

June 27, 2023

The following article is located at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/july-august/atheists-finding-god-jana-harmon-stories-faith.html>

Christianity Today, June, 2023

INTERVIEW

50 Atheists Found Christ. This Researcher Found Out Why.

Jana Harmon paints a detailed picture of the reasons skeptics come to faith.

INTERVIEW BY CHRISTOPHER REESE/POSTED JUNE 12, 2023



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Christians rejoice when atheists give their lives to Christ, but typically we only see the end result. Unless we know the skeptic personally, we rarely get a detailed picture of what brought about an openness to faith. In *Atheists Finding God: Unlikely Stories of Conversions to Christianity in the Contemporary West*, C. S. Lewis Institute teaching fellow and Side B Stories podcast host Jana S. Harmon presents findings from her conversations with 50 atheists who came to faith. Christopher Reese, editor of *The Worldview Bulletin*, spoke with Harmon about her research and its implications for sharing the gospel with skeptics.

What were some of the commonly held beliefs of the atheists you interviewed before their conversions?

Generally speaking, they viewed Christian belief and believers through a negative lens. Lacking exposure to genuine forms of belief, many developed their perception of Christianity through an unfriendly, distanced cultural perspective, which led to reductionistic caricatures and stereotypes. Or, for those who had some contact with religion or religious people, they found Christianity to be wanting and unattractive. Faith was often painted as superstitious, delusional, and uneducated, irreconcilable with science and contemporary ways of thinking and living. Christians were often seen as intolerant, bigoted, judgmental, and hypocritical.

Interestingly, not nearly as many of these former atheists had good reasons to justify their own godless perspective. They seemed to know what they were against much more than what they were for. Many had readily dismissed God and faith out of hand without thoughtful analysis of exactly what they were rejecting or what they were embracing. They simply presumed a settled perspective based upon what they heard around them in the surrounding culture or by esteemed authorities.

For many former atheists, difficult life experiences had convinced them there could not be a good, present, or powerful God. Others held understandable objections to belief, to the Bible, to a perceived irreconcilability of science and faith, to “bad” religion and

religious people, and to various Christian claims about morality.

Did you detect any patterns in the circumstances that led these skeptics to reconsider Christianity?

Nearly two-thirds of the former atheists I spoke with thought they would never leave their atheistic identity and perspective. They were not looking for God or interested in spiritual conversations. So what breached their walls of resistance? In general, people are not comfortable questioning their own views until something disrupts the status quo. And in these cases, there was some catalyst, some form of dissatisfaction that caused them to question their own atheism or begin looking more closely at Christianity.

We all want to make sense of the world and be satisfied in our lives. Dissatisfaction can prompt searching for something more than our worldview has to offer. Disruptive longings can grow in someone as they look for better explanations to understand the world around them or their own lives.

What were some of the challenges your interview subjects faced after embracing Christian belief?

Unfavorable cultural stereotypes of Christians abound in Western culture. Within that context, conversion to Christianity came at great social cost. Nearly one-third of respondents reported negative responses or rejection from friends and family. They found their newfound faith to be socially frowned upon, embarrassing, and relationally alienating.

One former atheist recalled, “We lost a lot of friends, honestly. Even then our beliefs were very liberal and, in some sense, more closely aligned with atheism than with Christianity on all sorts of issues. But just saying, ‘We’re going to church this Sunday’ or ‘Jesus is God’ meant a lot of people hated us and wouldn’t even talk to us anymore because of that. It was difficult.” Even so, his newfound joy and peace in Christ sustained him in his new faith.



NEWS

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DAVID ROACH

Is there a conversion story that you found particularly surprising or moving?

Every story of conversion is surprising and moving. For me, though, what stands out most are the stories of coming to faith against seemingly insurmountable odds.

Take Jeffrey, for instance. He became an atheist following a childhood tragedy where he lost two brothers in a house fire. His deep pain fueled a vitriolic hatred against God and instability in his own life. During the next 20 years, he developed strong arguments to support his emotional resistance to belief. When his wife unexpectedly became a Christian, his anger against God only grew.

One evening his wife called and asked him to pick her up at the home of the Christians who had led her to Christ. Jeffrey was expecting a heated exchange, but instead received warm hospitality. Feeling valued, he was drawn back again and again toward meaningful conversation. Over time, his walls of resistance began to melt, friendship and trust developed, and intellectual questions were answered. Eventually, he lost his resistance to God and found the peace and joy that had long eluded him.

When it comes to sharing the gospel with skeptics, what lessons can we learn from your research?

In many ways, sharing the gospel with skeptics is similar to sharing the gospel with anyone who doesn’t know Christ. The first thing to recognize is that everyone is unique. Just because you call yourself an atheist doesn’t mean we can presume exactly who you are or what you believe. Beliefs are always formed and then held in the context of our own life stories. It’s important, then, to take time to

listen to individual perspectives, to hear what people believe and why they believe it. This not only allows you to value who they are and what they think; it also reveals personal questions that are often lurking beneath the surface of intellectual objections. It gives you a pathway toward meeting people where they are.

It is also important to be present in the lives of skeptics. Your life provides an embodied example of genuine Christianity, and a potential counter-narrative to the negative stereotypes. Being present in someone's life also allows you to be available at moments of possible openness to Christianity.

Along the same lines, keep in mind that someone's willingness to seriously consider God or faith can take a long time to develop. It requires what one former atheist calls "relational patience." In the meantime, we should prepare our minds for action, as the apostle Peter says (1 Pet. 1:13). We need to be able to seriously address the big questions and hard issues so that when the door opens and objections come, we are ready to effectively engage with thoughtful responses.

Finally, we need to be constant in prayer for those who are far away from Christ. It is only through the loving work of the Holy Spirit that hearts, minds, and lives are changed. We work in participation with what God is already doing and depend fully upon him to use us in ways that make the gospel attractive.

What would you like atheists who read the book to take away from it?

I wrote this book to take an honest look at how and why atheists embrace atheism, become open to change, and convert to Christianity. My hope is that any atheist who reads it will appreciate why intelligent, educated atheists have become convinced that Christian faith makes the most sense of reality. More than that, I hope they will seriously consider the claims of Christianity for themselves and be inspired by the tremendous life changes detailed in the pages of this book.