

The Last to Know—an Atheist Comes Home

Misty Mealey

In November 2001, my husband, our firstborn child and I were all received into the Catholic Church. Like most converts, I look back on my journey to Rome with great astonishment, especially considering that just a few years earlier I was an avowed pro-choice, pro-homosexual rights atheist.

Unlike many converts, the Bible played virtually no role in my conversion. I had grown up in southern Virginia in a nominally Protestant home with parents who attended church once every few years or so. However, I was an avid churchgoer well into my teens, and attended a variety of denominations to escape an abusive home life. My parents were uneducated and we were often severely impoverished, and I cherished the feeling of normalcy and peace that could be found in the pews of those small-town churches.

Even so, my knowledge of Christianity was appallingly shallow, even after nearly a decade of church attendance. As a teenager, I had no understanding of even the most basic tenets of the faith, such as the Trinity. I had been told repeatedly that Jesus had died for my sins, but I had no idea who Jesus was, nor why I was somehow responsible for his death. But I did believe in God and during my darkest hours, I prayed desperately to him for deliverance.

It was a deliverance that would not come soon enough. While my ignorance would certainly have made me easy pickings for any secularist, the final blow to my belief in God came in my late teens. At 15, I secretly contacted half a dozen Christian churches in a nearby city, explained my situation, and asked for help. Each one gave a different reason why they “could not get involved.” One woman, between speaking in tongues, told me I just needed to pray harder. I even attempted suicide as a literal “cry for help,” but was sent home from the hospital with no counseling or further investigation.

After that experience, my belief in God vanished almost overnight. I stopped going to church and would not pray again for nearly 15 years. Many atheists express anger toward the very deity they claim does not exist, but I can honestly say I did feel as if I was discarding my faith out of bitterness. Rather, it was simply a matter of logic—I suffered and asked the all-powerful, all-loving God to help me. Since he didn’t, he simply must not exist. Instead of faith, I forged a steely self-reliance that I believed would effect great changes in my life. When the local court granted my petition for emancipation at age 17, my atheism was cemented.

To support myself my senior year of high school, I worked double shifts at a fast-food restaurant. It was there that I was first exposed to Catholicism through the local parish priest and two chatty, elderly Catholic ladies, who occasionally came through the drive-thru. Incredibly, I had no idea that Catholics were even Christian, and the murder of one of the women that fall on church grounds did not bring me any closer to that truth. The theory around the grill was that the priest did it; after all, he always wore black clothes and sported a strange white collar that clearly signaled a depraved, criminal mind.

My college experiences put me squarely in the center of the secular moral rot. Drunkenness, promiscuity, and just about every form of sexual debauchery (including homosexuality) was not only tolerated on my enlightened, liberal arts campus, but encouraged. As a writer for the university paper, I interviewed Dr. Ruth, which I proudly turned into an article

promoting fornication, contraception, sexual deviance, and abortion among my unmarried peers. I met some Catholics, but they were no different from the rest of the population. One evening my freshman year, I heatedly argued against priestly celibacy with a Catholic young woman who unwaveringly defended it. But no matter—at least we could agree on the merits of fornication and contraception.

I was still firmly atheistic by the time I graduated from college. And yet, even as I lived a hedonistic life as a modern, enlightened young woman, free of the shackles of traditional morality, there were experiences that could not be explained by my atheistic worldview. I would have moments of blinding emotionalism when I heard a piece of classical music or witnessed a particularly beautiful natural landscape. And like every human, my heart occasionally swelled with love and this, too, disturbed me. The sacrifices I saw people make because of love contradicted the logical self-interest of atheism. Without a purposeful Creator, beauty and love simply did not make sense.

While most of my atheistic and agnostic peers tended to denigrate Christians, I put on an air of gracious tolerance toward them. In truth, however, I secretly envied those men and women who had genuine faith. But having rejected God so thoroughly, my sporadic attempts at prayer during low moments were hollow and felt contrived. Attempts to participate in the occasional local religious services left me feeling even more confused and empty. I half expected someone to tap me on the shoulder and say, “Hey, you. We know you’re not one of us. Outta here.”

I finally stopped trying to pray and left the churches to “the real McCoys.” I posited that being a “good person” was all that mattered. I held to the contradictory positions of being a moral relativist on the concept of sin but insisting my own goodness was firmly rooted in an unchanging, objective moral standard.

After graduation, I worked as a writer outside Philadelphia. Soon I met Tom, a computer engineer working in Virginia, and within months we were engaged. Although all of our secular peers were opting for elaborate church weddings, Tom and I professed no faith and had no desire to don a religion we did not believe to have an attractive backdrop for our wedding. We were married in a small civil ceremony in his parents’ living room in February 1998.

Looking back, I’m certain the Holy Spirit led me to my husband and then ensured I had abundant grace going into our marriage. Had I treated him with the same selfish disregard I did every other man I had dated, the marriage would not have lasted. And I would have lost the man whose open mind and spiritual curiosity led me out of atheism and eventually into Catholicism.

Although he was baptized Catholic, Tom was not raised in the Church. His parents sent him to a Catholic prep school and he decided to go to a Catholic college, but he emerged from a decade of parochial school attendance with near total ignorance of the Catholic faith. By the time we married, he considered himself agnostic and attended no church.

During the first several years of our marriage, we had plenty of time for intellectual pursuits. Although I was the literature buff, Tom had infinitely more imagination and was interested in everything from New Age philosophies to reincarnation to demonic possession. He read (and convinced me to read) books on a whole host of spiritual subjects.

We were blessed to have friends and acquaintances of many faiths and we often questioned them about their beliefs. During visits with an orthodox Catholic couple, we learned more about authentic Catholicism. Even more impressive, however, was their personal witness.

It was not lost on us that the Catholic Church, which obviously had some wacky ideas about suffering and sex, could count among its ranks a vibrant young couple who happily submitted to her most demanding teachings.

I still did not believe God existed, but our discussions about the spiritual realm intrigued me. And some cracks in the armor did begin to appear. After our Catholic friends pointed out the arbitrariness of the “life begins sometime after conception” pro-choice argument, I gradually came around to the pro-life position. Even as an atheist, I could see that abortion was a human rights issue and the only morally prudent position to take. After all, if this life is all we get, snuffing it out *in utero* seemed, well...beyond the pale. I enjoyed those years being an anathema to abortion advocates; dealing with a “pro-life atheist” meant they could not dismiss my beliefs as the product of misguided religious indoctrination.

But it wasn't until a few years into our marriage that Tom and I began our spiritual journey in earnest. Early on, we visited a Buddhist temple but were disturbed to hear a young woman “in robes” tell about assisting a friend with an abortion. Although Buddhism sounded warm and fuzzy, it left us unsatisfied. Not only was it not an intellectually rigorous faith, but we just couldn't bring ourselves to embrace a spiritual destiny that ended in extermination. Tom also objected to the local temple's “pay as you go” system that required members to pay several hundred dollars to receive instruction from a visiting Buddhist master.

Around this time, we read a powerful book titled, *Hostage to the Devil: The Possession and Exorcism of Five Contemporary Americans* by Malachi Martin. Several very important truths seeped into us from that book. First, we believed the author and accepted that evil spirits exist. Second, if evil exists, there must be a force for good pushing back or the world would be overrun entirely with evil. And finally, the only people able to vanquish the evil were *Catholic* clergy doing so *in the name of Jesus*.

We were so disturbed by the book that we went to Mass the following morning at a local church. Unimpressed by what we perceived to be the lifeless character of the parishioners and priest, we left before Communion.

We hesitatingly began to admit that the key to the truth was Jesus. It was actually a devout Mormon who showed us the love of Christ, if not the truth. A highly intelligent man renowned for his political commentary, he spoke unabashedly about his love for and obedience to Jesus with such passion we couldn't help but be moved.

“Are you thinking what I'm thinking?” Tom asked, as we left the Mormon's house.

“That there's something to this Jesus guy?” I responded. And with that, we both essentially accepted that Jesus was who we were looking for.

So we had found Jesus, but where was his church? We visited a few Protestant churches and even met with one pastor, whose philosophy of “Christianity is whatever you want it to be” sat no better with us than Buddhism had. We attended another church on Easter and were impressed by the vibrancy of the congregation and pastor. In fact, the warm reception we received by these pastors stood in stark contrast to that of the Catholic clergy we had encountered. We approached one priest after Mass and asked to learn more about Catholicism. He brushed us off, telling us to “Call the diocese.”

Despite our mostly positive experiences with the Protestant churches, we were quietly disturbed by the doctrinal inconsistencies in Protestantism. How could the Holy Spirit be leading congregations and pastors to different and often conflicting truths about salvation?

Ironically, the final death knell for Protestantism was sounded by an issue that is a stumbling block for most Catholics: contraception. I had suffered years of unpleasant side-effects on hormonal birth control and my Catholic friend convinced us to learn and use natural family planning. Although I purchased *The Art of Natural Family Planning* by the Couple to Couple League to learn the method, I began skimming the chapters on theology. Then I began devouring those chapters. Here was a vision of human sexuality—a redeemed, glorious vision—that I had never heard before.

In fact, our embrace of natural family planning would finally put an end to the doubts I could not seem to shake. One night after reading about the harmonic dance of hormones in the menstrual cycle, I had the absolute certainty of God's existence pierce my heart. If, as a woman, I was so intricately and beautifully made, then the reality of my Creator was irrefutable.

In addition, we learned that all Protestant denominations had considered contraception immoral until 1930. Within just decades, however, nearly all of them had abandoned their opposition, with some of them even declaring contraception to be a moral good. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, always had and still did proclaim it as an intrinsic evil. Since we believed in objective truth, we also believed truth does not change based on the political and social winds of the day.

We found a startup Catholic church online and attended Mass one Sunday in spring 2001. On plastic orange chairs in an elementary school cafeteria (they had no building yet), my husband and I realized we were home. The sense of rightness was unmistakable and we approached the priest after Mass. At our appointment with him a week later, we told him we wanted to convert. He asked us why, following with a statement to the effect that living the Catholic faith required more sacrifice and diligence than any other religion. And the world had enough lukewarm Catholics.

When we explained that we were already pro-life, anti-contraception Christians practicing natural family planning who had rejected Protestantism, he invited us to RCIA. After six months of in-depth instruction in orthodox Catholicism from a passionate young priest, we were beating down the doors to be members of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

My husband and I were profoundly blessed to have come to the same conclusions at the same time in our spiritual journey. But even with all the obvious changes in my beliefs and lifestyle, I seem to have been the last to know that I was on the road to Catholicism all along. And there were plenty of signs. In college, I argued *ad nauseam* in favor of the intrinsic value of hope with an agnostic, prompting him to accuse me of being a “closet theist.” Years later, a devoutly Catholic young woman had told me I was “Catholic to the core” when I challenged the notion that suffering was incompatible with the existence of a benevolent, all-powerful God. I laughed off her comments, thinking I had a greater chance of winning the lottery than I did of becoming a Roman Catholic.

Four years ago, as the waters of baptism washed across my soul, I did both.

Misty Mealey and her husband, Tom, live in southern Virginia with their three children. In addition to her roles as wife and mother, Misty is the natural family planning coordinator for the Diocese of Richmond.