

How a Christian left a Church, an Atheist went to Church and Everything Worked out in the End.

by Ed and Christi Scheid

Ed:

Society has shown that it is possible for people with differences to form lasting relationships. People of different races, different cultural backgrounds and even differing political views can have happy and rewarding relationships. But what about people with different religious views? But I'm not talking about differences between Christians, Muslims or Jews. We'd like to talk about the biggest difference, a relationship between a believer and a non-believer. Is it possible for a christian, muslim or jew and an atheist, agnostic or humanist to have a lasting and meaningful relationship?

If we look at the religious texts the answer would probably be no. The bible says in 2 Corinthians 6:14 "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?" In the Koran it states "Do not marry unbelieving women until they believe. A slave woman who believes is better than an unbelieving woman, even though she allures you.... Unbelievers beckon you to the Fire." For there Jewish community there is even a book called "How to Prevent an Intermarriage" to prevent someone from the Jewish faith from marrying a non-Jewish person. You can download the book for free from www.PreventInterMarriage.com.

Going against what these religious texts teach and what some in the religious community teach, interfaith marriage is on the rise in America. This includes marriages between the religious and non-religious. In a study by Schaefer Riley, the author of the book "Til Faith Do Us Part: How Interfaith Marriage is Transforming America", 42% of marriages are between people of different faiths. What is discouraging though is that couples in interfaith marriages tend to be less happy and a third of marriages between evangelicals and non-evangelicals end in divorce. The divorce rate between evangelicals and some with no religion is 62%.

Today, Christi and I would like to share with you our journey. It's a journey about two people who ignored parts of each other until one day they became mirrors to each other forcing them to look at what they were not seeing. A journey of how a Christian left a church, and atheist went to church and everything worked out in the end.

I was raised in a Catholic family. Not in a strictly religious-go-to-church-every-Sunday family but more of a major-holiday-church-going-family. I attended Sunday school and was even an altar boy for a brief time. I never had much attachment to religion growing up and when my parents gave me the choice to stop attending Sunday school in the 8th grade, I was more than happy to take back my Sunday mornings. During my later teen years I divorced myself from religion altogether but kept my views to myself. I knew my family would have little understanding or approval of my beliefs. When I was eighteen I express my lack of belief to a girlfriend. She was quite shocked to find out and it spelled the beginning of the end for that relationship. Christi and I met when I was nineteen. Fast forward a few years, when Christi and I got married, religion was the furthest thing on our minds. During the first five years of our marriage we were finishing college, travelling, enjoying our newly formed marriage and packing on the pounds eating cookies and cream ice cream drenched in magic shell topping.

Christi:

My faith has always given me comfort. I grew up in a Catholic home and was taught about God. We prayed before dinner and at bedtime and my sister and I went to Catholic school. My parents were very involved in our small town parish by volunteering as lectors and Eucharistic Ministers. I watched them and saw what their faith brought to them. As I became an adult, went off to college and met Ed I continued to follow in their footsteps. I would attend church faithfully every Sunday. I was involved in my parish as well by volunteering as a Eucharistic Minister and Lector. Hearing the music and saying the prayers during the routine of the mass brought me comfort. I enjoyed sharing my faith with others. This is something I had missed in my relationship with Ed.

When we knew we wanted to get married I told Ed I wanted to have a Catholic wedding. He went along with what I wanted to do and we very rarely discussed our different beliefs. He went to church with me a few times at Easter and Christmas then stopped. I didn't understand why and didn't really question why. I also told him when the time came I wanted to baptize our children. He told me he was okay with this but would not be there to support me because it went against what he believed. I remember feeling sad about this but went on like anything else I did and we didn't discuss it any further.

As the years went by and life became busy with raising three boys and carrying a full time job as a social worker, part of me changed. The emotional part of me changed and I started struggling with Depression. Ed told me to find something that interested me and pursue the interest. My best friend Amy had just joined the parish I belonged to and told me she heard about a retreat called CRHP-Christ Renews His Parish. It is a retreat for women of the parish that want to become closer to God, while making connections with other women of the parish that you do not know. Since I was struggling with Depression I thought I'd try turning to my faith to find an answer to help me deal with my emotions. I went on the retreat in March 2010.

Ed:

As part of the retreat I was asked to write a letter of support to Christi and at the close of the retreat the families of the ladies came together to show their love and support for them as they renewed their faith. I was all for letting Christi know how much I loved and supported her, but I was now being asked to do this in a religious context. I all of a sudden felt that I was betraying my own beliefs by supporting Christi in hers.

I think it is important to point out that I have never taken issue with Christi, or anyone else for that matter, believing in god, Allah, Zeus, the Flying Spaghetti Monster or any other deity they wish to pray too. I do have issue when someone takes their personal beliefs and tries to impose them on someone else.

After the retreat we did talk about the new tension that developed between us. During one of our conversations, Christi mentioned how the priest said everyone was a sinner. This did not sit well with her because to her, she was not a sinner. She did not

like the Catholic church's stance on gay marriage and birth control either. She kept saying though that going to church gave her peace in spite of these differences. I could not understand how she could find comfort in a place that she disagreed with so much.

Christi:

At the end of the retreat we were surprised to see our families had gathered in the old church building to greet us. Ed and the boys came to the church with flowers in hand and gave me hugs. This made me feel so good that I had their support. That night I thanked him again for his support. He told me how hard it was for him to come that day to the church. That he almost called my parents to ask them to take his place. But he was thinking about what he wrote in his letter to me. He told me the last thing he wanted to do was rant and rave about my religion. When he was in drum corp all the corps would get together and play a song together at the end of competition. Ed said he never thought about the meaning of the words until he wrote the letter. I'd like to share some song lyrics with you. It is called "You'll Never Walk Alone" from the musical Carousel.

When you walk through a storm
Keep your chin up high
And don't be afraid of the dark
At the end of the storm is a golden sky
And the sweet silver song of a lark Walk on through the wind
Walk on through the rain
Tho your dreams be tossed and blown
Walk on Walk on
With hope in your heart
And you'll never walk alone, you'll never walk alone

After the retreat was over there was a follow up gathering at the church a few weeks later for those that wanted to come and discuss their thoughts about the retreat. I attended the gathering and learned the women who were at the retreat could come together as a group and prepare to host a retreat the following year. After the meeting I went home and told Ed that I wanted to be part of this group. Needless to say this did not sit well with Ed. But I already had my mind made up that I wanted to share my

story of how my beliefs differed from that of my husband's. Our group met twice a month which then eventually once a week when we got close to giving the retreat. Each time we met we would talk about different things such as a parable from the bible or a certain prayer and the meaning of it. We would also learn about one another so we formed friendships.

As the months went by I enjoyed myself more and more. I found that interest Ed had been talking about. The women of the group were believers like me and this lifted my spirits. Ed and I would have discussions about these meetings because I could tell that there was something bothering him. I didn't think that he liked it when I went to the meetings. This troubled me because I had finally joined a group that I looked forward to going to and enjoyed being in. After all Ed had photography club and wine/beer making. What difference did it make if my group had something to do with my faith and religion?

So time went on and I continued to go to my meetings. But I started struggling too. After all of the discussions I had with Ed, I started to realize what he had been talking about. He had told me that I needed to look in the mirror and see the real me. He had talked about my religion verses my faith. If I really was Catholic why did I go to church, why did I associate myself with that particular religion if I didn't agree with most of the beliefs? For example: Catholics believe Jesus was born of the virgin Mary. I disagree. I believe Mary and Joseph were Jesus' parents. Catholics believe in Pro-Life. I disagree. I believe in Pro-Choice. These are some examples. There are others which we could have many discussions on. I won't go into that today. But as you can see it started me thinking about my faith, my religion and how I practice my faith.

Ed:

What we have shared so far barely scratches the surface of the struggle we went through. We struggled with the acceptance of each others beliefs for a little over a year. At the lowest point, we questioned whether it was even possible if two people with such differences could have a lasting relationship. Thankfully we had the common sense to seek counseling to try and reconcile our differences. The recurring themes in our problem were Christi had a hard time coming to terms with my lack of belief and I couldn't understand how someone could get comfort in an institution that she didn't

share many beliefs with. The counseling taught us two very important things. The first thing we learned was respecting our differences and sometimes our differences have no influence on one another other than what we make up in our head. It doesn't upset me that Christi likes country music and I don't or she likes pickles and I think they are gross. Why should it bother me then when she gets comfort in her faith?

The second thing we learned was the importance of communication. Up until we went to counseling, it was difficult for us to communicate our feelings other than being angry or upset. We focused on only the negative and forgot about the things that bonded us in the first place.

I'd like to share with you a clip from the movie Lincoln. (play movie clip)

While the context of the clip may be different from our situation, the underlying theme is the same. "Things equal to the same thing are equal to each other." Christi and I feel the same about love, equality, respect and fairness. If we feel the same about these things then we should equally express them with each other. With such a hot topic issue like religion, it's easy to overlook all that is good about each other and why we loved each other so much.

Christi:

Knowing that I was struggling with the Catholic religion but also realizing I needed that sense of community and belonging, Ed came across something interesting. While on an online atheist community, he came across a secular parenting discussion being held at an Unitarian Universalist church in Cincinnati. He was curious as to why an atheist community was promoting a secular parenting topic at a church. Looking into what he found he discovered what Unitarian Universalism is and that this may be something that may interest him and me.

On the UU website there is a link to something called Belief-O-Matic which has you answer questions about your beliefs then tells you which religion suits you. Who would have guessed that UU was at the top of my list? Catholic was third or fourth down. So I decided to read more about UU through the Harmony website. I agreed with all 7 principles. I told Ed that this was something I wanted to check out. I told him I think it would be good for him and the boys to check it out too. We went one time. The

kids enjoyed themselves and even Ed enjoyed himself... in a church... Who would have guessed? Never once did Dwight, Koen or August return from mass asking "Can we go back mom?" So I knew Harmony was the community for us. I was so glad my family had found a place where we could grow together spiritually. We have been members for two years now and this community has been wonderful for us. We have made many friends and have been challenged to think about and discuss our differences. Shortly after we joined Harmony I started attending the first BYOT class. We met for nine months then wrote a Creedo statement. It was then I had really discovered the Christi that had been looking in the mirror. I realized that I don't have to go to church to have a relationship with my God. It is something that I had been struggling with all along but finally became okay with it.

Ed:

While Harmony does not fill a spiritual need for me, it does fill an intellectual one. Many years ago, when I would get together with a particular group of friends, we could discuss religion, politics, social justice or any other hot button topic of the day. At the end of the night we were still friends regardless of views, no matter how different from our own. As life trodded along, we moved away from each other and the group was replaced with acquaintances, co-workers and family members that were more concerned with telling everyone how right they were and how wrong everyone else is rather than having an actual dialog. This shift made me bitter towards many viewpoints and most certainly did not help the problem that arose between Christi and I. Since the first time we attended Harmony, my favorite part of every service has been the discussion group. The diversity of the backgrounds and experiences of the members and visitors is incredible. While we all have many things in common, we all still hold some different views. Being back with a group of people that can discuss and debate a topic and then push their differences and opinions aside as quickly as they can move the chairs away for social hour is refreshing to say the least. Though we don't have to move a bunch of chairs out of the way at home, I know Christi and I can disagree about something and a hug and simple "I love you" is all that is needed to move along.

I also learned something very important from Christi. As I mentioned before, I could not understand why she would be part of something that she did not share so many beliefs with. I learned that for her, getting comfort wasn't necessarily from her

beliefs but being part of a ritual and part of a community that shared a common thread. As with all communities, there is never complete agreement on just about anything. My realization on this came shortly after we joined Harmony. While we all share different views on things like religion, politics, gun ownership, dogs vs. cats, cooperative versus community or chairs with arms or without arms, we all share equally love, friendship, fairness and respect. I'm part of a community now called Harmony and it brings me great comfort too.

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever realized that someone was holding a mirror up to you and the reflection you saw was something you did not like? How did you respond?
2. "The couples that are meant to be are the ones who go through everything that is designed to tear them apart and come out even stronger" Unknown author. Do you agree with this quote? Why or why not?
3. Is there any part of the UU religion or belief community that you disagree with? If so what and how do you reconcile your differences with being part of that community?
4. The first UU principle is "The inherent worth and dignity of every person". Are there people in your life that you don't understand? If so what can you do to bridge the gap? Are there people in your life with whom you have disagreements? What can you do to find common ground?
5. The third UU principle is "Acceptance of one another and encouragement of spiritual growth". When someone has a completely different belief from you, how do you accept and encourage their growth?
6. Can you take time to read about or participate in an event that celebrates another religion or tradition? If so would you feel that it is a betrayal of your own beliefs?