

CONFESSONS OF A PROFESSOR

*Every story of conversion
is the story of a blessed defeat.*

C. S. LEWIS, FOREWORD TO JOY DAVIDMAN'S
SMOKE ON THE MOUNTAIN

Before reading a book, it's helpful to know exactly where an author stands, how she reached that stance and what her path forward might be. This is now a prerequisite to feminist scholarship. So here is my confession. Though my parents took their four daughters to church nearly every Sunday, once I got to college I walked away, not really knowing exactly what I was leaving behind. The church we attended was already infected with a secularized gospel. My mind and soul were essentially formed by the more pervasive culture of television shows, movies, nightly news, books, magazines, schools and universities of the 1960s and 70s—all resolutely secular.

I grew up watching soap operas (the soft porn of my childhood) and learned to imagine my personal life within the parameters they set. What could be wrong with having affairs even with married men if they played on all three channels during the day and my mother was watching them? I learned that the most beautiful, bright and elite women were the most daring. These influences inflamed my own selfish and impure

desires. Judaic principles claim that what we allow into our eyes and ears forms us.¹ Sitcoms depicted men as weak and ignorant, then and now, which reinforced my 1970s fascination with radical feminism. At the time, college environments were also strongly influenced by antiwar, free-love, open-marriage and Marxist movements. All these began to shape my mind and heart and thus the way I began to live my life. Until a few years ago, I saw nothing odd about this; I was a thoroughly post-modern woman.

Then for various reasons scattered throughout this book, in 1993, after having been awarded full tenure at my university six months earlier, I began to secretly explore and then later to clumsily attempt to follow Christ. Secretly—because I knew this was not going to gain me any status in the secular university that I loved. To be honest, at first my efforts to follow Christ were more of a trial. In my mind I always left open the possibility that this too might be just one more ultimately empty philosophy. I might in a couple of years find myself bored again, tired of it, and convinced that it also was too shallow to make any real difference. I had discarded many such philosophies before.

By the time I was forty, I was so confused that my panoply of thoughts and ideas often conflicted with one another. When I was conscious of the contradictions, I simply brushed them aside, not realizing (or caring) that there might be an alternative. In retrospect, by the time I was a fully tenured professor, I could not reliably think myself out of a paper bag. Perhaps worse, few people apparently noticed. One brave individual did try to tell me one day—he quipped that if I was half as open minded as I thought I was, my brains would fall out.

For most of my life, I believed the claims of secularists, and thus I intellectually worked out of the frameworks of secular humanism and material naturalism. I indoctrinated my students into these principles, drawing primarily on the various ever-changing theories emerging from secular humanism. I intentionally excluded any principles founded on religious frameworks except for slipping in a few “spiritual” principles I borrowed from time to time from pantheism. I was a material naturalist and secular humanist by day and a pantheist by night.

Within these frameworks, I also built my personal life. By the time I

had become a professor I was regularly using drugs and alcohol (recreationally, of course), frequenting bars and discos (of all kinds), experiencing bouts of depression (sometimes serious), and watching pornography with my partners. In my better moments, I was seriously monogamous. By the time I began to see and long for the life circumscribed by Christ, I had been married and divorced twice and had had two abortions.

Spiritually, I experimented with any number of pantheist methods, including Zen and Transcendental Meditation, and various manifestations of the New Age movement—feminist theology as well as holistic, whole earth, neo-pagan and Wiccan experiments. These forays revealed my rather desperate attempts to find peace and happiness, a desperation of which I was completely unaware. What I really wanted was power—intellectual, personal and spiritual power.

My intellectual life was tied up in the various “progressive education movements,” such as radical feminism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, multiculturalism and Marxism (critical theory). My colleagues and I were Marxists by ideology, not by lifestyle. Most “Marxists” in the university are more like Marx and his contemporary apologist Bill Ayers, both of whom lived partially off their capitalist fathers’ fortunes.² We also were living the good life; were we to be asked seriously to give up our own salaries to equalize things, we would have found another reason to revolt. As ivory tower Marxists, we were not serving the poor like Mother Teresa; we were admonishing the government to help the poor the way we wanted them to be helped (to become revolutionaries). We would of course lead the revolution because we were the intelligentsia.

Upon his election, Pope Francis echoed his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, in his resistance to secularism when he said to the cardinals at his first mass, “If we do not confess to Christ, what would we be? We would end up a compassionate NGO [nongovernmental organization]. What would happen would be like when children make sand castles and then it all falls down.”³ He is making the audacious claim that with Christ real things happen that do not happen when we simply help others without him. This would have been incomprehensible to me until I spent two months at Mother Teresa’s homes in Calcutta.

In 1996, a year and a half before Mother Teresa passed away, I went on sabbatical to Calcutta to find out what she meant when she said, "Our work is not social work; it is religious work." My own research focuses on the inside of public school classrooms where the poor and handicapped are educated. I wondered what she might teach me now that I was exploring Christianity. In my mind the trip was a mix of research and adventure.

Upon my return, I experienced a profound intellectual crisis. I was beginning to speak and write about my experiences in Calcutta, but soon realized that the essence of Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity was incomprehensible from any of the worldviews I had been living and teaching. I could explain what they did but not how or why they did it. I could only tell half the story with secular language; I could not adequately describe their core motivations and had no way to explain the peace and power that accompanied their works.

How was I going to explain to my world that Mother Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity did not believe the work we admired was their first work? Rather their first work was to belong to Jesus and to pray unceasingly. How was I going to explain that when they tended the most desperate and unlovable person, they believed they were tending Jesus in the distressing disguise of the poor?⁴ How was I going to explain that her entire ministry was developed around three visions she had of Jesus who spoke to her from the cross?⁵

In time I overcame these worries and wrote a book as best I could from her worldview, but when the book was finished my crisis was not fully resolved.⁶ I could see the outline of the problem but little else. I called the book *Finding Calcutta* because toward the end of my visit Mother Teresa impressed on me that God did not call everyone to work with the poor or to live like the poor as she and her sisters had been called, but God did call everyone to a "Calcutta." "You have to find yours," she commanded, shaking her finger at me. To work myself out of my intellectual crisis, I strategically began to study the worldviews in which I formerly had spent my life and the one for which I now longed. I had found my Calcutta; I was adamant to make sense of this new life as well as to understand better the lure of the old one.

Admittedly my conversion to Christianity has been a radical one. Biblical descriptions of conversions include the notion of turning one's mind around 180 degrees—*metanoia*. Unfortunately, *metanoia* is translated in English simply as "repentance." Repentance is an essential but incomplete description of what is involved in *metanoia*—completely turning around to face in God's direction.

Theologian Lesslie Newbigin describes the radical conversion as not only a conversion of the will and of the feelings but a conversion of the mind—a "paradigm shift" that leads to a new vision of how things are afid, not at once but gradually, to the development of a new plausibility structure in which the most real of all realities is the living God whose character is "rendered" for us in the pages of Scripture.⁷

In the West we tend to analyze history in such a way that it looks as though we are always progressing. In the humanities and social sciences, the highest status is granted to those who are progressive (leftist). I prided myself on being among them. C. S. Lewis wisely noted, "If you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive."⁸ I certainly win no prize for the one who turned back soonest; I was forty-one.