

Testimony

Rosalind Picard Tells Her Story

An MIT Professor Meets the Author of All Knowledge

I used to think religious people were ignoramuses. Then I got smart and took a chance on God.

As early as grade school, when I was a voracious reader and a straight-A student, I identified with being smart. And I believed smart people didn't need religion. As a result, I declared myself an atheist and dismissed people who believed in God as uneducated.

In high school, I led a classroom debate team arguing for a godless form of evolution, confident my side would win because "this was science." When the class voted and awarded victory to the creation side, I was dumbstruck. Most people didn't understand science, I figured—either that, or they were unduly swayed by the most popular girl in class. She had a swimming pool in her backyard and threw fun parties.

At the time, I babysat to earn money. One of my favorite families was a young couple; both the husband (a doctor) and the wife were really sharp. One night, after paying me, they invited me to church. I was stunned—people this smart actually went to church? When Sunday morning came around, I told them I had a stomachache. They invited me again the following week, but once more I came down with another phantom stomachache. The more they persisted, the more I struggled to invent convincing excuses. (You try faking an illness to a doctor.)



Just a Phase?

Eventually, the couple tried a different tact. "You know," they said, "going to church is not what matters most. What matters is what you believe. Have you read the Bible?" I figured that if I wanted to be an educated person, I needed to read the best-selling book of all time. The doctor suggested starting with Proverbs, reading one chapter daily for a month. When I first opened the Bible—this was the King James Version—I expected to find phony miracles, made-up creatures, and assorted gobbledygook. To my surprise, Proverbs was full of wisdom. I had to pause while reading and think.

I quietly bought a modern translation called The Way and read through the entire Bible. While I never heard actual voices or anything to justify summoning a neurologist, I felt this strange sense of being spoken to. It was disturbing yet oddly attractive. I began wondering whether there really might be a God.

I decided to work my way through the Bible again, thinking that perhaps my experience was common for first-time readers. This time I would step back and read it more carefully, the better to debunk it. I also vowed to learn more about the Bible's origins and to study other religions. Maybe, I thought, my culture—in which most people were Christians or Jews—was conditioning me to find Christianity attractive.

A favorite Jewish teacher at my high school ran a "gifted" program that let me devote one class each semester to whatever I wanted. I studied Buddhism, Hinduism, and several other faiths. I visited temples, synagogues, mosques, and other holy places.

More than anything, I wanted to get past this "religion" phase, because I knew I didn't want religion. But despite my wishes, an internal battle raged. Part of me was increasingly eager to spend time with the God of the Bible, but an irritated voice inside me insisted I would be happy again once I moved on.

There were two passages I found especially troubling: Matthew 10:33 (“But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.”) and Matthew 12:30 (“Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”). I resented what felt like an unwelcome ultimatum. I didn’t want to believe in God, but I still felt a peculiar sense of love and presence I couldn’t ignore.

During my freshman year in college, I reconnected with a friend I had met at a summer honors program. He was a straight-A student and a star on both the basketball court and football field—I had never known anyone so smart and athletic. He helped me with difficult physics homework, and then he invited me to his church. This time, I felt fine.

The sermon prompted many questions. I started to raise my hand while the pastor spoke before realizing that everyone else was sitting quietly. I nudged my friend: “Can we ask questions?” He hushed me. How do we learn if we can’t ask? After the sermon I tried getting answers, but people mostly wanted to socialize. I started coming to Sunday School classes because the teachers let me ask questions. I also kept reading.

One Sunday, the pastor talked about the difference between believing there is a God and following God. I knew Jesus claimed to be “the way” to God, but I had been trying to avoid anything Jesus-related—I couldn’t help hearing his name with the word freak attached. But the pastor got my attention when he asked, “Who is Lord of your life?” He discussed what happens when “you, a human being, put yourself on that throne.”

I was intrigued: I was the captain of my ship, but was it possible that God would actually be willing to lead me? From there, I came to a deeper understanding of what it meant to have a relationship with God through faith in Jesus. It seemed silly to pray about this—after all, I still had doubts about God’s existence. But in the spirit of Pascal’s wager, I decided to run an experiment, believing I had much to gain but very little to lose.

After praying, “Jesus Christ, I ask you to be Lord of my life,” my world changed dramatically, as if a flat, black-and-white existence suddenly turned full-color and three-dimensional. But I lost nothing of my urge to seek new knowledge. In fact, I felt emboldened to ask even tougher questions about how the world works. I felt joy and freedom—but also a heightened sense of responsibility and challenge.

Learning and Exploring

Have you ever tried to assemble something mechanical, and it only kind of works? Maybe the wheels spin, but not smoothly. Then you realize you were missing a piece. When you finally put it together correctly, it works beautifully. This is how it felt when I handed my life over to God: I thought it had worked fine before, but after it was “fixed,” it worked exponentially better. That’s not to say nothing bad ever happened to me—far from it. But in all things, good and bad, I could count on God’s guidance, comfort, and protection.

Today, I am a professor at the top university (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) in my field. I have incredible colleagues who have helped translate my lab research into difference-making products—including a smart watch that helps caregivers save the lives of people with epilepsy. I work closely with people whose lives are filled with medical struggles, people whose children are not healthy. I do not have adequate answers to explain all their suffering. But I know there is a God of unfathomable greatness and love who freely enters into relationship with all who confess their sins and call upon his name.

I once thought I was too smart to believe in God. Now I know I was an arrogant fool who snubbed the greatest Mind in the cosmos—the Author of all science, mathematics, art, and everything else there is to know. Today I walk humbly, having received the most undeserved grace. I walk with joy, alongside the most amazing Companion anyone could ask for, filled with desire to keep learning and exploring.

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