

Not an Atheist by Choice

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I skated into place for a drill at hockey practice. My eyes flitted about, staring out the glass above the boards which surrounded the rink. The brain in my adolescent body was wondering about the process of religious conversion, recalling how someone at church had recently talked about his conversion to Christianity. That there were a multiplicity of religious beliefs embraced by different people had not concerned me. I had some low level consternation, however, when I tried to understand how a person could believe one thing and have that belief fundamentally altered. Specifically, I was unable to conceive how anyone's faith could change.

My theological and ontological foundation was pervasively entwined with a variety of Christian connections. It was not that I had a rigid Christian upbringing that made change nigh on verboten or even terrifying. My Christianity was never something I found cause to rebel against. Not being a Christian did not make sense to me. I knew people who did not believe what I did, and I was not bothered by our difference. But anything I encountered was met through the lens of Christianity, and specifically an Anabaptist, Mennonite filter.

A truncated list of my Christian connections illuminates how pervasive the Church, the Bible, and the presence of God, Jesus,

and the Holy Spirit were in my life. I grew up in Winnipeg, attending a Mennonite church where I was baptized on Pentecost at the age of nineteen. I spent a week at a Bible camp in Manitoba during the summer of my ninth year. The following four summers I went to Camp Assiniboia (run by Mennonite Church Canada's organization Camps with Meaning), a blissful part of every year of my life during that time. I then spent one week at a Camps with Meaning canoe camp because I was not old enough to work at Camp Assiniboia, but then for five summers worked at Camp Assiniboia – with remuneration from First Mennonite Church. I also spent time during the year doing maintenance there, leading activities, organizing camper reunions for the camp, and attending meetings about camp management. I attended Westgate Mennonite Collegiate from grades seven through twelve, and obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from Canadian Mennonite University (CMU). I participated in the annual Peace It Together conference for youth, both as a teenager and later as a session organizer. I taught Sunday School for a few years, played in the church band, was a worship leader, and preached.

One day, approximately ten years after contemplating the topic of conversion as I skated the ice in my odiferous hockey equipment, a friend and I were debating whether it was possible to change one's beliefs. He said it was possible for him to change his mind about some things, but not about his beliefs. His concept of the immutability of belief echoed the understanding I had held when I was gliding across the indoor ice. And yet it was around this time that I came to identify as an atheist. In 2009 I started an organization for non-believing students at a university campus.

There was no wrestling with my beliefs in which some kind of other belief won the contest. No amateur interest in *Beyond Good and Evil* or thrilling anti-establishment posturing made me trade my Jacob for Nietzsche in the match against the Angel of the Lord. I had never even been mad at God as a believer (or as a non-believer, for that matter), or even disappointed. I never wished God did not exist. I never hated the expectations I shared with those who claimed Christ as their saviour. I had relished my religious beliefs. I had tested them often, but never was I trying to get rid of them. I had thought that the best way to be a human being was to take Jesus Christ as one's archetype, and emulate His love of God and sacrifice for all people.

I received immense energy from studying the Bible, asking questions, and debating about religion with others. It was a spirit adventure in the name of curiosity, elsewhere know as antagonism or just plain annoying, and it defined my young self perfectly. My

belief in God, Jesus, Heaven, goodness, sin, discipleship salvation, and all related subjects seemed unshakeable. It did not matter that those concepts were shrouded in mystery that would only ever illuminate a part of the whole. I just simply did not doubt that there was a God and that Jesus was my saviour.

Three moments of my religious journey stand out as noteworthy markers along my way to becoming an unbeliever. These events relate to my idea of morality, of what it means to be a good person. Looking back on it, now, I wonder if my entire religious persona, as a believer, was structured around my psychological feelings of self-worth, which involved seriously low self-esteem, with monstrously distorted views of my place in history; I assumed one day I would suddenly become very powerful, probably as a way to deal with my self-hatred.

My relationship with God changed during a course I took at CMU called Theology of Peace and Justice. I do not remember the specific occurrence in the class, but somehow I was confronted by the question: How would you act if there were no God? I realized that until that point, I had assumed a believer would act differently if they did not believe. For myself, however, I realized I would live exactly the same way whether or not I “knew” (read: believed) God existed. True, I thought that maybe I would not pray or go to church if there was no God to pray to or worship, but my morality would remain the same. This conclusion led me to ask myself what I needed God for if not to hold my morality together. Concurrently, however, I did believe in God, and the belief did not seem to hamper my life, so I saw no reason to give it up.

The Bible came to take on a new position in my life during a class at CMU called Theology of Evangelism. We were discussing Ronald Sider's 2003 book *Doing Evangelism Jesus' Way*. In the first chapter, Sider refers to Ed Dobson, pastor of the largest evangelical church in Grand Rapids, Michigan since 1986 who started an initiative to minister with care to people with AIDS, while maintaining strongly that homosexuality is a sin. Every student in our class of about a dozen people – our professor did not offer his personal thoughts – shared their opinion on whether they thought homosexuality was inherently sinful. I recall I was the only one who did not believe it was a sin. Upon reflection it became clear to me that my opinion about sexuality was not based on what scripture said. My beliefs seemed to come from somewhere else. I firmly believed that whatever was a sin with homosexuality was a sin with heterosexuality – unkindness, unfaithfulness, lying, violence – but not the orientation or practice of the sexual preference. I knew it was possible to build a case for or against the issue based on

scripture, but my stance was not centred on what the Bible said. I then recognized that my morality was not bibliocentric, but based on evolution and social mores – which in western culture stems from a connection to Christianity and a focus on the Bible. But no matter, I am no longer particularly hung up on the roots of my morality.

Approximately a year after I graduated from CMU, it dawned on me that most of my prayers involved me begging God to take control of me and make me better, or make me do only good things. My understanding of my own self was that I was incapable of goodness on my own, but could be made good if I simply allowed a stronger power to take me over, as if I were a programmable robot. I realized then that I cared less about being good all the time and more about focusing on doing the good things that I could do. Instead of iterations of “I can’t do it, please help me,” I determined I would make my prayers a way of identifying with the world around me. I stopped focusing on being a moral failure, and began to make prayer a way of living out my ideology. My prayers were then no longer directed towards God, but rather became a living expression of what I cared about. Eventually, this led to the point where I stopped being aware of any need for a relationship with God.

Over the course of my early twenties, my Christianity gradually dissipated. I was never angry with God or the church. I thought the church was good. I thought Jesus was the archetype of goodness. Slowly, I just stopped believing.

The story of how I became an atheist seems to me similar to C.S. Lewis' description of how he became a Christian. My brother lent me *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis' 1955 book about his own conversion in his late teens. I was so excited to read the book. I had adored Lewis' literature since I was little: the Narnia books, his space trilogy, *The Screwtape Letters*. I did not always agree with his theology – including his militarism and patriarchy – but his prose was rapturously captivating. I figured if anyone could show me the errancy in my professed unbelief, it would be Lewis, an atheist who became a Christian. I was so wrong. *Surprised by Joy* showed me nothing about the nature of my belief. All I could see was that Lewis had always been a Christian, and just slowly came to terms with his belief, so that one day he's walking with some friends, a breeze blows, and there you go, he's a Christian. I was annoyed by the book, because I expected an earth-shattering argument. I looked at the commitment to Christianity I had made in my late teenage years as a profound choice. When I came to *Surprised by Joy*, I wanted to encounter a forceful argument against atheism. I

realized later, however, that no argument would suffice to change my atheism, because I am not an atheist by choice. I use the term atheist voluntarily, but I did not choose not to believe in God.

Unbelief just happened to me. My religious convictions were not sent packing for a lack of faith and trying immensely hard to be a good Christian. The effects of those honest experiences of religious power which I once encountered – through years of theological training, Bible study, church attendance, fervent prayer, singing hymns and choruses, and all the cultural trappings of my particular religious community – linger, but they have a vastly different meaning today.

So, in becoming an atheist, whither my Mennonitism?

At the tail end of 2013 I was working for *The Uniter*, the University of Winnipeg's student newspaper. I was interviewing Nathan Dueck, an author raised in Winkler, Manitoba. He said he self-consciously considered himself Mennonite, and he also pointed out that he never attended a Mennonite church, was not baptized as a Mennonite, did not use the term ethnic Mennonite and did not speak Low German. He went on to explain to me that he also did not want to use the term ex-Mennonite to describe himself because he did not want to deny his heritage.

His description affected me because I had a hard time knowing how to apply the term Mennonite to myself, unless I used it to speak about my heritage and my life until my mid-twenties. It was true, I was no longer a Christian – I did not “believe in God,” I did not believe that Jesus Christ was “my lord and saviour,” and I did not even care whether or not Jesus existed as an historical person.

The word “belief” is inherently tricky. There is a way in which of course I believe in God, and the power of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The way in which I believe something is the way in which its story resonates within me, which is what I find “belief” means overall. I also believe in Superman, Shiva, Santa Clause, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Much, or all of my belief in a story, reflects my understanding of power: how do I live with the power I do or do not have, and how can I interact with other humans on a stage in which we all have some share in power? I do not mean anything supernatural by these questions. If there is any “energy” or force that connects us all it's gravity, or swirling electrons, protons, neutrons. I think any “meaning of life” is a human creation – and it can be a curse or gift to be required to find our own meaning in an existence which will carry on with or without us.

I still find the Bible to be one of many sources of authority even though I understand that much of the Bible is fictional. Likewise,

while I do not claim to be a Mennonite necessarily, I carry Mennonitism with me. For instance, I have yet to renounce pacifism. Additionally, I have not officially asked to be taken off the member's register at First Mennonite Church and still receive a tax-deductible receipt for zero dollars for my contributions to the church on an annual basis.

I have a hard time attending church because sermons do not usually allow for discussion. I appreciate religious institutions, however, because they grapple with morality and the question of what it means to be human. Most other institutions deal with questions of efficiency. Case in point: having attended a Christian high school and obtained my first degree from a Christian university, it has always been strange to be in other academic settings where the topic of religious belief is largely unaccounted for in a classroom setting. During my honours degree at the University of Winnipeg, I took mostly Art History courses. While much of the works we studied dealt with religious themes and iconography, students and professors tended not to address the topics from a standpoint of personal religious conviction. I rarely learned the religious convictions of my fellow students or of our professors at the University of Winnipeg, and yet I know they have beliefs related to religion.

Five years ago, a co-worker suggested I read a recently published book by evolutionary biologist, ethologist and popular atheist apologist Richard Dawkins titled *The God Delusion*. I remember mainly three things about the content of the book. Primarily, that a lot of his arguments, while fairly straightforward and convincing – to me – usually lacked a critical argumentative step, as if he just assumed his audience already thought the way he did. The other two points were that Dawkins said he still enjoyed attending services at the church in which he was raised and his comment that while there are many religious groups for students on campuses, there are few school-based communities for non-believers.

At the time I read the book, I did not think I had a term which I used to define my religious beliefs, and I was not looking for a group to which I could belong. Once I read Dawkins' book, however, I looked for opportunities for non-believers to associate and feel a sense of belonging with like-minded people. Such a group existed at the University of Manitoba, but there was no organization of this kind at my school. Therefore, in the spring of 2009, I created the University of Winnipeg Atheist Students Association, although I did not use the term atheist to define myself.

My brother asked me about this apparent incongruity a few times: why would I start an association for a group of people whose identity I did not share? Eventually, I admitted to myself that if the term for one who does not believe in God is “atheist,” then I would have to accept that word as describing my religious belief.

So, when I started the University of Winnipeg Atheist Students Association, what kind of institution was it I created? I first put some posters up around the university telling people about a Facebook group I had created, and then I waited. The first few meetings were held in my apartment, with the first attracting about six people. At one point we had close to one hundred members. I later formally applied to have the group officially recognized as a student group at the university so we could obtain some of the privileges accorded to student groups and we were accepted.

The main purpose of the organization was to create a place where non-believers could hang out with other non-believers, and to support students at this university who were atheists. The support was mainly an offer of moral support, to be a confidence booster, and to help people feel comfortable with talking about their identity. A monthly meeting was our sole regular activity. We also had barbecues, participated in student group fairs, and took field trips to places like the Planetarium, to a church talk on how evolution is untrue, and to the local Evidences Museum, a creationist's response to evolution, housed in the basement of Winnipeg's Oxford Bible Church.

Our group was not geared towards conversion and was not anti-theist. It was not a group of angry people who wanted to destroy the faith of others. There were no political objectives of the group. We did not even have requirements for membership besides the potential member wanting to become one.

This kind of non-organization typifies atheism; there is no doctrine, no requirements of belief, no head, no sacred texts, no saints, nothing: not with atheism proper, anyways. Popular atheism has all those things, but popular anything does. Some non-believers told me they were interested in the group, but that it made no sense for atheists to organize because there was nothing to organize about. I agreed, except that I thought it would simply be nice for atheists to meet other atheists; like any group of people, atheists are not all like-minded. We had members: not just people who hung out with us, but members who identified as Christian, pantheist, agnostic. While there is no content to atheism besides the belief that deities do not exist, that does not mean an atheist does not believe in anything. Instead our beliefs do not stem from our atheism.

The group lasted from 2009 to 2012. We had a core group of five to fifteen people who attended semi-regularly, but it was never a dynamic enough organization for anyone to want to carry the mantle.

How do my once-fellow Mennonites view me now that I am a heathen? Well, they still want me to be a part of the church, as an atheist. At least some of them do. I have a small number of acquaintances and friends who are pastors; if they are bothered by my atheism, they do not show it, and we have wonderful interactions, with no one trying to make the other person think the way we do about religion. In fact, a youth pastor some years ago asked if I would teach Sunday school. I told him I was a non-believer, but would be happy to teach about Mennonite heritage and Christianity and the Bible, with a focus on the land, food, and ethical choices surrounding these topics. I also said I would not invite or encourage the youth to become Christians or join the Mennonite church. He said he was fine with that and I taught the class.

Last year I applied for the job of director at the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg, a Mennonite Church Canada institution, requiring the director hold Anabaptist values. After I solicited them, I received letters of recommendation from three Mennonite pastors in full light of my atheism. Those offers of support are some of the most beautiful gifts I have ever been given. (I asked a few other pastors who did not offer the same support, although I still consider them good friends.) These gifts have reminded me of the sense of security in all social settings which I think every person would like to have, and I am thus spurred on to keep being an apologist for religious people when non-believers make disparaging comments about them or simply do not understand the Bible. I should point out that my atheism is not just a Christian or Mennonite atheism, although those are the contexts in which I came to understand theism and thus really the only languages I have for interacting with it.

Despite my general privilege, and support from Mennonite leaders, I have a bit of difficulty sharing about being an atheist. I often leave it off of a résumé when I apply for jobs. One of the most dedicated, thoughtful atheists I know, who is a genius socially and possesses business acumen, suggested I leave my involvement in the student group off my resume when applying for a job with him as a reference.

I also will likely never tell me aging grandmother about my unbelief. I want to admit the truth about who I am to her but it would only horrify and cause her immense sadness if she knew. I

wish people did not think it was horrible that I do not believe in god, but some do, and will, no matter what.

My parents and family members do not seem to be bothered by my atheism, but I know some good friends who are. They have told me I am worse than suicide bombers because “at least they believe something.” Or “I thought you were smarter than that.” Clearly, there is a lot of learning to do about what atheists are. But plenty of atheists have similar attitudes to believers. I do not really care what you believe. I do not care whether or not I am always going to be an atheist. I do care, very much, about how we treat one another.