

My relationship with Orthodoxy began with a divorce. I was raised an evangelical Christian; a Southern Baptist with Pentecostal influences. The lines blurred between theologies but the basics were the same. I could go into what caused me to divorce myself from Christ, based on a rejection of what I had been taught, but these would only be excuses for divorcing myself from Christ. In truth, I should have worked on our relationship, rather than walking away altogether. However, it is important to note that I was taught about a very small world, but encountered a very large world. I became an atheist. I became the sort of atheist that is quite disgusted by religion in any form and had a particularly hostile attitude toward Christianity. At one point, had I heard a voice from a burning bush, I would have thrown rocks at it.

In my transition to atheism, I was faced with an “epiphany.” The idea that there is no God affected me in precisely the same way that “getting saved” had affected me before. It was a religious high. After the high of getting saved, I fell into a sense of purpose. Becoming an atheist came with the same initial high but after the high there was no purpose. I never knew if I was falling or flying and to what purpose I should be doing either. Thus began the roller coaster of hope, fear, and uncertainty that I now use to describe my atheism. Coming from a background that saw the Left Behind scenario as an unavoidable eventuality, my hope came from seeing human potential. Perhaps we could reach the stars. The fear came from having no rock to lean on for the safety of my children. The uncertainty came from having no eternal reference point for my struggle to be “good.” In an atheistic universe, we each are the final authority on “Good” and I was deeply convinced that I could not possibly be that authority. The end of my faith was not only the death of God Himself, but the death of salvation. I missed Jesus.

One fellow atheist once described me as an “atheist platypus”, which I wasn’t really sure how to deal with at the time. I still felt that some things were sacred; love, children, marriage, etc. were all sacred and inviolable in my eyes. The problem, of course, always came in justifying my position. One feels a pressure from the group to conform to certain ideas. I could never quite accept a Pro-Choice position. I thought the child was sacred but I could not justify what it was that made that “fetus” sacred. In an atheistic universe, there is only logic and the complex electrochemical makeup of the human being in relationship with other complex human beings. There is nothing that makes anything sacred except for a “feeling” which is never evidence of truth, only of opinion.

I began to look at other religions. Despite my rejection of it, I did see the wisdom of Christianity. Perhaps there was some wisdom that could be obtained from other faiths as well. In Buddhism, I learned the Second Noble Truth: Suffering is caused by desire tempered with ignorance. This desire is present in all human lives and I found great truth in its relationship to our suffering. Some think it means that if we do not want anything then we cannot suffer. I think it also means that the actions initiated by our desires ignite suffering in others as well. We follow our temptations to our graves and knock others into theirs along the way. Buddhism, strangely enough, taught me about Passions and a much more accurate picture of what sin really is.

Taoism (Daoism) also had something to tell me about myself. Taoism concerns itself with the true nature (or “way”) of things. What is the way of swordsman? What is the way of a dog? What is the way of Man? Animals are corrupted by human captivity. How are humans corrupted by human captivity? This is where I encountered the concept of “Uncarved Wood.” In this teaching the work of a life is to undo all the effects of your

world and become closer to what your true nature is. Taoism reminded me that we are not quite what we are intended to be.

Once, while in an atheist chat room, I encountered the idea of promiscuity among friends. I ventured forth the opinion that I thought intimacy was too important to be handled so carelessly. The host of the chat room said “Look... we’re atheists. As long as you’re safe, you can minimize the consequences and just have fun.” I sat there looking at the screen dumbfounded. He was right, of course. Nietzsche’s words, “beyond Good and Evil” rang in my ears. Physical pleasure was the new reference point of good. It was rational, empirical, and it just plain felt good. It was also unacceptable. I had heard and repeated many arguments from the atheist camp stating, “One does not need religion to have morality”, and here it was flashing across my computer screen the absolute proof that not having religion changes morality. Morality is based on axioms that one has about himself and his relationship to others. I did not care for the fruit of this set of axioms.

On another occasion, I watched a video describing a scenario with quick sand and the need for rescue. The endangered person refused to be exploited by possible rescuers and eventually died. The storyteller described the person’s position as “bigoted.” I was outraged. It is not bigotry to refuse to be exploited even if it means death. I responded, saying as much. One of the responses I received stated, “The possible rescuer has no requirement to assist.” Again, I was dumbfounded. There was no Brotherhood of Man. There was no empathy. This is when I, still being an atheist, walked away from the atheist community altogether.

What is Man? The question bounced around in my head. I began a process of introspection. We are emotional beings. We have innate desires that serve specific functions. We hunger, thirst, etc. Undoubtedly, we have a drive to seek God whether He exists or not. I decided if I were going to be a real human being again, I would have to seek God again. As noted, I had studied other religions, but none seemed realistic. I could be a Buddhist or a Taoist, but I could not be a religious Buddhist or Taoist. They just weren’t real to me. I think it was Zoroastrianism that first gave me a real expression of religion again. The Gathas had a lot to say about Truth. Perhaps I should seek Truth. If God is Truth, then I will be seeking God. I couldn’t be a Zoroastrian either, but it was a place to start.

I encountered an Archbishop from Canada named Lazar Puhalo. He has a video series called “Dancing with Unicorns” that tore down my objections to Christianity. This thing called “Orthodoxy” was gaining ground in my thoughts. The more I read about it the more I had to read. I began to realize that I had rejected a version of Christianity that was not original. It was, perhaps, a vague shadow and mirror of what Christianity was in its originality. I had never really rejected Christianity, because I had never encountered the fullness of it. This Christianity, I could not reject. I met with a priest and he answered many of the questions I brought, although I already knew the answers to them. The Q&A session I had arranged with Fr. John was merely an excuse to make contact with the Church. He invited me to a Vespers service.

When I walked into the parish, Matushka met me at the door and asked me to sit. She told me not to worry about what everyone else did, I could sit or stand as I liked. I still had my atheist face on. As the choir began, I noted their harmony. Like some sort of religious anthropologist, I sympathized with the power of the melodies to the human mind and how the emotions were so well conveyed. Fr. John walked by with his “smoky thingy.” I

breathed deeply the smell of the incense. With the music in my ears, the incense in my nose, and the hard pew under me I felt more alive than I had in years. I felt human. Looking at my fingers I felt inches from fully appreciating the magic of existence. And it is a kind of magic. When I arrived home, my wife informed me that I was “glowing.” I felt like it.

What are we made to be? I was instructed in catechumen class that an Orthodox life is a process of becoming more fully human. Created in the divine image of God, Man has a potential that is not realized in our fallen countenance. It is little wonder that the Saints seem so otherworldly. For them, the Passions, their fellow man, and God are in their proper perspective. They resemble the idea of “Uncarved Wood” because they assume their divine nature in spite of the corruption that affects us all. This corruption, or sin, is the misuse or distortion of the good gifts of God. Our desires have purpose in our lives, but they are twisted into deadly Passions that consume us. Though I had already accepted the Orthodox Church, these truths given in an Orthodox perspective completed the acceptance.

I was recently asked by a fellow parishioner what it was that proved God to me. I’m really not sure that He has been proven to me. There are still times that I wonder if I’m getting it all wrong, Lord help my unbelief. I am no theologian, and among sinners I am first, but I know as much as I know that I exist that Man needs God, whether He exists or not. I need God. That’s as good a place to start as any.