

Religion:

How I Lost It

but Found Something Better

One night I prayed to know the truth. The next morning I discovered I was an atheist.

That is what I lightheartedly tell folks when they ask about my religious beliefs. Of course it was neither as simple nor as sudden as that. My release from religion was a gradual and mostly unintentional process spanning a period of several years. But it shouldn't take quite that long to read this, so if you'll bear with me I'll tell you of my journey.

First, however, I should clarify my motives. Most religious people seem to assume that believers who become atheists do so in an act of rage or revolt against religion, or perhaps in rejection of conventional morality. I cannot speak for all atheists, but in my own instance that was not the case. As a youth I was unusually conservative and respectful of authority. Any questioning I did was with the expectation of having my faith reaffirmed and enhanced by the answers. While it is true that it was anger and revulsion which initially motivated me to examine my beliefs more critically, I nevertheless clung to my religion for years, attempting to rationalize and justify it, before finally finding myself forced to abandon it as hopelessly incompatible with reality. It was not until I had been rid of religion for a time that I realized I was much better off without it.

I should also note that some details might be inaccurate or out of sequence due to the imperfections of memory, but those shortcomings should not interfere with the substance and general veracity of the story.

I was born in Cincinnati during World War II, and was reared in a "respectable" mainstream Protestant Christian household. I had the standard indoctrination of Sunday School and Bible stories as part of my early upbringing, and I accepted it unquestioningly, if somewhat uncomprehendingly.

At the age of four (following my family's move to another city) I had a terrifying experience in a nasty little concrete-block fire-and-brimstone church — lots of jumping and shouting and screaming, activity I was not at all accustomed to in grown-ups — thoroughly alarming and upsetting to a sensitive little tyke who had been raised on "Jesus Loves Me." I was sobbing uncontrollably when Mom finally "rescued" me and took me home. Fortunately she decided that we should look for a different church. Although this episode in no way affected my young belief in God and Jesus, it was my first decidedly negative experience with religion.

In the main, my religious upbringing was pretty laid back. Once Mom had found us a suitably "civilized" church, we settled into a routine of Sunday School for an hour each week. But other than that our life was quite secular, except for one or two exciting and uplifting (to me) school Christmas performances of excerpts from Handel's "Messiah." Belief in God was expected as normal and proper, but we didn't make a great fuss over it as some are inclined to do. I was never baptized. We didn't attend Christmas or Easter church services, but treated these holidays mainly as family reunion, feasting, gift-giving, and fun-for-kiddies occasions (which was just fine with me).

I don't remember learning much in Sunday School, except that there were people, such as Jews and atheists, who did not share a "proper" Christian belief, and hence were immoral and evil. And probably traitorous, too, for those were the "McCarthy - HUAC*" days. It therefore came as quite a surprise to me later when, while I was in my mid teens, Mom finally revealed to me the reason that Dad never went to church with the rest of the family: He didn't believe in God! Though my own religious faith was unshaken by this revelation, it was nevertheless a real eye-opener. It awakened me to the fact that people who did not believe in God and Jesus are not necessarily evil, for Dad was one of the most conscientiously (though quietly) principled and ethical people I have ever known.

It was in elementary school that I learned about dinosaurs, prehistory, and the concept of humans as an animal species. In junior high school I learned that the earth was billions of years older than the human species. And in high school I was introduced to biological evolution. I was even cast in a minor role in a school production of "Inherit the Wind," which introduced me to the term "agnostic" in the form of the real-life lawyer Clarence Darrow, and brought me face to face

with some of the glaring dichotomies between science and fundamentalist belief. It didn't shake my mainstream faith, but it convinced me that some religious beliefs were antiquated and stupid in light of modern knowledge.

After high school, I was still religious in my mainstream Christian way. I had shed the biblical creation timetable in much the same fashion as I had shed Santa Claus and the Easter bunny years earlier. But I still held to the belief that God was the creator of the universe and life. Then came college. There I learned of recent scientific experiments, which had shown that complex organic molecules spontaneously form under conditions believed to have existed shortly after the formation of our planet. Suddenly, there was no need in my universe for a supernatural creator; evidently, nature could handle such tasks entirely on its own. Still, there were other reasons for belief in God, and I reshaped my thinking to allow that a Higher Power had used natural processes—including evolution—as tools over billions of years, rather than a series of miraculous "let there be" commands spanning a mere week. Though some of the biblical stories were goofy, I saw, God and his works were far grander than I had ever supposed.

Then one Wednesday evening, my best friend invited me to attend church with him and his parents. Having nothing better to do (I thought), I agreed to go. Flashback to age four: "Fire and brimstone!" "Evil is everywhere!" "We're gonna fry if we don't get saved!" This time, however, the experience didn't traumatize me, for I had caught snatches of this horrid crap spewing from radios for years, and was by this time fairly inured to it. But it did set me thinking.

My friend's belief in "fire and brimstone" Christianity and my own belief in "love and peace" Christianity were equally intense, yet fundamentally incompatible. They could not both be the word of the same God; they could not both be right. And if one was wrong, I mused, perhaps both were. To resolve the difficulty, I tried to imagine what might happen if I were a visitor from Mars to Earth, having no religious experience. I wondered what unmistakable sign would guide me, as a stranger to earthly religion, to the One True Faith (whatever it might be) and away from all others? The more I studied the matter, the more it seemed that there was no such sign. Despite the Christian bias of my own youth, I had to admit that there was nothing compelling about Christianity which did not have some equivalent in Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or for that matter in the old Norse, Egyptian, or Greco-Roman religions.

During the next year or two I drifted into a kind of Christian deism (for want of a better term), in which I viewed scriptural assertions with increasing skepticism, and Jesus as a great teacher but otherwise a quite ordinary and mortal human being. Yet even if it wasn't the deity of a recognized religion, God was still necessary, I felt, as the ultimate arbiter of good and evil, the author of morality.

In the spring of 1965, I enlisted in the intelligence branch of the Army. Following training I was sent to Europe, where I found myself, along with a number of other non-fundy Christians, in the unaccustomed day-to-day company of Jews, agnostics, and even a Buddhist or two—on the whole a pretty decent and fun bunch of people, I discovered. Even the amiable, cigar-chomping post chaplain was an okay guy. Considerate fellow that he was, he made it a point not to preach to our religiously diverse group at the compulsory monthly training sessions, but rather dismissed us for that hour. But a few months after I had arrived, his tour of duty was over, and the chaplain who replaced him was something else.

The new chaplain, a fundamentalist Episcopalian (a most curious bird) from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, who came to us by way of some unspeakable hole in Vietnam, was perhaps the strongest single influence on my adult religious life. It was from his hard-nosed preaching, especially to the many non-Christians in our unit who were (according to him) eternally and horribly damned, that I got a hard look at the side of religion which I had only briefly glimpsed before. Our good chaplain unrelentingly slashed through the love-and-peace trappings of Christianity and revealed the grotesque hatred, ignorance, fear, and superstition which lurked at its core. I can truly thank that man and his fervent belief for giving me the final, hard shove I needed to confront the ghastly, bloody, insane and deformed horror of the Christian religion, and ultimately to discard it altogether. Furthermore, I earnestly wish him whatever eternal reward he deserves for that kindness!

On the whole, though, the disintegration of my religion was a surprisingly positive experience. But there lingered one troubling question: Without divine authority, what support is there for morality? Pondering this, I saw that morality in *some* form is essential to the structure and prosperity of human society. And if morality has a secular purpose, I reasoned, there must also be a secular basis for it. In the years following my departure from the military, therefore, I pieced

together a set of ethical values based on the demonstrably beneficial or harmful effects of various actions and attitudes. I was especially delighted that the product appeared far more self-consistent and pertinent to the modern world than the petrified Decalogue of biblical taboo to which I had earlier subscribed. I had, it turned out, reinvented a centuries-old idea which others called "humanism."

It was now rapidly becoming clear to me that the universe behaves very much as might be expected if God didn't exist, or at least didn't care. Eventually it dawned upon me that in the grand scheme of things there is, in fact, no grand scheme—merely the indifferent and impersonal consistency of nature. Even as an explanation for things as yet unknown, a deity is superfluous, for experience has shown that religion never truly explains anything; it merely serves as a fig-leaf cover for the shame of human ignorance. God performs no observable function and has no valid purpose. The question entered my mind, "What is a god without purpose and for which there is no evidence?" "Non-existent," came the most plausible answer. The blinders of dogma and the yoke of dread were finally off. For me the universe now shone in a wholesome new light, the comforting glow of reality no longer distorted, either by the garish artificial "glory" of myth and miracle, or by the ghastly glare of hellfire. I was—I am—free!

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*HUAC: House Unamerican Activities Committee

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I initially posted this article on my personal website in 2000. During my post-retirement academic adventure a few years later, I was asked by Michelle Lawrence, editor-in-chief of *Illuminati* (a quarterly regional campus publication for creative writing), if I'd like to contribute something of my own to the periodical. I directed her to my website, and this is what she chose. It appeared in the Spring 2006 issue.

However, something went awry: the five-page article was truncated after the fourth page. I am charitably disposed to assume the deletion was accidental, a printer's error. However, I cannot rule out deliberate action by someone who might have taken offense at critical remarks contained in the deleted portion. As far as I'm aware, the item was never reprinted in complete form.

The 2005 version of the article is still posted elsewhere on this website. In this version, however, I've made it possible for the reader to form his or her own judgment about the deletion. The article is displayed in its entirety, but with the portion deleted from the print version highlighted in gray.