



Ending My Religion

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Forget this world, forget this course, and come with wholly empty hands unto your God.

— A Course in Miracles

I grew up in the hyper-Christian culture of Charlotte, North Carolina, within spitting distance of Jim and Tammy Bakker's ill-fated Praise the Lord Ministry and other evangelical fiefdoms too numerous to count. But because my mother believed in Faulkner and Steinbeck above all other gods, my upbringing was more literary than religious; for that, my gratitude to her knows no bounds.

By early adulthood, I had fallen in with a group of sardonic and proudly rational peers whose favorite response to the oft-posed question "Have you found Jesus Christ?" was "What? Have you Christians lost him *again*?" We scoffed at religion, figuring that quick wits and skepticism would get us

through life far more effectively than piety and faith.

But a jaundiced eye will only take you so far. In my early thirties, ten years into my Berkeley, California, citizenship — and thus about as far from conventional religious beliefs as could be — I was laid low by chronic fatigue syndrome (cfs). At that time, my affliction was an undiagnosed complex of maladies ranging from perpetual exhaustion to twice-weekly migraines and a nasty, ongoing stomachache. In cfs, I encountered the first opponent capable of shocking my personality into cardiac arrest. As it became clear that I would find no simple medical solution for my illness, I began to doubt all my assumptions about how the world worked and what I was doing here — in short, my entire concept of reality. That was just the inner damage; out in the "real world," I soon lost my livelihood, my home of six years, and several close, defining relationships.

Photo: Laura Noel

They say there are no atheists in foxholes; I would add that there are not many with a long sojourn in a sickbed on their résumé. The spiritual conversion experience that often visits those who have hit rock bottom due to illness, addiction, or depression can be looked at in two ways: either people crack under the pressure and take flight from their senses, or they crack under the pressure and catch a healing glimpse of a new reality. Reviewing my own experience over the past sixteen years, I would say that both perspectives are correct. You have to go a little nuts to begin looking at the world in a whole new way, and that style of seeing can have an authentic healing effect.

The danger of the conversion experience is that you may conclude that being perpetually unhinged is a *requirement* of being spiritual. Then you start thumbing your nose at all conventional forms of logic and common sense — and, before long, you've become an easy mark for a corrupt guru who needs unquestioning followers to bankroll and applaud him. Worse yet, you may become a guru yourself.

Because I began my adult life with some training in investigative journalism, I was never a good candidate for a wholesale religious conversion. To this day, I tend to respond to all extraordinary claims — whether they concern spiritual advancement, investment schemes, or political salvation — with an “Oh, really?” and an urge to uncover the shadow side of whatever good news is being foisted upon me. Early in my conversion experience, however, I realized that this healthy skepticism had become a poisonous cynicism, amplifying the chronic stress that had led to my collapse.

I appreciate that my skepticism also inoculated me against the foolishness that can waylay novices on the spiritual path: I never fell for a guru and thus never had to become disillusioned about one. Allowing myself to become a little nutty and irrational did open me up to certain mystical experiences that were genuinely healing. At the same time, keeping a critical eye on such experiences helped me to sort wishful thinking from actual outcomes, and to temper a renewed idealism with a practical realism.

These days, I believe that honoring our innumerable flaws and frailties is key to a sensible and sustainable spirituality. Such a downwardly mobile faith, however, is hardly ever discussed by gurus or promulgated in best-selling books. In fact, the most common and serious flaw of contemporary New Age thinking is the belief that human experience is somehow meant to be a brightly lit carnival of optimum health, perfect love, universal peace, and material wealth (which God really *does* want you to have, don't you know?). If you are not yet experiencing an unlimited high of personal comfort and universal consciousness, says the New Age, then you soon will — right after the next meditation retreat, group hug, or synchronized mass prayer, which we can now participate in through e-mail.

But the fact is, we humans get sick and die; we hate each other and make war; and a great many of us are desperately poor and always will be. Those of us who have the luxury to contemplate our consciousness at expensive

retreats and world healing conferences are the beneficiaries of an unjust economic system that reflects the truth of our mass consciousness far more than do our solemnly repeated affirmations. Herding our ancient, innately conflicted drives of fear, self-defense, and greed toward an oceanic altruism is certainly a worthy goal, but one toward which we make painfully slow progress, despite our best intentions. I have always wanted to see a spiritual conference advertise that attendees will come away with an immeasurably small improvement in their consciousness — and only if they work exceptionally hard and pay exquisite attention to the proceedings. Admittedly, it wouldn't be very good marketing, but it would reflect the truth about how difficult it is to change ourselves. Human beings rarely get anything done over the weekend.

Despite my skeptical outlook, I believe in human and spiritual progress, because I've experienced substantial positive change in my own life and witnessed it in the lives of others. I would go so far as to say that the changes stemming from my spiritual awakening have been profound: I recovered from a serious illness, found meaningful work, helped build and sustain a happy marriage, and basically got over my grudge against the world.

In the sixteen years that followed, I became as religious a person as I think I could ever be, even becoming publicly identified with a particular path while studying and writing about a broad range of spiritual subject matter. I wrote three books and nearly a hundred magazine articles in a long effort to practice what I gamely identified as “the journalism of consciousness.” (An evangelical Christian scholar I once interviewed characterized my work in pithier terms: right after I called him a “fundamentalist,” he called me a “New Age reporter.” *Ouch.*)

Oddly enough, the strong sense of spiritual guidance I developed is now steering me away from thinking, talking, or writing much about spirituality. Every new book in the field seems to say the same old thing, and every advertised workshop looks like a means to help people find ever-loftier rationalizations for maintaining their self-absorption. (Do we really need “the courage to be rich”?) Whereas I used to look forward to interviewing the latest wise man or woman, now I'm much more interested in talking to the average businessperson or the neighborhood soccer coach. I've grown more attracted to people whose spirituality is immanent or unconscious. I'd rather have a fleeting, wordless *experience* of the meaning of life than talk about it for hours on end. In short, it seems the time has come to end my religion.

The “spiritual supermarket” that has blossomed in our culture over the last few decades has resulted in a wild *mélange* of teachings and gurus outside the religious mainstream. Each new popular teaching enjoys a brief vogue before being debunked in public, thence to retreat to its former anonymity with a small core group of true believers still intact. So it was with Werner Erhard's *est* and Bhagwan

Shree Rajneesh; so will it be with yoga, which is currently enjoying unprecedented popularity as a health regimen if not as a spiritual path. American culture dictates that muckraking journalists will soon begin exposing corrupt yoga masters and institutes, leading to some prominent yoga-is-bad-for-you articles and a consequent ebbing of the yogic tide. But many people's lives will have been changed for the better by yoga nonetheless.

Anyone who tries to understand esoteric paths needs to appreciate that even the strangest perspective will probably benefit *someone*, regardless of how silly or weird it looks to most of us. I have several good friends who swear by the positive, life-altering effects of *est* or the Forum, which I've always regarded as an overpriced workshop in remedial responsibility. I have a very intelligent and down-to-earth business associate who faithfully follows the *Urantia Book*, even though I find that enormous tome an impenetrable metaphysical mishmash. And I know for sure that I have friends of considerable sophistication and proven loyalty who still question my sanity because I became involved with *A Course in Miracles* (ACIM).

For the uninitiated, the Course is a very long (twelve-hundred-plus pages) book providing a self-contained contemporary spiritual teaching that mixes Eastern metaphysics, Christian terminology, and mystical psychology, with more than a dash of creaky old Gnosticism tossed in for flavor. It offers both a lengthy philosophical discourse and an intensive built-in meditative workshop, in the form of a lesson-a-day workbook. The Course was written in secret during the late sixties by a Columbia University psychologist named Helen Schucman, who professed to be ambivalent about religion. She claimed that she didn't understand what she was writing, and furthermore resented the seven-year task of recording ACIM, which she said had been dictated to her by a subconscious and decidedly mystical force. After the Course was published in 1976, Schucman rarely spoke about it in public and was never reconciled to its message of forgiveness and brotherhood. She died in 1983.

In fact, the book, which rolls on for hundreds of pages at a time in flawless iambic pentameter, claims its own spiritual authorship — namely that of the historical Jesus Christ speaking through a human channel to bring a corrected version of his original message to the world. Despite the great good that the Course has brought into my life, I've always wished Dr. Schucman had left the Jesus part out. I wish she had just admitted she was nuts.

If you're wondering why I'd ever confess to following the teachings of a book written by someone who heard voices and was possibly certifiable, my first defense is that there are some notable precedents for this kind of thing. Roger Walsh, an entirely respectable professor of philosophy and psychiatry at the University of California-Irvine — and a Course student himself — points out that the landscape of religious history is littered with disreputable visionaries: "Jesus was condemned as a common criminal; Lao-Tzu wandered off into the desert a total unknown; Confucius

couldn't hold down a job; and Mohammed was a suspect camel driver on whom a lot of people waged war."

My second defense — admittedly more to the point — is that the Course showed up in my life when I was desperate for something that would heal me, and it worked. It did not work in the sense of being a magic mind-pill that took away all my physical aches and psychic pains. It worked in the sense of inspiring me to reorient my life, which I had fairly well wrecked by my early thirties. The challenges I faced included forgiving my parents (a major task), learning how to take care of my health, finding both a voice and a worthwhile purpose as a writer, and giving up the universal bitterness that I'd come to believe was my emotional birthright.

As if all that were not enough, the Course also delivered exactly what it promised: the development of a reliable "inner voice" that has become my primary source of guidance. Before the Course, I can remember the torture I went through in making difficult decisions: weighing the pros and cons and coming to a rational conclusion independent of my gut feelings (which were usually dominated by an inarticulate fear). The results of this process were generally messy and sometimes cruel to myself and others. I often had to abandon my hard-won strategy for doing the right thing in favor of simply reacting against overwhelming and unexpected circumstances.

Although my current way of making decisions is hardly infallible, it is far more peaceful, instinctive, and responsive to the unpredictable factors that can affect any chosen course of action. Though I still weigh pros and cons and try to come to sensible conclusions, I never settle for a merely rational answer; I wait silently until a message of guidance comes to me — and it always does, in fairly short order and often with surprising specificity. Occasionally, it is a weird, unexplained directive: "Go into that store and wander around until you run into someone you know." (And someone familiar does show up.) But, more often, it is an essential confirmation of my own common sense: "Don't send that smartass e-mail to that editor; you'll regret it immediately!"

I think of this inner voice as "advanced intuition." By this, I do not mean that my intuition is better than anyone else's, only that it's far more reliable than what I used to have. I have no idea what the source of my inner voice is, and I feel no need to identify it. I certainly do *not* believe it is the voice of Jesus Christ, or a dead ancestor with a quavery Irish brogue, or a high-ranking Pleiadian sending me psychic data packets from a spaceship zipping betwixt the rings of Saturn (although that last notion would be especially fun).

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