

# Becoming an Atheist At Wheaton

Draft of Chapter  
*Between Faith and Learning*

April 11, 2008

*“Yes, I was a Christian. I was in love with God. Going to church was literally the highlight of my week. I was passionate about evangelism. I was a hardcore Christian. I wasn’t a perfect Christian, but I truly sought God until I stopped believing in him.”*  
(Lily)

The most pervasive feature of the Wheaton student culture is the near-unanimous identification of students with Christianity. At Wheaton 98 percent of students identify themselves as “Christian.” Over 97 percent of students believe in God, that Jesus is God, and that Jesus is the one and only way to Heaven. It is easy to forget that even with such overwhelming support for Christianity that there still exists a minority, albeit only a few dozen or so, that are not Christians. These students do not believe in orthodox doctrines about Jesus, or may not believe in God at all. This chapter explores what it is like to be one of the rare students.

Wheaton student culture allows students a range of territory in which they can explore theological or existential questions. This land is sometimes unfamiliar. It is safe. One can move into a realm of doubt or wander outside of Evangelicalism. But there are boundaries. In leaving the faith, a student crosses the bounds of acceptable belief. Understanding what life is like for such a person allows us to better understand the culture of Wheaton students. From this unique vantage point, we can see how the student culture of Wheaton works to keep students within the faith, and how it treats those that stray too far.

## **Why (Few) Students Leave the Faith**

Each decision to leave the faith is unique, but there are several factors that might push Wheaton college students toward the exit door of the church. As with other young adults, students may experience a decline in religiosity as part of the maturation process (Fowler 1981, 1984). Students sometimes face negative life events, such as a death in the family or divorce, which may spur a departure from faith (Albrecht and Cornwall 1989). Students who grew up in homes that were not religious, or students who are less emotionally attached to their parents are more likely to become apostates (Sherkat and Wilson 1995).

There is also the threat posed by their education. Inherent in the college’s project of integrating faith and learning is the historical separation of evangelical Christianity and the academy (Noll 1993). This can create a tension between a student’s beliefs and acceptance of a discipline’s dominant paradigm, which may be inconsistent with evangelical thought. Education at Wheaton is not indoctrination. Some students, as they adopt the values and norms of the academy, find it difficult to maintain their religious worldview. Identifying as an intellectual or preparing for a more academic

career (e.g., a biologist) increases the likelihood of becoming apostate during college (Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977).

At Wheaton, such a change is unlikely for most students. The typical Wheaton student shares many of the characteristics that encourage people to remain in their faith tradition (c.f. Sherkat and Wilson 1995). Persons raised in devout families are less likely to become apostate, as are those raised in Evangelical homes. Abandoning their faith would be even less likely for students with close emotional ties to their parents. Thus, for most students, becoming apostate would be highly unlikely even if they had chosen to go to a secular university.

The institutional pressures and student culture make it more unlikely that students will become apostates while at Wheaton. The college provides formal sanctions against those who leave the faith. Students are required to affirm basic Christian beliefs. While it would be highly unlikely that the college would take any action against a student, students still fear such discipline. Students I spoke to on this topic made it clear that they would expect the college to confront the student and perhaps go so far as to “kick the atheist out.”

Institutional actions are more subtle and pervasive. Students may be expected to write a research paper on how their faith informs their view on a topic, discuss their beliefs as part of class discussion, or even lead the class in prayer. The student with no faith faces a difficult decision. Should he fake it? Should he explain his problem to the professor? Neither option is going to involve disciplinary action, but it will be unpleasant.

Transferring to another college that fits their new beliefs may not be a viable (or affordable) option. Wheaton requires an above average number of courses as part of its liberal arts curriculum. Many of these courses would not be easy to transfer, other than as electives. How would another college classify Wheaton’s required courses such as “Gospel, Church and Culture,” “Old Testament Literature and Interpretation,” “New Testament Literature and Interpretation,” or “Christian Thought”? Would they follow Wheaton’s example and accept interdisciplinary courses such as “Theories of Origins” as a science course? Transferring may mean retaking semesters of course work. Spending an extra year and thousands more in tuition may make transferring an unreasonable option.

More important than any institutional cost is the risk of being ostracized by fellow students, including close friends. From the moment students begin orientation, students are surrounded by students who value their faith and who are seeking a community of people with similar beliefs. Wheaton student culture helps students work through their faith and create their identities *as Christians*. When a student

abandons the faith, she is abandoning the common link between the identities of students. One cannot integrate faith and learning *sans* faith. One cannot be for “Christ and His Kingdom” if one believes that there is no Christ. One cannot be both a Wheaton student and an atheist. In breaking away from religion, a student risks being set apart from friends, neighbors, and acquaintances.

Within the Wheaton student culture there are two acceptable decisions for those who no longer hold firm to the beliefs that they did when they came to Wheaton. First, the student can express “disbelief” as “doubts.” Many students will have moments of doubt. Some are temporary. Some involve doubts in particular evangelical understandings, not in the existence of God or other general Christian doctrines. For the student who has more long-standing disbelief, expressing her experience as “doubt” rather than “disbelief” allows her to remain within the range of spiritual experience understood and accepted by other students. Second, the student can claim a more liberal Christian faith. Students are aware of the variety of Christian experience, and there is room for liberal theologies and practices (for students, not faculty). By identifying with a non-evangelical church with a wider range of theology, the student is able to remain within the acceptable bounds even though they may hold to beliefs that Wheaton would consider outside of orthodoxy. Students expressing doubts or claiming a more liberal faith are able to remain within a range of beliefs that is understood and tolerated in the Wheaton student culture.

For some students, these options are unacceptable. They reject Christianity in all its varieties. They may arrive at this through a questioning of its morality or its doctrines. Their experience is not doubt; it is disbelief. Some may believe in some spiritual existence, but they reject Christianity. Some jettison the existence of any supernatural phenomena. For agnostic or atheistic students, there is no room within the Wheaton student culture. They have become the very rare student who has left the faith despite their background and the pressures from the institution and student culture. This chapter describes what the experience of these students may be like.

## Leaving Eden

I came to know a self-described “underground atheist” at Wheaton. Like other students, Lily came to Wheaton a devout Evangelical. She began to doubt the reality of Christianity, in particular, and all religion, in general. During her junior year she “de-converted” to atheism. She began a blog during the summer before her senior year. In it, she talked about her experiences as atheist who was “alone on a campus of 2,500.”

Lily was hesitant to meet me for an interview because she enjoyed the anonymity

her blog provided. No one on campus knew—or even expected—she was the author. She wrote about her experiences while remaining intentionally vague on details such as her major, her coursework, and even her gender. She wanted the freedom to express herself without being harassed by her fellow students. Once, a close friend ironically suggested that Lily read it so that she would know that she is not the only atheist on campus. Lily was not conspicuous. She was a typical Wheaton student. Her attire and language were just like other students. She was not rebellious. She obeyed the rules of the college. There was nothing about her that would lead someone to suspect that she was no longer a Christian.

Eventually, Lily agreed to meet. It was more of a conversation than an interview. She needed someone “normal” (not from Wheaton) to talk to. When we met, it was clear from her speech and body language that she was apprehensive. We met at the Wheaton public library, which is close to campus but rarely frequented by Wheaton students; she did not want to discuss her experiences around other Wheaton students. She appreciated the opportunity to discuss her frustrations with someone who understood the Wheaton experience, but who was no longer part of the regular Wheaton community. We decided that it would be best not to use our discussion for the research. Lily valued her anonymity. She wanted to give some background on her life and discuss her experiences, but she did not want to make these details public. Fortunately, her blog provides enough details to tell her story.

Using this type of document is different from using interviews. In the “Leaving Eden” Lily expresses herself differently than she would face-to-face. In person, she is soft-spoken. Her body language communicates gentleness. Writing in an anonymous blog, however, she uses a rhetorical style that is, paradoxically, bold and vulnerable. “Leaving Eden” is part-autobiography, part-diary.

Some sections of the blog share her story of deconversion. As such it shares features found in other deconversion autobiographies discussed by Barbour (1994). He finds that people often present the causes of deconversion as being intellectual doubt in previously held beliefs and questioning the morality of their way of life. When Lily discusses her deconversion, she presents it as a decision based on evidence. She is less critical of evangelical morality, but she critiques some ways of life, particularly intolerance and proselytism. Her writing also shares the strong metaphors and emotionally-charged language found in deconversion autobiographies. For example, Lily chose “Leaving Eden” as the title for her blog because it a metaphor for her deconversion experience:

Adam and Eve must have had a similar experience when they left Eden. The world outside the garden was a more accurate depiction of reality than they had known, yet because it cut their feet, they pined for the place they had left. I, too, wanted...to be back in a place of comfort

and familiarity, where I could pray and put my trust in God and look to him for everything. But I recognized the pain for what it was: reality. Realness is not in the future, or in some eternal heavenly Form. Reality is now, and if you're looking for it elsewhere, you're missing it. There is no limit to the wonder and breathtaking detail of this world, unless you decide that there is. If you put all your hope in a future world and cover up the wonder before your eyes with a film, a filter, then it will be limited, and you will never see the full extent of it. (October 11)

The Fall is an ironic metaphor for the decision to no longer believe in God, but it aptly describes her experience of moving from comfortable, familiar religion to the "real world" She finds this reality preferable to seeing the world with "a film, a filter" that is limiting. Lily presented the reader with similar metaphors, which is common for this type of spiritual autobiography.

There is one major difference between the rhetoric in "Leaving Eden" and other deconversion autobiographies. Lily wrote the entries in sequential order as events in her life unfolded. In a typical autobiography, the writer provides a unifying narrative. Lily did not do this. The blog was organized like a diary. She discussed her deconversion, but the focus was on her experiences following this decision. This resulted in some stream of consciousness entries in which she expressed anger, frustration, and other negative emotions that resulted from that day's events. Because Lily felt completely alone on campus, the blog provided her with a way to express herself. As a result, it provides a unique look into how a self-described atheist might experience life at Wheaton.

## **Deconversion: From Typical Wheatie to Lone Atheist**

*"I used to be a very committed Christian. I was in love with God and full of faith, and I loved my first two years in the community of a Christian college"* (July 2)

For Lily, the decision to become an atheist was a decision to choose what she had decided was the truth. She came to the conclusion that there is no God and no supernatural phenomenon. It was not rebellion against her parents or the church. As I have already discussed, she explained that this was an intellectual decision to no longer live a life that she did not find credible. She explained her "deconversion" (her term) as an intellectual decision. Choosing to no longer be a Christian was a decision to accept life as it really is, even though it would be easier to remain a Christian. But she had "leave Eden."

Speaking of her decision to become an atheist as a "deconversion" and using an analogy to Adam and Eve reveals one of the difficulties that Lily faces as an atheist.

As a person who has been an evangelical for most of her life and who was still attending Wheaton, she generally expressed her experience of becoming an atheist in the language of evangelicalism. For example, she wrote what she, ironically, calls a “devotion” in which she quotes scripture to describe her new experience.

It was as if previously there had been a thin, fuzzy film over everything I saw or sensed or felt—not the result of sin or distance from God, but the result of painting a veneer of God on the surface of everything. All that was stripped away when I began to see the world as the thing itself and not a reflection or footprint...How many people really drink up the full extent of reality? It is more than we can imbibe, yet some look at the filmy breadth before them and say, “everything is meaningless”. Let us put childish ways behind us, peel away the narrow filter, and go further up and further in. (October 11)

In this entry she alludes first to Paul’s letter to the church in Collosians in which he discusses how Christians need to mature in their faith just as he had put “childish ways behind him” when he became a man. Her reference to “everything is meaningless,” is taken from Ecclesiastes. The phrase “further up and further in” is an allusion to the last chapter in C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*, in which the inhabitants of Narnia move closer and closer to perfection for the rest of eternity. Such allusions are indicative of Lily’s struggle for identity as an atheist at Wheaton College. She no longer believed in God or Christianity, but she still used the “language of Wheaton evangelicalism that [she] worked so hard to become fluent in” (November 29).

Identifying as an atheist was a difficult process because Lily had been a Christian for most of her life, and had chosen Wheaton because of her faith. She had come to Wheaton as a devout Evangelical Christian. She believed in Jesus. She witnessed to others about her faith. She prayed often. She went to church with enthusiasm. She loved God. Like other Wheaton students, she wanted an education that included a strong Christian emphasis. While at Wheaton she decided against studying philosophy, in part, because it was not sufficiently Christian by her standards. She found the philosophy courses did not push “the Christian line.” She found them “devoid of any ‘Christian college’ flavor,” which was frustrating because she “really wanted to integrate faith and learning” (October 1).

During her first few years at Wheaton, she loved God and loved being a Wheaton student. As an atheist, she looked back on these experiences with ambivalence. She recognized that at one time her faith seemed real and was important to her. She often had received comfort from prayer. Now, as an atheist, she missed the experience of prayer. She pined for an atheist equivalent to prayer and other Christian experiences:

I might be overdramatic. But when I really get down, it’s just a little bit harder to pick back up. Christianity gave just a small catalyst in the

form of “God loves you” or something else equally mushy but nonetheless effective, that made it easier to bounce back from a mistake or a disappointment. (October 1)

Lily viewed prayer and other Christian experiences as false. She did not miss Christianity or God. She did, however, miss some of the experiences she had as a devout Christian. The result was ambivalence to her life as a Christian.

This ambivalence was revealed in Lily’s experience at the October “all-school.” This is the monthly communion service that is open to the entire campus. It is not one of the mandatory chapel services. It is voluntary service in which students share in communion (aka the Lord’s supper or the Eucharist). For many Wheaton students, all-school is a sacred time in which the campus comes together for corporate worship. It is during a student’s first all-school as a freshman that many students begin to identify as true Wheaton students. Lily was no exception:

This place is full of memories for me. I remember freshman year and our first worship service during orientation week. It was truly amazing, the place was filled with students singing out to God for hours, and even when it was over we didn’t want to leave, we kept singing, until finally those of us that were left gathered for prayer and left reluctantly. I remember thinking that that night was one of the best of my life, that God must have such amazing things in store for me at Wheaton. (October 29)

In her first two years as a student, she often went to all-school. She wrote that, “I was one of the students serving communion, holding the bread and grape juice and solemn with the privilege of serving my classmates and serving God. At the time I truly saw that as a privilege. I loved it. It’s a good memory” (October 29). As an atheist, she missed the worship experience:

I’ve been a Christian for a lot of my life, including the most important years thus far. These songs and prayers and rituals are a big part of what my life has been. I try to remember them for memory’s sake, to remember them as I saw them then. I want to count as good memories those that were good to me at the time, and not edit them, for then they wouldn’t be true memories. (October 29)

She attended the October all-school because she missed listening to worship music. She was surprised at how much she missed the experience of being a Christian.

I was really in love with God. I think I just remembered tonight, vividly, just how much I was a part of this. I spent most of my college years being hopelessly in love with God and being consumed by it, so that even now

there's nothing else that I can talk about with as much passion. When I think about God now there's nothing there, and it grieves me a little to see my former self so consumed and devoted to something so unimpressive. But it was real to me then, so when I remember, I try to remember as if it were real. (October 29)

Lily remembered "being hopelessly in love with God." She was "consumed by it." As an atheist, she missed the passion she felt as a Christian:

A small part of me wishes that I could have that much passion for something again. Being an atheist makes me at times exhilarated and happy. But you can't have passion and devotion for nothing. I'm looking now for something to be passionate about, something to fall in love with. I guess I'm so used to that vacancy being filled by God, I don't know how to have normal passions. It's hard for such an entrenched Christian to learn how to be a normal person. (October 29)

Going to all-school reminded Lily of some of the positive experiences she had as a Christian. She wanted to grab hold of those experiences, but she had no idea how to do this as a "normal person."

Throughout her blog, Lily did not refer to any part of her Christian life as terrible or hurtful. Some Christian practices that she previously embraced are now "incredibly hokey" or strange. For example, she described a visit to the doctor in the campus health center:

At the end of my appointment, the doctor put a hand on my shoulder and prayed for me. She said that's how she likes to end every appointment. I thought: whoa, that is really creepy. That's the kind of thing I would have really loved as a Christian- any bit of Christianization that makes everyday activities different from the rest of the world. It's kind of the point of a Christian college, and people drink it up here. (I mean, if there's a Christian way to sneeze or a Christian way to open a door, people do it.) But as an atheist, I'm sorry, the praying doctor is just creepy. (October 3)

This and other experiences that she previously cherished are now rejected. She was not bitter. She did not express anger toward Christians. She understood that as a Christian she valued those experiences. But an atheist, she reinterpreted this experiences as misplaced and misunderstood.

## “Coming Out” as an Atheist

Lily often used the term “coming out” to refer to times when she told someone that she had become an atheist. The term is borrowed from the experience of homosexuals who “come out of the closet” and reveal their sexuality. Referring to her experience as “coming out” expressed the nature of her experience. She identified as an atheist, but she did not feel safe letting others know this. Only a few select friends knew her true beliefs. Her experiences coming out to them reinforced her reluctance to come out publicly.

Lily’s coming out, albeit through an anonymous blog, was a political act. It voiced a position that was not permitted within the community. The mere act of becoming an atheist was not allowed; making this decision public was a direct challenge to the community.

I didn’t want any other current or future students in my situation to search for hours [on the internet] like I did and not find anything relevant. There have always been and always will be atheists and other happily non-Christian students at Wheaton (and at other Christian colleges as well). My experience is not new or unique. It is just unspoken. I’m tired of atheism and deconversion being a shameful thing that is only discussed either secretively by the nonbelievers or mockingly by the believers on campus. So I want this blog to be a kind of collective voice of the Wheaton atheist. Maybe if I can lay out my reasoning and experiences here, people will be able to consider my position and listen, instead of simply hearing the word “atheist” and immediately running to start a prayer group for my lost soul. That would be fantastic. (October 14, 2007)

As an atheist, she felt “frustration and anger at being silenced.” To help herself and other Wheaton students like her, she started her blog,

...to set a precedent for atheist students at Wheaton and other Christian colleges. At Wheaton, atheist students are either treated like they don’t exist, or are used as examples of what not to be. I was tired of that, even when I was still a Christian, and I think it’s a really lousy way to go through college being treated as second-class because of your nonbelief. (FriendlyChristian.com)

Rather than keeping quiet, Lily chose to express herself. In another college setting, creating a blog because “I just wanted to get things off my chest and have a place where I could be honest” would be a benign act of self-expression. At Wheaton, doing so was a direct challenge to the purpose of the community.

Lily's identity as an atheist was a threat to the student culture, even though she did not advocate atheism for others. She decided that Christianity was no longer her faith. She was not interested in deconverting other students. She stated that "I really have nothing against Christians, and I'm certainly not out to convert anyone to atheism" (November 13). In some entries she discussed an atheist book or an argument by a Christian that she finds fallacious. This, to her, is a working out of her new found philosophy, not an attempt at atheist apologetics. She is reticent to impose her beliefs (or lack thereof) on others:

I can honestly say that I have no intentions of leading anybody away from whatever road they're on. I'm in my infancy as an atheist and I'm quite happy figuring out my own road and sharing it with people who want to walk with me. I've actually had conversations with Christians where I've sensed that they had some doubt in their own faith, and I knew there were strong atheist things I could say that would rip that seam a little wider. But I keep quiet, both out of respect for them and their faith, and because I know I'm not ready for the responsibility of trying to change someone's mind on something so important. (FriendlyChristian)

This reticence was something that Lily found lacking in the Evangelical community. She saw a moral failing in the students' lack of tolerance for other beliefs. In rejecting her faith, she rejected their evangelistic zeal. In one entry she discussed how it was common in "the evangelical circles" to which she had belonged to pray that God would allow one to convert someone to Christianity. She recalled "hearing about friends who were depressed because they hadn't personally led anyone to accept Christ lately. Seriously, get over yourself" (November 13). In rejecting her previous faith, she also rejected its emphasis on changing the beliefs and practices of others.

This call for detente is a call to change the college community. To not challenge atheism (or any other belief system) would require either that students recognize non-Christian beliefs as acceptable and put aside one of the defining characteristics of Evangelicalism. In advocating toleration, Lily is challenging the boundaries of Wheaton student culture.

Coming out as an atheist resulted in opposition. From her close friends, she often received questions and comments that were taken as challenges to her atheism. She described an exchange between her and a friend:

A friend of mine who knows that I'm an atheist kept asking me what I think is the purpose of life. Because I chose to become an atheist, I must have an answer, especially since I rejected Christianity's answer. This really frustrated me. Isn't that what we're supposed to be seeking at

our stage in life? What's the point of being young and in college if you can't ask questions about the meaning of life without knowing what the answer is? He kept pressuring me: "I think you would be happier if you felt like your life had a purpose." Whoa, there. I'm not even going to touch that. (However, this friend was "very surprised" to hear that I am happier now as an atheist than I ever have been.) (September 27)

Lily did not view this as being motivated by animus. She did not describe him as someone who is out to hurt her. He is still a friend. Yet, his questions, which are acceptable within the Wheaton student culture were received by Lily as condescension and exclusion. Regardless of their motivation, his questions presumed that he has life figured out, and that he is happier than Lily, as a result.

In November, Lily decided to come out to a Wheaton professor that she knew well. She described this professor as "a spiritual mentor and role model." When Lily was first doubting her faith, she had discussed it with this professor. Given her abandonment of Christianity, Lily felt an obligation to tell her mentor. Lily wrote that "it ended up being a good conversation, but boy was it awkward at first." Lily was able to excuse this awkwardness because she has found through repeated experience to ignore people's first reaction to the new:

I think when you spring an unexpected piece of information on a person, you have to excuse the first things that come out of their mouth. I've found this to be true with most of the people I've come out to. Usually the entire first conversation I have with someone upon revealing my atheism just needs to be scratched out completely, until they've had time to think about their reaction and we've re-learned how to relate to each other. (November 6)

Coming out to her mentor followed other patterns that she had come to expect from people at Wheaton to whom she told about her deconversion.

As expected, she pulled off several faux pas: the "you're a Christian, you just don't know it, etc.," and everyone's favorite, "God loves you." Everybody does that, and most of them should probably be forgiven for it.

Lily found that at Wheaton, even close friends and mentors would not accept her atheism as a legitimate life choice. Well-meaning friends questioned her positions. They doubted the credibility of her experience. They wanted her to be happier by believing what they did. In becoming an atheist she became someone different, someone who was no longer with the same status as the rest of those in the community. Even so, she expressed satisfaction at telling "the significant people in [her] life" about her decision rather than "deceiving them." In other cases, coming out had more significant sanctions, such as the end to friendships.

There are some times when I feel absolutely delighted to be an atheist hidden among thousands of Christians. This is not one of those times. I walked across campus today after a conversation that signaled the end of another friendship. Thinking, this is what it feels like to be alone. It sucks. Though I'm still in the closet, I'm no longer pretending to be a Christian. That means I don't take part in a large percentage of what goes on on campus. I can feel people mentally shrinking away from me, even people who were perfectly fine with my questioning of Christianity a year ago. I have nothing against Christianity and Christians. I'm not trying to deconvert people. I just don't understand why a single atheist among Christians is so threatening to them. (September 21)

In becoming an atheist, she felt cut off from the community. She was "hidden" and "in the closet," but when she came out she felt "alone." She stopped participating in campus activities. She felt "out of the loop." She experienced a distance between her and others. While it may be acceptable to doubt or question one's faith, to become an outright atheist means to choose separation from the rest of the student community.

What made this separation all the more difficult was that Lily had once cherished being a part of the community. She did not abandon this when she became an atheist. But to be part of the community meant being a Christian.

Sometimes I miss being a Christian. I don't miss Christianity, but I miss being a part of this whole thing. This whole thing that goes on at this school, where I am way out of the loop. (October 29)

In her most poignant and vulnerable entry, Lily discussed going to the all-school communion at the end of October. It was an experience that felt, paradoxically, comfortable and strange. She found herself "dodging in between spectator and participant." She said that during some parts of the service,

I actually felt like I was one of them. I felt like I actually was a Christian and like I believed what I was singing. That felt good, to tell the truth. For a few moments, I detached myself and thought: it is not that unlikely that I could become a Christian again tonight. I really felt like a Christian; I could just go through the motions and become a part of this community again and will myself into believing that I actually love God. Nobody would be able to tell that I don't actually believe in God. I might not even be able to tell the difference. But that would make me delusional. So I snapped out of it. (October 29, emphasis added)

By joining in with the Christian worship, she felt part of the community again. Yet, she knew that she could not become a true member. She was no longer "one of

them.” She felt comfortable with some of the music and some of the events, but she also found parts of the service “foreign,” “ghastly,” “cult-like,” and “barbaric.”

Her feeling of alienation intensified when more Wheaton students found “Leaving Eden.” These students responded to her blog by emailing Lily confrontational messages. Lily was wounded. Students had taken advantage of her honesty and vulnerability.

I was hoping that this blog could be a place where I could be honest, but that no longer seems possible. Maybe the internet is just not the right place for honesty. For an atheist at Wheaton, there is apparently no place for honesty. I guess I should have known that from the beginning, shame on me for being optimistic. Everything I say is used by Christians as ammunition against me. I listen to the stories and testimonies of Christians day in and day out without a word or a “yay, he’s doubting” thought, but that’s something Christians can’t reciprocate. I can’t talk to people without being prayed for, I can’t say anything good about Christianity or anything bad about atheism without it being used against me as evidence that I’m not a real atheist. When I listen to Christians talk about their faith, I never doubt that what they’re saying is true for them. I never question whether they actually believe in God or whether Christianity actually makes them happy. I would never even consider contradicting someone’s story about himself. So why can’t people trust the words of an atheist? Why do atheists apparently not know themselves as well as Christians do? Because we’re depraved and don’t know our own minds and don’t know the truth about ourselves, obviously. Maybe I should just shut up and let Christians tell my story for me, since they know me so well. (November 11)

Two days later, she continued “writing out of anger and frustration.” She discussed bitter exchanges with Christians in which they said things such as “You might not believe this, but God does love you and you will bow to him one day.” Lily responded against this “verbal vomit” with the rhetorical question: “What purpose could it possibly serve to say this to me, that is worth my offense and disgust? Do you honestly think I haven’t heard this a million times before?” She discussed how she is not offended by benign statements like “I’ll pray for you,” though she asks “why you consider it so important for me to know you’re praying for me.” She explained that one reason for people trying to tell her about God is that

Christians want to be the one to plant the seed in the atheists’ mind, which the Holy Spirit will use to eventually bring them to Christ. I’m so tired of belaboring this topic that all I can say is, if this is why you feel the need to tell me that God loves me and that I’m wrong about

him, please don't bother. The Holy Spirit has plenty of God seeds in my memory bank to work with, it's not like I need a refresher. (November 13)

She reminded Christians who were confronting her that although Jesus commanded them to witness to others, he also said the world would hate them because of this witness. She then concludes, "You can tell me that I'm going to hell, but for crying out loud don't expect me to still be your friend."

It was after this set of incidents that Lily and I first met to talk about her experiences. She wrote about our conversation in a brief entry:

I had a normal conversation yesterday. This is a big deal. I can say with 95% certainty that I have never before had a normal conversation at Wheaton. Normal is something I usually only experience when I leave Wheaton during breaks or visit friends who don't go to Wheaton. I can't really define it, and most of the time it's not until I experience something normal that I notice how much abnormality I've been marinating in. I had a normal conversation. There was nothing spectacular about it. It was just so....normal. (November 27)

I was glad to know that I was able to help, though all I did was listen and provide some perspective as someone who understood Wheaton but was not a part of it. As a researcher, the importance of this entry comes from Lily's understanding of "normal" and "abnormal." "Normal" was something that existed outside of Wheaton. She was "normal;" Wheaton was "abnormal." She considered "un-normal" conversations to be "just formulaic." She described these conversations—which includes almost all of her conversations at Wheaton—as "going against human instinct", as if "they are somehow trying not to be human, or maybe human in not quite the same way."

What Lily wanted from her Christian friends is *acceptance*. She valued friendships with people with different beliefs. She considered "it a privilege and a joy to try to understand someone whose beliefs are difficult for me to understand." She wanted people to value her beliefs because they were important to her. She asked for acceptance, however, recognizing the potential asymmetry this imposes:

I recognize the difference here: I don't think Christianity harms anybody who chooses to follow it (except in its most extreme fundy versions, but let's assume the best). Many Christians, however, do think that being an atheist "hurts" me in some way. If you believe that, my saying otherwise probably won't convince you. But I'm an optimist, so let's just give it a try: I am happy as an atheist. My moral standards haven't changed. Atheism hasn't made me a worse person, and I'm satisfied that it's the

right thing for me. If you can accept that, if we can just get over the fact that you believe in God and I don't without arguing about it, I'd be happy to tell you about my spiritual life as an atheist. And I'd be happy to listen to what God is doing in your life. (December 1)

Lily was not expecting other students to abandon their faith. She had friends who were open about wanting her to become a Christian again, but that they were willing to respect her by not preaching to her. She respected and appreciated such honesty. Others, however, would ask Lily about her deconversion, but then use her answers to argue with her. To Lily, they refused to really listen to her:

It seemed to me like they didn't want to listen to what I thought if it differed from what they thought it should be. To me, contradicting someone when they talk about their personal journey is something that you just don't do, yet Christians were doing it to me left and right. Many Christians seem to think that they know my thoughts better than I do. Why ask a question if you're not willing to accept the answer? Why listen to my story if you're not going to believe it? (FriendlyChristian)

Lily found that her fellow students held stereotypes about atheists. They had no close relationships with irreligious people. Students were "very surprised" when they heard that she considered herself happier as an atheist. They did not believe her when she said what she believed. They could not fathom abandoning their own faith, though many admit to having periods of serious doubts. This was disappointing for Lily. She wanted, desperately at times, to have deep friendships with those around her, but her decision to become an atheist made this nearly impossible at Wheaton.

## **Passing as a Christian**

Lily came to Wheaton because she was a Christian. For over two years, Lily lived and studied in an environment that attempted to integrate faith and learning. Then she became an atheist. With only a short time remaining before receiving her degree, and with the problem of transferring courses, she felt she had little choice but to finish at Wheaton. But how does an atheist integrate faith and learning when she lacks faith?

In Lily's experience professors were "really intent on imparting their own answers to students and not giving us the opportunity to think for ourselves" (September 27). She found that "Wheaton students are encouraged to question Christianity to an extent, but someone always tries to reign you in and direct you back to the Christian answer before you're within spitting distance of Doubt." She described her courses as being open to ideas, but because of the primacy of Christianity, other views were viewed as illegitimate:

My classes this semester are very discussion-heavy. We talk about issues to which there are a variety of possible responses, supposedly to survey all the possibilities and formulate a Christian response. What actually happens is that the professor tells us what the Christian response is, i.e. what we are supposed to accept, and we discuss why the other ones are wrong. For example, we could be talking about something as benign as why we should aid people in developing countries after a crisis. Obviously, Christians help people because they view everyone as having the image of God. Obviously, atheists don't think people have the image of God, so we have no motivation for helping them. It's all so stupid I want to slap myself. Of course, Wheaton values intellectual exchange, so other ideas are always given a chance. The professor will ask, "can anyone think of how atheists would justify helping people?" while sitting there with this stupid little grin on his face, most of the class smirking about those ridiculous atheists who can't justify anything they say. I can't even think of a response fast enough. So we move on, satisfied that we've considered the alternatives and found that only Christians have an answer. (That was a little more sarcastic than strictly necessary, but as an example it's not far off the mark.) (September 27)

Lily came out as an atheist to her close friends, but she remained in the closet to her fellow students and her professors. She did not want to be considered one of those "ridiculous atheists." She did not "want to be judged on the basis of my atheism by people at Wheaton who only know me in passing" (FriendlyChristian). She was unsure how she would be treated by professors if she came out publicly. She did not expect expulsion or other formal repercussions, but in some of her classes she was required "to give devotions, write papers and participate in class discussions about my personal spiritual life and my views on Christian theology." She did not know of a "precedent for atheist students" at Wheaton (FriendlyChristian). It was easier to remain quiet and not reveal her true beliefs. She chose to pretend to be the same type of Evangelical Christian as the other students in her courses.

This decision simplified her academic life. It did not make it better. She thought that "pretending to talk and write like a Christian" would "be fun." Instead, it "actually end[ed] up killing my soul a bit" (November 29). It made her "feel a little bit ill to have to do this." As the semester came closer to its end, she wrote more about her difficulty completing her courses because of the problem of having to include her presumed faith into her work:

It is absolutely killing me to write devotionals and papers on my spiritual development and Integrate Faith and Learning "For Christ and His Kingdom". Not to mention reading things like Alister McGrath, who for God's sake just needs to shut up about Dawkins and get his own material already. (December 2)

All of her course projects and papers “must be from a Christian perspective.” At first, she thought that this would be easy because she understood it and even “fun” because she would have the opportunity to use the vocabulary she had not used since becoming an atheist: “like sanctification, eschatology, spiritual discipline- not to mention the whole language of Wheaton evangelicalism that I worked so hard to become fluent in” (November 29).

What was her experience writing from a Christian perspective? As she graphically titled one entry: “Regurgitation burns on the way up.” Though she did not believe a word of what she was saying, Lily led devotionals, prayed in public, and read Scripture at the start of classes. She wrote papers that integrated her “faith” and learning. Lily would have preferred to explore how atheism changed her understanding of her course work. But she chose not to despite the pain of being incognito. It was easier than coming out.

As she wrote her papers, she wondered whether her professors would be able to tell that it was not her “real voice.” She doubted that they could because

so much of evangelical culture is like that anyway, requiring fluency in the language, that they probably can’t. Like people who stand up and raise their arms during worship at all-school communion-some of them are just regurgitating choreography. But you can never tell.

Ironically, she was disappointed that her professors and classmates could not tell that she was faking her beliefs. She quietly hoped that she would be exposed.

I had hopes that my evangelical regurgitation would be detected. I had a crazy idea that someone would call me out on it, that after listening to one of my class devotions or reading one of my papers, a professor would pull me aside and say, “nice try, but this isn’t real.” That would have made me feel better about Christianity and Wheaton. But no such luck. When I give class devotions and write papers about my personal Christian beliefs, I get good grades and people thank me for my sincerity. It makes me feel terrible. And it makes me wonder whether the people who I admired for their sincerity really were.

Her ability to pretend to be a thoughtful Christian made her doubt religion even more. If she could succeed at fooling others, how many Christians had she falsely believed to be devout when they were not?

## **Leaving Wheaton**

Lily graduated at the end of the fall semester. Shortly thereafter, she stopped her blog. On New Years Eve, she posted her final entry. She began by announcing that

she was finished at Wheaton. She was graduating early. She added: “Yes that’s right, I’m ‘free.’”

She wanted to “go back to what’s actually important in my life instead of keeping a disproportionate focus on my lack of religion.” While at Wheaton, developing her new identity as an atheist seemed very important. When Lily left Wheaton, her atheism became less important to her:

The truth is, I’m really sick of this blog. I’m sick of talking about being an atheist. Frankly, I don’t really care anymore that I’m an atheist. While I was at Wheaton it seemed like a big deal, and it probably was there. But now that I’m slightly closer to the real world, I just don’t think it’s that important whether you’re an atheist or a Christian. It’s definitely not important enough for me to keep up a blog about it.

On the Wheaton campus, being an atheist consumed Lily’s life. At each turn, from her residence to her classrooms to the student health center, Lily was reminded of her difference from other students. At Wheaton, one’s religion is the most important part of one’s identity, even when your religion is irreligion. Outside of Wheaton, “slightly closer to the real world,” her lack of religion became much less important.

Lily stopped blogging about her experiences, but she kept the blog available online for future students. One of the reasons she began her blog was to encourage other Christian college students. When she began her deconversion, she looked on the internet for others who had left the faith. Finding none, she began her blog. She decided to leave the blog online “in the hope that it might help some other Christian-college-student-turned-atheist who goes online for hope that they aren’t alone.”

## Discussion

Lily’s experience provides a unique look at Wheaton’s student culture. There is a space in which students can consider their beliefs. They engage each other in discussions about moral and theological questions. As an atheist, Lily stands outside, no longer welcome in this area. Her friends were tolerant. They did not understand her decision. They did not know how to approach her. Atheists, in their view, were wrong-headed people who rejected the very thing that made up the core of their identities. They were threats. Lily, however, was an atheist *and* a Wheaton student, a creature as strange as a duckbill platypus. Lily was no longer given the freedom to think, discuss, and debate. Questions about faith were no longer part of an intimate give-and-take; they were probes meant to dissect her new beliefs. She

was no longer part of the community. She had become “alone on a campus of 2,500.”

Lily came out as an atheist to her friends, but she remained “in the closet” to the rest of the campus. She was able to pass as a devoted evangelical Christian. To do this, she had to do some things she found uncomfortable, even painful. She said nothing when a nurse put her hands on her and prayed. She took her turn to lead a class in prayer and a devotional. She wrote papers that “integrated faith and learning” even though she had no faith. Though painful, this was preferable to further sanctions. Her friends may not have understood her new beliefs, but at least they were tolerant and well-intentioned. She could not count on others reacting the same way. When Wheaton students discovered her blog, many wrote her emails that were argumentative and offensive. They dissected her words, taking advantage of her more vulnerable statements. Some wanted to meet her, not to get to know her but to convince her of her sin and error. They told her that even though she may reject God, one day she would be in judgment and will be forced to kneel before Jesus. By remaining anonymous, Lily faced such comments only through her computer. She could go through her day pretending to be like everyone else because she knew how many of them would have reacted if they knew what she really believed.

Throughout “Leaving Eden” is a call for tolerance. Lily did not want to convince anyone of her beliefs. She was a Christian once. Jesus was real to her. Her faith was the most important part of her life. It defined her identity. She respected the beliefs of those around her. What she wanted was admittance back to the safe space where her and her friends could discuss their beliefs and the important questions of life. She wanted to move the boundaries of permissible debate to include people who not only questioned but even rejected faith. She was unable to do this while at Wheaton. Instead, it took leaving Wheaton College to be able to say, “I’m free.”