

Jenny, Ex-Christian, Australia

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Often when people ask me ‘How did you come to Islam?’, I take a deep breath and try and tell them the ‘short version’. I don’t think that Islam is something that I came to suddenly, even though it felt like it at the time, but it was something that I was gradually guided towards through different experiences. Through writing this piece I hope that somebody may read it, identify with some things and may be prompted to learn more about the real Islam.

I was born in 1978 in Australia, was christened and raised ‘Christian’. As a child I used to look forward to attending church and going to Sunday School. Even though I can still remember looking forward to it, I can’t remember much about it. Maybe it was getting all dressed up in my best clothes, maybe seeing the other children, maybe the stories, or maybe it was just that I could look forward to my grandmothers’ famous Sunday lunch when I got home. My family wasn’t strict about religion at all – the bible was never read outside church from what I knew, grace was never said before eating. To put it simply I guess religion just wasn’t a major issue in our lives. I can remember attending church with my family sometimes, and as I got older I can remember getting annoyed when the other members of my family chose not to come. So for the last couple of years I attended church alone.

At the time that I attended primary school ‘Religious Education’ was a lesson that was given weekly. We learned of ‘true Christian values’ and received copies of the bible. While I wouldn’t admit it at the time, I also looked forward to those classes. It was something interesting to learn about, something that I believed had some sort of importance, just that I didn’t know what.

In my high school years I attended an all girls high school. We didn’t have any sort of religious classes there, and I guess to some degree I missed that because I starting reading the bible in my own time. At the time I was reading it

for 'interest sake'. I believed that God existed, but not in the form that was often described in church. As for the trinity, I hoped that maybe that was something I would come to understand as I grew older. There were many things that confused me, hence there seemed to be 'religious' times in my life where I would read the bible and do my best to follow it, then I would get confused and think that it was all too much for me to understand. I remember talking to a Christian girl in my math classes. I guess that gave me one reason to look forward to math. I would ask her about things that I didn't understand, and whilst some explanations I could understand, others didn't seem to be logical enough for me to trust in Christianity 100%.

I can't say that I have ever been comfortable living with a lot of aspects of the Australian culture. I didn't understand for example drinking alcohol or having multiple boyfriends. I always felt that there was a lot of pressure and sometimes cried at the thought of 'growing up' because of what 'growing up' meant in this culture. My family traveled overseas fairly often and I always thought that through travelling I might be able to find a country where I could lead a comfortable life and not feel pressured like I did. After spending 3 weeks in Japan on a student exchange I decided that I wanted to go again for a long-term exchange. In my final year of high school I was accepted to attend a high school in Japan for the following year.

Before I left Australia to spend the year overseas I was going through one of my 'religious stages'. I often tried to hide these stages from my parents. For some reason I thought that they would laugh at me reading the bible. The night before I flew to Japan my suitcase was packed however I stayed up until my parents had gone to sleep so I could get the bible and pack it too. I didn't want my parents to know I was taking it.

My year in Japan didn't end up the most enjoyable experience in my life by any means. I encountered problem after problem. At the time it was difficult. I was 17 years old when I went there and I think that I learned a lot of valuable lessons in that year. One of which was 'things aren't always what they seem'. At one stage I felt as though I had lost everything - my Japanese school friends (friends had always been very important to me, even in Australia), my Japanese families, then I received a phone call saying that I was to be sent home to Australia a couple of months early. I had 'lost everything' - including the dream that I had held so close for so many years. The night that I received that phone call I got out my bible. I thought that maybe I could find some comfort in it, and I knew that no matter what, God knew the truth about everything that everybody does and that no amount of gossip and lies could change that. I had always believed that hard times were never given to us to 'stop us', but to help us grow. With that in mind, I was determined to stay in Japan for the whole year and

somehow try and stop the ridiculous rumours. Alhamdulillah I was able to do that.

From that year I came to understand that not only is every culture different, but they both have good points and bad points. I came to understand that it wasn't a culture that I was searching for.. but something else.

I attended an all girls Buddhist school in Japan. We had a gathering each week where we prayed, sang songs and listened to the principal give us lengthy talks. At first I wasn't comfortable attending these gatherings. I was given a copy of the song book along with the beads that you put over your hands when you pray. I tried to get out of going to them at the start, but then decided that I didn't have to place the same meaning to things as others did. When I prayed, I prayed to the same God that I had always prayed to – the One and Only God. I can't say that I really understand Buddhism. Whenever I tried to find out more I met with dead ends. I even asked a Japanese man who taught English. He had often been to America and he said that in Japan he was Buddhist, and in American he was Christian. There were some things about Buddhism that I found interesting, but it wasn't something that I could consider a religion.

In a lot of ways I picked what I liked out of religions and spiritual philosophies and formed what I considered to be my 'Jenny Religion'. I collected philosophical quote after quote in high school, read into things such as the Celestine Prophecy and Angels when I returned to Australia, and still held onto the Christian beliefs that made sense to me. I felt like I was continually searching for the truth.

(part 2 of 2)

When I returned to Australia from Japan I had grown closer to a girl that I went to high school with. She was always somebody who I considered to be a good friend, but wasn't in 'my group of friends' whom I sat with in class or for lunch. Some of the people in that group I haven't heard from and haven't seen since I returned. I realized that this other girl and I had a lot more in common than I had first thought. Maybe this was because I had changed a lot in Japan, or maybe it was because I had learned that being 'socially acceptable' and popular wasn't important because the people that are making those judgments are not always morally correct. I didn't really care who my friends were and who wasn't, but I did care that I was true to myself and refused to change to suit other people. I felt like I had found who I really was by losing everything that I had previously considered important.

The girl that I had grown closer to was Muslim, not that I thought of it at the time. One night we sat in McDonalds, taking advantage of their 'free refill coffee' offer and talked about religion, mainly in what way we believed in God. She was the one asking the questions mostly, about how I thought God to 'be'. I enjoyed

the discussion and felt somehow that I might be making some sense to her with my 'Jenny Religion'. When we got home she got out the 40 Hadith Qudsi and read them for herself. She read some of them to me which of course got me interested. I asked to borrow the books from her so I could sit and read them all too, which I did. Reading the books in some ways was frightening. To me, examples of Islam could be found in TV news reports and in books such as 'Princess' and 'Not without my daughter'. Surely, I thought, the Hadith were just a good part of it, but the bad part was there too.

From there I moved back to my university for the start of semester and couldn't really get the books from my friend anymore so I started looking on the Internet. I had already 'met' some Muslims on the IRC but I considered them my friends too and that they wouldn't tell me the 'truth' about Islam. I thought that they would only tell me the good parts. I did ask them some questions though and *Masha'Allah* they were a great help. I still remember asking a Muslim guy whether he believed in angels. Angels were a part of my 'Jenny Religion' and I certainly didn't believe that a Muslim guy would admit to believing in the existence of Angels!! My limited and ignorant understanding of a Muslim male was one who beat his wife, killed female babies and was a terrorist in his spare time. This sort of person couldn't possibly believe in angels! I was shocked when he said 'Of course I believe in angels'. From then I was interested to know what else Muslims believed in.

I often think that I initially continued reading about Islam through the Internet to prove it wrong. I was always looking for that 'bad part'. Everybody couldn't have such a bad view of Islam if there was no reason for them to. I had always found a bad or an illogical part to every religion that I had read into, so why would Islam be different? I remember finding an Islamic chat site for the first time and expected to see suppressed females just reading what the males were saying. I expected them not to have an opinion, I expected the 'typical Muslim girl' that I had always felt sorry for. To my shock I saw girls happily chatting, with opinions that they were allowed to express. These Muslim girls were somehow more liberated than me.

My learning about Islam through the Internet continued through chatting to lots of people and printing out homepage after homepage. The more I learned the more scared I was. I didn't tell any of my friends that I was reading about Islam, not even my best-friend. At first it was because I didn't want them telling me only the 'good parts', and then even when I came to realize that I wasn't going to find any of the bad parts, I didn't want them to get their hopes up about me reverting to Islam. I wanted this 'decision' to be one that I made on my own - without pressure.

This 'decision' that I refer to wasn't really a decision at all. I am often asked 'What made you decide to become Muslim?', but when something as clear and

logical as Islam is put in front of you, there is no choice. This is not to say that it made the decision to say *Shahadah* (The Testimony of Faith) any easier. There were many things that stopped me at first. Firstly I didn't think that I knew enough about Islam, but then it didn't matter because I knew that I would never find anything that was illogical or 'bad'. I came to realize that saying *Shahadah* is not the final step, but the first. *Inshallah* (by the will of Allah) I will continue to learn. The other thing that made me hesitant was separating the word 'Islam' from all the bad things that I had associated with it. I always thought that I couldn't possibly be Muslim!! To then learn that my 'Jenny Religion' and beliefs for example of God being One, was actually Islam was hard at first. Islam brought everything together, everything made sense. To me, finding Islam was like one big bus ride – I had stopped and had a look at all of the stops along the way, taken a bit from all of them, and continued on with the journey. When I found Islam I knew it was the 'last stop' of my long ride.

In October of 1997, my best friend came with me for me to say my *Shahadah* at an Islamic Centre in Melbourne (Jeffcott St). I was still scared at the time, but after one of the sisters going through the Articles of Faith, and me putting a mental tick next to each of them, I knew that there was nothing left to do but to say it with my mouth. I still cry when I think of the moment that I said 'Yes, I'll do it'. I finally dropped the mental wall that had been stopping me. I was to repeat in Arabic after the sister. With her first word I cried. It is a feeling that I can't explain. My friend was sitting beside but a little behind me, I didn't realize it then but she was already crying. I felt so much power around me and in the words, but I myself felt so weak.

Sometimes I think my family wonders if this is a phase I am going through.. just like my other phases. I was even vegetarian until my mum told me what was for dinner that night - a roast. There is still so much for me to learn, but one thing that I would like people to understand is that I know *Alhamdulillah* (all praise is due to Allah) that Islam is a blessing for mankind. The more you learn, *Insha-Allah*, the more beauty you will see in Islam.