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Finding Faith, Losing Religion

An attempt to identify myself...

For several years, my response was “I’m not sure. I know I’m not Christian.” This evolved into a more developed logic, “I’m Agnostic. I know that because I’m not a Christian. I’m not a Christian because I absolutely do not believe that Jesus Christ died for anything but punishment for posing a threat to the government. I’m Agnostic because I believe there is something more to *it*. I’m just not sure what.” Saying those words embarrassed me. I always thought myself above ignorance, but when asked what my religion was, I had nothing more intelligent to say. I was not about to identify as Christian solely because the majority of Americans do, let alone my family. In that sense, I knew I was not ignorant. I did know, however, that I needed to place a title to my beliefs if I was ever going to have any credibility in a discussion or debate about religion. So I decided to search. I needed to unravel this dilemma leaving a void within me in order to lead a fulfilling life. It was time for me, as a human being, to identify which religious category I could associate with. As controversial as the religious debates (wars) in our world are, I understand the significance of, first, explaining why I want an answer to this question. It must be noted that an extremely dangerous problem arises when a population does not regularly question the accepted beliefs and practices of their society. Questioning keeps authority figures; governments, religions, employers, et cetera, in check. Not questioning harbors an ignorant population susceptible to corruption and turmoil. Little did I know, distinguishing

reasons for my studious journey led me almost directly to the answer. Understanding how complex religion truly is, though, I decided to not stop there. There was no way this was going to be that easy.

The best way for me to begin my investigation was to clearly note what the search did not mean to me. First, I, in no way, intended to find a meaning for my life on this planet. Next, I was not searching for answers to any deeply philosophical questions. I then must note that, due to my pre-constructed beliefs, I was not looking for guidance from any “higher power,” and was not looking for acceptance among any particular group. Most importantly, in order to redeem my credibility among a widely-Christian population, I was not out to dispel Christianity or dissect and pummel the Christian church. Doing that would imply that Christianity is the natural norm that needs to be dismissed. For one who is absolutely positive of their disbelief in Christianity which stems from a childhood of doubt, I have no reason to prove to myself that Christianity is not my “way.” I am also aware of the fact that constructing an essay in an antichrist voice would benefit me in no way.

Having identified what I was not looking for, I needed to confirm with myself what exactly it was that I *was* doing. Reasons must exist for why I would possibly want to label myself. I have three prominent reasons for my examination into religious philosophy. Simplest of all is the ease factor. I would like to establish a simple, educated response for what it is that I truly believe. More personally, locating a group that I can belong to will assist me in establishing my identity as a unique human being. Finally, some of the strongest and deepest companionship I have witnessed has its roots in religious philosophy. Placing a name on my philosophy would help me find others who share my common philosophy and would inevitably set me up for potentially meaningful relationships with other humans.

What I knew, how it relates, and what I *needed* to know...

The most intimidating element of this search was going to be sorting through the thousands of religions to find the right one. I knew that within each religion was a plethora of variances and denominations of each religious system. What assisted in guiding me through my search, and also exponentially complicated it, was my acknowledgement that each religion holds its own certain amount of truth and each, none more than the other, holds significant value. Coming from a small, rural town in the Heartland of the United States, one which has thirty-three Christian churches for its eleven thousand citizens, I was also aware of the Christian church's predominance where I grew up and in the United States overall. Yet another perplexing thought is the fact that each religion is distinct and unique. Distinguishing factors of various religions include different sets of values, different gods and/or icons, different methods, places, and books of worship, and, what compels me the most, different views on life and the afterlife.

Knowing what I already did know about religion, I understood that I needed to learn much more in order to answer my question. I needed to study different religions, what they stand for, how they behave (generally speaking), and what and how they worship. I also needed to do some personal philosophizing for myself. Getting in touch with myself and identifying what I truly believe in *before* associating with a religion allowed me to find what suits me as opposed to how I could settle into a religion. I knew that I was not going to alter my beliefs for any cause; I was going to see what I could classify under based on my core morals, values, and beliefs.

Recognizing my self-proclaimed philosophy and all of its fine details brought me much closer to what others may call "g/God," I call "fulfillment." The important elements of my philosophy include equality among all humans. This is to say that citizens of one country, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, and class are all wholly and completely equally

evolved. Evolution would be my next major belief. Through rationality, it is impossible for me to claim the works of thousands of scientists as insignificant enough to be overlooked or disregarded due to archaic religious philosophies of creation. These two ideas led me to my personal conclusion that I do not believe any form of higher power exists. What I have now whittled down to is some form of Atheism – which would also lead me to suggest that each human being has ultimate and total control over his/her own fate. One widely-believed concept that I never could fully understand the basis for belief is that of an afterlife. Since the seventh grade, when I learned what brainwaves were, I have seen all thoughts, ideas, and the other elements that make up one's "soul" as nothing more than electronic impulses dancing around the brain like a field full of fireflies under the night sky. Under this logic, when the body dies, the electronic impulses stop, killing the mind as well. In short, there is no afterlife. As I continue, my philosophy would seem to grow more and more controversial in our American society. With that, I feel that neither I nor anybody else should be persecuted for their religious beliefs. An overall respect for fellow humankind, one that is given, not earned, is another belief that falls right in line with my philosophy. To continue to list my personal convictions would result in me writing my own personal philosophy like those of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. I, in appreciation for the longevity and powerful impact of the words of those great philosophers, will refrain from doing so. I have detailed the main points of my beliefs; I must carry on with how I began to classify them.

My crusade...

Naturally, the first step in any research process is picking a topic to research. The differences in researching a topic for personal gain versus researching to write about, for personal gain or not, are in the topic selection itself. To research something that you plan on

sharing with others through writing or any other medium, the topic must have universality.

Religion, though different in all corners of the world, is one of the single most universal topics we can encounter in our modern planetary society. What made religion a potential topic, though, is my individual interest in it.

Once I decided to embark on this complex journey, the next step was to, as I have already detailed, think about what I already knew about religion and what I wanted to know about religion. The guiding factor in this process, though, would be to understand what religion means to me. The definition of religion that I have chosen to employ features no element of gods, God, or the supernatural. Religion, to me, is “a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). Previously, I would have defined religion based on my family and friends’ values and beliefs. That logic, though, is far too passive for me to submit to. In the interest of universality, it is important for me to acknowledge that which others would apply as their definition of religion. This, for the general population, would consist of a god, God, or other higher power.

During the Information Revolution, the modern counterpart of the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions, and with my utmost respect for science and technology, the first active method I elected to utilize for gathering information on religion was a general web search. Luckily Google places the most relevant results at the top; sorting through 321 million pages to find information did not strike me as the way I wanted to spend the remainder of my years. Doing this, I found information on a huge (uncountable) number of religions. This search method offered me links to sites which provided me with a general overview of some of the most popular religions. This approach was not going to answer every question I had, no doubt, but it did open me up to different religions that I had never heard of before. Google linked me to the BBC’s

webpage devoted to various religions. This was the most useful overview tool I found. Not only did it summarize the world's major religions, it listed copious amounts of resources for further information on each. On top of that, BBC.co.uk itemized various denominations and subdivisions of the major religions. This feature changed my life.

Being faced with the daunting task of picking one of these religion/subdivision and/or denomination combinations for myself, I knew I had to narrow down the list. I approached this task with great care; I had to make sure I didn't overlook the right one. I had two different methods for narrowing down the massive list. The first, one I am not particularly proud of, made sense to me. I picked four of the world's largest religions, despite their belief in a higher power. My justification for this seemingly careless selection process is simple: if so many people accept these philosophies as true, and have for thousands of years, perhaps there is some validity underneath the visages I have refused to accept. The second method focused more on what the overviews claimed as the different religions' dogmas and how I could relate to them. In the first category of religions I narrowed my list down to, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism became subjects of my research. The four philosophies which personally appealed to me, Unitarian/Universalist, Humanism, Agnosticism, and a blunt claim of "no religion" fell into my second category.

The next step in my process was to survey fellow classmates via e-mail. The survey was sent to roughly thirty of my peers to determine where their beliefs lie. Though I was not too optimistic about my results, rather I had assumed what they would be, I followed through with this method simply because I wanted to identify if any of my peers were facing the same challenge I was with identifying oneself with a religion. The questions I asked my peers would lead me to information regarding what religion they associate with, what religion their family

associates with, whether or not they attend religious services, if they have any interest in attending religious services, what they claim as their religion on a social networking website, Facebook, if they have ever questioned the integrity of their religion and its teachings, and finally if they have ever searched for a religion that better suits them than the one they currently associate with. The reaction to these questions was by no means overwhelming or surprising. The results were interesting in that they confirmed my assumptions and in a timely matter, however with less than half of the sample population responding, I could not let myself be completely satisfied with the results. This would also lead me to investigate the flaws with surveying in this manner. Such is the case in many optional surveys, only those who are most passionate about the topic respond. This, in turn, leads to a very small amount of responses.

Looking beyond the flaws of the survey and turning to the results, only one out of the twelve responses could not identify as Christian. One hundred percent of those who responded came from Christian families. Despite the fact that seven out of twelve do not attend religious services, ten out of twelve say that they do have interest in attending. Another ten out of twelve declare Christianity as their religion on Facebook while the other two refused to respond to that particular question. Despite the fact that fifty percent of those who responded have questioned the integrity of their church and its teachings, only one out of twelve has searched for a more suitable religion for themselves. What that says is that, though six out of twelve have questioned the integrity and practices of their church, only one out of that same twelve has sought out alternative religious practices. This would seem to suggest the same ignorance that is potentially detrimental to society as we know it; at least it has proven to be in the past.

Beyond the confines of a relatively small survey, I also gathered data from the social networking site, Facebook, itself and from the United States Census Bureau. The purpose of

gathering data from Facebook, like that of the survey, was to get a further understanding of where my peers stand, to determine their passion for their religion, to see how they may market themselves as humans, and to see if I could expand on my list of potential answers to my overall question. The procedure I used to gather data from Facebook was simple. First, I had individuals on my personal “Friends” list organized in a random fashion. From the random order, I went to the first fifty user profiles to read what they occupied their “Religion” field with. The data I gathered revealed to me that one out of fifty identifies as Agnostic, twelve out of fifty identify as Christian (various denominations), three out of fifty rest their faith, or claim to, in music, twenty-five out of fifty, half of the sample population, refused to respond to the field, while one out of fifty identified as Pagan. The remaining eight posted other, non-faith based information in this field. Compared to the U.S. Census data I gathered from 2001, 76.7% should have responded “Christian,” while only 24% actually did. The significance of 50% of the sample population refusing to share their religious beliefs is not to go unnoticed. This could imply a variety of things including, but not limited to, a fear of social rejection based on religious beliefs or the idea that some may truly not know how to classify themselves religiously. This 50% of peers comes nowhere close to the U.S. Census’ 5.4% of individuals who refused to disclose their religious affiliation. Some other interesting data gathered from the Census information is pulled from a comparison of religious affiliation from 1990 and 2001. In 2001, 76.7% of those who completed the Census identified as Christian compared to the 86.4% in 1990. Though the numbers show a decline in the popularity of Christianity over those eleven years, the difference could also be attributed to a more diverse population entering the United States.

Who I am...

In my venture to classify myself religiously, I did have an underlying suspicion I was looking to investigate. This suspicion was whether or not the general population is allowing themselves to question beliefs, practices, and rituals widely accepted as the norm to prevent themselves from falling ignorant, opening themselves and society up to a great demise of civilization. This, I would contend, is the problem of not questioning.

I also needed to align myself with the proper definition of religion that would suit my beliefs. It is important to recognize religion is not only a set of beliefs guided by faith; it is a way of life. Upon examining my beliefs and the various pre-established religions available for classification, and also concluding that society has no right to influence my beliefs, I have come to understand exactly where I fit in the colorful spectrum of assorted religions. According to the U.S. Census Bureau data, less than .05% of Americans identified as Humanist in both 1990 and 2001, however the actual number of Humanists is growing faster than the population growth rate. This is not to be used as due justification for my newfound affiliation with the Humanist society, however the compelling *Humanist Manifesto* series of essays and books seems to recite, in writing, everything that I feel is right in the Universe.

In the first *Humanist Manifesto*, *Humanist Manifesto I*, written in 1933 by Raymond B. Bragg and Roy Wood Sellars, fifteen points defining the true meaning of Humanism lead to what is determined as the “central task for mankind”: the quest for the good life. It also acknowledges that man is responsible for determining his own fate and that he alone has the power to achieve greatness. Notably, Bragg and Sellars establish the core of general Humanist beliefs: the philosophy of Creation of the Universe has been discounted by then-modern science, along with that, man has evolved through a continuous process, mind and body are one, suggesting no afterlife, religion is a means for realizing the highest values of life, toleration of other religious

entities is natural for Humanists, and finally that it is important for the Humanist doctrine to be left open for change based on world events and scientific advancements.

Humanist Manifesto II was compiled in 1973 by Paul Kurtz and Edwin H. Wilson. This second *Manifesto* elaborated on points presented in *Humanist Manifesto I* and related them to modern events. Though it accuses *Humanist Manifesto I* of presenting a message filled with too much optimism, Kurtz and Wilson point out that a more realistic optimism will present a more viable outlook to Humanists. *HMII* also declares the Humanist opposition to racism, weapons of mass destruction, and reaffirms its disbelief in supernaturalism. The points included in *Humanist Manifesto II* also face the modern issues of the 1970s such as: support of human rights, birth control, including abortion, and divorce, and the idea that technology is and will continue to improve our lives. A more effective international court system is also called for. The most powerful excerpts from *HMII* claim “No deity will save us; we must save ourselves,” and “We are responsible for what we are and what we will be.”

An up-to-date version of the *Manifesto* was published in 2000. *Humanist Manifesto 2000* was another modernized compilation of Humanist beliefs edited by Paul Kurtz. This, like its predecessor, expands on points noted in previous editions of the *Manifesto*. The most revolutionary idea of *HM2000* is a call for “Planetary Humanism.” This looks at Humanism beyond a religious system and pushes into a more political movement. Some modernized points of *Humanist Manifesto 2000* include: recognizing the benefits of technology, openly accepting scientific naturalism, placing a call for a universal commitment to humanity as a whole, and a newfound optimism about the human prospect. Part of the Planetary Humanism movement includes a suggested Planetary Bill of Rights and Responsibilities to not only guarantee rights to everybody in our globalized society, but to establish responsibilities for all humankind to uphold.

The globalization of our world is a product of the Information Revolution we are currently living in. Humanism recognizes the significance of this movement and calls for new planetary institutions to assist in governing our new, worldwide society.