

“**LOVE
IS THE MOST
IMPORTANT
THING**”
IN THE UNIVERSE

Kathleen George

I think back to the young woman I was at conversion to the Eastern Orthodox faith: twenty-three years old, fresh from a semester abroad in Cairo, having moved thoughtfully from the various Protestant denominations of my youth to this ancient form of Christianity I encountered in its Middle Eastern birthplace. In Orthodoxy, as in those other branches of Christianity, I was eager to pursue a relationship with what I believed was the core of my being: the Christian triune God. I loved the Orthodox Church from the moment I first entered a domed, incense-filled parish. As an artist, I loved the physicality of the Orthodox liturgy: the rhythmic movements, the iconography, the light reflected everywhere in gold and candles. I found a home in this for almost twenty years.

Breaking from this home was a slow-going, confusing, and at times devastating process. But eventually, for very specific

reasons, my faith in both the Church and its God became completely unraveled, and like a curtain lifting after the play is finished, I cannot unsee the truth of this. Really, what happened is that I became more and more alarmed at the dissonance caused by Christianity and my inner self and finally I grew mature enough and courageous enough to take the steps to move away, uttering words I never thought I could say: “I am no longer a Christian.”

The crux of it was this: I learned from the cradle that Christianity stood for love. It was supposed to be humble, to “turn the other cheek.” It was supposed to love the poor. It was supposed to be OK with weakness and forgiveness. And it was indeed those things some of the time. But primarily, I found its legacy to be, paradoxically, one of exclusion. It spoke about the “love of neighbor,” but had a set of rules that shut out whole segments of society. In the Orthodox Church, the cruel inequality that women experience all over the world is actually *acted out*, as if on a stage, every Sunday morning, every Saturday night, and at every other special service all over the world in every Orthodox parish. In my earnest youth at first conversion, I was able to shroud this reality and accept the dissonance. I was held in rapture by the Church’s gifts (a sensory love of the liturgy, the ancient mystery and learning, the art and meaning of the icon, and blossoming friendships). I was able to put aside my repugnance for the patriarchy and love Christ and his Church

and keep the feasts for years. Many women in my parish were beloved and held roles of quiet leadership, doing that crucial behind-the-scenes work that is the lifeblood of any well-run church community. And yet.

As I grew older, my disquiet regarding the patriarchal structure of the Church and its exclusion of others created such loud dissonance in my being that being physically in church became unbearable. During the last years, just prior to leaving completely, I would attend only great feasts or when I felt lonely for the friendships, the music, and the rituals of church. In my inner being I felt more and more separate from this thing called Christianity, and this being called Christ.

I felt guilty that I was included at the cup and allowed to marry, but others were not. I felt angry that I was kept from serving in the altar. I believed the Church had squandered its gifts as it underutilized women. Continuing to attend the services made me feel complicit. It became clear to me that institutional exclusion was at the very center of the Church and the Christian faith. I felt deep in my core that religion was less about love and more about exclusion and power: who is in and who is out. I must be out.

So I left the Church. At first it felt like spinning in chaos. The whole of reality seemed to shift. Christianity, which informed my relationship with God, had been so grounding for me; my place in the universe was both consciously and subconsciously secure and ordered. Now it was all torn away. I didn't necessarily intend to leave Christ when I

left Christianity, but that's what slowly happened. I had been captivated by Christianity, but it had gravely injured many. I started to suspect that the whole thing was not real. What God has a church like this? No God, I eventually considered. *Mankind* has a church like this. Once I had the courage to entertain this thought it became large in my mind. And as I mentioned, it was like being immersed in a gorgeous play, but at the end, the curtain rises and one enters reality. I can't put the curtain down again and pretend to be in the play. I didn't mean for this to happen; it just did.

Life is more complex and uncertain when one doesn't have a belief in God. It is not easy to live without religion: people like religion. Societies like religion. It gives order and answers, but I now believe it is not the truth. I live with more uncertainty than I used to, but there are still ancient teachings that I am certain of: love is the most important thing in the universe. I must love others. We are connected. I must love and care for the earth and its creatures. I must think beyond myself and also seek to understand myself. I must not take for granted this one life. I must have gratitude for what I have. These are all things I have learned from decades as a Christian, but I am certain they are universal lessons, found among all people in some form or another. I am thankful for those lessons.

It's been a few years now. I'm really doing well, I want you to know. My life is rich and full, not without sorrow, and not without great and true joy.

I'm signing off now as a non-believer, with relief and gratitude. ✱