

FROM THE COCONUT GROVES TO HARVARD: A CHRISTIAN-HUMANIST FAITH JOURNEY

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The Book of Matthew, the first book of the Christian Scriptures, concludes with these words of the resurrected Jesus addressing his disciples: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen."

My parents, grandparents and great-grandparents took these words literally as Evangelical Christian clergy. Where is my family from? Alabama, Georgia? Not at all. My family has deep New York roots. One hundred years ago, my maternal great-grandfather George W. McPherson was President of the Old Union Tent Evangel, which united the evangelistic ministries of most of the Protestant churches in New York City. It was the vaudeville era, and every summer, he would erect a huge tent on an empty lot in the city, on land donated by the Episcopal Church. It was a tent that could hold over 1,000 people, and the great evangelists of the day would come through and preach. You can find his name and advertisements listed in the archives of *The New York Times*. In 1925, however, Darwin's Theory of Evolution triumphed over orthodox religious views in mainstream public opinion with the Scopes "monkey trial." Evolution posed a huge challenge for people of faith: do we have a soul within or did we just descend from the apes?

The educated classes in New York City accepted evolution, and the substantial financing behind the summer tent meetings dried up. With acceptance of evolution there came a more culturally relative way of understanding Christianity. More liberal Christian churches began to shift their view of missions to charitable endeavors. This created seismic fractures between conservatives and liberals in virtually all the Protestant church denominations. After 1925, my great-grandfather's evangelistic tent folded, and he retired to write his memoir in which he predicted that the Evangelistic thrust would shift to the southern states of this country, what is now known as the Bible belt.

Accordingly, his son, my maternal grandfather, Dr. Norman McPherson, despite graduating from Columbia College and Princeton Seminary, moved out of New York City to upstate New York and later, southern California where he founded new conservative churches. In turn, my father, born in Poughkeepsie, NY, was a Billy Graham admirer and became an Evangelical pastor. Billy Graham was a Southerner, but it didn't matter. He was now leading the Evangelical forces. In the Evangelistic tradition, my father would issue an altar call at the conclusion of every Sunday service, inviting people to come forward and publicly accept Jesus as their Savior. I was a young girl when my parents decided to become missionaries to the Philippines.

Looking back, I realize my deepest spiritual experience as a child occurred, not in church, but when I was alone riding a horse in a coconut field in the Philippines, where my parents were newly arrived missionaries. I was 7 years old. I had been transplanted to a strange country on the other side of the globe, had said goodbye to my collie dog who would never be able to stand the tropical heat, and to my favorite aunt who taught me how to read. But as I rode my horse into the coconut grove, I came to a beautiful stream and garden. Dismounting my horse, I felt the quiet harmony of the place just take me over and calm me down. My horse stood there with me in perfect stillness. Suddenly in that moment, I knew I would be alright. The divine was there, around me and in me. I mounted back on my horse with ease, and together we went back home. I knew all was well, and would be well. As a therapist much later noted, I was not in church, I was in nature when I had this transcendental experience of the divine. It was a direct experience, not mediated through a priest or pastor. And it resulted in a feeling of inner peace overriding my fears, culture shock and dislocation.

As I grew older, my questions concerning my religion grew. By the age of 10, I began to wonder what my otherworldly religion had to do with life in the here and now. I was just a kid with my whole life ahead of me, God willing. Yet my religious community in the late 20th century was caught up in End Time thinking. A favorite song was, “Coming again, coming again, maybe morning, maybe noon, maybe evening, maybe soon... Jesus is coming again!” The Cold War sabre rattling was grist for a literal reading of the apocalyptic Book of Revelations and imagining a final battle of Armageddon just around the corner. What kind of life could I look forward to and prepare for with the end of the world hanging over us?!

I also began to wonder why God would send Muslims, Jews, anyone born in a non-Christian or non-Protestant country to hell? Is that fair? They were just believing what they were taught by their parents and culture to believe, just as I was. Why should my people be right and theirs wrong, resulting in them going to hell? It seemed like these ethnocentric beliefs thrived the more narcissistic one was.

Those people who constantly warned against hellfire also seemed complacent in the face of social inequality and injustice in the world. For them the world was just an interim phase of life that was passing away. Meanwhile, in the Philippines, I saw terrible slum conditions, many people and children being unable to meet their most basic needs. As a missionary family, we lived simply, but compared with the poor were part of a small middle class. What about the many poor? What about the world in the present?! It seemed that for many people their lives were hell on earth for lack of a roof over their heads, sufficient food and clean water.

For Evangelicals, belief in divine inspiration of the Scriptures is as important as belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. In 1973, when I started a Masters’ program in Biblical studies at an Evangelical seminary outside Boston, leaders of the Evangelical world tightened up on their teachings on the Bible. Nearly every professor in their seminaries had to sign a new statement of faith, subscribing to the new doctrine centering around the word “inerrancy”—the notion that literally every word of the original manuscripts of the Bible was directly inspired by God. I

knew some respected Evangelical Bible teachers who were not prepared to go that far. I remember vividly the tension in our seminary. Always looking strained, my advisor, a New Testament professor, one day advised me to transfer to Harvard Divinity School.

Harvard, probably the most liberal of all seminaries in the country (even enrolling students of non-Christian religions), was the antithesis of an Evangelical school! But feeling the noose tightening around my advisor whom I respected, I took his advice and made the leap to Harvard. Fortunately, I was accepted with a full scholarship, based on the work I had done in the Biblical languages. I say fortunately, because I transferred to Harvard without the blessing of my parents, who were shocked and opposed to my transfer, and unwilling to give me a dime of support.

My four years in Cambridge proved to be a bigger culture shock than moving to the Philippines. It was one thing for me to live on the periphery of the Evangelical subculture and question its beliefs, and quite another at the age of 25 to pick up and move by myself into an entirely antithetical subculture. I found myself living in a co-ed dormitory and conversing with students who were not only Christian heretics by Evangelical standards, but Jews and Muslims. Every week, there was a Protestant-Catholic dialogue with in-depth discussion of the effects of the Second Vatican Council. I became acquainted with some very liberal and admirable Catholic nuns who wore secular clothing. I ate in the graduate school cafeteria with atheist students from other departments of the University. Above all, my historical study of the Bible in my courses completely undermined my fundamentalist belief system.

By the spring of my first year at Harvard, I woke up one day to realize I could no longer accept the doctrines concerning the Bible that I had been raised on. When that realization dawned on me, I literally felt like the air had left my room. It felt like an asthma attack. I literally could hardly breathe for several minutes!

I took a leave of absence for a semester, read voraciously, and went into psychotherapy. I felt like I had much catching up to do: psychology, feminism, other religions. Eventually I graduated with my Master of Divinity from Harvard in ancient near Eastern languages and literatures.

For me, the Bible was now no longer a religious icon but a great work of classical literature that needed to be read within its original historical context. I viewed Jesus as an enlightened human but also a man of his own time and place, a Jewish prophet of first century Roman Palestine who probably had black hair and brown skin! The entire Bible, a book I thought I knew well from my Evangelical upbringing, appeared to me in a new and completely different light. The Hebrew Bible was no longer just a stepping off point for the story of Jesus, but rather a great repository of riches that stood on its own. I learned that many statements for which Jesus is famous are actually re-statements of Torah.

After Harvard Divinity School, I came to New York to work on a Ph.D. in Religion at Columbia University. There I met Brian, who introduced me to Transcendental Meditation and the Focolare Movement. Meditation nourishes mystical experiences like the one I had as a child in

the Philippine coconut grove. The Focolare, which began as a Catholic spiritual renewal movement and is today inter-religious, provided a model of how to be a faithful Christian precisely by engaging in open dialogue with those unlike oneself. This stands on its head the kind of Christianity in which I grew up; instead of proselytizing, the Focolare Movement teaches one to leave others free to be themselves and love them as they are.

As a meditator and practitioner of the Gospel of Love, my life in pluralist New York City has been and continues to be a divine adventure. In 1999, my Ph.D. research on religion and politics in Imperial Germany was published by a peer-reviewed academic press under the title *God and Caesar*. I have taught college courses in world religions in New York City and presented papers at academic conferences. For six years, I worked at Hadassah, first as assistant to the national president, then for the national board as minutes editor. For the last fourteen years, I have worked in Harlem and other New York City public schools teaching English as a Second Language to children from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Europe. All of this is far from the role of Evangelical pastor's wife that my mother and father envisioned for me, but it validates the religious intuition I had as a child in that coconut grove—that there is a cosmic intelligence at work in all things, and my life is a part of that divine adventure.