

Anja, Ex-Christian, Germany

(part 1 of 4)



“... This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed my favor upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion...” (Quran 5:3)

I was born 1967 in a small town in Sauerland County, Germany. My younger brother and I grew up in the country, where my parents and grandparents lived in a two-family house. My grandfather used to be principal of a primary school. My father would have liked to become a forester, but instead he only became a teacher in secondary school. He still does love nature very much. But throughout the years he seems to have lost His love for Jesus Christ, which was quite disappointing for my grandmother, who has always been a firm believer. She was a member of a small church and all her life she participated actively in the church and tried hard to set a true Christian example for her children. My grandfather on the other hand could hardly be called a believer; this was something that my grandmother only found out after the wedding. Steady church attendance turned out to be no proof of faith. Till today after each church service my grandparents engage in heated discussions about Christian belief in general and the contents of the last sermon in particular. This situation did affect their three sons. Today only one of them is a church member.

My mother on the other side comes from a family, where devotion to faith was key. Belief was never subject to discussion. Actually nothing ever was subject to discussion. My mother, being the youngest child, was never taken seriously. What else could be the use of a daughter? Till this day she regrets that she wasn't allowed to learn another profession. And again it was taken for granted, that my mother was to marry my father. Since he was the son of a teacher he was a good match. The shared faith would guarantee a happy marriage.

But during the first years the marriage became unstable due to religions tensions. While my grandmother was elected as first woman into the church's council of elders, my parents one at a time left the church. And there came a

day, when they didn't have anything in common anymore. So after 20 years of marriage and uncountable tries to get along, both agreed on throwing in the towel and in 1986 their marriage was dissolved.

At that time my brother and I weren't too attached to religion, which added to my grandmother's dismay. We did join Christian Youth groups and take Bible classes, but neither of us became church members. Actually we haven't even been baptized. The church my family belonged to doesn't baptize children, but rather grown up people, who consciously make a decision for Christ. When we reached necessary age, we both decided against being baptized.

Not that I wouldn't have been interested in religion. Religion always fascinated me. Christianity offers an acceptable approach, the belief in one God, who contacted mankind by sending prophets. In this way God taught the people who they are and how they should interact with each other and their environment. But I was soon to notice that Christian values could so easily be adjusted. What does Christian theology teach? Every human being is full of sin; original sin is burdening us from birth. God sent His son into the world to suffer and die on the cross and save us from this burden of guilt. A number of questions remained unanswered for me; God's son, who was supposed to be a man and at the same time the true God, was praying to be saved from the crucifixion, but to whom did he pray so ardently? His life became the turning point of history, which divides people in "before" and "after" Christ. Belief in him is the only way to be saved. Didn't he say himself: "I am the way, the truth and the life. Nobody comes to the Father but through me." (John 14, 6)

With Jesus' death the Hereafter lost its terror. Christianity preaches that God is Love, so how can there be a Hell? The devil, who used to be a mean of oppression to keep church members in order, has been pensioned. The values of contemporary Christianity are pretty much limited to "Love your Neighbor". As long as I don't hurt anybody, everything goes. Jesus says: "You shouldn't think, I have come to dissolve the law or the prophets. I didn't come to dissolve, but to fulfill." (Matthew 5:17) The difference doesn't seem to be too big in modern Christianity. Commandments are out. Church goes with time. Though not fast enough for some of its members.

The Bible hardly has any weight anymore. Probably some truth can be found in it, but who decides on what is truth and what isn't? Who decides, what is valid and what isn't? The church? The theologians? Or everybody for himself? Doesn't everybody according to best knowledge and conscience fabricate his own belief? Let's be truthful and no longer call the result Christianity. Let's call it "Brianity", "Susanity" instead!

Believing Christians will of course protest by now. They will say, the common basis is there. Well, where is it? The true revelation, the words God told Jesus from Nazareth, where are they? In the Bible there wasn't even one chapter dedicated to them.

Central sentences of Faith, that divide the church, have been derived from historical reports and letters, decided on during theological conferences or just called out as State doctrine. And how many times did I hear: “You can’t understand this. You just have to believe it!” I believe that God gave us our brains so that we might use them. And I believe, that a message of God, when it is questioned, has to offer more answers than that.

That’s what I told my religious instructor, when my high school class spent a weekend in a monastery shortly before graduation. “Days of reflection” that’s what they called it. The teacher surprised me with his answer. He said: “God won’t let you go. You’ll see.” At the end he turned out to be right, though he probably may have imagined it a little differently.

My interest in God and religion again caught up with me, when I came across Islam. After taking my high school diploma I moved to a city, to take up studies of economy at the university. At that time I thought that this field of study would do me good in terms of finding a job. I wasn’t too interested in the subject, but I thought, that my studies would come to pass very quickly, but instead I was subjected to a very depressing atmosphere. Crowded stuffy audition rooms, boring lectures by boring professors. As students in these classes, we were busy with other things. “Did you see what the tall blonde in the third row is wearing today?” - “Do you have a light?”

Student life on the other hand was fascinating from the very beginning. I had till that point in time lived in a small town. Even during my year as an exchange student in the U.S.A. I stayed in a small country town that made it obligatory to visit the church on Sundays! Now at university there seemed to be a new world opening up for me. I got to know so many different people and I loved to discuss God and the world. Among my new acquaintances were a few foreign students, who were born Muslims. So the subject of Islam came up.

Generally I was quite amused by the thought, that actually there are still people around, who seriously follow a law from the Middle Ages. But in reality everything looked quite different from what I knew. The life of foreign students in Germany doesn’t have anything in common with the tales of a *Thousand and One Nights*. In the beginning I had still asked my Muslim neighbors in the student homes kiddingly, why tomatoes don’t have to be ritually cut? Or why a Muslim, who remembers God before he eats and thanks God after the meal, doesn’t do the same thing when drinking his beer in the pub?

But the more I learned about Islam, the less funny those jokes became for me. Actually the Islamic religion wasn’t that strange to me, as I had always thought. I rediscovered a lot of those components that I had always liked in Christianity. For one, of course, was the belief in God. Islam is strictly monotheistic. There is only one God. God is in Arabic “Allah”. The expression really doesn’t mean anything else but “the God” and is also used in the Arabic language version of the Bible.

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A Muslim believes - like a Christian - that God has sent prophets, to lead mankind on the right path. Names turned up that sounded so familiar: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jonah, and also Zachary, John and Jesus.

I learned that Muhammad, the son on Abdullah, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, who lived in the 7th century A.D. in the Arabian Peninsula, was believed to have been the last prophet. He had been given the Quran and this book was the foundation for all Islamic teachings.

I had a look at that book, the Quran.

**“This is the book: in it is guidance sure, without doubt...”
(2:2)**

That is noted there about the Quran itself.

Another interesting point that I came to realize at that time was that Western scholars to a degree agree that there are miraculous passages in the Quran. Even from a pure literal and linguistic point of view, the Quran is considered a miracle and it has set the standard for Classical Arabic.

The contents of Quran are as remarkable as is the form. It is in no way a simple “Arabic History book”, as a well-known Orientalist described it in the media. On the contrary, it contains astonishing facts on nature, society and generally everything that concerns human life.

Already in the first revelation it states: **“Read, and thy Lord is the Most Bountiful, He, who ...taught man that which he knew not.” (96:3-5)**

One of the amazing historical facts that can be found in the Quran relates to the ruler of Egypt. In the story of Joseph the Quran talks about a King and in the story of Moses it talks about a Pharaoh? The reason for this was only known when the French Historian Jean Francois Champollion with the help of the Rosetta Stone succeeded in deciphering the old Egyptian Hieroglyphic letters. It turns out that at the end of the Middle Empire the Hyksos tribes, originating in Asia, occupied the Northern part of present day Egypt. A king ruled that area, this would roughly translate to the time of Prophet Joseph. Under the rule of the Hyksos he was raised to become the advisor of the King. And under the reign of the Hyksos the people of Israel migrated to Egypt, where they were welcomed.

In the 16th Century B.C. during the reign of Pharaoh Ahmose, the Egyptians managed to retake the country. The people of Israel were hated on account of their cooperation with the King that was ruling the northern area of Egypt. That explains why the people of Israel at the times of Moses were oppressed and enslaved. Quran distinguishes between the terms “King” of the Hyksos and “Pharaoh” of the Egyptians.

As we go further into the story of Moses, we see that God says: **“This day shall we save your body, that you may be a sign to those who come after you! But verily, many among mankind are heedless of Our Signs!”** (10:92) This verse talks about the mummification of the Pharaoh.

The Quran also mentions scientific facts in relation to creation. God says: **“Do not the Unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together before We clove them asunder? We made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe?”** (21:30) This fact corresponds with the newest findings of science.

And did you know, that according to Quran we do not live “on” earth, but rather “in” earth? This verse speaks about the atmosphere, which obviously is part of the earth. Without it we wouldn’t exist. Just think about the high speed with which we are traveling through space due to the rotation of the earth. Try to imagine the wind resulting from the movement speed, which we would have to cope with if it wasn’t for the atmosphere.

Quran accurately describes phenomenon of nature such as the buildup of clouds, embryology, chemistry of digestion and the expansion of the universe. Up to now there haven’t been any scientific findings contradicting Quranic verses. On the contrary, some Quran statements can only be fully understood and appreciated with the help of contemporary science. We find that throughout the Quran, time and time again, the reader is asked to use his faculties to recognize the truth.

With the help of the Quran Arab Bedouins and traders managed to build a society, in which not only science but also fine arts were blooming. Europe at that time was still stuck in the period known as the Middle Ages.

On belief itself we read in Quran: **“There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong. So whoever disbelieves in Taghut and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing.”** (2:256)

Actually Islamic theology is as clear as the testimony: **“There is no God worthy of worship but Allah, and Muhammad is His last prophet.”**

In Islam there is such thing as the original sin. God says: **“...And every soul earns not [blame] except against itself, and no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another...”** (6:164) After Adam and Eve sinned, God taught them repentance.

God’s son? In relation to this, God says: **“Say, “He is Allah, [who is] One. Allah, the Eternal Refuge. He neither begets nor is born. Nor is there to Him any equivalent.”**(Chapter 112) Jesus of Nazareth was only a prophet of God!

A turning point in history? Absolutely no. To the contrary, history proves an unbroken continuity. From the very beginning there was only one religion, which was to submit to the one God, in Arabic: "Islam". This religion was proclaimed by all prophets, including Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Prophet Muhammad has been the last of them, but still he was a human being like you and me. The speech held by his friend Abu Bakr Siddiq on the occasion of his death has been preserved till today. He said: **"So, who among you worshipped Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, should know, that Muhammad is dead. But who worshipped God; truly, God is alive and will never die."** And then he reminded the people of the following verse of Quran:

"Muhammad is no more than a messenger: many were the messengers that passed away before him. If he died or were slain, will you turn back on your heels? If any did turn back on his heels, not the least harm he will do to God; but God will swiftly reward those who are grateful" (3:144)

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The church? There isn't any. No organization, no hierarchy, no sacraments. Every Muslim can preach. Or contract a marriage. Or pray the death prayer for a deceased.

Interpretation of Scriptures? As far as central sentences of belief are concerned, Muslims are united. God is God and the prophets were human. Quran is the word of God, as well as the books revealed to other prophets. Angels are a reality and the resurrection is a reality. Islamic scholars are - in contrast to their Christian scholars- more concerned with the practical application of religious principles. They announce religious opinions on the basis of Quran and Sunnah, which is the example of the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. Such an expert opinion is called "fatwa". No scholar has in any form any God given authority. A fatwa always does reflect the personal opinion of the scholar that is based on textual evidences. You can take it or leave it.

About 1 billion people all over the world testify this belief. And up to today Islam hasn't lost its attraction. The Arabic word "Islam" has the same letter root as the word "Salaam", peace. So the meaning of the word Islam implies also to find peace, peace with God, the world and oneself.

I learned and understood. But still I wouldn't accept the truth. I guess I was just too lazy to become Muslim. It looked much too hard for me. Islam is something that enters into every walk of life. Christianity on the other hand tends to be a little bit ignorant of reality these days. Well-measured piety, which is worn for the church service like the Sunday dress is then stored in the closet for the rest of the week.

Nevertheless I began to try Islam out. I joined my Muslim neighbors in the fasting of the month of Ramadan. That means I didn't eat or drink between dawn and sunset. And every evening we met to break the fast together. Sometimes we even cooked together. An Egyptian student by the name Mohamed turned out to be an excellent cook. Mohamed took me aside some time in the middle of the month and encouraged me to ask, so I asked many questions and to each question he gave a superb answer. In those Ramadan nights I also got the opportunity to watch the prayers. And I tried to imitate what I saw in the privacy of my home. I bowed and prostrated. As I didn't know the words that are said, I improvised by saying "Our heavenly father..." I also began to reduce my consumption of alcohol and pork. And once I even went for a walk in the city wearing a scarf over my hair, just to try it out. Finally I learned why the Palestinians in the student homes put a bottle of water in the bathroom. For Muslims it is normal to wash after using the toilet. In Germany there are usually no hand showers or the like installed in the bathrooms as there are in Muslim countries. So a bottle of water had to do.

Many Muslims around me were wondering why I was interested in Islam and the reality was that many of them weren't too concerned with the Islamic regulations themselves. Again and again I heard: "Of course I am Muslim. If I would be living in my country, I would live according to Quran. But here in Europe everything is different. I am still young. I will have time enough to be pious sometime in the future."

On the other hand there were also few people that were trying hard to live their faith properly. One of my neighbors in the student homes belongs to this category. Mohamed, the excellent cook during Ramadhan, had a Bachelors degree in Biophysics from Egypt and had come to Germany to do his doctorate degree. When I got to know him he had been in Germany for 6 months only and was still attending German language classes at university.

His religion, Islam, meant everything to him. He had already acquired a broad knowledge on Islamic matters. Among the Arabs in the student homes he was referred to as "Sheikh". A nickname, that didn't seem to be fitting for a 24 year old, sportive young man with curly black hair. Mohamed himself didn't like the name. Once he told me, the responsibility of it was too big for him.

Actually everybody, who needed advice or help, came to the "Sheikh". If a student needed a room, or if someone needed to go to hospital or just wanted to sell his used books they would all come to Mohamed.

In the beginning our acquaintance developed kind of slowly, as Mohamed tried hard to stand up to his image as a practicing Muslim. He stayed away from any possible temptation. And for a Muslim, women definitely belong in that category. But soon his religious responsibility took over. Is it possible to send someone away who is interested in Islam?

To me he was indeed an interesting person to talk to. Rarely had I met someone as open minded as him. We spent our time discussing Islam and the world; of course only at “neutral” places..We learned a lot from each other in that time and Mohamed became one of my most reliable friends.

In the meanwhile I had completely lost my interest in my economics studies. Due to my poor efforts the last exams hadn’t turned out all too well and so I decided to study Oriental Studies. I figured a good grade in this subject would be more useful than a bad one in economics. My studies were going a lot smoother. Some credits from my economic studies could be transferred for my new minor sociology. And the new classes were so interesting to me. They offered a whole lot of new subjects for discussions with Mohamed.

During this time I finally began to support the Muslims. At university I was more and more annoyed by the ironical way in which Muslims were treated by non-Muslim Stuff. Still I couldn’t even imagine becoming Muslim myself. What is good for Arab women isn’t necessarily good for German women. I thought to myself, how can a German women live as a Muslimah? I did hear of such women, but had never met anyone personally. At least that is what I thought. Till shortly before spring break I found out by chance, that one of the students in my Arabic class was a German Muslimah.

It was still winter and cold outside. Every time this woman left the classroom, she pulled her long woolen scarf up over her head. One day I asked her, if that had any other reasons but the cold and she replied affirmatively.

Heide was a teacher, married to a Muslim from the Lebanon. When she became Muslim, she took the Islamic name Khadija. She participated at the Arabic class to collect credits for a graduate course in teaching foreigners.

From her I learned that in our city there was an organization for German speaking Muslim women. I accepted her invitation to accompany her to one of the group meetings. And from there on everything began to change at high pace.

We agreed on a day to go and Heide offered to give me a ride. So we met in the city. This time Heide was wearing a “real” headscarf that she had wrapped quite elegantly around her head. I had brought a scarf with me as well. I was getting a little nervous. How would I be welcomed as a Non Muslim? What kind of women was I about to meet? Heide comforted me and said that guests were always welcome and there really wasn’t any need for me to wear a scarf.

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Heide herself was still a quite new Muslim. Nevertheless she did already know her way around the Islamic community in our City. She used to do everything with full heart and power. She was already being considered as a

teacher for an Islamic school. On our way to the meeting she told me, what I had to expect:

“The group consists of about 30 women of German and Turkish origin. They meet once a week in the facilities of a Turkish Islamic organization. The group leader, Maryam, is a German Muslimah of about 50 years of age. She has lived some years with her husband in Turkey, where they both participated in a lot of Islamic activities. Maryam, who by now is widowed, does engage in Islamic activities in Germany as well. She holds speeches on Islamic subjects and has founded this women’s group. During the meeting Maryam will hold a lesson on Islam, and then those women, who feel like it, stay a little longer to chat. We bring tea and cake along.”

This week the cake was Heide’s turn. It took its time in the oven and Heide had been a little late. So she was speeding up. “Maryam isn’t all too happy with people coming late.” Unfortunately we didn’t find any free parking space close to the building. So Heide just drove into the yard. We were lucky. One of the parking cars was just about to leave and a friendly man with Turkish appearance gave us signals to help her get the car into that free space.

The crowd was fascinating for me. “All are going to the meeting?” Heide laughed: “That would be nice.” Of course not everyone was going to the meeting. Heide explained to me, that every weekend the place was that crowded, as the Turkish organization held its own activities.

The German language meeting was held in a separate part of the building. When we entered the hall, we were already greeted tumultuously: “Hi, Khadija!” “How are you today?” “Oh, did you bring one of your delicious cakes?” “The others are in the kitchen!” “Maryam is about to start the lesson!” Women with covered hair and long dresses passed us. And again and again I heard the Islamic greeting: “As-Salaamu Alaykum!” - “May God protect you and give you security!”

I was included in the friendly welcome and kissed on both cheeks. Guests were welcome! The women thought it was great that someone dared to enter the “lion’s den” to see for herself, what the Muslims are like. This meeting appeared to be not only for German speaking Muslim women, but also a contact group for women interested in Islam. So I seemed to be at the right place.

We really were late. The lesson started right away. Heide-Khadija placed the cake in the kitchen, and then we entered the lecture room. The long room was covered with gray fitted carpet. There wasn’t any furniture but a little bookshelf at the wall. The women were sitting in a circle on the floor. They had left their shoes outside, as it is customary in mosques and Muslim homes.

Maryam, the group leader, had placed several books in front of her. She was a corpulent lady with bright blue eyes that glanced friendly from under the simple white scarf. This day she talked about the continuity of history as

documented in Qur'an. About the different prophets, that all brought the same message over and over. The lesson didn't contain too much news for me. Islam recognizes most prophets of the Old and New Testament. Some of the details of the stories differ, but the basis thought is always the same. God sends prophets to remind the people of his message.

More interesting to me than the lesson were the listeners, that more or less concentrated followed the lecture. "Isn't it surprising, that the message of God again and again was forgotten?" For some of the women the information seemed to be new. What surprised me? "In Qur'an there is a chapter that puts the stories of the prophets into an overall context. Who knows what chapter I am talking about?" There were women of every age, many of German origin, some Turkish girls, obviously still at school that whispered in each other's ears and kept leaving and reentering the room and this distracted Maryam so she said: "If you don't want to listen, just stay outside!" All women were covered. They were wearing scarves in all colors and shades, simply tied or elaborately wrapped, or decorated with lace. Some had pulled the scarf down on the forehead. Others were showing their hair. "Always when the people had problems, they turned to God, and later they figured, they wouldn't need Him anymore." Some women had brought small children. One discovered the light switch as a fun game and didn't want to play with anything else. "Please, could someone take the child away from that light switch?" Finally the mother took the loudly protesting child into the kitchen, where he discovered the cake, which kept him busy at least a quarter hour. But when there came some phone calls for several of the women and a Turkish girl wanted to know how many cups tea and coffee she should prepare and how long it would take till we'd finish, Maryam had had enough. "We'll go on from here next week, and now we'll have tea." So finally I got a chance to talk to the women. They right away took me in. "After all, we are all sisters." "Do you drink coffee or tea?" "Have some cake!" "So, how did you like it?" Soon we were in the middle of a lively conversation. Of course everybody wanted to know, who I was, and what brought me here to a Muslim meeting. Maryam talked about how long it had taken her faith to grow. "But I never have regretted my decision for Islam." Heide-Khadija on the other hand hadn't known so much about Islam when she became Muslim. But: "Till today I have been only positively surprised." What had attracted her was the "healthy Islamic way of life"; abstinence of all kinds of drugs. Prayer and fasting as exercise for body, mind and soul. Hygienic commands. All this made sense to her as a teacher for biology and sport.

Maryam confirmed, that the regular prayers had done her back a lot of good. And then she talked about her time in Turkey and tried to explain to me Turkish history. A subject I still don't know much about. At that time I was hopelessly lost. On this day I got to know quite a few women. And all told me their personal stories about how they came to Islam.

Hamida after her divorce had become friends with a Turkish couple and on that way got to know and love Islam. Her 15-year-old daughter Nina had kept

her Christian religion, though not really practicing. She had accompanied her mother to the meeting.

Fatima-Elizabeth, in her mid twenties, studying to become a teacher, had some years ago worked on a vacation job. She had worked in a factory side by side with a German Muslima. Fatima-Elizabeth's family was Catholic, both parents religious instructors. They were quite shocked when they learned that her daughter embraced Islam. The shock had faded away during the last years and with goodwill on both sides the living together worked out fine.

Fatima-Elizabeth's friend Sabine, a nurse, who came to Islam through her husband, wasn't that lucky. Her father rebuked her from the house because of her headscarf. There were mothers, housekeepers, students, a secretary, and a dental laboratory assistant. The women were single, married, divorced. Husbands if existent, came from Turkey, Lebanon, Yemen, Morocco and other countries. Some women had taken an Islamic name, others hadn't. Actually the women had only one thing in common. And that was their religion, Islam. But that seemed to fulfill them, yes, to be the guiding line in their lives. "Islam is the frame, in which we live."

That day I learned two things. For one I discovered, that the frame Islam sets isn't so narrow as I had expected. There is no standardized Muslim. A Muslim is just a person, who took a decision for God. These women had embraced Islam. But they had stayed themselves.

And secondly I realized for the first time, that you never finish learning. Now I had met all these women that were so faithful, though they didn't know "everything" there is to know. Knowledge isn't all. The important thing is to have firm belief.

"It was We Who created man, and We know what suggestions his soul makes to him: for we are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein." (Quran 50:16)

Some weeks later I took my personal decision for God and Islam. After 2-½ year of learning I embraced Islam. What finally led me to this step was the thought: "If I die right now and stand before God, how can I explain to Him, why I haven't become Muslim?" When I couldn't come up with a reasonable answer anymore, I decided on the only logical thing to do and testified: "There is no God worthy of worship but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet."