

My Hispanic Muslim Legacy: by Khadijah Rivera

What Islam means to me: To be qualified is to know GOD?

I was raised as a Roman Catholic from a very strict and practicing Hispanic family. To even think of leaving the aristocratic Catholics was considered a sin. Actually having been raised by nuns in private [schools](#) taught me that one did not have the luxury of questioning the Bible or even the Catechism that was engraved in our memory banks as children. I once had the audacity to ask my teacher why we did not study the Bible; her answer was a blunt, “You might misinterpret it.” As an adult I once asked the very same question of priest, and once again I received a similar response. In other words, they had led me to believe that only qualified officials of the church teach and understand “God’s Word.” How sad, I thought; soon after I began to search for an answer.

The strongest component of Catholicism was the belief in the Trinity. It believed that there were three gods of equal weight in the heavens, and that upon birth we inherited a mortal sin. So, right from the start we were sinners and needed repentance or a sacrament to clear away this sin. As a parent it was hard not to question if the smile of innocence behind an infant could hide a deadly sin. What if the infant died before performing the Catholic rite of Baptism? Did that mean he/she would go to hell? And if Jesus Christ had not died in the cross for the sins of man, did that mean that we would all have fire as our ultimate destiny?

Reverting to Islam would be complicated by my childhood training that Jesus Christ was my savior and salvation. To pray to anyone but him would be blasphemy. I therefore studied several religions when I left my church and its rigid teachings. But they were all Christian and not much different from the original one. Of course they all believed that the papal aristocracy was nonsense and I praised them for that. But they could not justify Jesus Christ in a sensible nor logical manner. Point in fact: ask three Christians of different denominations to explain the Trinity or better yet, ask them if Jesus is the son of GOD. Ask them what version of the Bible they read, and you will also find astonishing variations. I actually turned away from religion completely for many years and became a leftist. I left the religious dogma and found a replacement.

A replacement to religious dogma?

In my college years I opened up to a radical way of saving the world. I believed that if we could promote change in the political realm, then we could bring equality and economics that would ultimately change and save the physical world. I was an American activist going from marches to study groups of Dialectical Materialism, Maoism and Socialism. All this journey proved was that I was still empty – for it left a gap in my very existence. I had one thing in common with the Christians and one thing opposite the ones I was attempting to emulate: “I loved God!” I just needed a vehicle to surrender.

For years I watched closely the events in Iran and yet the student movement that I was following could not afford me a way to make change in that country. I joined student marches and met with like-minded idealists. While we sat in brainstorm sessions planning our next poster spread in Manhattan, an old man sitting on a rug in Paris dictated a revolution. He told the dictator Shah of Iran to leave because he was coming back to Iran – and guess what, he left! I began to study this man’s political assessment, but the more I read about what he proposed to resolve in Iran the more I understood the religion of Islam. At no time was I looking for a new religion as I was a diehard Christian who was not even practicing. But this became a turning point in my life. I had to evolve as a human, in order to evolve as a Muslim.

Surrender to GOD

On October 22, 1983 I took my vows of submission as a Sunni Muslim with sincerity to ONE GOD. *Allahu Akbar* (God is great). I have been a practicing Muslim for over twenty-two years and have never regretted it. In fact, in the face of tyranny and prejudice I have become stronger and more resolved to not only raise a family of Muslims but also to become a *Da'iee* and spread the good word [of Islam] among Hispanics. After the tragedy of 9/11, many Muslims removed their veils for fear of assaults. I was destined to die as a Muslim if need be, for my only defense was faith! *Alhamdulillah* (all praise be to God), neither did I remove the veil nor hide. I stood up and went on live television to speak to Hispanics on Telemundo on the noted Christina Show from Miami. I had

become a modest but resonant Muslimah. Rather than rollover, I made an uproar about the injustices done to Muslims.

The faith of Islam has brought me strength in the face of adversity and an inner peace which I never had. It was not difficult for my extended family to accept my new found faith. But for my immediate family it was very difficult. I lost all my non-Muslim friends that I had grown up with, but found an extended family in Islam. I no longer pray to a saint in order to request intervention with Jesus Christ. I now understand that if I follow the true teachings of all the prophets and the Ten Commandments that there can only be ONE GOD. "Thou shalt not bear false gods before me." Therefore, my destiny with Islam is fulfilled. I worship Allah directly, as it should be.