

Nexus Interview: KafirGirl

Contributed by KafirGirl
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Thanks to a suggestion from last month's interviewee, Steve Wells from the ASB, this month we're interviewing KafirGirl, who is currently blogging her way through the Quran. Steve calls it "by far the most entertaining blog I know", and it is pretty damn fantastic. If you haven't seen it yet we highly recommend it. KafirGirl is an ex-Muslim who started doubting as a kid and has been an atheist for the past 9 years, and we're happy that she was gracious enough to let us ask her some questions!

Hi KafirGirl. Can you tell us a bit about your experiences with religion as a child? What does a good Muslim kid generally do to learn about their religion?

My parents taught me to pray when I was really young — 4 or 5, maybe. I don't really remember praying all that much when I was a kid, though. I started Quran lessons with an imam soon after that. He would come to our house every day after school and teach us how to read the Quran in Arabic. My most distinct memory of those lessons was the way my mom would throw a scarf over her hair when the guy showed up, and immediately yank it off when he left.

When we moved to the States, my parents sent us to Islamic Sunday school at the local mosque. It was a mostly Arab mosque and they were pretty hardcore about learning the Quran and praying. We had to keep charts of how often we prayed and everything. My brother and I got busted for forging our mothers' signature on our prayer charts. Twice. (Note to any would-be forgers out there: if two of you are going to fake the same signature, only one person should handle the signing part. And also, don't erase the signature and do it over if you don't get it right the first time. Seriously.)

Our parents pulled us out of that mosque and made us to go a Pakistani-majority mosque, which was a lot more lax about stuff. No prayer charts, for starters, and it was a lot more informal. Nobody yelled at you if your headscarf came loose, for instance. We had Quran lessons, group prayer and separate discussion group for boys and girls. That was basically where we could sit around and ask questions about how to take a ritual shower after your period ends, or where babies come from. Major awkwardness.

Anyway, that was pretty much the extent of my religious education. I think most Muslim kids have the same general experience: they learn to pray and read the Quran, and they go to mosque, which is just as much of a social thing as it is a religious one.

You started having doubts fairly early: about 8. What prompted this?

I think, in my case, it actually helped that I grew up surrounded by church-going Christian kids. It made me question how different religions could exist. Why was one friend a Baptist while another was a Methodist? Where did Islam fit in with all of this? Why did we pray differently if it was to the same God? I started asking these questions really early on and it set the wheels in motion.

Living as a religious person in a religious community can tend to reinforce faith. Do you find, as a minority within your family community, that a closer knowledge of religion can also help the individual (and outnumbered) atheist to reinforce their doubts?

Before I started reading the Quran, my Muslim friends would say things like, "If you read the Quran, you'll believe again." Well, turns out they were wrong. I think reading the Quran has not only reinforced the doubt, but also armed me with better arguments and a snarkier attitude. I highly recommend it! In fact, I'm planning on reading the Bible when I'm done with the Quran. If I still have the will to live, that is.

Your blog talks about your parents' reactions to your disbelief. Your dad's comment on his worst mistake, teaching you to think, is pretty brutal. How were you "taught to think", and how would you suggest more Muslim kids get the opportunity to do the same?

My dad has always been highly critical of rote learning, which is exactly how the Quran is taught. Memorizing something is not the same thing as understanding it, and I think that's the downfall for a lot of Muslim kids. That's also why it's such

a huge pain in the ass to argue with a lot of Muslims. They'll just repeat the same thing over and over again without really knowing what it is they're saying.

Anyway, my dad taught me think by encouraging us to ask questions and to read everything we could get our hands on. You know those kids' books with titles like "The Big Book of Why" and "1000 Science Questions & Answers"? He got us a ton of those, and I devoured them. Books like that taught me that it's important to ask "why" and "how." Unfortunately for my dad, I started asking those questions about Islam and it turned me into an atheist. Doh!

So what made you start blogging your experiences in studying the Koran? Do you think it's been an effective way of connecting with others, and getting your point of view across?

I decided to blog my way through the Quran when I realized there was no way I would read the book without some kind of accountability. It's unbelievably boring, and I've had many, many false starts where I'd make it a few pages in before getting bored and moving on to something else. I think putting my thoughts out there for others to read would make me a little more likely to keep up with it, and so far, so good! I've connected with some really great people, and they're teaching me as much as I'm teaching them. It's fantastic.

What, in your opinion, is the best and the worst bits of the Koran that you've blogged so far?

I think the hardest posts I've written have been the ones dealing with the Quran's views on women. How anyone could possibly say that Islam is a feminist religion is beyond me. The best parts — or at least my favorite parts — have been the scientific "miracles." There is some seriously bad science in the Quran, and that always makes for entertaining reading. Flat earth, anyone?

Please... tell us about the LOLmuslims, we LOVE them. Are they your favourite part of the site?

The idea for LOLmuslims started when I was Googling for images to use for the blog's banner. I found some pretty amusing pictures of Muslims at a protest, and it just clicked. It's been way fun to make them...and it gives me a nice break from reading & writing about the Quran!

I think my favorite part of the site is probably the comments section. And I'm not just saying that to kiss my readers' collective butt. I've learned so much about all 3 Abrahamic religions from people who are way smarter and more knowledgeable than me. They make my brain hurt. Best feeling ever!

What kinds of reactions have you been getting? Are they mostly from religious or atheists, and how much do their beliefs (or lack thereof) govern their responses to you, do you think?

The reaction to the blog has been overwhelmingly positive. The vast majority of responses I get are from atheists, and they're thrilled that someone is taking on the Quran. I've gotten a lot of emails from ex-Muslims — some who are open about their non-belief, and others who have to hide because they live in a country where it's not really safe to be an open atheist.

The religious response falls into a couple of categories. Christians tend to push the Bible ("There's none of that hateful stuff in MY book!"). It's like they think it's their job to swoop in and bring the ex-Muslims to Jesus. The Jews that contact me are mostly atheists, so we're cool. And then there are the Muslims. The Muslims who email or comment are preachy and pissed off and insulted. I've had a few death threats, which is pretty much expected these days. Mostly it's just ranty emails about how I'm wrong and headed to hell.

Oddly enough, a lot of Muslims refuse to believe that I'm an ex-Muslim. Readers will occasionally email me some blog or forum with a rumor about my "real" identity. A few weeks ago, I read that I'm actually a Jewish man from Buffalo, New York. More recently, I read that I'm not one person, but a team of Israeli spies, working around the clock to spread lies about the Quran. One site actually said it's impossible for me to be a Pakistani girl because my writing style is clearly that of a man's. ...yeah.

Unfortunately, you feel safer being anonymous. Many of our readers are life-long atheists from communities where atheism is close to the norm. Can you explain to these readers particularly what it's really like to always have to be so aware of what you are saying?

It's funny because in my everyday life, I don't feel like I have to be wary of what I say. I'm one of those outspoken types — I believe the latest catchphrase is "militant atheist." I'm actually very open about my atheism with my friends,

siblings, and even my coworkers. My anonymity is most just on the internet (see above about death threats from loonies).

The only people I won't really discuss my atheism with are my parents. They've made it pretty clear that they don't want to argue about it, so I just don't bring it up.

What's been the most rewarding part of the experience for you?

I actually know what I'm talking about now! When I argued with Muslims before, I didn't really know how to respond to some of their claims. And now I can point out specific verses and call them out on their crap.

I also think I've been able to dump a lot of emotional baggage when it comes to my family. I feel like I've spent my entire adult life hiding who I am and what I (don't) believe for fear of hurting their feelings, and I finally realize that I don't have to do that anymore.

The whole thing has been a very positive experience.

And finally: readers of your blog know about your epiphany with pork. What's your favourite way of eating it now?

If there is a heaven, it tastes like broiled pork chops. Little salt, dash of pepper, a metric ton of diced garlic and you're good to go!