbits of the planets. Seventh century science knew none of this. How could Muhammad be so uniquely wise? My mind drew me towards the Quran, but I resisted.

I started going to church again, only to find myself in tears in nearly every service. Christianity continued to be difficult for me. So much didn't make sense:

the Trinity; the idea that Jesus was God incarnate; the worship of Mary, the Saints, or Jesus, rather than God. The priests told me to leave reason behind when contemplating God. The Trinity did not make sense, and nor was it supposed to. I delved deeper. After all, how could I leave my culture, my heritage, my family? No one would understand, and I'd be alone. I tried to be a good Christian.

I learned more. I discovered that Easter was instituted a couple of hundreds of years after Jesus's death, that Jesus never called himself God incarnate, and more often said he was the Son of Man; that the doctrine of the Trinity was established some 300 odd years after Christ had died; that the Nicene Creed which I had faithfully recited every week, focusing on each word, was written by MEN at a political meeting to confirm a minority position that Jesus was the Son of God, and the majority viewpoint that Jesus was God's messenger, was expunged forever.

I was so angry! Why hadn't the Church taught me these things. Well. I knew why. People would understand that they could worship God elsewhere, and that there, worship would actually make sense to them. I would only worship one God, not three, not The Father, Son and Holy ghost; not Jesus as Lord, nor the Saints, nor Mary. Could Muhammad really be a Messenger, could the Quran be God's word? I kept reading the Quran.

It told me that Eve was not alone to blame for the 'fall;' that Jesus was a Messenger; that unbelievers would laugh at me for being a believer; that people would question the authenticity of Muhammad's claim to revelation, but that if they tried to write something as wise, consistent and rational they would fail. This seemed true. Islam asked me to use my intelligence to contemplate God, it encouraged me to seek knowledge, it told me that whoever believed in (Jews/Christians/Muslims/whoever) would get rewards, it seemed a very encompassing religion. We stand again and still standing, bend down again to a resting position with our hands on our knees. What else can I say to God? I can't think of enough to say, the prayer seems so long.

I puff slightly, still sniffing, since with all the standing and kneeling and standing I am somewhat out of breath. So you seriously think that I would willingly enter a religion which turned me into a second class citizen? I demand of my questioners. You know that there is a lot of abuse of women in Islamic countries, just as in the West, but this is not true Islam. And don't bring the veil thing up. Don't you know that women wear hijab because God asks them to? Because they trust in God's word.

Still. How will I have the courage to wear hijab? I probably won't. People will stare at me, I'll become obvious; I'd rather hide away in the crowd when I'm out. What will my friends say when they see me in that?? OH! God! Help.

I had stalled at the edge of change for many a long month, my dilemma growing daily. What should I do? Leave my old life and start a new one? But I couldn't possibly go out in public in hijab. People would stare at me. I stood at the forked path which God had helped me reach. I had new knowledge which rested comfortably with my intellect. Follow the conviction, or stay in the old way? How could I stay when I had a different outlook on life? How could I change when the step seemed too big for me?

I would rehearse the conversion sentence: There is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet. Simple words, I believe in them, so convert. I cannot, I resisted. I circled endlessly day after day. God stood on one of the paths of the fork, tapping his foot. Come on Kathy. I've brought you here, but you must cross alone. I stayed stationary, transfixed like a kangaroo trapped in car lights late at night. Then one night, God, I suppose, gave me a final yank. I was passing a mosque with my husband. I had a feeling in me that was so strong I could hardly bear it. If you don't convert now, you never will, my inner voice told me. I knew it was true. OK, I'll do it. If they let me in to the mosque, I'll do it. But there was no one there. I said the Shahada under the trees outside the mosque. I waited. I waited for the thunderclap, the immediate feeling of relief, the lifting of my burden. But it didn't come.

I felt exactly the same. Now we are kneeling again, the world looks so different from down here. Even famous football players prostrate like this, I remember, glancing sideways at the tassels of my hijab which fall onto the prayer mat; we are all the same and equally humbled before God. Now we are sitting up straight, my prayer leader is muttering something still, waving his right hand's forefinger around in the air. I look down at my mat again. The green, purple and black of my prayer mat look reassuringly the same.

The blackness of the Mosque's entrance entreats me: 'I am here, just relax and you will find me.' My tears have dried on my face and the skin feels tight. What am I doing here? Dear God. I am here because I believe in you, because I believe in the compelling and majestic words of the Quran, and because I believe in the Prophethood of Your Messenger Muhammad. I know in my heart my decision is the right one. Please give me the courage to carry on with this new self and new life, that I may serve you well with a strong faith. I smile and stand up, folding my prayer mat into half, and lay it on the sofa ready for my next encounter with its velvety green certainty. Now the burden begins to lift.