

The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert

an english professor's journey into christian faith



Rosaria Champagne Butterfield

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Praise for The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert

As you read Champagne Butterfield’s incredibly poignant and vulnerable account, you can’t help but put yourself in Smith’s place.... Would you have reached out to a woman who thought Christians and their God were “stupid, pointless and menacing”?

—Jim Daly, president, *Focus on the Family*,
www.crosswalk.com/blogs/jim-daly/the-power-of-our-words.html

There are some stories that just need to be told—some testimonies of the Lord’s grace that are so unusual and so encouraging that they will bless everyone who hears them. This is exactly the case with Rosaria Butterfield, who recently authored *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*.

—Tim Challies, challies.com

The conversion that deconstructed her life and worldview taught her a thing or two about how Christians fail homosexuals and post-moderns. One such failure is an unbelief in Christ’s power to transform people and the Bible’s power to captivate people.

—Rev. Chuck Huckaby, worldviewchurch.org

Every now and then you read something that not only is a good book, but makes you want to have a meal with the author and get to know them better. This was one for me.

—Aimee Byrd, housewifetheologian.com

It’s a fascinating, gritty glimpse into an intersection of unlikely worldviews.

—Mike Duran, mikeduran.com

The Secret Thoughts
of an Unlikely Convert

an english professor's journey into christian faith

expanded
edition

Rosaria Champagne Butterfield



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Foreword

Are you an evangelical?” The voice on the phone pressed on. “What do you believe about the Bible?” I had written her a letter inquiring about how such as I, a local pastor, could be sure that the university students in our city at least knew what the Bible says, regardless of whether or not they believed it. As a professor in the English department, she was responding. But I was surprised by her questions. She was—a fact I learned later—interviewing me!

The questions and dialogue on the phone continued for some time. It was friendly interchange, and with the next question I posed this response: “Dr. Champagne, I think that question should be considered in front of our fireplace following one of my wife’s good dinners. How does that sound?”

She enthusiastically responded, “That sounds wonderful!” And so began a friendship which my wife and I have treasured and regarded as a gift from God.

It wasn’t long before Rosaria was frequenting our table, always bringing something: cheese, freshly baked bread, and always an eager mind. What great conversations we had! As an English major in college, I relished these discussions with someone so cognizant of current authors. But much of our conversation related to the topics about which we had first spoken: the Bible, theology, and worldviews. She became very dear to us.

What follows is her story. From our early acquaintance, I recognized that our new friend feared no topic, spoke her mind in clear terms, and opened her heart as well as her thoughts. You will find that about her not only because that’s the way she is, but also because that is who she is.

Our church in Syracuse had prayed for years for the university. Rosaria is one of God’s gracious answers!

—*Kenneth G. Smith*

Acknowledgments

God, Why Pick Me?

When I was 28 years old, I boldly declared myself lesbian. I was at the finish of a PhD in English Literature and Cultural Studies. I was a teaching associate in one of the first and strongest women's studies departments in the nation. I was being recruited by universities to take on faculty and administrative roles in advancing radical leftist ideologies. I genuinely believed that I was helping to make the world a better place.

At the age of 36, I was one of the few tenured women at a large research university, a rising administrator, and a community activist. I had become one of the "tenured radicals." By all standards, I had made it. That same year, Christ claimed me for himself and the life that I had known and loved came to a humiliating end.

I am often asked to share my spiritual journey. People are interested to know what it is like to travel a long journey to Christ. I am not hesitant to oblige. How our lives bear the fruit of Christ's spilled blood is important. The stories of our lives can serve to encourage and warn others. But telling the stories of our lives is heady business. How and why are our stories shared? Are they shared to bring attention to ourselves? To shock people? To entertain?

Are our testimonies honoring to the whole landscape of the Christian journey? Not if they speak only of the "how-shocking-was-my-sin-before-I-met-the-Lord" story. (As though the sin I commit today is less shocking!) Not if they share only the safe feelings, rehearsed responses, and good "decisions" for which we give ourselves unearned credit.

My Christian memoir divulges the secret thoughts of an unlikely convert like me. This book seeks to uncover the hidden landscape of the Christian life in its whole context, warts and all. Perhaps some of my unrehearsed thoughts will resonate with you. I often wonder: God, why pick me? I didn't ask to be a Christian convert. I didn't "seek the Lord." Instead, I ran like the wind when I suspected someone would start peddling the gospel to me. I was intellectually—and only intellectually—interested in matters of faith and I wanted to keep it that way. How did a smart cookie like me end up in a place like this?

In the pages that follow, I share what happened in my private world through what Christians politely call conversion. This word—conversion—is simply too tame and too refined to capture the train wreck that I experienced in coming face-to-face with the Living God. I know of only one word to describe this time-released encounter: impact. Impact is, I believe, the space between the multiple car crash and the body count. I try, in the pages that follow, to relive the impact of God on my life.

I began this book in 2003. Although this book called me to look back, each page is indelibly inscribed by the joyful demands of my day-to-day life. My husband, Kent, sacrificially committed himself to helping me complete this project. Kent's love, guidance, and support brought this book into light. Each chapter collided with a child placed into our family through adoption or foster care. And each chapter was punctuated by the absence of other children, those whom I came to know through desperate phone calls from the Department of Family Services; those whose needs or numbers exceeded our arms' expanse. At each child's placement into our family, my mother and stepfather, Dolores and Theo Otis, gave me all of the support and encouragement that I would need. I'm the only mother that I know whose own mother single-handedly threw a progressive baby shower for each baby or child. With each gift for a child, my mom always slipped in something wonderful for me. ("Rosaria, get your hair cut; get a pedicure; buy a new TV!") The grafting of my children into my family with Kent, and the grafting of my mother and stepfather into my present life, made it safe for me to take the long look back that the writing of this book required.

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I wish to thank those who read and commented on many chapters: Kent Butterfield, Pastor Bruce and Kim Backensto, Pastor Doug and Amy Comin, Natalie Gazo, and Pastor Ken and Floy Smith. All of the errors in judgment and offenses that you find on these pages, however, are solely mine.

I also wish to thank those people who supported and encouraged me during the writing of this book by their words, examples, and teaching: Pastor Charles and Margaret Biggs, Pastor Steve and Julie Bradley, Matthew Filbert, Pastor Jerry and Ann O'Neill, Dolores and Theo Otis.

God used the unsuspecting members of the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church in countless ways. I am indebted to: Pastor Brian and Dorian Coombs, Phyllis Coombs, Kurt and Kathy Donath, George and Maggie Hueber, Chris and Shari Huggins, Gene and Gail Huggins, M and NM, Bob and Vivian Rice, Ben and Diana Rice, Dr. Ken and Becky Smith, Dr. Jonathan and Marty Wright, and Ron and Robyn Zorn.

I also thank my colleagues and friends from Geneva College, especially Dr. Byron Curtis, Dr. Dean Smith, Dr. Bob Frazier, Dr. Maureen Vanterpool, Dr. Jonathan Watt, and President Emeritus Jack White; I thank my mentor and boss from the Center for Urban Biblical Ministry, Mrs. Karla Threadgill Byrd.

Finally, memoirs collide past and present in messy and bizarre ways. My colleagues and friends from my Classical Conversations Homeschool Community in Purcellville, Virginia, keep a smile on my face, a spring in my step, and a Latin verb to conjugate on the tip of my tongue. I am honored to share the daily trench of homeschooling with Regina Gossage, Alissa Hall, Martha Mason, Julia Shaw-Fuller, and Jennifer Truesdale. My editor at Crown & Covenant Publications, Lynne Gordon, is the most compassionate reader in my world, and I thank her for her interest in this book and for the myriad of ways that she improved it.

I am grateful to the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, and to the pastors, sessions, and members who have sacrificed their time, money, and personal liberty for Christ's covenant. I am grateful for the denomination's historical and bold stand for abolition and for the example of Christ-commanded racial advocacy that this sets for us today.

I dedicate this book to my children, in the hopes that they each will write their own worldview testimony for God's saving grace through Christ Jesus, our Lord.



Conversion and the Gospel of Peace

Syracuse, N.Y., 1997–2000

How do I tell you about my conversion to Christianity without making it sound like an alien abduction or a train wreck? Truth be told, it felt like a little of both. The language normally used to describe this odd miracle does not work for me. I didn't read one of those tacky self-help books with a thin coating of Christian themes, examine my life against the tenets of the Bible the way one might hold up one car insurance policy against all others and cleanly and logically "make a decision for Christ." While I did make choices along the path of this journey, they never felt logical, risk-free, or sane. Neither did I feel like the victim of an emotional/spiritual earthquake and collapse gracefully into the arms of my Savior, like a holy and sanctified Scarlett O'Hara having been "claimed by Christ's irresistible grace." Heretical as it might seem, Christ and Christianity seemed eminently resistible.

My Christian life unfolded as I was just living my life, my normal life. In the normal course of life questions emerged that exceeded my secular feminist worldview. Those questions sat quietly in the crevices of my mind until I met a most unlikely friend: a Christian pastor. Had a pastor named Ken Smith not shared the gospel with me for years and years, over and over again, not in some used-car-salesman way, but in an organic, spontaneous and compassionate way, those questions might still be lodged in the crevices of my mind and I might never have met the most unlikely of friends, Jesus Christ himself.

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It is dangerous to look back on my life, from the perspective of a lover and follower of Christ, now also a wife and a mother. It is painful to lay my hand on the absence of my former life, and breathe. My former life still lurks in the edges of my heart, shiny and still like a knife.

I come to the limits of language when I try to describe my life in Jesus Christ.

My life as I knew it became train wrecked in April 1999, at the age of 36—just a few weeks shy of 37. At that time, I was an associate professor at Syracuse University, recently tenured in the English Department, also holding a joint teaching appointment in the Center for Women’s Studies. I was in a lesbian relationship with a woman who was primarily an animal activist and a nature lover and also an adjunct professor at a neighboring university. Together we owned homes, cohabitating both in life and in the university’s domestic partnership policy. My partner T ran a business: she rehabilitated abused and abandoned Golden Retrievers for placement as helper dogs for the disabled or family dogs for those animals not strong enough to work. Our houses (we owned and lived in two—one in the country and one in the university district) were hubs of intellectual and activist work. Aside from the kennel, we supported a lot of causes: AIDS health care, children’s literacy, sexual abuse healing, and disability activism. We were members of a Unitarian Universalist Church, where I was the coordinator of what is called the Welcoming Committee, the gay and lesbian advocacy group.

My historical field in English studies was 19th century literature and culture. My historical interests in 19th century literature were grounded in the philosophical and political worldviews of Freud, Marx, and Darwin. My primary field was Critical Theory—also known as postmodernism. My specialty was Queer Theory (a postmodern form of gay and lesbian studies). In my department, tenure requirements were rigorous, expecting a published and reviewed book, six scholarly articles, and significant exposure at conferences, delivering lectures on the topic of your research. I remember thinking that this intensity of intellectual work was normal until I explained our department’s tenure requirements to a doctor friend. He said, “Wow! That’s like having to cut out

your own spleen and eat it!” Albeit apparently toxic, my work, nonetheless, felt vital and enriching.

Looking back now, I don’t know how to think about myself as a professor. Most often, I felt like an impostor—I felt like I wasn’t really smart enough to be there. I always felt lucky to get a job at Syracuse University. I didn’t assume I would get tenure there and was a little surprised that I did.

Within three years I became the Director of Undergraduate Studies and I enjoyed advising and organizing our curriculum and encouraging our students. Some of my senior colleagues advised me against becoming a department administrator before I received tenure, not only because administrative work would take time away from my research and writing, but also because administrators get embroiled in department politics where it is easy to make gratuitous enemies and hard to recover lost ground. I rejected this traditional counsel and took the job anyway. In bucking the traditional advice, I learned a good lesson: Success comes when we build on our strengths. Doing something I loved and I was good at helped me to get my writing and research done in an efficient and focused way. Although risky, working from my strengths turned out to be a good risk and I’m glad that I took it. I felt vindicated in the principle that risks are worth taking and that gain is only sweet when you actually have something to lose.

In spite of feeling like an impostor, I apparently didn’t look like one. I did a lot of high-profile things as a professor. I gave a keynote address at a gay pride march and was invited by major universities, including Harvard University, to lecture on gay and lesbian studies. I tried to do my work with integrity and enthusiasm, but certain aspects of my job were hard for me, like working with graduate students on their dissertations and comprehensive exams. The job market was always bad and I never really felt equipped to mentor their research.

The part of my job that I loved the best was undergraduate teaching. I still shiver at the dynamism and the epiphanies of the classroom. I miss this. I also miss my colleagues. I miss being in the company of risky and complex thinkers, people who are invested in our culture and who challenge me to think to the edges of my comfort zones. I believed then and I believe now that where everybody thinks the same nobody thinks very much. I miss

being around people who find their equilibrium in contradiction and diversity. Of course, there were other perks—a dependable salary, the best job security in the world, tuition remission for my family members at Syracuse University and research universities of equivalent status, a great research budget, a book budget, opportunity to travel. But even now, homeschooling two of our four children and living on one salary, I don't miss the material benefits. I miss the people.

As a lesbian activist, I was *involved* in my gay community. I had drafted and lobbied for the university's first successful domestic partnership policy, which gives spousal benefits to gay couples. I had to put up with a lot of flak from the conservative Christian community for this. My life was busy and full, and, I thought, moral. I was concerned with issues of morality, and even authored an article on the subject of the morality of gay and lesbian lives. I was an "out" lesbian in the same way that I am now an "out" Christian. It would never occur to me to live my life in falsehood, and I had and have the kind of privileged jobs (then as a professor and now as a Christian wife) where I do not have to be "careful" or closeted. The closest I ever got to Christians during these times were students who refused to read material in university classrooms on the grounds that "knowing Jesus" meant never needing to know anything else; people who sent me hate mail; or people who carried signs at gay pride marches that read "God Hates Fags." (By the way, "God Hates Fags" is also a website where young nominally Christian homophobes can log on to acquire hate tactics.)

Christians always seemed like bad thinkers to me. It seemed that they could maintain their worldview only because they were sheltered from the world's real problems, like the material structures of poverty and violence and racism. Christians always seemed like bad readers to me, too. They appeared to use the Bible in a way that Marxists would call "vulgar"—that is, common, or in order to bring the Bible into a conversation to stop the conversation, not deepen it. "The Bible says" always seemed to me like a mantra that invited everyone to put his or her brain on hold. "The Bible says" was the Big Pause before the conversation stopped. Their catch phrases and clichés were (and are) equally off-putting. "Jesus is the answer" seemed to me then and now like

a tree without a root. Answers come after questions, not before. Answers answer questions in specific and pointed ways, not in sweeping generalizations. “It’s such a blessing” always sounds like a violation of the Third Commandment (“Do not take the Lord’s name in vain”) or a Hallmark card drunk with schmaltz. It seemed to me that the only people who could genuinely be satisfied with this level of reading and thinking were people who didn’t really read or think very much—about life or culture or anything.

In addition to appearing to be anti-intellectual, Christians also scared me. Outside of the Lord, life is a very treacherous ordeal. Proverbs teaches this when its author Solomon writes: “The way of the unfaithful is hard” (Prov. 13:15). Of course, Christian life is hard too, but it is hard in another way, in a way that is at least bearable and purposeful. Christians can lay hold of the meaning and purpose and grace of suffering and truly believe that all things, even the evil ones, “work together for good for those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). A life outside of Christ is both hard and frightening; a life in Christ has hard edges and dark valleys, but it is purposeful even when painful.

I get ahead of myself. Here is one of the deepest ways Christians scared me: The lesbian community was home and home felt safe and secure; the people that I knew the best and cared about were in that community; and finally, the lesbian community was accepting and welcoming while the Christian community appeared (and too often is) exclusive, judgmental, scornful, and afraid of diversity. What also scared me is that, while Christianity seemed like just another worldview, this one for people who enjoyed living narrowly circumscribed lives, Christians claimed that their worldview and all of the attending features that I saw—Republican politics, homeschooling biases, refusal to inoculate children against childhood illnesses, etc.—had God on its side.

Christians still scare me when they reduce Christianity to a lifestyle and claim that God is on the side of those who attend to the rules of the lifestyle they have invented or claim to find in the Bible.

Although I knew that I wasn’t the smartest scholar in my department, I enjoyed doing research and writing. I enjoyed (and still do) the risk of examining new ideas. I had a sticky

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note on my computer with a quotation whose author I never knew. It read: "I would rather be wrong on an important point than right on a trivial one." This quotation reminded me that when you make your mistakes in public you will learn that they are mistakes and in being corrected you will grow. It also reminded me that being wrong and responding to correction with resilience was a higher virtue than covering up your mistakes so your students and the watching world assumed that success meant never being wrong. Working from your strengths and cultivating resilience in all matters of life have always been guiding principles for me.

I'm a former gymnast and marathon runner, and I have always found flexibility and a steady pace to be more useful than perfection or bursts of speed. Winners have always seemed to me people who know how to fall on their face, pick themselves up, and recover well. It has always seemed to me that without the proper response to failure, we don't grow, we only age. So I was and am willing to take the risk of being wrong for the hope of growing in truth. It seemed to me that if we fall, we need to fall forward and not backward, because at least then we are moving in the right direction. Resilience, recovery, and recognition of my strengths and failures galvanized my research and my life.

In spite of having a worldview that valued flexibility, unanswerable Big Life Questions started to nag at me while I was doing initial research and writing for my second book, a study of the rise of the Religious Right in America, and the hermeneutic of hatred that the Religious Right uses against their favorite target: queers, or at that time, people like me. I had been studying the Christian Right since 1992, since Pat Robertson at the 1992 Republican National Convention declared: "Feminism encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians." I thought then, and I think now, that this is a foolish and a dangerous statement. After all, it was the first wave of feminism in this country that secured for women the right to vote and access to public education. It seemed to me then and it seems to me now that Christians truly become ugly when we become jealous of the successful persuasive rhetoric of others. The truth is,

feminists have been more successful rhetoricians at the core of major U.S. universities than have Christians, even though most of these universities have Christian origins.

Although I live my life now for Christ and Christ alone, I do not find myself in like-minded company when my fellow Christians bemoan the state of the university today. Feminism has a better reputation than Christianity at all major U.S. universities and this fact really bothers (and confuses) many Christians. Feminism has truly captured the soul of secular U.S. universities and the church has either been too weak or too ignorant to know and to know better. But how has the church responded to this truth? Too often the church sets itself up as a victim of this paradigm shift in America, but I think this is dishonest. Here's what I think happened: Since all major U.S. universities had Christian roots, too many Christians thought that they could rest in Christian tradition, not Christian relevance. Too often the church does not know how to interface with university culture because it comes to the table only ready to moralize and not dialogue. There is a core difference between sharing the gospel with the lost and imposing a specific moral standard on the unconverted. Like it or not, in the court of public opinion, feminists and not Bible-believing Christians have won the war of intellectual integrity. And Christians are in part to blame for this.

The Pat Robertson quotation is a good example of what I saw in my study of the Religious Right (and what I still see): spiritual pride and club Christianity. But I also knew that there was more to it than that. I wondered about this. What is the core of Christianity? Why do true believers believe? What do they believe? Why is their faith person-centered and not idea-centered? Because I'm an English professor, I had to read the Bible to make sense of the hermeneutic used by the Christian Right. Because I was a scholar, I knew that, without having studied Hebrew or Greek, or knowing the relationship between the different fields of theology and different applications of doctrine, canon, and textual study, I was not able to study the Bible on my own. I started a self-study of Greek and searched for someone to help me understand the Bible. "Help" came in a most unusual way.