Leap of faith

They rejected their pasts, their habits – and sometimes their friends – to convert to Islam. What made them do it? Jemima Khan reports

Kristiane Backer, a convert to Islam, at home. Portrait by Pål Hansen. Sittings editor: Michelle Duguid

Last time I met Kristiane Backer, she was a sultry MTV rock chick who was "living the dream – with a great job and a hedonistic lifestyle of parties and mixing with rock stars". Today, at 42, curled up on the sofa of her terraced Chelsea home, barefoot and dressed unremarkably in jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt, she's still as lissom as I remember her. Only now, she's a practising Muslim who prays five times a day, fasts and, since performing *hajj* in 1995, is intent "on maintaining her purity".

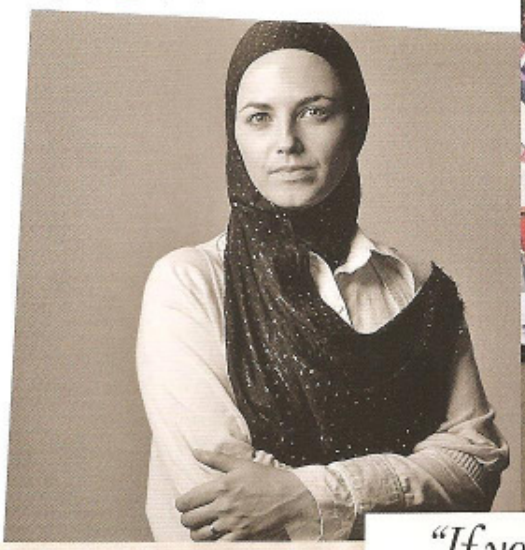
British converts (of whom there are about 50,000) in many ways transcend the Islam-versus-the-West dichotomy. Inhabiting two seemingly conflicting worlds, they are uniquely well placed to understand the perspective and prejudices of both.

Kristiane, a German who has lived in London since she was a teenager, admits to initially having had "the same prejudices about Islam as anyone who only takes their information from the media. But when I looked behind the headlines and stereotypes, a fascinating new universe opened up to me." For her it was the poetry of Sufi music that "opened [her] heart to the religion". That and, presumably, the zeal of a just-born-again Muslim boyfriend. She read the Koran, and "the clarity and logic of it convinced me. Eventually, I wanted to feel the religion and experience the beauty that I was reading about, and there was only one way to do that – to get down on the prayer mat and to practise. I am 100 per cent happier now as a Muslim."

Converting to Islam changes everything, from how you eat, dress, work, pray and socialise, to whom you might marry. Following just the basic tenets of Islam is contrary to all the accepted norms of Western society. And it can also involve great personal sacrifices; after her conversion, Kristiane was the focus of a negative press campaign in her native Germany, and was replaced at work by another presenter. She now presents for an Islamic channel.

Myriam Cerrah, 25, grew up in Fulham with her French father and Irish mother. She went to the Lycée Français in South Kensington and worked for a time as a barmaid at the racy King's Road bar Po Na Na. She was, she says, "like any young girl of my class and background, clubbing at the age of 14, drinking, etc." A child actor, known as Emilie François, she was cast at the age of 12 to play Margaret Dashwood in Ang Lee's Oscar-winning *Sense and Sensibility*, the younger sister to Emma Thompson and Kate Winslet's characters. She was featured in Australian *Vogue* at 14 and went on to star in two more major films, attracting one of the best Hollywood agents in the process.

"My parents expected to see me at the Oscars, following in the footsteps of Kate Winslet," says Myriam. "But instead, I shunned acting, moved to Jerusalem and started wearing a *hijab*. I can understand why this proved so hard for them to understand. People say I gave up on a dream. But I >



Left: Sarah Joseph in the offices of *Emel*. *Below:* *The Mirror* highlights opposition to Islamic veils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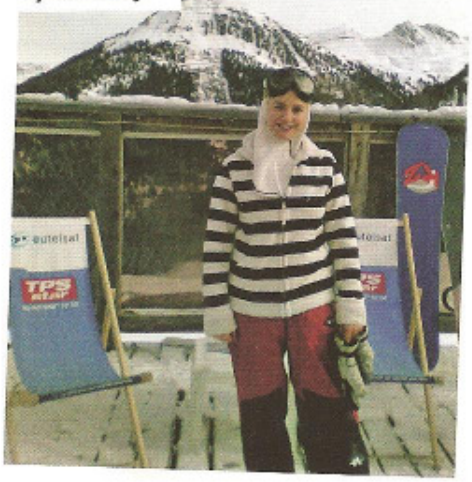
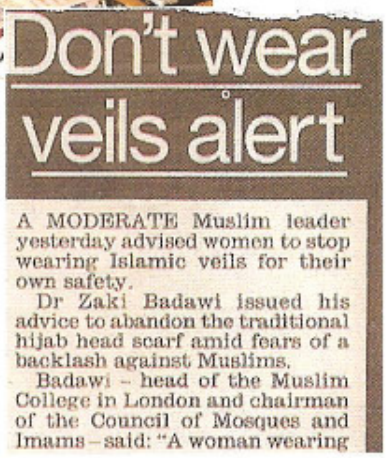
Sex and the Muslim girl, an incendiary mix

An explicit novel by Selin Tamtekin has caused uproar in her native Turkey. She tells Rosie Mill… had to brea…

From top: former child actor Myriam Cerrah; *The Sunday Times*, November 4, 2007; Myriam wearing the *hijab* while skiing



"If your head is covered and you're not interesting, no one is going to give you the time of day"



Don't wear veils alert

A MODERATE Muslim leader yesterday advised women to stop wearing Islamic veils for their own safety.

Dr Zaki Badawi issued his advice to abandon the traditional hijab head scarf amid fears of a backlash against Muslims.

Badawi – head of the Muslim College in London and chairman of the Council of Mosques and Imams – said: "A woman wearing

traded it for something far superior, and I wouldn't give it up for the world."

When we meet, Myriam is wearing a loose-fitting tartan dress with black trousers. Even with her hair tucked under a crinkly grey headscarf, she is notably good-looking. She has a Cambridge degree in social and political science, an MA in Arab studies from Georgetown University and an Oxford DPhil lined up for September on the subject of Islamism. She may be only 25, but with her formidable intellect, it's hard to cast her as either naïve or repressed.

At Cambridge, she remembers berating her Muslim friends "with all the usual clichés: 'Look how your religion demeans you!' But the more I poked, the more they came back to me with things that made sense." Then one evening, she read a French translation of the Koran and found it "mind-blowing". She converted that night in her room, aged 22.

Islam, she says, has "helped me to understand my life in the grander scale of things. It answered all the existential questions raised in my teens studying philosophy. It has given me strength, direction and stability and above all a relationship with our creator in which I find solace."

Sarah Joseph is the founder and editor of *Emel*, a British magazine that celebrates Muslim life. Aged 37, she's petite with big green eyes and tawny colouring, inherited from her Anglo-Indian father; when I meet her, she's dressed in a white linen top and trousers, and a pale blue floor-length summer coat, topped off with a starched white *hijab* – part of her daily uniform for the last 20 years.

Sarah grew up in a secular house off the King's Road, with her British mother, who was divorced from her father, and several siblings. Most of her childhood was spent surrounded by models. In the Sixties, her mother, Valerie Askew, herself a former model, started the eponymously named model agency, Askews, which launched the likes of Naomi Campbell, Catherine Bailey and Sadie Frost. The models were her friends, but Sarah felt alienated by the superficiality of the modelling world. "There was so much more trauma than in real life, so much pain for the girls. I can still remember the weekly weigh-ins."

Growing up, her image of Islam was "Seventies Palestinian terrorists, the two women in yashmaks who squashed me in a lift near the agency, and an Arab playboy husband of one of the models, who once rushed into the office shouting: 'I divorce thee, I divorce thee, I divorce thee.'" Again, it was her own prejudice about Islam that prompted her to look into the religion. She was, by her own admission, a precocious child with an "innate religiosity" and a sophisticated social conscience; she remembers marching into Safeways on the King's Road and demanding to know why they were selling South African apples during the Apartheid era.

Sarah had considered becoming a nun, and claims to have had "Mother Teresa aspirations", but says she found the notions of papal infallibility and original sin problematic. Then, while at university, she started to read about other religions. She found an increasing affinity with Islam, and ultimately converted. "People tend to focus on the rules and regulations, on all the oddities of clothes and food, but to be honest, these are not the essence. Islam means surrender. I was looking for inner peace, tranquillity and contentment. Islam gives me that."

There's a sense that these women are tired of having to justify their choices. Some of their arguments seem rehearsed and defensive. "I've had these conversations literally hundreds of times," says Sarah. "'What made you convert? Why do you wear that? What's it like to be oppressed?'" And Myriam points out: "When you start a conversation about Islam, you don't start at ground zero – you start at minus 20. Then you end up in 'I'm not this, I'm not that.'" Yet the thing they find most tiresome is what they see as an excessive focus on the *hijab* and Muslim dress. "I just wish people would get over it," says Sarah.

The *hijab*, that seemingly innocuous square of flimsy fabric, not dissimilar to the scarves >

Rehan Jamil; Steven Lawson

often worn by our own Queen, has become a focal point of Western hostility to Islam. Viewed as a symbol of subjugation, associated with patriarchy and the control of female sexuality, it makes non-Muslims and especially non-Muslim women angry. I'm surprised at quite how angry. I myself feel fairly ambivalent about it. While I never saw the wearing of the *hijab* as a religious obligation in Islam, I wore one sporadically throughout my years living in Pakistan for cultural and political reasons. To me, the real issue is freedom of choice. I regard the banning of the veil in France as equally oppressive as the imposition of it in Iran. Yet women who choose to wear the *hijab* here in Britain are viewed by many as traitors to their sex and to the cause of feminism.

"I hate this idea that Muslim women cover up because men can't control themselves," says Myriam. "For me, it's about choosing what aspects of myself I will allow people to assess me on. I'd rather they assessed me on what I have to say than what I look like." When I press her on the subject, she says: "I've always thought that oppression works in far more pernicious ways than clothes."

She started experimenting with the *hijab*, in the form of a bandanna, even before she converted – apparently her hair is her best feature – and noticed that it changed the way that people reacted to her. Having worked in the film industry, "where all people were interested in was my name, my hip size and my hair colour," the *hijab* allowed her to develop as a person. "When you're pretty, you get away with a lot," she says. "But if your head is covered and you're not interesting, no one is going to give you the time of day. To develop yourself, you have to make an abstraction of your physicality, so your focus of energy is on your internal and your spiritual self."

Since the night she converted, she has worn the *hijab* "and the same dresses as before, just two sizes bigger, and with a cardi". She refuses to wear the Saudi *abaya* (head-to-toe floor-length black) as "I'm not going to dress like I'm foreign, because I'm not; the *abaya* is very Gulf." And she has overcome the problem of beach holidays with the recent invention of the "burkini", a two-piece suit made from a material that doesn't absorb water or cling to the body, and has a built-in *hijab*.

Kristiane, however, chooses not to wear the *hijab* on the grounds that it attracts attention in Western countries in a way that is counter to the original intention behind it. She doesn't believe that wearing one is an obligation as a Muslim, explaining that she wears her "*hijab* on [her] heart". Looking around her flat – an empty Joseph bag at the front door juxtaposed with the carved wooden Islamic screen in her front window – reminds me of the uneasy relationship between fashion and modesty. In my days as a Pakistani politician's wife, I was derided by friends, and a tabloid, for wearing the same blue cardigan every time I went out – an expedient way to cover up but still wear pretty, short-sleeved dresses. "Well, I wouldn't wear Alaïa now," concedes Kristiane with a smile that acknowledges hers was once the slinkiest silhouette in town. "Some of my friends think it's a waste." She, however, finds it a relief not to have to live up to society's changing expectations of women's bodies, and claims to have found a strengthened sense of female solidarity and less rivalry among her "Muslim sisters" as a result.

The *hijab* may be most the most visible point of difference, but there are other, greater challenges for the convert. The act of conversion itself is relatively simple – the convert must make the pronouncement of the *shahadah* (testifying that there is no god but God, and that Mohammed is his messenger) in front of two witnesses – but the ramifications are huge. Even the basic rules of socialising can be awkward. As Kristiane says, "I used to be flirtatious because it was fun, and it was part of communication, but not any more." As a new convert, Myriam was reluctant to shake hands with men, but has since reconsidered her stance.

Abstinence is another issue. Myriam's father is from the Champagne region in France, and when they used to go for family holidays, everyone used to drink champagne like water. "My aunt even owns her own vineyard and produces the stuff, so it was a massive deal for them that I didn't want to drink any more." Despite the fact that she sees herself as a "you-do-what-you-do-and-I-do-what-I-do kind of person", she believes it is sinful to socialise with people when they're drinking alcohol. "When I get invited to a wedding, I can't ask for a separate table, so I'll say to my friends: 'You drink while I just pop off to the loo.' It's not ideal."

Marriage brings with it another set of problems. In a well-known *hadith* (saying of the Prophet), marriage is said to be "half the religion". Yet finding that half has proved to be challenging, particularly as dating and extramarital sex are out. "For most men, it's a bit of a turn-off," laughs Kristiane, who is currently single. Despite getting married to an Egyptian Muslim after her conversion, the marriage subsequently fell apart "for cultural reasons". Finding a partner, she says, "is one of the most difficult aspects of all. I'm not great marriage material for conservative born-Muslims who want a virgin from their own culture. I need someone who, like me, can bridge both worlds." Muslim women are obliged to marry a Muslim man, although the same does not apply in reverse.

The Islamic way of marriage can involve lots of negotiation, most of which tends to come about through formal introductions by Muslim friends or family. "There's a weird thing that happens when you're a convert, whereby Muslim men come up to you in the street and ask: 'Are you married?'" says Myriam. "You wish, at that point, that you had a Muslim family, who you could tell him to speak to. You're so isolated and atomised when you're a convert."

Unanimously, the women claim the most painful aspect of conversion was the reaction of their families. "I think it can be like a bereavement for families; they feel they have failed," says Sarah, whose mother saw her daughter's conversion as "a retrograde step" and as something that would prevent her from "becoming the dynamic person she always hoped I would be." It was only with time that Sarah says she was able to prove

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to her mother that her Islamic way of life was "actually an affirmation of and not a rejection of her upbringing".

It helped, also, that her husband "didn't look like Obi-Wan Kenobi – with a robe and a beard and staff". He is of Bangladeshi origin, a human-rights barrister who speaks perfect English and who "understands that I am a Westerner and that my English background is part of who I am".

What they all share is a sense of calm and spiritual fulfilment, in stark contrast to the way they felt as young women, whether as a foxy young TV presenter, blossoming starlet or model agent's daughter. The real battle that they face now is with the way they are perceived. "If you're English, you don't wear your religion on your sleeve," says Sarah. "My God, I'm wearing mine on my head." ■