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On Being a Cultural Christian and a UU

I was a second-semester Freshman at Marietta College in Ohio when the first “chink” in my Christian beliefs occurred.

I had been raised a Methodist by my parents—what I’ve come to think of as a default decision between my Dad, a Lutheran by birth due more to his being of Finnish descent than any profound attraction to that denomination, and my Mom, a Baptist raised by a stern, Bible-wielding grandmother following the death of her own mother when she was only six.

Methodism seemed a likely compromise—not as strict as my Mother’s upbringing, but not as loosey-goosey as my Dad’s. I was a devout kid: I attended Methodist summer camp and envisioned becoming one of the missionaries in Africa for whose suffering black charges we collected mittens at Christmas time.

(Mittens for African children...really?)

When I was in high school, I even taught Sunday School, using flannel boards and flannel-backed biblical figures cut out of cardboard to illustrate the Old Testament stories of David and Goliath, and Joseph and his treacherous brothers.

(Remember...this was waaaay long before videos and iPads.

What I did not do, despite the raised eyebrows of many of the church elders, was join the church. Oh, yes...I dutifully took the confirmation classes that were *de rigeur* for high school students, but there was just something about the verbal declaration of belief that was required of new members—one hand placed on Bible, other hand upraised—that gave me pause.

Amazingly enough, my parents supported my decision to NOT take what I had come to think of as “final vows” in the Methodist church. I say “amazingly” because, like many staunchly middle-class parents of the 1950s, my folks were keenly aware of what other people thought of them and their kids.

2

(Did I mention that our family was named the "Family of the Year" in 1956 by our community's PTA, and that I have the plaque to prove it? Of course, that was long before I eloped with a Catholic boy while still in college; before my sister ran away from home; before one brother was caught drinking and smoking dope, and before my other brother applied for—and received—conscientious objector status during the Vietnam War).

But I digress...

You can understand, then, that it took some courage for my parents to brave "what other people will say" and support me in my decision about not joining the Methodist Church.

But—and this is important—I still retained my belief in Christianity. In fact, it never occurred to me to consider myself anything other than a Christian. After all, everyone in the community in which I grew up—West Springfield, Massachusetts—was Christian. I knew no Jews, let alone any Muslims or Hindus. There were no Blacks (or Negroes, as they were then called), let alone any Asians or Indians in our town. The only "different brand" of Christian I knew were the neighbors on our street who were Catholic—the Rucinskis and the Griffins—and since they made it perfectly clear that they considered their church the only "True Church," we dismissed them as being mis-informed.

Fast forward, then, to Marietta College and a religion course called "High Roads of the Universe." It was taught by The Rev. J. Glover Johnson, an elderly Southern gentleman who had written the book on which the course was based—a book published in 1946 that was long out-of-print and, since there were few copies still in existence, was sold by students to one another at the gouging price of \$15. Note here: This was the most expensive book I had to buy my Freshman year; those of you who have kids in college know how much things have changed since then!

3

At any rate, High Roads of the Universe was a “survey” course on Christianity. In a monotone Southern accent, J. Glover reviewed for dozing students the principal tenets of the faith: the trinity, the Apostles Creed, the Resurrection. Looking up from his notes, he then declared that “in order to be a Christian, you do NOT have to believe in the Virgin Birth, but you do have to believe in the Resurrection.”

What?? My head snapped up in astonishment. Could Christians decide what they did and didn't have to believe? Was this a multiple choice religion? A buffet table where you could pick and choose?

Well, well, well. This put everything in a very different light. I hadn't realized that I could do my own thinking and still be a Christian.

If only.

Thus began my long investigation—and I use the word “investigation” advisedly--into not only Methodism but also into Christianity generally.

First I learned that far from being the “be all and end all” of religions, Christianity had actually evolved not only from Judaism—this I had actually known—but was the literal “descendant” of another religion, Zoroastrianism, which flourished in Persia between 1700 and 500 BCE. This religion was founded by the Prophet Zoroaster who taught not only of a single Creator God, but also of a savior who would be born of a virgin impregnated by the seed of the Creator while bathing in a lake. A perilous end time would occur in which all humans would have to wade through a molten river, where the righteous would survive unscathed and those who had committed evil deeds would be consigned to a place where fires burned without ceasing.

My, but this was sounding familiar.

I turned my attention next to the Nicene Creed, a statement of faith that I had been taught was a bed rock of Christianity. This creed was the handiwork of 300

4

or so church bishops convened by the Roman Emperor Constantine I in 325 AD in Nicaea who hammered out what Christians were to believe about the nature of the Son of God and his relationship to God the Father. Oh—and these men (and they *were* all men) also established a uniform observance of the date of Easter.

Apparently the shenanigans in Washington, D.C., would have rivaled the clashes that occurred at this First Council of Nicaea as the early church fathers (did I mention that they were all men?) attempted to persuade one another of God's will in these important theological questions.

And I was supposed to believe what they had finally come up with? I don't think so!

And so it went...one belief after another falling apart after further study.

Finally, of course, I had to think about the real Biggie—the Resurrection. Did I really believe that a man—crucified, dead and buried, as the Apostle's Creed states—actually arose from the dead, moved away a huge stone blocking the crypt in which his body was placed, appeared to one woman (or four, depending on which book of the Bible you read) and then appeared to numerous other individuals before ascending into heaven? Did I, in fact, believe this supernatural tale?

Well, no, I didn't.

Since I long knew that this was the belief central to Christianity, I now knew I was not—GASP!—a Christian.

But how could this be? I had been a Christian all of my life. I lived in a community surrounded by persons who professed the Christian faith. All of the inspiring religious music I knew and loved was Christian in nature, and there were hymns that could move me to tears. The church buildings—both awe-inspiring and

5

quaint—were places of reverence to me. I still appreciated sermons about finding the right path or avoiding the shallow temptations in life—or even Bible stories.

If I wasn't a Christian, who—or what—was I?

For a long time, I faked it. I attended a Christian church and pretended I still believed. I sang the hymns but didn't say the creeds. I constantly read ahead to see whether or not I would say the responsive readings. I no longer took communion. I attended Christmas Eve services—the candles! The music!--but I found excuses not to attend Easter services.

In short, I felt I was living a lie and, worst of all, I was lying about God—who I either did—or didn't—believe in!

Somewhere around this time I heard the term “Secular Jew.” I remember being puzzled and asking what it meant, and being told that a Secular Jew was Jewish by ethnic or identity but wasn't religious. In other words, someone could be a Jewish atheist, identifying with Judaism culturally but not religiously. Indeed, I was told by the man my northern UU Congregation calls “our Rabbi” that Israeli Jews are predominantly secular.

Bingo! It occurred to me that if it was possible to be a Secular Jew, it was also possible to be a Secular Christian—and that's what I was!

In the intervening years, of course, I've learned a great deal more about Secular Christians. They often self-identify as Christians, but when questioned about their beliefs acknowledge that they're not really sure what they believe. Often, their church is central to their lives because of the social relationships they enjoy there, but a belief in God has no everyday role in their lives. They do not expect God's help, fear God's judgement, or believe that things will happen “God willing.” Theologians estimate that fully 70% of Christians do not believe the “small print” of their religion but live quite comfortably in what they consider to be the Christian United States of America.

6

I no longer consider myself a Christian, but because I live in a country that has the trappings of Christianity in virtually every nook and corner, I realize that I am a cultural or secular Christian. I was reminded of this recently when Becca Boerger, a member of my northern congregation, introduced me to a compilation of religious poems and writings she had prepared and that she entitled, "Advent for Atheists." Perfect!

My religious beliefs have evolved over time and doubtless will continue to do so. For me, the most comforting part of being a Unitarian Universalist is what the Rev. John Morgan, a modern-day circuit riding minister who was the founder of our Pennsylvania congregation and also the son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers, has to say about our faith.

"I love being a Unitarian Universalist because when I change my mind about my beliefs, I don't have to change my church," he said.

To which I say, Amen!

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