

The Devils That Do God's Work

by AJ Fortunato

When I was a younger man, I once found myself in the beginning of a short relationship with a girl whose family lived only a couple of hours away. One holiday season, she invited me to join her to celebrate Christmas with the family. As a member of the military (we both were), I relished the opportunity to spend time with family, anyone's family, during the holidays because I lived so far from my own. She never struck me as particularly religious, and she almost apologized with the offer, telling me that her family always went to church service on Christmas Eve. She assured me that it was a huge church and it was more like a concert than a sermon.

So I thought I would extend polite gratitude for the invitation and accompany the family during their Christmas tradition.

She was right, the church was a huge mega-church, with a rock band and big screens. There had to be over a thousand people filed neatly into the pews. One of my friend's relatives, her aunt, was a particularly pious woman. She seemed to be an active member of the church and we were led to the "good seats" due to her high influences within the church. As we filed in we were each handed a small white candle with a paper wax guard.

The minister masterfully delivered a powerful, emotional sermon that awed the entire congregation, myself included. At the appropriate cue, the candles at the ends of each pew were lit, and the flame passed to the next person in symbolic community. My candle initially seemed no different than the hundreds of others around the church, but suddenly, and seemingly perfectly timed with the pinnacle of the sermon (the part where we all rejoice at Christ's birth), my candle's flame grew twice as large. Thinking back, I seem to remember the wick was doubled at that point, but at the time I only noticed that my flame was larger than everyone else's around me. Everyone else seemed to notice and they all seemed to be looking at me (in this place where I was really just trying to blend in). The minister, all the way up on stage, was looking directly at me, delivering his sermon directly at me, even pointed at me at one point — in the way you point to a group of people as collective "you," but his finger was aimed at me. I felt like I was under a microscope.

At the time I had an overwhelming feeling of shame, like my whole life I had said that there was no god, but that I was looking over my shoulder as I said it. I felt an immediately crushing low, but there was hope. The minister was offering it to me like a rope at the bottom of a deep well, and I gratefully grabbed that rope and opened my heart to the idea



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of redemption by the hand of god.

It was an extremely emotional moment. I was trying very, very hard not to burst into tears. In fact, the whole way back to the family house, I sat in quiet frustration, trying not to wail and let out a big emotional sob. I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of this girl or her family. I didn't know how to be a Christian, but certainly crying all over the place after a Christmas service wasn't the way to go, as could plainly be seen by the example shown by every other person there.

My friend's aunt was busy gathering all the children together at the house in an effort to continue the joyous and celebratory "Christ in Christmas" experience. I was right there with her — soaking it all up.

Later, she pulled me aside to talk and I admitted to her that I had "found god." By this point, because of my unusual behavior, I'm sure that it had become clear to her and to everyone else. She then gave me a small Bible to take home.

The public outpouring of emotion was too embarrassing for me to continue any relationship with this girl. That connection fizzled out pretty quickly. I tried to attend regular church at that point, and even went to some Bible study groups. I even listened to some sermons on tape with one of my bosses at work.

Eventually, however, the usual skepticism broke through. I had important questions which were greeted with inadequate answers. Rational thinking kept surfacing, and my faith in god, too, fizzled out pretty quickly. I concluded that I really have been an "atheist" all my life.

So goes my brief brush with god. When I think back on this time in my life, I feel betrayal and anger. I feel duped. It is apparent to me that I was a victim of some cute game that these people play. The aunt had me pegged as a nonbeliever from the very beginning, and employed some devilry with the church to try and "Shanghai" me into the flock. I was, apparently, an easy target. Looking back, I can see the entire incident now like a movie plot. Aunt leads us all through the candle line, giving a knowing wink and a nod to the ministry candle-distributor, then a special (extra thick wick) candle gets slipped into the hand of a targeted person. Sort of like one poisoned wine glass — all part of the spy's secret plot.

This isn't a harrowed story of how I escaped the Church, but more of how I failed to escape when I got too close. I wasted only a small amount of my time, reconfirming what I always knew — deep in my heart and brain. Atheism is my lifescape. □