

BEST DECISION SHE EVER MADE

Islam is often called the fastest growing religion, and each person who embraces Islam has a unique story and unique reasons. Despite widespread misconceptions about women in Islam, a growing number of women are finding that Islam is the true religion and the best way of life. Ann Ronayne's story is below; she welcomes emails from readers and can be reached at ann.ronayne1@gmail.com.

“Me? Go live in Kuwait? No way!” That was my reaction when my manager tried to persuade me to take a position in Kuwait. But I was to learn that ﴿...the command of Allah is a decree of predestiny that is ever fulfilled.﴾ (*Quran 33: 38*)¹⁰⁵

I was born and raised in suburban Washington, DC in a Catholic family, and I attended Catholic schools. In the 1960s, the Catholic Church made major changes in its teachings in an attempt to be more modern; it tried to focus more on positive aspects and de-emphasize what was considered negative: punishment, regulations, abstinence from certain foods at certain times, etc. (Even so, Catholics in the West routinely ignored many of the rules that still existed, such as the prohibitions on contraceptives.) The Mass, which had always been said in Latin, was said in English instead. The nuns who taught us replaced their habits (modest dress) with modern clothes. Our religion classes had never involved reading the Bible, but now, instead of focusing on religious beliefs, they involved discussion of social issues and singing a lot of contemporary folk songs, as did the new Masses. It seemed strange that so much of what we had been taught as the truth was now completely changed. Still,

¹⁰⁵This translation is taken from Hammad, *The Gracious Quran*.

when we prepared for our first Holy Communion, we were taught that the bread that the priest was putting in our mouths was the actual body of Jesus (which would bleed if we were to bite it). For these and many other reasons, I doubted my religion and rejected it from a young age.

My decision was only confirmed as I learned more. If the trinity was such an important concept, why hadn't Jesus explained that clearly (and repeated it over and over again)? If God wanted to forgive us, He could have done that without coming to Earth Himself. If He did send His son (who was also God?) down to Earth to guide us, why would He neglect to give us the message during his thirty-three years, so that the truth had to be discovered and given to us later by Paul, who never even met Jesus?! If Christianity were the true religion, why didn't Jesus himself live and teach it?

For many years, I considered myself an atheist or an agnostic, but I was never concerned with choosing a label. I thought it was enough that I tried to be a good person, and I felt that non-believers actually did more good works because they didn't depend on any supernatural being for help. I never felt that I was searching for answers about the purpose of life or about religious beliefs.

After the Gulf War, I was working as a computer consultant when my company was offered a position in Kuwait which was perfect for me. My initial reaction was that I had no desire to go and work in a place where I thought women were treated as second-class citizens; after all, I had the usual stereotypes about women in a place like Kuwait. The manager on location assured me that the working environment was professional and that there were many bright women in the organization, including those who would be my supervisor and manager. I was eventually persuaded to take the contract for one year, thinking that it would be an adventure.

I soon learned that all of the stereotypes I had brought with me were wrong.

My colleagues were always friendly and respectful, and it occurred to me that it was almost the only environment I'd ever worked in where I saw no evidence of sexual harassment—not even any off-colour jokes or racy calendars hanging in cubicles. (It was certainly different from the atmosphere I'd experienced in the US military.) The women working with me were university graduates and were not shy about speaking out, and most chose to wear Islamic dress. Advertisements did not use women's bodies to sell products.

I was impressed to see the bonds among families and members of the society in general. When one colleague lost his pay check, all of the men quickly pitched in until they had collected the same amount of money for him. People also gave generously to the needy, both locally and globally.

When someone's mother called and said she needed something, the person would leave work to take her to the doctor or get what she needed. If a man's uncle died, all the men attended the funeral prayer; if a woman's aunt died, all the women went to visit her to give their condolences. When someone married or had a baby or recovered from an operation, an extensive network of family members, friends and colleagues shared that experience. Hospital rooms were large and even furnished with sofas and chairs to accommodate all the visitors.

The attitude towards the elderly was different from what I was used to, since extended families lived together, with several generations in one house; the children who didn't live in the same house came to visit often, if not daily. Grandparents had children and grandchildren living with them and were not left to live and die alone, or sent to nursing homes (which don't even exist). Older women were highly respected; they did not feel the need to make themselves look young and beautiful in order to gain self-esteem.

Taking care of one's elderly parents was seen as a blessing and an opportunity for doing good deeds, rather than a burden, and care of one's parents is emphasized in the moral system of Islam. (This is not to say that non-Muslims in the West don't care about their parents, but there are different priorities and expectations. There is usually more of an emphasis on nuclear families and independence, with the elderly themselves not wishing to be a burden on their families.) In general, dealing with difficult situations was seen as a test and not a cause for despair. Taking one's own life was rare and also forbidden because only Allah has that right.

When the month of Ramadan came around, I was amazed by the idea that one billion Muslims around the world were fasting together—abstaining from food and drink every day from long before sunrise until the sun set. I joined them in fasting the entire month, although I had no intention of becoming Muslim and didn't experience the spiritual recharge that I would feel later as a Muslim.

At the time, I knew little about Islam, and I'm embarrassed to say now that I considered it a backwards religion which would only appeal to the ignorant masses. As I slowly realized that the stereotypes I had brought with me were all wrong, I became curious about the religion. As I learned more, I discovered that Islam was the reason for the moral system I had witnessed, and that these positive social aspects had been part of Islamic societies throughout the centuries. Even small things that had struck me—such as greetings given among strangers when one entered an elevator or an office—had their basis in Islamic teachings.

I got a Quran translation and some other books and began reading. Over and over again, I was surprised at what I found—and perhaps more by what I didn't find. I found a belief system which was rational and uncluttered, and I didn't find the oppression of women

or terrorism that I had expected. I was attracted by the emphasis on social justice and standing up against oppression.

I was struck by the scientific accuracy of the Quran, demonstrated by statements which describe scientific phenomena that were not discovered until recently. I learned that the Islamic world had made major contributions to scientific knowledge and was the seat of civilization and learning while Europe was in the Dark Ages. Logically, I knew that an illiterate seventh century Arab could not have written this book himself. I began to question my idea that there was no Creator—that the intricate systems that made up the universe and its life forms could have developed randomly or that we were born, lived and died with no purpose.

I was impressed that the Quran had never been changed over the years, so that the Quran we read today (in its original Arabic) is exactly the same as that revealed 1400 years ago. I was surprised to find out that Islam had the same roots as Judaism and Christianity, and that Muslims believed in the same prophets, including Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (peace be upon them all).

I began to understand why Muslims loved Prophet Muhammad (bpuh) so much, and I wondered why I never knew anything about him... never even knew that he was a historical figure about whom so much was known. Authentic narrations from those who were closest to him describe him as a modest, truthful man who stood up for justice and against oppression.

I used to walk along the beach at night, looking up at the moon and stars and reflecting on Allah's creation, as the Quran recommended. I became convinced that the Quran must have been a message from God, but it took me a while to actually accept Islam... yet it was rational and simple in its essence: one Creator, Who offered us guidance to make the best of our lives in this life and the next.

Of course, there were aspects that made me reluctant to make such a momentous change in my life. For example, although I

understood the purpose and the benefits of Islamic dress, I couldn't imagine wearing it myself until I attended a Ramadan dinner at an organization for English-speaking Muslim women and met dozens of Western women who had converted to Islam, and who felt proud to dress this way.

On the day that I decided I was ready to officially declare my Islamic faith, I asked a co-worker to help me do so officially. There is actually no requirement to say this publicly or to get any kind of certificate; the declaration of faith is simply a matter of testifying that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad (peace be upon him) is his Messenger. It was a very moving experience, since I was essentially starting life over again, with a clean slate. It was undoubtedly the best decision I've ever made.

When we returned to the office, I went back to my desk and resumed work. It didn't occur to me that this was anything but a personal decision... but my friend informed everyone, and to my surprise, I received congratulations from well-wishers for the rest of the day. That evening, she invited me to her aunt's house and—with only a few hours notice—her mother, sisters, aunts, and cousins (whom I'd never met before) had a party for me, complete with gifts of Qurans, prayer dresses, gold, etc. Over the next days and weeks, I received dozens of gifts from co-workers (some of whom I had never met), friends and acquaintances. I was very blessed, and I know that others who embrace Islam sometimes encounter many hardships.

In my feminist years, we spoke of 'sisterhood', but this was my introduction to true sisterhood. Muslim women considered me their sister, simply for the sake of Allah (God). Over the years, I've met so many amazing Muslim women of all nationalities and classes and educational backgrounds, and in our gatherings, we often talk about how blessed we are and how different our lives are from what many people think. It's hard to describe the feeling

of standing in prayer, shoulder to shoulder with so many different women, knowing that we are sisters in Islam whether or not we even know each other.

It took me several weeks to build up the courage to wear the hijab (Islamic headscarf), but I found it liberating in a way that I hadn't expected. I was worried when I travelled to the U.S. wearing the hijab soon after becoming Muslim, but I needn't have been. Everywhere I went, I was greeted by other Muslims with the Islamic greeting *Assalamu alaykum* (Peace be upon you). I felt welcomed as a part of the worldwide Muslim community, and the hijab was what made that possible; if I wasn't wearing it, other Muslims would not have recognized that I was also Muslim and would not have offered those greetings.

I don't mean to claim that the Muslim community is some sort of utopia. Certainly there are problems, but the problems are not from Islam; on the contrary, they are due to ignorance and rejection of Islamic beliefs and practices. The reality is that Islam does not need a reformation; Muslims do.