

It's a strange time to become a Jew . .

The actress Margo Stilley explains how her search for fulfilment has led her to a new faith

‘Why would you want to convert to Judaism?’ exclaimed the rabbi at the synagogue in Marble Arch, ‘we have all these problems.’ ‘Why would you want to be Jewish?’ asked the Parisian Jew at a barbecue last week. ‘You’re kidding me,’ said my lovely and most politically correct Swedish flatmate. A girl of my age declaring herself a convert to any religion is sure to raise eyebrows. Not just in surprise that she is independently and actively pursuing her spiritual growth, but mostly because a girl of 23 wouldn’t dare talk about her religion in public. Fanaticism has turned religion into the biggest taboo of our generation. It is an absolute conversation stopper.

Of course my friends are shocked by my spiritual conversion. After all, we modern twentysomethings are far too clever to be completely without religion for long, so we’ve simply invented our own. Eating Disorders, Consumerism, Alcoholism, Drug Abuse and Depression are the new religions for a new millennium.

But we need guidance. We need faith, support and knowledge. We need a goal, and most of all we need a faultless role model who inspires us to do our best to reach that goal. Without religion, the only thing that is answering all of those needs is personal satisfaction.

When I was 12 years old, growing up in Conway, a coastal town in South Carolina, I was kicked out of my Southern Baptist church for asking ‘Why?’ ‘Why did Jesus do that?’ ‘How do you know there is a hell?’ ‘How do you know this isn’t hell?’ The same answer was given every time: ‘Because the Bible says so, Margo.’

The pastor called my parents and told them that I wasn’t allowed to come back until I could be a ‘good Baptist girl’. When I asked my parents why we went to the Baptist church when there were three churches on the way into town, I was told, ‘Because it’s closest to our house.’ I had to apologise and sit silently through Bible school.

It seemed strange to me that my family could be so blind and methodical when choosing something that was supposed to be so important. As Southern Baptists we were taught not to question anything. The head of the parish and the leader of our services was the pastor and we, the congregation, were his sheep, or the ‘flock’.

Perhaps, if I had had an educated, intelligent, sophisticated pastor, things would have been different, but as God, or fate, or luck, or all of the above would have it, that was not the case. My pastor was an excited born-again Christian called Terry who lost his leg when working as a coal miner in West Virginia.

Forgive me, but I didn’t trust the man to check my spelling homework, let alone teach me biblical analogies and most certainly not to lead me into spiritual salvation.

This rebellion proved unpopular. On my 16th birthday I came home to find all my belongings lying on the lawn. I was no longer welcome in my parents’ home. I had to

leave school and take two part-time jobs to be able to save up enough money to pay rent and graduate.

Socially, I had little choice but to give Christianity another chance. To keep in touch with my friends and to keep hold of what little bit of respect I still had from the people in Conway, I threw myself head first into worshipping at the Methodist church. I was even sponsored for Chrysalis, a hardcore retreat where teenagers have to nail their sins to a cross.

After my brief return to Christianity I knew that it was not the religion for me. And with that small bit of knowledge, I strayed further and further away from the ignorance promoted by the Southern churches.

At 20, I auditioned with the director Michael Winterbottom for the lead in his controversial and sexually explicit film *9 Songs*. I wanted people to question their own moral identities as I had. I wanted the audience to ask themselves, "Why don't I like this?" "Why does this bother me?" I sacrificed myself, so that the audience could find out a little more about themselves. I have found out so much about myself by questioning the simple things around me and one of those discoveries is that I don't actually have a problem with sex.

That was something that had been drummed into me in South Carolina by a culture that deems sex as dirty and bad. Sex breaks up marriages and spreads disease. Sex will send you to hell. After mistrusting everything I had been taught because I grew up and realised I was surrounded by uneducated dimwits, I had started to mistrust a lot of what society deems appropriate and inappropriate.

I was learning from my mistakes, I was learning from the misfortunes of others, but I realised that it wasn't enough just to be a "good person". My life needed to answer to something bigger than me, my immediate needs or my immediate future.

When I started to consider having a potential family I realised I needed to get myself on some sort of spiritual track so that I could nurture a child in the way that I never was. When I realised my parents believed in something completely and unquestioningly and with very little real knowledge, I lost a lot of respect for the two people who should have impressed me the most. I am determined not to lead my future children into that void.

I asked myself what it was in each religion or philosophy that appealed to me and what was absolutely necessary in a religion. I had just finished reading the Koran, which I found too accepting of violence, constrained by time and place and too vague when it came to feminism, when I noticed that it was Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year, and that a lot of my friends were observing it.

What was it about this group of people that I was so attracted to? What was it about their relationships with their families that I so wanted for my own? The first thing that attracted me to Judaism was the undeniable family strength that has held Jewish people and culture together for 3,000 years. Mark Twain once asked: "All things are mortal but the Jew: all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?" There is no secret, it is the strength of the Jewish family and their shared history. Which, I suppose, is the other thing that immediately drew me to Judaism: how educated Jewish people are about their history. Jews, whether religious or not, know

where they have come from and what they would wish for their future, and this certainty is based on fact, not faith.

The Jews are a very scientific people and this leaves me feeling easy with their reason. As I'm learning more and more about Judaism, I'm finding that there is an amaranthine well of knowledge for me to uncover. Each of the 613 mitzvot, or commandments, teaches us to promote peace within ourselves, between people and between people and nature. It is the peaceful nature of this religion that so attracted me.

My conversion is a long process. I've been studying and reading essays and books on Judaism, Jewish culture and Israel for the past two years. A few months ago, I decided it was time to begin my official conversion, not least because I am in love with a Jewish man, but certainly not mostly because of that either. It doesn't surprise me that I am in a relationship with a Jew, we hold many of the same views and opinions naturally. But, in spending the past year with him and his family, it has now solidified my desire for this religion and given me a reason to make my conversion official. I began by looking for a rabbi to learn with. This is very difficult. You have to find a rabbi that suits you in the same way you have to find a husband that suits you. I have so far only been to see Ashkenazi rabbis, descendants of the Jewish communities of the Rhineland, all of whom have impressed me greatly. I would like to meet with some Sephardic rabbis — Jews descended from Iberia — before I settle down to learn one-on-one.

It is not an easy conversion to make. I have to start learning at 23 years what born Jews are taught from day one. It will take me a few years of studying and practice to be sure that I have soaked up a sufficient amount of knowledge to consider myself officially either a religious or cultural Jew.

I do not support Israel, nor do I denounce it, I do not feel knowledgeable enough yet to form a concrete opinion on the war in the Middle East, although I sometimes feel I should wear a sign around my neck that says: "I am converting to Judaism and it has nothing to do with Zionism." Zionism is a national and political movement. A religion should be based on its books, theories and philosophies. I have planned to spend six months in Israel learning Hebrew, but given the current circumstances, I will wait and see what happens.

And so, after nine years of searching the spiritual wilderness, I am settled. I stopped speaking to my family about religion years ago. When I would talk to them about my reservations and doubts about Christianity, instead of trying to reassure me, they would tell me that I was going to hell. But for me, ignorance is not bliss. I will not be a perfect Jew, nor will Judaism make me perfect.

But I know that Judaism will give me faith, support, knowledge and history. I am not Jewish because I choose to be, I am Jewish because there is no other choice for me.