

# (Don't) Take Me to Church



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"Mom, I'm an atheist."

Glass shatters. The dog barks from the commotion. My mom has me by the shirt collar and is dragging me to the front door. This is it, I say. I am officially going to hell.

Born into a Catholic family, I was raised on the crisp pages of the Holy Bible and the smell of burning incense every Sunday afternoon. My parents, naturally, sent me to a private Catholic school. Clearly they wanted me to be Catholic as well. (Disclaimer: it didn't work out.)

So after eight long, grueling years in Catholic school, it probably came as a shock to my parents when I completely disregarded tens of thousands of dollars of their money to become an atheist. But let me be clear: I didn't choose the atheist life. The atheist life chose me.

Ever since I popped out of the womb, I have questioned God's existence all while confessing my sins to an elderly man clothed in white robes and drinking diluted wine in acceptance of Christ's blood and sacrifice. As I joined in the chorus of song at my weekly Sunday mass as a 13-year-old, something just didn't feel right. I felt out of place – like I was trying to sing a song but didn't know the words.

All of my Catholic friends swayed and danced beside me, basking in God's glory and righteousness, but I – I was blanketed in a fine layer of disbelief.

Despite this self-discovery, the world continued to revolve around me. I was surrounded by Catholics, which had to mean that I, too, was Catholic. Or perhaps just a closeted atheist.

I became a puppet and the church my puppeteer. Strings wrenched me up, down and side to side, spitting words out of my mouth and clasping my hands together in prayer. The slightest rebellion of my weary shoulders

or calloused hands earned me a harsh yank in the other direction.

I began to realize the difference between religion and me. I was black – devoid of photons and therefore incapable of producing light. Religion was white – holy, fresh, precious and pure. Religious people spoke so freely of their faith. God would save them. God was there. God would forgive. Those who believe will find salvation.

But where was my God? Who would forgive me? How would I find salvation?

Even without a God, I have seen that the world is righteous and pure and hopeful. I have seen that there is no right way to live except to live in the way one sees right. Atheism is defined as a lack of faith, but no, I do not lack faith. I strive to understand what is most likely true rather than believe what I wish to be true. The world is not a wishing well to waste ev-

ery penny on mere chance.

People choose to think that it is easy being an atheist—that I lazily choose not to believe because I do not care or am not committed. I assure all that this is not the case. Being atheist is one of the hardest things I have had to accept. I do not have the luxury of God forgiving my every sin, nor the constant reassurance of life after death. I am my own God. I forgive my own sins. I rule my own life. But this part of me does not reveal itself unless people suggest to me that I cannot live without a God. Again I assert that there is no right way to live.

I am not tragically atheist. I do not belong to the hateful, egotistical atheists that rebel against all religions. Someone constantly reminds me of my lack of faith in God, but it does not make me any less proud. My beliefs are not going to change, for I am a woman of science. And yet, I do not discrim-

inate others' faiths, but people discriminate me for mine.

And they say atheists are not kind. While lending a helping hand to a homeless person on the street or constructing a home for a desperate family, I smile at the religious man beside me helping others because of his faith in God. What he will never understand is what motivates me to help others, to lend a helping hand to someone in a time of need. It is in this moment, the moment when I feel the most alive, that I do not know that I am atheist. I have no need nor desire to know because kindness does not go hand-in-hand with religion.

They will say that I am a sinner, that I care about nothing but myself, but God is not necessary to be a good person or to live a full and meaningful life. I am not slamming the church doors closed; I am just choosing not to open them. So please, don't make me.



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