



Why I Left, Why I Stayed: Conversations on Christianity Between an Evangelical Father and His Humanist Son

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Bestselling Christian author, activist, and scholar Tony Campolo and his son Bart, an avowed Humanist, debate their spiritual differences and explore similarities involving faith, belief, and hope that they share.

Over a Thanksgiving dinner, fifty-year-old Bart Campolo announced to his Evangelical pastor father, Tony Campolo, that after a lifetime immersed in the Christian faith, he no longer believed in God. The revelation shook the Campolo family dynamic and forced father and son to each reconsider his own personal journey of faith—dual spiritual investigations into theology, faith, and Humanism that eventually led Bart and Tony back to one another.

In *Why I Left, Why I Stayed*, the Campolos reflect on their individual spiritual odysseys and how they evolved when their paths diverged. Tony, a renowned Christian teacher and pastor, recounts his experience, from the initial heartbreak of discovering Bart's change in faith, to the subsequent healing he found in his own self-examination, to his embracing of his son's point of view. Bart, an author and Humanist chaplain at the University of Southern California, considers his faith journey from Progressive Christianity to Humanism, revealing how it affected his outlook and transformed his relationship with his father.

As *Why I Left, Why I Stayed* makes clear, a painful schism between father and son that could have divided them irreparably became instead an opening that offered each an invaluable look not only at what separated them, but more importantly, what they shared.

Why I Left, Why I Stayed: Conversations on Christianity Between an Evangelical Father and His Humanist Son Details

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From Reader Review Why I Left, Why I Stayed: Conversations on Christianity Between an Evangelical Father and His Humanist Son for online ebook

Angel Sanabria says

Interesante diálogo entre un ministro religioso y su hijo ateo; no obstante, los argumentos de ambos me parecen un tanto débiles, los dos tienen posturas muy fijas, los dos creen: uno a que sí y el otro a que no. El hijo pierde la fe a los cincuenta y tantos años, después de una vida dedicada a la religión, sus motivos: una experiencia cercana a la muerte, el clásico problema del sufrimiento y la influencia de los "nuevos ateos"; ahora dice vivir más plenamente, luchando por la paz, la justicia, el amor. ¿No lo hacía antes? Él asegura que sí. ¿Entonces, cuál es la diferencia? Ambos quieren disfrutar la vida presente, no piensan que se deba sacrificar en aras de una vida en el más allá. En eso coincido con ellos, pero el creyente argumenta que hay que vivirla al máximo, porque nos llevaremos nuestros recuerdos a la siguiente vida; el ateo sostiene que hay que disfrutarla porque no hay otra más que ésta. ¿Notan la semejanza diametralmente opuesta? No me convencen estos planteamientos. Yo no valoro la vida por su cantidad, sino por su calidad; no la aprecio porque vaya a continuar en otra vida (aunque lo espero), ni porque sólo tengamos ésta (¿cómo asegurarlo?). Yo amo la vida porque siento que todo en ella es gracia, es un regalo, es belleza que me abraza, que me seduce, que me aplasta; que me conmueve hasta las lágrimas, ya sea una alfombra de nubes, la brisa del mar, la caricia del sol, la sinfonía de la naturaleza, sus paisajes, el aroma del campo, la sonrisa de los niños, el encanto de las personas, el abrazo de mis seres queridos; todo, todo, todo me estremece, y aunque el sufrimiento y el dolor no me gustan, sé que forman parte de este universo tan grande, tan maravilloso; aún si fueran el precio que habría que pagar por existir en este mundo, vale la pena tenerlos, porque conforman los claroscuros de la vida, los contrapuntos de la armonía cósmica. ¿Qué se necesita, pues, para disfrutar la vida: ser creyente, ser ateo? Pienso que eso no lo determina, sino ser verdaderamente humano y tener un corazón agradecido. Campolo padre da las gracias al Dios cristiano, Campolo hijo a la buena estrella del Big Bang. Por mi parte, yo digo: ¡Amén! a aquél que dijo: "Si Dios existe, todo es gracia".

Geoff Little says

Rarely does a non-fiction title feel so personal without descending into emotionalism. Super-well edited among its many strengths. I have a deep Evangelical fundamentalist upbringing, with the obligatory fallout of a curious, empathetic, 21st century human. So, this book seemed to be reading me--as much as I it. Much recommended if this sort of thing is familiar.

Shirley Freeman says

I enjoyed reading this father/son dialog. At age 82, Tony Campolo is a well-known preacher and teacher of an Evangelical Christian social justice mind-set. His son Bart followed in his footsteps for many years preaching, teaching and living a life devoted to the poor. At age 50ish, Bart told his parents that he had become a secular humanist - that he no longer believed in God or supernatural events or life after death. In this book, father and son take turns articulating their beliefs and the reasons for them. While they have clearly come down on different sides of the religious equation, they both agree that love is the most excellent way. As

someone who comes down somewhere in the middle of their points of view, I enjoyed reading their clear voices and thinking about where I landed on the continuum. I read the digital ARC of this book to be published in February 2017.

Kristin says

I really enjoyed the honesty of this book. I think it owed a lot to a shared agreement that was mentioned in the joint conclusion: "We agree that it is nearly impossible for people on opposite sides of the faith divide to have a warm, constructive conversation about religion and spirituality unless and until they first resolve to leave ultimate judgments about eternal salvation in the hands of God." This is the elephant in the room in most conversations of this persuasion. One person can't see beyond their own conviction of the other person's damnation, and the other can't see beyond the condescension of such a presumption. I've been on both sides (more the latter these days).

Tony and Bart's relationships is refreshing this way, but it doesn't take away from the honesty with which each man proclaims his convictions and suggest the error of the other side, which is important in keeping this from becoming a bland account of loving tolerance. This is a conversation, but it is also an argument. A loving, respectful argument. They touch on many big topics (this would be an awesome discussion starter for a theologically-minded book club or bible study), but without the space to really delve into huge questions about faith, morality and death, readers must be content to have their intellects merely tickled.

Michelle says

I highly recommend this book for anyone who is an atheist struggling to communicate with religious parents or other loved ones as well as religious folks struggling to understand their atheist loved ones. It's a short book, but I felt like it touched on a lot of important topics. The chapters on death are particularly meaningful for me personally. Because it's coauthored by a Christian pastor and his secular humanist atheist son, each topic is discussed from both perspectives. It gave more of a way to see the other side's point of view than explicit advice, but there is some excellent advice in there for people on both sides of the divide. I think if I am ever able to speak with my family about our differences, I'll be much better equipped to do so in a way that has the best chance of preserving the relationship thanks to this book.

I had never heard of Tony Campolo before, even though he's apparently a huge deal, and this didn't detract from my appreciation of the book. I found some of the things he said to be absurd, but was surprised at how much common ground Bart still felt like he had with him. (To be fair, I didn't agree 100% with Bart either, especially when it comes to his warm feelings about his former religion.) I wish this book was mandatory reading for people somehow, because it really hits home how often what we feel are insurmountable divides are actually not such a big deal when we stop and listen to each other, not with the goal of converting the other person to our way of thinking but to understand them and learn from them.

I borrowed this book from the library, but I plan on buying a copy so that I can reread it, lend it out, and possibly leave it lying about with the hope that it sparks a conversation. Highly recommended.

Heather says

The last time I read a book by Tony Campolo I ended up in a police manhunt so I was a little concerned about picking up this one. I had heard about Bart Campolo leaving Christianity and working as a Humanist chaplain. It was big news in the Christian community. Either it was seen as proof that you can escape your upbringing or it was seen as proof that the Campolos had always been too liberal anyway so obviously they are going to go astray.

This book comes from the discussions that they had after Bart came out as not believing in God. The book is written in alternating chapters with each man expressing their point of view on a particular topic.

The first thing that surprised me was a preface chapter written by Peggy Campolo, Tony's wife and Bart's mom. She talks about how she didn't identify with Christianity during the early years of the Tony's ministry while her kids were growing up. She has since become a believer and seems to feel a lot of guilt. She thinks that if she was a Christian while Bart was growing up then he wouldn't have left as an adult. This is typical of the baggage that gets put on parents if the children leave a religion.

I was frustrated while reading Tony's chapters. Because Bart has now lived on both sides of the debate, he is able to discuss options openly. Tony freely states that he has never known a life where he wasn't certain of the presence of God in his life. It is obvious that he sees Bart as a wandering child who he hopes gets back to the right path. In the meantime he not really listening to what he has to say. He just seems to be patting him on the head as he speaks and then saying, "Oh, you don't mean that."

"For the Christian parents of positive secular humanists like Bart, however, I have some advice: Take every opportunity to affirm and encourage your children whenever they say or do something that reflects your Kingdom values, and let them know that you see a direct connection between their behavior and the love of God, even if they don't. Doing so demonstrates that you notice and appreciate your kids' goodness while maintaining your own understanding of its ultimate source, and also opens up opportunities for you to talk about what gets lost when God drops out of the picture."

Obviously he is still hung up on the idea that you can't be a good person if you don't have a God dictating what is right and what is wrong. Bart does a good job discussing why this isn't true. Too bad his father wasn't listening.

Tony also talks a lot about guilt. He doesn't understand how people without God handle all their guilt. He says he lies awake at night feeling guilty about all the harm he does until he is able to let God take the guilt away from him. I don't think most people have those kinds of guilty feelings. Has he ever considered that maybe the guilt comes from following a religion that teaches that you are a horrible person?

The idea behind this book was to help families have conversations about some members leaving Christianity. I don't think this book fosters productive conversation because it felt to me like the humanist was explaining over and over and the Christian was just waiting for him to see things the "right" way again.

This might be better for people who need to talk to Christians. Bart gives answers to a lot of the questions that he's been asked. It could help to have some well thought out answers on hand for the common questions. This review was originally posted on Based On A True Story

Jim says

I didn't think I would be so disappointed by this book.

While the Campolo the Younger gave decent reasoning for leaving the church, I was a bit put off by some of his discussion. (More on that later.)

And Campolo the Older gave very poor reasoning for why he stays. Once again, most of the arguments I read for a reason to go to church or believe in God fall into two camps. 1. Really crappy reasons that sound ok on the surface but don't have any logic behind them. And, 2. Good rationale for believing in a supreme being, but not necessarily the God revealed in the Bible.

Apostasy*

Tony starts out in the forward saying:

I was completely shocked when Bart told us that he no longer believed in God.

Which I understand is a true statement - but after that, starting with this, he ends up conflating "not being a Christian" with "not believing in God". The two aren't exactly the same thing.

It struck me as fascinating and deeply offensive when Tony noted that in *Christianity Today*:

America's foremost evangelical publication, suggested that if I had not focused so much on social issues and my concerns for the poor, Bart's departure from Christianity might not have occurred.

Which I find profoundly foolish, since many Christians are leaving the church in droves because the church is *not* focused on social issues. I don't know how Tony ended up coming to terms with that statement, but I hope he realizes how moronic it is.

When Bart talks about the beginning of the end, I can totally relate. I understand what he's saying; where he's coming from.

...my Christian orthodoxy, and eventually my ability to believe in anything supernatural, actually died the death of a thousand cuts—and ten thousand unanswered prayers—over the course of more than thirty years.

He continues to talk about the changes he experienced:

Over the next 30 years, the realities of my life forced one theological accommodation after another, until there was literally nothing left of my evangelical orthodoxy.

I can relate.

In Bart's case, though, he says his worldview changed, but his values didn't; I experienced something different. My values changed - I became more socially aware. And that changed my worldview, because I came from a church that didn't value compassion or caring for those that need it or working for the benefit of those in our society who have less.

He states one of the things that has bothered me in the back of my head for years:

This may well be my biggest problem with evangelical Christianity: It is grounded in a bizarre, counterintuitive self-hatred that claims we have no intrinsic goodness or value of our own, but rather deserve to be eternally punished simply for being born human.

And Bart's revelation struck me as funny, as he abandoned his faith but remained an evangelist of sorts:

Holy mackerel! Evangelizing people to love, justice, and community is going to be a whole lot easier now that I don't have to convince them to buy a whole set of unbelievable Iron Age myths at the same time!

And he notes what a lot of believers fail to understand. It's not that atheists or secularists believe a specific thing about God - e.g., that "God doesn't exist"; it's that atheists and secularists usually don't believe because they just don't have a reason to - there's nothing in their experience or senses that tell them "there is a God". Bart said, *I didn't **choose** not to believe in God; I just stopped believing.*

And I love that he's trying to put together humanist communities. Because, as he says:

Just because someone doesn't believe in God doesn't mean that they aren't interested in having transcendent experiences, cultivating compassion, expressing gratitude, and making meaning through loving relationships and sacrificial service.

And if there were more Christians that believed in some of his worldview, the world would be a better place. While I know some Christians like this, I know a lot who aren't:

My greatest enemies aren't supernatural delivers and their traditions, but rather the darker forces that threaten to undermine human flourishing: greed, violence, ignorance, intolerance, hunger, loneliness, boredom.

And:

I believe the fate of humanity depends on their willingness to make profound sacrifices for the sake of future generations, and on their ability to inspire others to do the same.

Remaining Faithful

But many of Tony's statements really bothered me. I appreciate the fact that he concedes that there is an aspect of feeling to the whole thing - and I totally understand and appreciate that. But then he says things that don't seem to be logical to me.

For example,

One of the main reasons I remain a Christian is because I love knowing that my sins are not only forgiven, but also forgotten!

I know this is a draw of Christianity. And I get it to a certain extent. But what surprised me was this self-identifying apologist seems to say here that not only does this draw him to Christianity (understandable), but it's *one of the main reasons* he's still a Christian. He makes it sound like if he didn't believe his sins were forgiven, he might totally abandon the whole thing! This seems a bit off to me. I get it that some of the main reasons you live this life is because you actually believe it - but just because of the good feeling it gives you outside of that belief? It seems like shallow thinking for someone who professes to be a thinker.

He states that he has a *long and ongoing experience of God's abiding presence in my life*. Now, this I understand. Say you believe because of your experiences (if you're being logical). Please don't say one of the main reasons you believe is the good feeling you get.

He also uses the crappy argument that there is no morality without God. I call bullshit on this. He says:

If there is no God, then anything is permissible.

I'm sorry, but if you have to be told not to kill someone to get you to not kill someone, you're an asshole, and not a good person. This argument is completely horrifying.

He uses other poor arguments. Like, you're not reading the Bible right if it doesn't make you believe that it's God's word.

And his last chapter really conflates believing in God and believing in the God revealed in the Bible. Believing there is a supreme being that created the universe isn't the same as believing that being dictated a book to men that explains how we live.

What?

There were some things that Bart said that dumbfounded me.

Honestly, even now, if there was a magic pill that could enable me to believe all that [God] again, once and for all time, I would gladly swallow it in a heartbeat, and not only because it would make my family so happy.

That's crap. I don't believe it. I don't believe that Bart, believing that no God exists, would do something to make him believe something that - in his worldview - is completely false. That makes no sense. I don't get that at all. So why not just get hypnotized into believing it again?

And the two chapters on life after death? One by each author? They made me want to throw the book away. There's nothing good in there stating "Why I Left" or "Why I stayed." Taken together, they're just a big thought experiment that in the end doesn't mean anything. Pascal's wager is useless - unless you think God is a horrible entity. I don't agree with either of the authors that Christians focus on heaven - because I think most Christians don't act like they do. They (we) live their (we) life here how they (we) want, without a focus on what happens after. I think it's a lot of lip service - at least that's my opinion. (Because if Christians really lived like there was an afterlife, I think they would live differently. With more of a focus on love, than hate.)

Overall, I was disappointed. Tony doesn't do a good job in his position, and though I felt a lot of what Bart felt in his leaving the faith, I feel like he said some crazy things for a secularist.

It's really about "Why I believe Jesus is the Son of God" and "Why I believe nothing supernatural".

**Apostasy* is abandoning your religious faith

Peter says

Best in genre

Bookmarking for further comment later, will edit. Very much worth the read. Fabulous tone of each being a caring human .

John says

It's probably clear which side I was on here, but the point is that the sides can come together, in some way?

At least to be heard?

And that is a great thing.

Zach Christensen says

A beautiful book. I must say that I think it is misleading that Tony Campolo refers to himself as an Evangelical. His beliefs do not resemble Evangelical theology at all in my opinion. I can sympathize with Bart, as his beliefs withered, he saw that his Christianity had little to no contact with reality. An inerrant Bible, a God who micromanages everything, Jesus needing to serve as a punching bag for God's wrath, a place called hell where people are punished eternally for not having certain ideas in their brains, etc. all are rigorously defended by Christians because they cannot stand up on their own. Eventually they fall apart when placed under scrutiny. I was bummed that he did not entertain other perspectives within Christianity, but nonetheless, he has found a functional and fruitful way of seeing the world, and for that I cannot think less of him.

I was surprised to see an endorsement on this book from the so-called "Friendly Atheist." I have read some of what he has written and watched a few of his videos, and I have never thought "wow, what a friendly person." He does not seem friendly at all, and I would not have lunch with him even if he were paying. However, Bart seems to be quite the friendly atheist. I would definitely have lunch with him, and I bet it would be a blast, even if we talked about religion, politics, philosophy, or anything.

I enjoyed this book immensely, and I read it very swiftly over the course of two days. The art of conversing with someone who believes differently than us is something that we desperately need to reclaim in an increasingly polarized world. This book provides a great model for how to do just that. I strongly recommend picking up a copy of this dialogue, and you will be glad you did.

Sandra says

I hardly know how to rate this book. It made me mad and sad in equal measures and sometimes at the same time.

It is certainly a book that should be read by any Christian parent who has children who have turned their backs on Christianity. The book does not give any easy answers to any questions that might trouble these parents but it may relieve the guilt that often accompanies some of these situations.

Patrick Eckhardt says

This was a very good book. I probably would have given it five stars, but I'm trying to do less of that. Because I mostly only give five stars.

The good: Peggy's forward set the tone of difficult honesty that followed in the rest of the book. It was really interesting to read what is more or less a dialogue between two people who love each other dearly and yet live at huge epistemological odds with one another. It showed a level of grace and care - and even faith in one another and in the reading public. Tony shines when he's engaged with sociology and the human brain. Bart is really an engaging writer who tackles humanism with the same fervor he once tackled evangelism.

The disappointing part, to me, was when Tony focused less on himself and more on "the other." He spent a decent amount of time explaining what the secularized believe or feel, or can't believe, or can't feel. And several of the areas felt a bit trite (e.g. you can't be a moral person without a belief structure). Bart, on the other hand, wrote less about "this is where the other is at" and more about "this is where I'm at and how I got there." It was (in my reading) a more compelling narrative. I wish Tony had focused more on what it means to be a person of faith, rather than a somewhat apophatic discussion of the unbeliever.

Certainly worth reading, and I can see this being a very valuable resource to families struggling with divergent beliefs.

Meghan Moore-Hubbard says

Can't even handle how much of this book resonated with me, from both parties. The honest dialogue between father and son was both refreshing and heartbreaking. I find myself somewhere in between the two of them but that made it all so much more meaningful!

Kati Skon says

A challenging read from a belief standpoint, but a quick and easy read from a literary standpoint. As Fox Mulder of aliens, when it comes to the existence of God, "I want to believe." I think its important to entertain other possibilities, and I do struggle with doubt quite a bit. But I want to believe. I prefer Tony's warm, loving version of the world to Bart's cold, heartless one. But who is correct? I don't think any of us really know. I want to seek truth, but this is one area where there may be no obvious objectivity to be found.

Perhaps there is and I just don't want to believe it. Both these men make compelling arguments, and I think Tony's point that we rely too much on empirical evidence to decide what is real. However, in the age of "alternative facts", it seems dangerous to believe anything we cannot personally confirm. So what is true? What is real? Is believing there's more to this life just wishful thinking? My desire believe is not really for my own sake so much as it is for all the people who suffer and deserve something greater and more beautiful than this existence. I feel a beauty in the world that doesn't align with the cruel reality that some people face. Why do we desire fairness if there is no ultimate fairness to be received? But at the same time, there are so many religions and belief systems in the world, how can we know which is true? All I know for certain is that humans believe in the Golden Rule for some reason, and it seems like the best way to make heaven on earth. I want to do my best to live this life to the fullest, but for those who can't - I hope there's something more.

hayley says

The joint authorship of this book between father and son makes it particularly moving. Encountering a pair so willing to listen thoughtfully and engage with the other's beliefs is rare enough in real life, but the deep love Tony and Bart share cannot be missed, despite their diverging belief systems.

Although I left most chapters finding them helpful for a broad conversation but lacking in depth or support (at least that meant much to me), I couldn't help but be moved by each man's willingness to engage respectfully with the other. The fact that both men, through the religions they subscribe to, value treating people with love as the utmost goal is completely clear, and starting with each other shows how seriously they take this belief.

In the final chapter, which they write together, they highlight the importance of storytelling. I've come across this idea frequently over the past few years, and I can't decide whether I take it seriously or think it's a fad. The fact that art is valuable and teaches empathy and understanding seems obvious, but I question whether telling stories is vital to engaging people or simply a marketing technique masked as a means of building relationships. I don't know.
