

1. opinion

1.1. I'm a feminist, and I converted to Islam

Editor's note: Theresa Corbin is a writer living in New Orleans. She is the founder of Islamwich and a contributor to On Islam and Aquila Style. A version of this piece first appeared on CNN iReport.(CNN) -- I am a Muslim, but I wasn't always. I converted to Islam in November 2001, two months after 9/11. I was 21 and living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. It was a bad time to be a Muslim. But after four years of studying, poking and prodding at world religions and their adherents, I decided to take the plunge. Questions and answers I am the product of a Creole Catholic and an Irish atheist. I grew up Catholic, then was agnostic, now I'm Muslim. My journey to Islam began when I was about 15 years old in Mass and had questions about my faith. The answers from teachers and clergymen -- don't worry your pretty little head about it -- didn't satisfy me. So I did what any red-blooded American would do: the opposite. I worried about it. For many years. I questioned the nature of religion, man and the universe. After questioning everything I was taught to be true and digging through rhetoric, history and dogma, I found out about this strange thing called Islam. I learned that Islam is neither a culture nor a cult, nor could it be represented by one part of the world. I came to realize Islam is a world religion that teaches tolerance, justice and honor and promotes patience, modesty and balance. As I studied the faith, I was surprised many of the tenants resonated with me. I was pleased to find that Islam teaches its adherents to honor all prophets, from Moses to Jesus to Mohammed, all of whom taught mankind to worship one God and to conduct ourselves with higher purpose. I was drawn to Islam's appeal to intellect and heartened by the prophet Mohammed's quote, "The acquisition of knowledge is compulsory for every Muslim, whether male or female." I was astounded that science and rationality were embraced by Muslim thinkers such as Al-Khawarizmi, who invented algebra; Ibn Firnas, who developed the mechanics of flight before Leonardo DaVinci; and Abu al-Qasim al-Zahrawi, who is the father of modern surgery. Here was a religion telling me to seek out answers and use my intellect to question the world around me. Taking the plunge was 2001, and I had been putting off converting for a while. I feared what people would think but was utterly miserable. When 9/11 happened, the actions of the hijackers horrified me. But in its aftermath, I spent most of my time defending Muslims and their religion to people who were all too eager to paint a group of 1.6 billion people with one brush because of the actions of a few. I was done being held hostage by the opinions of others. In defending Islam, I got over my fear and decided to join my brothers and sisters in the faith I believed in. My family did not understand, but it wasn't a surprise to them since I had been studying religion. Most were very concerned for my safety. Luckily, most of my friends were cool about it, and even curious to learn more. The scarf These days, I am a proud wearer of hijab. You can call it a scarf. My scarf does not tie my hands behind my back, and it is not a tool of oppression. It doesn't prevent thoughts from entering my head and leaving my mouth. But I didn't always know this. Studying Islam didn't immediately dispel all my cultural misconceptions. I had been raised on imagery of women in the East being treated like chattel by men who forced them to cover their bodies out of shame or a sense of ownership. But when I asked a Muslim woman "Why do you wear that?", her answer was obvious and appealing: "To please God. To be recognized as a woman who is to be respected and not harassed. So that I can protect myself from the male gaze." She explained how dressing modestly is a symbol to the world that a woman's body is not