

A Personal Reflection on Theism

I am a theist. I believe in God. It just took me 30 some years to find a God that I could believe in.

I was raised Roman Catholic. Catholicism is like other the Christian religions except with more suffering. And a few unique features like crying rooms, transubstantiation, saving the souls of pagan babies and, of course, mean nuns. More on those in a minute... First I am going to explain why 18 years of the finest and most rigorous Catholic upbringing did not stick.

How many of you ever sat through a Catholic mass? OK. **(Comment)** Now, how many of you have sat through a Catholic mass delivered entirely in Latin? Hmm... **(Comment)**

Well I did. Over 1200 times before I was 10 years old. (Did you know that practicing Catholics believe that missing mass on Sunday is a sin?) And so our family went, every Sunday.

Picture yourself as a child, following the 3 rules of Mass:

1. Sit PERFECTLY STILL on a hard wooden bench for an hour.
2. Remain perfectly SILENT
3. PAY ATTENTION to a man in a colorful robe who mostly stands there talking in foreign language ... for an hour.

There it is...The trifecta of things that a normal young child cannot do! My mother had to train 3 children under the age of 4 to do these 3 things for an hour every week. Here's how that worked:

At the first transgression, we'd get THE DREADED LOOK. The next time, THE DREADED PINCH. If we became too loud, like if I cried as a result of the dreaded pinch, my mother would take my hand and together we would have to take "THE WALK OF SHAME" up the aisle, to the the Crying Room, essentially a large sound proof booth with a big window. It was kind of a big screen TV of crying children and mortified mothers.

The other focal point of the church (in addition to the crying room) was a large, life-like statue of Jesus on the wall behind the priest. Jesus was clearly in agony, with prominent nails in his hands and feet, a wound in his abdomen and thorns cutting his head. He was bleeding from all these places. It was gory and upsetting. And I

distinctly remember wondering repeatedly, “Oh that poor man! Why won’t anyone help him? I bet he wants down from there. I think he needs a doctor.” The fact that no one helped “that poor man on the cross” was the first of many in a long line of Catholic mysteries that left me troubled.

When I was 10 years old, the Vatican Council finally agreed to masses spoken in English. Then I could finally understand what the priest had been saying in Latin for all those years. And then I wished he would go back to Latin. Because then I learned about Transubstantiation. This is where the priest lifts up the bread and wine, and turn them into the ACTUAL FLESH AND BLOOD of Jesus Christ. Even more upsetting, I realized that I’d been eating Jesus’s skin for 5 years. At 10, I watched a lot of Bela Lugosi and Lon Chaney vampire and werewolf movies and this idea was profoundly VIVID and profoundly DISTURBING to me.

What else about Catholicism... Oh yes....One word..NUNS! I was taught by nuns throughout most of my 13 years of Catholic school. I’ll just say that I’d like to know who thought of taking prayerful women who have consciously chosen never to have their own children, make them wear hats that look like paper plates, and put them in charge of large numbers of

other peoples' children. As an early childhood professional, I'm going to go out on a limb here - - Not a good idea!

In fairness to the nuns, there really isn't a good way to manage 43 little kids in a room all day all by yourself and so they resorted to the bad ways. Lots of public humiliation of some swatting of hands with rulers and the like.

One last vignette about nuns... Did you know that nuns wore the relics of their patron saints around their necks? I remember Sister Theresa unscrewing a vial with a little bone chip she said was taken from Saint Theresa and passing it around the classroom so we could look at it. I of course was quickly raising my hand with many questions

- How did they get that bone from St. Theresa?
- Did she give it to them or was she dead?
- Did they dig her up?
- Did saints know that they would have their bones cut up and given away to nuns?

The Sister St. Bridget's answers of course were obtuse. The next year, I questioned Sister Antoinette about the pagan baby scenario. I did not understand why a loving and fair God would create a world where

babies born in say wild parts of Africa or the garment district of New York City would never come to accept Jesus Christ as their savior and therefore be disqualified from going to heaven.

For all you non-Christians, it maybe reassuring to know that from 1963 to 1976 I were praying for you. Praying that you would change your religion so that you could you go to heaven like me and my friends. You're welcome. Yes, we prayed for you and all the pagan babies. I really spent a lot of time worrying about this exclusive access to God and heaven issue. It was problematic for me and probably sowed the seeds for me to embrace UUism when I finally discovered it in my 30s...

SO let's review...the standard answer to any of my questions that the nuns didn't know or didn't want to discuss was - -"It's a mystery!" Questions I remember asking:

- How much bad stuff can you do and still go to heaven?
- Kids make stuff up sometimes. So how do you know it was really a miracle when those 3 shepherd children said they saw the Blessed Virgin Mary appear in Fatima?
- And most popular with the nuns: What's a virgin?

After a while, the nuns got savvy and just stopped calling on me in religion class. No, Catholicism is not a religion that encourages critical thinking. Instead we were encouraged to develop faith. And I never mustered enough to overcome my doubts.

Well eventually I grew up and went to college where I found other critical thinkers who questioned everything. We stayed up late into the night in dorm rooms and the cafes of Europe (because we were very cool) and philosophized about the big questions, often about the existence and form of God. Does God exist? If so, What is God?

Again, my lens here is that of human development. It interests me that as a culture, at least here in the US we don't acknowledge that there are stages to human spiritual development just like, physical, social, emotional and cognitive development happen in stages in the life cycle.

It's fairly well known anecdotally that crises in faith for most human beings happens around the age of 18. So if you have a teenager, don't worry. It's normal.

Mine started earlier and lasted longer.

The other major spiritual influence in my life has been Buddhism. I studied and practiced Buddhism when I lived in Japan. At Buddhist temple, I learned to meditate, to accept that the natural state is change. That attachment causes pain. That suffering is to be expected. Blending these concepts into my paradigm has helped me through difficult times of loss in my life: loss of my home of my livelihood, loss of my marriage and of my ideas about how my life would be. Buddhist philosophy has helped me to accept what is to work through changes, to process the pain and embrace whatever comes next. It has made it possible for me to let go of the outcomes of those life events outside my control and enjoy with satisfaction the life that I do have.