

Interview with Victoria Sherry - July 8th, 2019

00:00 - Jacob Beebe

Can you tell me what your name is and the church that you attend?

00:04 - Victoria Sherry

I am Victoria Sherry and I attend St. George Orthodox Christian Cathedral in Wichita, Kansas.

00:11 - Jacob Beebe

How long have you been a member there?

00:14 - Victoria Sherry

I have been at St. George for 12 years now, but I've been a part of the larger Orthodox community for 28 years.

00:24 - Jacob Beebe

Have you attended other Orthodox churches in Wichita or elsewhere?

00:26 - Victoria Sherry

Elsewhere, Kansas City, Topeka and Cheyenne, Wyoming. St. George's is actually my fourth Orthodox community.

00:38 - Jacob Beebe

Were you predisposed to this religious tradition? Did you grow up in it? Were your parents Orthodox?

00:43 - Victoria Sherry

No.

00:44 - Jacob Beebe

How did you become Orthodox?

00:46 - Victoria Sherry

Well, this is where I'm probably an outlier in terms of people you're interviewing because I grew up in the classic secular home where there was no religious tradition at all. So I never attended a church; I never knew anything about religion. If I asked questions, my parents would say, 'Well, when you get older, you can choose a tradition; you can choose a religion if you want', but they didn't feel any need to do that. So we grew up without a tradition, which, on the one hand, was very freeing because I had friends who spent a lot of time in church, and, you know, Sunday School and all these things, and you know, sounds kind of burdensome and, you know, we got to do whatever we wanted to do. As I got older I found it more frustrating, because I wanted to know what these traditions were, and it was hard to start from nothing to work up there. One thing I did learn was that my family was a Mennonite heritage, so my maiden name

was Voth, and that is a Mennonite name. And I learned that my grandfather had left the Mennonite faith because he wanted to serve in World War One. So that's pacifist. And then he married someone who was not Mennonite, and that was pretty much, you know, he was shunned after that, even though, you know, he was a great person. I didn't even know we were Mennonites although we had this very obviously Mennonite name until I started talking to my grandfather. Then I started getting curious about religious tradition. And particularly, once I got in college, I attended Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, and most of my classmates were Jewish. I discovered that they had a very definite identity that I didn't, you know, they sort of knew who they were and where they belong. They had this 6000 year old story that they were very comfortably a part of, even those who are atheists felt they belong to the story, and I just thought that was so cool. So I kind of went on the search trying to find, trying to learn about religion and see if there was a place for me in it. But I found it discouraging because every time I would learn about something, for example, Judaism, I learned quite a bit about Judaism from my friends, and I went to Passover seders, but at a certain point, it just hit me like, I'm not Jewish. You know, that is not how I was raised. It's something that's in you, you know, in your being, you know, from the time you grow up and I don't have that. So I kind of went through with some other religious traditions that I won't go into. And finally, at the very end, I thought well, you know, maybe I need to look again at Christianity, because that was obviously the dominant religion, but I had sort of rejected it as something that I couldn't really relate to, partly because I'd only seen the Protestant version of it. I did visit some Catholic churches, and I thought, well, these are really beautiful churches, but I felt, again, like I just didn't really belong there. There was something kind of off-putting about it. And so I've kind of been on this quest for a while. And eventually, I guess this leads into the next question, you know, who influenced me and my religious tradition? I met a professor at Washburn University, I grew up in Topeka, who said, I said, you know, 'I think I'm interested in Christianity, but, you know, I can't relate to Protestantism, and I'm not relating to Catholicism either'. And he said 'what about orthodoxy'? And I'm like, 'what is that', had never heard of it. But I had been starting to read the work of Renee Gannon, I don't know if you're familiar with him. He's a pretty famous Universalist scholar of the 20th century. And he's really writing about the commonalities among all religious traditions. But unlike a humanist today, his emphasis was on how you had to follow one tradition faithfully, if you were actually going to be, you know, religious person, you couldn't just say, 'well, I'm going to do a little bit from Islam and a little bit from, you know, Hindi and a little bit', you know that's no good. So I started reading about Orthodoxy, and I thought 'sounds pretty interesting'. I met someone from Australia, James Cowan, he's an author, was a friend of Arthur's who was Orthodox, He was erudite, you know, an intellectual, a writer, world traveler. And I thought, okay, this person can be Orthodox, and he had converted to Greek Orthodoxy, maybe I could, too. So gradually I finally got to the point where in 1991 I first visited an Orthodox Church and was just blown away by it. It's just this is like nothing I've ever experienced before. It was really an incredible discovery for me, because by that point, you know, I was at a point in my life, I thought, just thought I'm just not a religious person. I'm kind of sort of thought of myself as a failed religious person, you know, I looked and looked and kind of checked stuff out, and I was kind of on the outside. But the interesting thing to me about Orthodoxy is, and I want to go back to the thing about the Mennonite background in my family, is that the Mennonite spent 200

years in Ukraine, which is a place they visited for, you know, religious freedom, and freedom from conscription, ironically. And they were surrounded by in Ukraine, by Orthodox culture, and also by a very vibrant Jewish culture. And it seemed like the people that I've always been drawn to, Jewish and Orthodox, and I just said, as a part of me, they just felt like, you know, maybe that was just meant to be, you know, I'm meant to end up here. And I wanted to do some more research on whether some Mennonites ever became Orthodox, but I couldn't find a lot of documentation about it.

7:01 - Jacob Beebe

At what age did you find yourself most comfortable in the Orthodox Church?

7:07 - Victoria Sherry

Well, when I was 34 years old I was baptized. I never been baptized before, I was baptized Orthodox.

7:15 - Jacob Beebe

Do you have a family?

7:16 - Victoria Sherry

Yes.

7:17 - Jacob Beebe

Did they convert with you?

7:19 - Victoria Sherry

No. My brother came, my brother came to the baptism, my mother didn't. I guess she hadn't baptized me as an infant, she wasn't interested then, she wasn't interested now. My brother came and, which I thought was really nice of him. My family was very open minded about it. People will often say, it's really funny when I hear Christians, you know, they'll say, 'well, you know, our child, so and so it's just too bad, they left the church'. At this point, my family probably sat down and said, 'we don't know what happened. She went and became religious. We don't understand it, but we still love her'. I mean, I know that sounds funny, but I have a great family. And they have always been very supportive, but they didn't, they never, they've never really shown any interest in the religious part.

8:07 - Jacob Beebe

Can you tell us about your current employment, how long you've worked here, and where you've worked previously?

8:13 - Victoria Sherry

Yes, I'm at Eighth Day Books now. I've been here for 12 years since I moved to Wichita, so the same period of time that I've been at St. George. Before that I started out my, actually, my background is involved in environmental history. But also I got very, very drawn to the

humanities and interdisciplinary pursuit. So I worked for the Kansas Museum of History. That's where I learned a lot about local Kansas cultures, but nothing about the Orthodox, I didn't know there were any Greeks, Arabs, anybody with Orthodox background, but I did learn a lot about ethnic traditions in Kansas from that experience. Then I worked for the Kansas Natural Resource Council, which was an environmental group. And after that I worked for the Kansas Humanities Council, and again, working in the field of cultural programming and you know, continuing to learn more about local history in Kansas, a lot of the groups we work with are museums. And then finally I was part of the founding of a museum called the Heartland Orthodox Christian Museum. So that would really be the first time that I was actually working in a field that had a religious connotation. But it wasn't simply a religious institution, because it was also a cultural institution. It was in Topeka, and we spent several years organizing it and doing background research on the history the Orthodox in Kansas of which there were four primary groups, Greeks being the largest, just in general in the US, Lebanese which is the community in Wichita, Serbs and Russians. So the first, you know, two out of those three groups are in Kansas City, and then the Arabs and Lebanese are down here. So that was when I first started traveling. I spent time visiting St. George, getting to know people here even though I was a member of the Greek church in Kansas City. So, but I did, I learned a great deal. I did oral interviews with people who were second generation, their parents had come from Orthodox countries and had settled here, and it was just fascinating. So we did a series of exhibits at the Heartland Orthodox Museum to focus on the heritage of Kansans of Orthodox background, but also looking at the interaction of religion and ethnicity. So it kind of drew on my work and local history, and my interest in Orthodox religion, to sort of research and create these incidents.

10:58 - Jacob Beebe

Are there any existing exhibits that are online right now?

11:04 - Victoria Sherry

I have all of the panels from the exhibit saved. I don't think there's anything online right now. The Kansas Museum of History museum closed in 2004. They took some of the panels that we had created and circulated them around as traveling exhibits. So for example, the exhibit on Arab Christians in the heartland was on display at the Wichita Sedgwick County Museum, but then they returned the panels, and I don't know where the panels are now. But I have, you know, some versions of them in my personal possession. But they're out there. And you know, and then the research that I did, which we'll get into later, led to some of the books that I've done since.

11:57 - Jacob Beebe

This might be a unique take from your position, but what do you believe makes your faith tradition unique, and what draws people to this tradition?

12:06 - Victoria Sherry

Well, again, because I'm kind of an outlier. Those are two really different questions. I'm sure that other people like Fr. Paul and Warren will tell you what draws people to this tradition is the

sense of history, the sense of this being a, you know, very ancient faith, very unchanging, in a sense, conservative. That's attractive to many people. None of those things are what attracted me to it. I came from a much more experiential perspective. I didn't, I wasn't looking for an idea to believe in, or for a series of doctrines that I felt were, like, watertight, and could you know, stand up. I really wanted to know that there was a divine presence in the world. And that, you know, I could get closer to that, and that had never happened to me in any of the churches or meditation circles or any of the Quaker meetings and any thing I've been to. But in the Orthodox liturgy, there's a very mystical presence. That is, like I said, I just, I went in there, it's just like, I've never experienced anything like that. And 28 years later, I still every Sunday, I just, I'm like, I can't believe I'm here. I can't believe this is happening, this room isn't packed, because it's just so powerful. So to me, that way, it's really that liturgical spirituality that's really centered on worship. It's really centered on being present, on being silent and yet never silent. If you're in a liturgy, you don't say anything for an hour and a half, okay, everyone's quiet except maybe when you recite the creed and the Lord's Prayer, very, very quiet. And yet constantly the choir and the chatters of the priest, you're kind of in this worship space, that really sort of, you sort of leave the time and space where you are. And you enter into this very transcendent world. And one of the concepts in Orthodoxy regarding liturgy is that it's a mirror of the liturgy of heaven, that we know that heaven is a, it is a constant state of worship, and the angels are in a constant state of worship. And we want to join the angels at a certain point,

14:23 - Jacob Beebe

...with the angels and archangels and with all the companies of heaven...

14:25 - Victoria Sherry

Yeah, they're, they're like celebrating with us, and we're celebrating with them. And so in a sense, you're outside time. And so to me, like, I wouldn't say that it's a, it's conservative and the way that we think of conservative today, because it's beyond any categories that are in this world. You know, it's timeless, it's transcendent. That is just so important to me because I'm just looking for something very deep, I guess. So that's the answer.

14:58 - Jacob Beebe

You already touched on this a bit, but what formal education have you received? When and where?

15:03 - Victoria Sherry

I earned a Bachelor of Arts in 1980, from Hampshire College. So that's my formal degree. And it's one of those unique schools where you can put together your program any way you want. So mine was a was a blend of history, literature, and political science. I have probably done the most and in history, but you know, I've always done a little bit of this and a little bit of that. How do you continue your education? I love that one, because the Humanities Council, I worked not only for the Kansas Council for 11 years, the Wyoming Council for three years. Their whole theme is that learning should be lifelong, and that you shouldn't confine learning to be enrolled in school. And, you know, I'm the only person in my family that has, that doesn't have a master's

degree, because I felt like I've already gotten one several times over, you know, just on my own studying independently. And that's thanks to the education that I got. So, I continue my education by reading and by, you know, continuing to learn about this culture in Kansas that is so little known I guess, Kansas is kind of off the track.

16:14 - Jacob Beebe

This is the first time I'm coming across it as well. Not as well, but it is very unknown. I guess the next two questions kind of blend together. What work have you published regarding the Orthodox community. What work is going to be published for the central Orthodox cathedral? Can you just give us a summary of your work?

16:40 - Victoria Sherry

Well, there are two books that I've worked on. One is *Wichita's Lebanese Heritage* with Dr. Jay Price at Wichita State. That came out in 2010. And it, although it was not strictly focused on religion, you can't tell the story of the Lebanese in Wichita without including the religious dimension of the community. It was a mostly photographic work published by Arcadia, they do a lot of, it's kind of a package deal sort of book, where you submit photographs and captions, and they put it all together. But we had a chapter on faith and family and a lot about the church because that is really what is what gave this community its identity. And the same was true. The advantage I had is working in these different communities, the same is true with the Greek community, that the church, maybe people who came weren't extremely religious, but in the US, it became the center of the community, it was what really held people together. Because there they were in a foreign language. People who weren't necessarily accepted both the Greeks and Lebanese were considered to be non-white. So they experienced a lot of rejection, you know, by the larger society, but they were eager to become established here. And so the church was a place where they could sort of be with people who are like them, and really have a shared identity. And so the church was as much about identity as it was about religious belief. But then there were people who were very religious and to whom that was very meaningful and defining of their life. So before the Arcadia Press book, before *Wichita's Lebanese Heritage*, I published an article on Greeks and Kansas and Western Missouri in the *Journal of Modern Hellenism*, so I took some of my research and interviews I had done with Greek immigrants, Orthodox immigrants, and put it in that article. And again, it's very church centered, because most of the people that I interviewed, I knew through the two churches in the Kansas City area, Annunciation Greek Orthodox Church, and St. Dionysios Greek Orthodox Church. So it's kind of been this ongoing process where I've been building up since about 1999, building up a body of interviews, collected photographs that, you know, many of which are now in the State Historical Society collection, and articles and stories. And then really moving to Wichita in 2007, gave me an opportunity to focus again on this community that I'd already done some oral histories here. But I had an opportunity to, you know, meet more people to learn more. And so that led in 2018, to this project that we're just finishing now at St. George Cathedral, called *St. George Cathedral: The First 100 Years*, it's a centennial history of the church. And so it, unlike the other book, which was Lebanese heritage, which focused also on the businesses that were started the different enterprises that the Lebanese became involved in, it really focused on how that church

was built up. And so that is, in a lot of ways, it's sort of, to me, the most interesting thing that I've done because it focuses particularly on the life of faith and how they kept that alive and expanded it from very humble beginnings to this, you know, to a cathedral that stops traffic on 13th street when people drive by, its so spectacular. You know, how a little immigrant group, you know, with just really poor origins, how did they get here, and how did they credit, you know, their faith and their love of God as being part of that? So we really have a lot of fun with that book. And it will come out in September.

20:51 - Jacob Beebe

Two very boring two questions. What was the title again, when is it coming out, and who helped you?

20:58 - Victoria Sherry

It's called *St. George Cathedral: The First 100 Years* and Rod Learned is my co-author. So the two of us wrote, we each wrote about half of it. And then I took a lot of the photographs I had been collecting and new photographs that I found in... the St. George has archives, but they weren't organized. So part of what I ended up with was all of the St. George archives, in my home office, and I went through them and copied photographs and took excerpts from stories that you know, that no one had probably seen in many years, because they've just been sort of stashed away. So I hope that when this is over we'll have an archive at St. George, but that's another chapter. But the main thing was to celebrate the centennial, the church was founded in 1918. It was 2018 and it had been in existence for 100 years, we thought it was time to tell the story of the church. And we had a lot of input from a lot of people, a lot of personal stories as well as kind of an overall narrative, so I hope it will be well received.

22:00 - Jacob Beebe

What prompted the project other than the centennial celebration?

20:05 - Victoria Sherry

Yeah, I was asked to participate.

22:06 - Jacob Beebe

Did they know of your work history and that's why they asked you?

22:09 - Victoria Sherry

Right, because that St. George was part of the consortium of churches that founded the Heartland Orthodox Museum. So I had worked with Fr. Paul as a museum director before I was ever a parishioner. And, and Rod Learned is also a parishioner at the church, and he had been involved in some of the earlier versions of history. Like, I don't know, maybe around the 75th anniversary, I think he put together a little video. So I watched his video when I was doing my research for the museum. You know, it's like we've been piggybacking off each other. But yeah, we were just asked to do it, and we're like, 'okay, we'll give it a shot'. But it really was, was much more consuming then, you know, we thought it would be but it's, I think it will be an effective

story. It's not a deep, deeply religious story, but it's one where religion is constantly there. So you're telling the story of an institution, but it's not an ordinary institution?

23:19 - Jacob Beebe

Outside of the church and your main employment, are you a member or volunteer elsewhere?

23:25 - Victoria Sherry

Well, my husband and I both volunteer every month at the Lord's Dinner. And that's where the St. George, it's one of the St. George Outreach ministries. So we do that every month. We're also involved in our neighborhood association, you know, kind of, we really like local local stuff. Yeah, but I am not as involved in, you know, in historical institutions as I used to be.

23:57 - Jacob Beebe

Does working here help some of your studies?

24:01 - Victoria Sherry

I think that the way that Warren organizes books, you're almost learning. I used to say you can almost learn just from the spines of the books with the titles are so interesting. But yeah, we have a Kansas and regional section. And because I work here, I've been asked to give, you know, talks about the Lebanese. I have given talks, you know, around here. I trying to think, I think I've done some talks about the Russians in Kansas City and the Greek. So it's like, I do a lot of, I get asked to do presentations, partly because working at Eighth Day Books is sort of like a... it's not like working at Barnes and Noble. Lets just say that, because it's a more discerning bookstore.

24:23 - Jacob Beebe

There's a status to that.

24:25 - Victoria Sherry

Yeah. And people who've worked, people who come to work here tend to work here for a long time. And we tend to be kind of nerdy.

24:56 - Jacob Beebe

Do you have anything else to add about your work here, or previous work, your professional affiliations, or your faith at large?

25:05 - Victoria Sherry

Well, I hadn't really thought that much about this question, but as I was talking to you, it seemed to me that I'm really thankful that I've been able to blend together so many of my interests, my interest in sense of place, which is my main subject to my, really my academic research, sense of place, and then combining that with interest in ethnicity and ethnic traditions. And then finally, being able to combine those with religious traditions. If someone had said to me in the beginning, 'are you going to be able to pull all this together?' I'd been like, 'no, I don't think so'.



But it's really been great for someone like me, who's a synthetic thinker. You know, I like to pull different things together and just to be able to connect, being in Kansas, being a fourth generation Kansan with a very deep religious tradition. I mean, I am 20 miles from my great grandmother, great grandfather is buried. You know, near the church that celebrated its 200th anniversary, it was founded in Russia 200 years ago, they just celebrated their 200 anniversary a few years ago, very deep roots here. And yet, I'm also part of a tradition that's completely new to me, that I find really inspiring. I've been able to kind of pull all that together, and that's been, it's been an opportunity I don't think a lot of people get. I think there's a pressure in this world today to specialize and to really focus on one aspect of life or have a field of experience, and as I said, I'm much more of a generalist, I'd like to see the connections.

26:42 - Jacob Beebe

Maybe I should ask you one more question. First, why did you move to Wichita? And, second, what do you find... I mean, all states, all towns have their history. What about Kansas, and Wichita specifically, are unique.

27:06 - Victoria Sherry

Okay, well, the first question is why did I move here? We're in Laramie, Wyoming, from 2004 to 2007. And while we were there my husband completed his master's in Medieval History. So he got a teaching job in Wichita. And we had moved to Wyoming so I could work for the Wyoming Humanities Council, and then we moved here so he could work for a school district here, but it was an opportunity to be part of that St. George community that really brought us here, because we knew so many people connected to St. George and to St. Mary as well. We wanted to be in a place with a really strong Orthodox presence. And Wichita is kind of an Orthodox mecca. I don't think people know that, I mean, Wichita has a very well respected Roman Catholic community, people all over the country will say, yeah, in Wichita the Roman Catholics are really a powerful force. Right. But the Orthodox equally so. I mean, if you say to someone I live in Wichita, that'd be like, oh, St. George, Eighth Day books, you know. I didn't know I would end up working for Eighth Day, but I did meet Warren in 1991. And he was one of the people that also influenced me, as I was on the path to becoming Orthodox. Again, he was a very erudite intellectual, you know, person, I don't want to say I had a prejudice against religious people, but certainly, they didn't... in the culture at large they are not portrayed as the sharpest, you know, the sharpest knives in the drawer. And meeting Warren was like, wow, you know, this is someone I can relate to. So I ended up working for him kind of by accident. I didn't know where I was going to work when I moved here. So what makes Kansas and Wichita unique? Well, first of all, one thing about Wichita, as I said, definitely the Orthodox presence makes it unique. And I was going to add to that, as I've studied the Lebanese community in Wichita, I believe it's had a disproportionate influence on this city partly because of its size. For example, there are probably more Lebanese Orthodox and descendants of, you know, immigrants from Lebanon in Los Angeles, for example, but it's a very large city. And so they're just kind of a drop in the bucket. But if you drive around Wichita, there's a lot you know, there's hummus everywhere. You can get hummus and ball games, you know.

29:35 - Jacob Beebe

There's Farhas everywhere...

29:37 - Victoria Sherry

Yes, there's Ablah Library, there's, you know, everything is, kind of reflects their presence. And then there's this church, this enormous Cathedral. So there's a real sense in which, although you can be Orthodox anywhere, that there's a disproportionate presence here, and that's really kind of magnified in Wichita for various reasons. Kansas itself, I think, and again, this kind of goes back to what I felt like I have had the opportunity to do in my, my career in terms of research and writing and creating museum exhibits. I lived in New England, and you know, and attended a college in a five college consortium, where we had touring Broadway shows and where they were groups for this and that and people had organized this and that and it's all it was like a smorgasbord of culture. And you really didn't have to do anything, you can just kind of go around, enjoy it. When you move back to Kansas, there's a real sense in which if you want something to happen, if you think a book needs to be written about a subject, well go do it. You know, don't go to the library and see what other people have written because there isn't anything. And so there's still a kind of a pioneer spirit. I know that's kind of a cliché, but it's kind of a spirit here that if you want to do something and make your mark, you can do it. And so that kind of is reflected in the Lebanese community here that they've definitely made a mark on Wichita, and that if you want it, there's a lot of room here to do what you want to do. And there's really no one kind of holding you back and saying, that's already been done, or no one's interested in that, you know, people here are very open, very interested in topics they don't know anything about, which is something I didn't encounter in New England. It's a wonderful place. It's very vibrant. But you know, it's also very set in its ways; people know where they are, who they're aligned with and what they believe. and, you know, everything's kind of stratified. And you come out here and it's just, it's not that way. So, I love Kansas for that reason.

31:40 - Jacob Beebe

Very good. That was my last question, thank you very much.