

RELIGION: DISCOVERING GOD

Religion: I hesitate to use the word. It feels cold and formal to me. Moderns have adopted the word “spirituality” to sidestep archaic associations with a constrictive past. Some call themselves “lapsed Catholics” while others are fleeing from some form of fundamentalist Protestantism. They insist they are not *religious*, but just as adamantly declare they are *spiritual*. What did they mean?

Some spoke of an ineffable feeling of mystical awe, but did that dilute the term *spirituality*? Others spoke of developing a meditation practice, though I saw few of them seriously undergo the rigors of discipline required in maintaining it. So the word *religion* (the word means “to bind”) had fallen out of favor, conjuring up for these persons the quaint notion of dogma and tradition that binds a person to certain institutional practices and beliefs.

Two Ways of Defining Religion

These two elements took on significance for me recently from an unexpected source—Tim Crane’s *The Meaning of Belief: Religion from an Atheist’s Point of View*. I was reading it in order to better understand how an atheist might see religious faith. Written by an atheist, I thought it also might explain how I could see in a new light how my brother had named himself an “atheist” in his adult life. I had assumed my brother’s statement was a defiant gesture in part, revolting against the family background in deeply felt Christian thought and practices in which we both were raised, and from which he needed to distance himself.

I was interested to find that Crane based a strong case for a view of religion based on the same two fundamental characteristics I had observed in people. He named the first *the religious impulse*, by which he refers to a sense of the mystical and transcendent. This resonated with my own expression of faith.

He described the second as *identification*—meaning the way religious persons see themselves as part of a group using certain practices and language. This is what I had seen most clearly in others who espoused their faith with more dogmatism and certainty than I was comfortable with. Yet I also could identify with others who, like myself, felt grounded in our embrace of beliefs and practices that related to our faith. Identification also implies a common language. The words we use in describing spiritual experience are significant and help us feel we are on common ground with others.

Crane sees this broader way of defining religion is helpful in understanding why 80% of the world population identify themselves as *religious*. At the same time, as an atheist, he

is careful to emphasize that both of these definitions are separate from *beliefs*—those matters which a person might hold as true and that can be verified, or not. This is where he counters the contentions of the “New Atheists” (well-known spokespersons like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins), because they define religious persons as those who believe in events, including the supernatural—things that they assert can be found to be untrue. Their resulting stance is more militant—eager to convince the theist that s/he is wrong. Crane named these as “optimistic atheists” because of their desire to convert the believers of “wrong beliefs.” He names himself as a “pessimist atheist” preferring to hold “religious persons” in respect. Toleration, not “conversion,” is his goal.

Respecting people is entirely compatible with thinking that their opinions, views are wrong, confused, irrational, or wicked. . . You can tolerate people without respecting their opinions.

This different view of religion highlighted for me why some atheists seemed to me to be holding an almost “religious belief” in their atheism. “We are right; you are wrong, and we must “convert you”. I felt better understood by Crane who seemed to leave much more room for uncertainty—a stance that I have come to more deeply appreciate as I grapple with that elusive entity we call *faith*.

Following the Trail in My Family’s History

This has led me to assess my own life experience in a new frame. How did my self-identification as a religious person evolve, and what is the meaning of the differences with my brother. The two of us were raised in the same household environment. Yet it is in matters of “religion”—however we define it—where our differences show up.

When, in his adulthood, my brother named himself an atheist, it felt like a defiant gesture, posed against our family background: we were “preacher’s kids”. What was the meaning of this for us? Our father’s story has relevance here. How did he become a preacher? Our father has been no more than “formally religious” as a young person, but in his early 20s had an experience that might be called a *conversion*, for it changed the trajectory of his career, and the meaning of his lifelong affliction (legally blind) as having purpose. That change brought him into conflict with his parents—especially his mother (his father was more accepting)—and their more conventional nominal religious affiliation. Then he married our mother, whose early faith was nurtured in small-town Maine through conventional church attendance. She came to Gordon College as a person headed for missionary service. She spent two summers on mission as a member of the Student Volunteer Movement in western Canada, riding her horse and fording

streams in the rough terrain. Marrying our father took her to China for Dad's three-year term of teaching in a private university, and included the tragic loss of their first-born child. It was the later exposure to a vital evangelical community in her 40s when the family moved to Wheaton, Illinois, that our mother's heart was quickened to a new pulse of evangelical fervor and life. Her inborn passion for reaching out to teach and share her faith with others governed her lifelong activities in the churches where our father was pastor and in her treatment of us.

Together, mother and father were committed to raising my brother and me to follow their footsteps in faith. In some ways, both of us disappointed them: my brother by his separation from connection to religious community in any overt way, and I by a more gradual process: first engaging wholeheartedly and then slowly appearing to comply, and beginning to increasingly respond in an unfamiliar way to the ancient truths my parents espoused. Perhaps it was the language I used and topics raised that marked these subtle changes.

I trace this history in our family as having earlier signs for my brother and me. His baptism, occurring at the same time as mine, appeared to have a weaker root in his personal experience. His teenage rebellion took the form of disobeying "the rules" against movies and similar "worldly things." In a dozen subtle and not-so-subtle ways he was chomping at the bit in the time we lived in Wheaton, a town saturated with the influence of the Christian college—one founded by an abolitionist in the mid-19th century. His joining the Navy at seventeen was also a ticket to freedom from the religiously oriented strictures of family, church and community.

From occasional comments my brother made, I concluded that he assumed (accurately for a long time) that I had adopted unquestioningly the religious and ethical system we were taught. Although the way I held my faith became more nuanced and open after I was on my own in the professional world, I still identified with the evangelical Christian community. Even then, however, I began disassociating myself from "adjectival Christianity." I thought the word Christian was precise enough, without adding "Bible-believing" or "pre-millennial" or "fundamentalist" or "born again." "Evangelical" used to connote something warm and alive, and not as constricted as fundamentalist. No more. Its connotations in the popular mind make the term no longer comfortable or necessary. I have settled for the simple term Christian. In a world full of categorically minded people, I find I cannot pigeon hole others any more, either. The lines keep shifting. Like Eskimos that have seventeen words for snow, I find myself with an intricate, complex, many-layered perspective on the Christian religious scene today.

My transformative change in therapy in 1967 played a part in helping any traditional

notions of evangelism fall away. They had never fit well with me. I no longer saw others as "in" or "out" of favor with God, but persons who were moving along a path in a Godward direction. I could come along-side and see what their direction felt like, and learn from them. I did not need to change them, nor did I seek to change my brother. I am interested in the questions people ask, what they are curious about, where their ground seems to be. I am a seeker too.

In the late Sixties, I became part of a small more radical Christian subculture focused on social action. During that time, I wanted to converse with my brother about my changed attitudes, but I felt trapped by an outdated stereotype of what a Christian was, to which I perceived he clung. So although there were areas where we had grown much closer in our thinking than before, the rift between us was even wider.

I resisted the idea that I had to prove to my brother or anyone else how liberal I was, because that was too simplistic—seeming to imply that I had rejected my faith. But I also fervently longed for him to see the places where we stood together; I did not want him to assume my religious stance was identical to people from our past (including our parents). I wanted him to be interested in the complexity of my present religious life and positions—to hear the nuances, to discern and distinguish my particular kind of faith, a faith that is more and more at home with doubt. Two favorite book titles hint as to where I stood in the 1990s as I was feeling my way toward deeper understanding of my life and faith: Daniel Taylor's *The Myth of Certainty*, and Patrick Henry's *The Ironic Christian's Companion*. Both emphasize the necessity of *not knowing*, which is the prerequisite for faith.

Along the way, whole structures of meaning had to be discarded, or rebuilt. I was reinterpreting my religious identity. I could no longer go to the tablets of the law carved in stone—whether from the Old Testament—or St. Paul, or the church canon, or the unspoken and explicit rules of Christian conduct etched on my consciousness since childhood in the same way. I must now stand alone before God, and discern the inner voice of authority arising from within me, and believe that this was also God's voice speaking through me. What should I think about sex before marriage? What about praying for change in others and myself? What about choosing my vocation? How was I to view the Scriptures—the account of miracles, the Virgin birth of Jesus? What about church—its relevance? Is there a "just war" or should I be a pacifist? (In 1968, Vietnam was on my mind.)

Suddenly I was faced with a new freedom—to choose, to act, to love. It was not primarily a movement toward rebellion against my past. I could incorporate it, but move to include a larger palette of colors. And the ground on which I stood was God as I was

experiencing God from within, not just the God who had been taught to me from outside. A subtle difference, but it changed everything for me.

The Two Gods—Out There and Within

The God Out There is the God I learned about from my mother's knee, the stories of the Scriptures. I took in the sense of that God by my "parent gods"—for in childhood our parents are gods. I was taught to obey, not to lie, to be kind, and I was punished when I failed in these matters. Ergo, God must be like that.

For everyone, church, mosque, and synagogue amplify this God Out There by the teachings that emanate from these structures. I too had been part of a larger body of people—at church, at school and at work—who reinforced my concept of the God Out There.

Such a reference to that God can continue for a lifetime—as it does for some. Such persons may be very strong believers, even strict and fundamentalist Christians, Jews, Muslims, or they may be very strong resisters to faith, to the point of atheism for some. But the central concept for both believer and infidel is that of a God Out There, described in either harsh or kindly ways.

I was taught that this subjective God Out There (subjective because any description of this God is limited by my mental capacity to imagine God) wants to be in personal relationship to me, which set up a dilemma, since the God Out There was mediated to me through parents, church, and community, with varying degrees of success in convincing me that I could trust this God with my rather strong-willed, and at the same time self-reproaching, fragile little ego.

The movement toward the God Within was tortuous and long. I needed help in exorcising the demonic in my ideas of God, polluted by my skewed sense of what it took to "win" that unconditional love. I do not need to blame my parents (especially my mother, who had a strong introjected picture of God from her own aborted relationship with an adored but strict father), but I see how it is necessary for everyone to "go beyond" their parents in order to locate God Within—perhaps, in the words of a Zen koan—to see our Original Face. This is the one God saw before we, or our parents, were born— when we were "intricately woven" in the womb.

Moving to the God Within has had many ramifications. It has meant no longer knowing truth with the certainty I had been taught. The words of author and Trappist monk Thomas Merton riveted me:

I know nothing of You and, by myself, I cannot even imagine how to go about knowing You. If I imagine You, I am mistaken. If I understand You, I am deluded. If I am conscious and certain that I know You, I am crazy.

When someone asked me several months ago what my overarching goal in life was, the answer came easily: "To love God with all my heart, soul, and strength, and to love my neighbor as myself." Since knowing is part of loving, this means knowing God, knowing my neighbor, and knowing myself. At last, I have found a way to unite two strong streams in my Life—the spiritual and psychological. Knowing God/ knowing myself. In the knowing, loving grows, and makes possible love of neighbor. I am far from daily experiencing this in profundity, but knowing and loving God is at the bedrock of my soul and life.