

My Story

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Article

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By Kathy (Ma'asumeh) Kooshesh

This article is the reversion story of Sister Kathy Kooshesh who converted to Shi'a Islam after being dissatisfied with her experience with Christianity and the Christian Church.

In the Name of Allah, Most Compassionate, Most Merciful

How does one look back on the most important event in her life, and put it into perspective? This event for me was my discovery of the “right path”, Islam, and Submission to the One God. This event, my acknowledging the power of Islam, and my conscious decision to submit to Allah (SWT) was this most life-changing event.

But looking back on it, I wonder how did I get to where I am today, a Muslim? Surely, coming from a rural Arkansas background, and never even hearing about Islam until my late teens, would not prepare me for this huge change.

What, I wondered, made me different from all the others who hear about Islam, and reject it? Or who don't realize that it is the truth? Well, I usually start long before I even knew the word Islam, to explain how I ended up here.

When I was a small child, my mother was very ill. She was born with a heart condition, and had her first stroke by the time I was three years old. My mother's health problems always made me aware of the fragility of life, and what a great gift it is. My parents divorced when I was seven, leaving me with my mother. The few years we spent together after that, I believe, helped to shape and mold me to become the person I am today.

My mother was not a Muslim, she was a sincere Christian. She believed whole-heartedly that our purpose in life is to serve God. Although we were not regular church-goers, faith was an important part of our lives. We depended on each other, and grew together during those few years.

My mother eventually had another stroke, which left her totally disabled, and forced me to move in with my father and step-mother. At the time, it was a blow to me, as I didn't want the change. I love my father dearly, however, and looking back, welcome the time that I spent growing up in his household.

My father is not a religious person, but he is spiritual. He was always fair and moral, and between my mother's faith, and my father's morality, I grew up with a strong sense of responsibility toward God. I did not always attend church, or participate in organized religious activity, but I did feel at peace with God, especially in the quiet walks I used to take in the woods near our house.

I could see the Power and Majesty of Allah all around me, in the animals, the trees, and the beauty of His creation. I never doubted that Allah was real and powerful, but I did not know how to express my faith. So I began to look into church.

I attended various denominations, from the Church of Christ to the Assembly of God, to the General Baptist. The General Baptist church is where I spent the most time, and made many friends.

I think that making friends was the main reason that I stuck with attending church, though. I remember having many questions that could not be answered (like the concept of the trinity). I just figured my faith was not strong enough, or I was not smart enough to understand. Nobody could explain it to me adequately.

Eventually, I just pushed the confusion behind me and decided it was something that I would understand if God willed. I knew without a doubt that God was real. I also knew that I needed faith in order to attain salvation. But since Christianity was the only religion I had ever known, it did not occur to me to look elsewhere.

The other religions that I had heard about were practiced by people “over there” in other parts of the world, and the poor souls, they were in need of “saving”—at least according to the teachers at my church. I always had a problem with this, though. Saving, that is. To me, God must be Just (and alhamdulillah—Lah, I find today that He truly is).

I could not understand how God could banish someone to eternal hellfire, because they did not know the truth. I somehow believed that God would forgive our mistakes if we did not know better (‘Adl, I see now...). But since I had no background in any other faith, I continued to try to understand Christianity.

I had always been, and continue to be interested in learning about other cultures. From a purely sociological/anthropological point of view, I love to learn about and explore other's religions and cultures. I never thought that I would ever adopt any of the cultural differences into my own life, however. Growing up in America, children are often taught that “West is Best” and the rest of the world—the “third world”—is just trying to catch up with us.

I didn't necessarily believe this, but the ethnocentric attitude of those around me had worn off in some areas, and in addition, I had been so thoroughly convinced that I must believe God had a son, that to me there was really no alternative for me other than to attend the Christian church, believing as I had always done.

I was far too fearful of hellfire to accept anything else from just reading about it. I needed to see Islam in action before I would grasp its beauty. That would happen much later.

As I grew older and (somewhat) wiser, I realized that the problems I had had with the Christian church were not just between denominations. I had bounced from church to church by this time, in my late teens (again thinking I had no alternative), until I got to the point where I finally just quit. I could not fathom some of the ideas they were teaching, and I just had too many questions that they could not answer.

So I decided I would just believe in God, but not belong to any particular faith. I longed for the “feeling” of God around me that I used to find in my solitary walks in the woods. Christianity was not providing that. I thought I would do better on my own.

That is how I spent the most part of two years. I still considered myself a Christian, but by this time I certainly was not living any semblance of a moral lifestyle. My search for understanding and the path to God had led me away from the Christian church, but to what? I had never even met anyone who wasn't Christian.

I had no idea where to go, but I wandered around in the darkness for some time. The more I wandered, the further I moved away from God, and the more I moved toward everything I had ever hated. I became totally lost. Finally, knowing that there was nothing for me in the Christian church, but not having any alternatives in front of me, I began to seriously research and try to learn about other religions.

I did some study on my own, and took a class in comparative religion. I can't say at the time I was actually looking for a particular faith, but I was open to all. I took a class called Cross-Cultural Studies that would ultimately change my life.

It was in this class that my first exposure to Islam occurred. The course offered a study unit on Islam, and the gentleman who spoke to our class brought with him a huge (all Arabic) copy of the Qur'an, and some beautiful pictures of mosques from around the world. I remember thinking that the culture of Islam was certainly rich, and I wanted to learn more (even before I knew about the religion).

But the more I studied and participated in the class, I realized that this religion was not as it had been portrayed in the media. It was tolerant, caring, and brotherly. Not fanatical and oppressive as the media would have you believe.

I remember thinking that, for the first time, a door had been opened to me to answer some of the questions I had. Alas, however, the class ended, and I was stuck right where I had started (albeit a lot more informed).

I realized I needed a change in my life, to get away from the bad influences I had been running with. So I moved. It was the best thing I ever did. I transferred to another university, and there met the man who is now my husband. He in turn introduced me to other Muslims, and my study increased.

My husband was from Iran, and Shi'a, so the majority of people that I met at the time were Shi'a. They were models of the things they were teaching me. In every aspect, they lived what they taught. I respected this above all, since I had seen such hypocrisy in the Churches I had attended. It was refreshing to see people who believed so strongly in their deen that they were fearful of Allah for disobeying. They were not concerned with the rest of the world's opinion—only Allah's.

They were not interested in converting me to Shi'ism, but rather, in teaching me about Islam, and letting me make my own decisions. Whatever questions I had, they were there to answer. They helped me to begin my library, acquiring books that were not hostile to Shi'a, but logical and thought out. Logical arguments were convincing, but I wanted to know more about the early days of Islam, so I began reading more about the history of Islam and the 14 Masu'meen (AS). I read about figures such as Imam 'Ali (AS), Imam Husayn (AS), and Hazrat 'Abbas (AS).

These souls, along with many others in the history of Islam, had been through great struggle for their faith. With the logical arguments I had read in favor of Islam, and seeing this faith in practice by my new friends, I knew that these people in the early days of Islam who had struggled so valiantly, could not be wrong.

When I read Najul Balagha and the wise words of Imam 'Ali (AS), I knew that this man was surely the brother of the Prophet (SAW), and the best guide for the people after the Prophet Muhammad himself (PBUH&HF). His character and morality, bravery and wisdom were all patterned after the prophet himself, and I knew he could not be wrong.

The study took some time, but from the beginning I knew that this was what I had been searching for all my life. I said my shahadah formally on my wedding day with many friends as witnesses, although by that time I was already living the life of a Muslim, wearing hijab and learning my prayers.

Shortly after that, I decided to eat only halal meat. Being Shi'a, I have had a two sources of stress in my search for the truth. Firstly my own family was not supportive of my search, and secondly, the Sunni majority also tends to "disown" those who are Shi'a.

If the convert is in a town with the strong Shi'a community, this is not a problem, but for me it was. Our town was small, and our Shi'a community consisted of only about 7 families. Alhamdulillah, though, those 7 families were wonderful living examples of Islam, as I have said.

Little by little over the almost 10 years I have been Muslim, I have tried to implement the teachings of Islam into my life. It has not always been easy, as I am in a constant struggle with my nafs. It is truly the "jihad al-akbar", and one that I will struggle with the remainder of my life.

We converts have to remember that Islam was revealed to the people over the space of 23 years. Not overnight. In our zeal to "get it right" we often want to do it all *now*. It is best if we take it slow, learning the significance of each act of worship as we go. Then, we are more likely to understand and less likely

to turn back when things are difficult.

I thank Allah daily that I have been shown Islam, true and unadulterated, and that I have been given this chance to serve my Lord in the best way possible. I pray that I can only live up to the great responsibility that Allah has given me, and that I will be among the first to be in support of Imam az-Zamaan (AS) when he returns, Insha'Allah (May Allah Hasten His Return).

I would love to talk with anyone who is interested in learning more about Islam, or who would like to share his or her own story. May Allah bless us all, ameen.

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