

HSSB - The Translations Project, Secular Rescue, and De-conversion from Evangelical Christianity
Melissa Krawczyk, Director of the Translations Project 2-15-20

Melissa Krawczyk grew up as a Young Earth Creationist outside of Pittsburgh, PA. She had a happy childhood and she was not isolated. She had friends of other religions.

She attended public school. She was told to learn what she needed at school and at home they would tell her what is "right". Including the "truth" about carbon dating and the age of the Earth.

When her parents separated she started checking out other churches. But she eventually became more fundamentalist than her parents.

She went to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) which is a highly respected engineering school in Troy, New York. She was a Materials Science major and went on there for graduate school in the same field.

She wanted to be an astronaut. She and her family liked science. But she learned that some scientists were "misled" by the Devil.

When she was at RPI most of her friends were members of the Rensselaer Christian Association so she never had cause to question her fundamentalist beliefs. She joined a Baptist church there that was extremely fundamentalist. They did outreach to the engineering students to make them feel that they had a home away from home. This gave her further indoctrination into "creation science".

It wasn't until after Melissa finished graduate school that she was encouraged to question these beliefs. She met her boyfriend Tom who is now her husband. He had been raised without religion and he loved the elegance of evolution and conveyed this beauty to her.

She would argue with him, but she realized she knew little about evolution. She found a book "Finding Darwin's God" by Kenneth Miller who was a biologist but also a practicing Catholic. This book allowed her the option of believing in evolution while still believing in God.

She went on to read the book "Godless" by Dan Barker. (Dan has spoken to the Humanist Society and performed some of his hilariously clever music as well.) Dan was a former fundamentalist who had a similar life to Melissa's. She realized that everything she ever believed is a lie. This made for a miserable Christmas holiday season!

Rachel Held Evans lived in Dayton, Tennessee, the site of the infamous Scopes "Monkey Trial". She wrote a book "Evolving in Monkey Town" about her journey from religious certainty to a faith that accepts doubt and questioning. She also had a blog where people could ask questions. This blog made Melissa aware for the first time that it was possible to ask questions and exposed her to new ideas.

Melissa had been making fun of Richard Dawkins and repeating the claims that he was obnoxious and arrogant. Tom suggested she read his book "The God Delusion" and decide for herself. Melissa realized when she read it, "I am an atheist!"

She wanted to tell everyone. Tom suggested she take it slower about "coming out". When you have to hide what you believe it affects everything: Politics, charity, social interactions. She was afraid of losing friends and business.

She came out to her sister after her sister reminded her to bring her Bible to school in a group text. Melissa told her sister that she no longer believes those things. Her sister was devastated.

Her sister said she will always love her. But she was sad that she would never see Melissa in heaven. Melissa didn't tell anyone else for awhile.

She poked around looking for humanists. She didn't know about them yet. She learned about the CSICon 2016 convention in Las Vegas where Dawkins and physicist Lawrence Krauss would be speaking. Tom was a big fan. They spent a nerdy vacation there.

Melissa saw Richard Dawkins in the buffet line and rushed over to shake his hand. She thanked him for The God Delusion showing her that she was an atheist. He sat with her and wanted to know how she stopped being a Christian. He went on to suggest that she write her own book!

She is working on that book now. She has thousands of surveys of people who left their faith. She lives in Southern California now where it is fairly easy to be a non-believer. A few members of Tom's family cut them off. But mostly the family has accepted them now.

But she has come to learn how difficult it is for other people around the world who want to leave their religion. Especially for Muslims. Melissa had studied Arabic for 15 years and was very familiar with Islam.

She had never heard of anyone leaving Islam. She had no idea how bad it was. Way worse than what she faced. And her situation was not easy for the first years. People are threatened with execution for leaving Islam.

She found out about the organization Secular Rescue which is a project of the Center for Inquiry (CFI). Matt Cravatta is director of Secular Rescue and Melissa is volunteering for him. Their new web site is <https://secular-rescue.org/>

Melissa told the story of a person who lost their job because they weren't praying. A woman was sneaking food during Ramadan and her father beat her. A professor in Somalia wanted to deal with the drought with science instead of religion. He was put in jail. Some people are chased from country to country. There are networks of abuse beyond even governments.

Melissa said that it is not actually in Islam to kill apostates. But Sura 4, Verse 89 of the Koran does say "if they turn back then take them and kill them wherever ye find them". The Koran is derived from the Old Testament that makes a similar statement in Deuteronomy 13:6 through 13:10.

Whether the Koran calls for killing apostates, it is the law of many Muslim countries to do so. There are only a few documented cases of such executions in recent years. But it does not take many executions to terrorize people into keeping their non-belief a secret.

Unfortunately, there are very few countries now that will take in refugees of religious persecution. Secular Rescue cannot magically rescue anyone. It is almost impossible for people from such oppressive countries to get a visa to relocate to a safe Western country.

Side note: My own wife is a permanent resident of the US. But since she has a "Third World" passport it is difficult for her to get even a tourist visa for many Western countries. And there is almost no way she would get a visa to relocate. Most Americans have no idea about how hard it is for most people around the world to relocate anywhere.

Secular Rescue can offer some help, though. They can write a letter of support for someone who is seeking asylum. That process can take 3-6 years if it is approved at all. They can offer funds for protection or to relocate if they are able to relocate.

In Palestine a man told his wife that he no longer believed. She told her father who destroyed the man's pharmacy. They ran him out of town and he lost his children. Secular Rescue allowed a happy ending in this case. They got him to another country and he is getting his kids back. Often people in this situation benefit just from knowing that someone cares.

The goal is to find what people need and encourage them to look into all options. They may just need to relocate within their country. Their employer may be able to transfer them. Students may be able to apply to be a student in another country. Asylum requests should be the last resort now.

A typical rescue case is given about \$2500 in assistance. About one hundred people received assistance last year.

Melissa also talked about the Translations Project which is another CFI project. The idea is to translate books like The God Delusion, The Greatest Show on Earth and The Blind Watchmaker into Arabic, Farsi, Urdu and Indonesian. Dawkins is giving away these books for free in these languages.

PDF versions are most popular. There were 12,000 downloads just last year. Mostly from word of mouth, mostly from Twitter. In some cases new words have to be created as certain concepts don't even exist in the language! The translators really have to understand the material and there is a lot of back and forth with the editor.

Dawkins was inspired by an unofficial translation of The God Delusion that had 12 million downloads! Dawkins worked with that translator to improve it. Their web site <https://translationsproject.org/> is designed to be subtle enough to slip by the censors in oppressive countries.

The web site Secular Jihadists for a Muslim Enlightenment offers podcasts for free. People in oppressive countries can use a VPN to get around some of the censorship.

These projects definitely need support. Secular Rescue needs money. And they need volunteers to answer emails from people who need assistance.

Thanks to Melissa for sharing her story and for all of her valuable work. Please go to the Secular Rescue and Translations Project web sites to support their work.