

## HONK IF YOU LOVE VOLTAIRE: A RELIGIOUS LIFE

**M**y earliest religious memory is being taught to pray by my mother at the age of four:

“Now I lay me down to sleep.  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.  
If I should die before I wake,  
I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

The source of considerable discomfort to me, this prayer is still the source of my occasional insomnia. The reminder of death at bedtime for probably a dozen years before I quit the morbid practice, however, probably led to another prayer in my adolescence, “Lord, make a regular man out of me.”

A third prayer that I recall from my grade school years was a self-created desire to be the first in our family to die. The wish originated in a panic when I convinced myself that my parents had left me to the Gypsies, when they were simply reminiscing with some old friends at the hardware store while I waited at home peering through the Venetian blinds. Of course, my prayer was an overreaction to my fear of abandonment, but I requested the favor of an early death for several years before I outgrew this unwholesome practice. Fear, it seems, was a seminal influence on my religious development, and I’m confident that it’s an underlying factor in many believers who fear unbelief more than the devil.

My childhood, however, was not entirely morose. I recall Dear, my maternal grandmother, who incidentally owed her nickname to this adoring grandson, telling me one night as we sat on her back porch that the stars were knot holes in heaven’s floor. When I awoke once about three in the morning as a fire engine jangled by, I wondered why the heavenly lights were still on so late. Were the angels so extravagant, or did they just sleep during the day? If they slept while the sun was up, who was looking out for our welfare? And couldn’t God afford a seamless floor covering? Questions that made a grandmother squirm had much to do with creating my personal brand of nondogmatic spirituality.

I began a more formal religious regimen when my mother enrolled me in a Protestant Sunday school at the age of five in Heidelberg, Germany. (My father was a military officer, so we moved every two or three years.) The start of my religious odyssey, however, was not auspicious. Someone’s offering apparently had rolled out on the floor, so I tidied it up and placed it in my pocket. When my mother found the quarter in my coat after church, she accused me of not putting my money in the plate. I tried to explain, but guilt was already my meat, shame my potatoes. Later that summer, I passed out in church when the congregation rose unexpectedly to sing a hymn. My father carried me outside into the shade and tried to comfort me, but I knew that God was punishing a thief. When I took my measure beside Calvin’s yardstick, I was a foot shy of salvation.

I convinced myself that the slate was washed clean when we moved to Virginia, and before I knew it, I qualified for a “Hundred Sunday Bible” at the Falls Church Presbyterian Church. When the Army moved us again, I found myself in Brooklyn’s P.S. 201, where I was the only Protestant in my seventh-grade class. On Wednesday afternoons when my

classmates went to religious training at the corner Catholic church, I sat alone while Miss Munnely graded papers, and I estimated the range of the Pope's authority. When my father heard about these students attending confirmation classes, he surprised everyone by inquiring if the Ft. Hamilton Protestant chaplain would include me in his next class. I suspect he had a notion that some of the material covered would be on the SAT's. Suddenly I found myself memorizing the books of the Bible, the Lord's Prayer, and the Apostles' Creed. The Sunday that I stood confirmed in faith before the congregation was one of the prouder of my first twelve years, made even more significant by my father, who had privately been taking these classes himself, standing with me and a dozen other children. I never have understood why he didn't tell me about his classes, but then we rarely spoke or speak about theological matters, my father being from the John Wayne School of Theology. I was proud that he had joined the church, yet I often wished he would confide his thoughts about Jonah's survival, Mary's virginity, and Jesus's resurrection to me, but then his misgivings (if he had any) were no match for mine.

A year later, the Army sent our family to Norfolk, Virginia where my father attended the Armed Forces Staff College, and I made friends with the base chaplain's son. After Indian baseball on the parade ground one afternoon, we went to the chaplain's quarters to play indoors. As we passed by his parents' open bedroom, I glanced through the dark into the brightly lit bathroom. There the chaplain's wife was just stepping out of the shower and reaching for her towel. She looked up at me, smiled softly, and slowly swung the door shut with her bare, wet foot. I stood there in the hall while something foreign rolled in my groin. It was a religious experience, but I had no name for what I had been converted to.

The Army next moved us back to Ft. Benning, Georgia where my father went through airborne training. The family, however, lived in Columbus within walking distance of my grandparents. Here my grandmother, who had told me about the quaint floor of heaven a decade earlier, predicted that I would become a preacher. She had ten grandchildren, and it was appropriate, she said, that a tithe be returned to the church. I realized even then that I should have never told her about climbing the towering oak in the backyard every time a thunderstorm was cooking on the horizon. Up in that tree as the wind tried to toss me from my mount, I felt closer to the deity, whom I often recognized in violent weather. Yet even on clear days, judging from my shadow, I had begun to notice that the sun seemed to follow me about, so I was sure I had been chosen for something miraculous. At the First Presbyterian, I stretched my arms and let my head sag forward before the cruciform mirror in the choir room. I prayed that God would clarify which spiritual Banzai charge He wanted me to lead, but all I heard was silence, a very good answer I now realize, for at that hormone-conflicted time, I would have nailed myself to a cross like one of those Filipino ascetics if I'd thought He wanted me to. I studied my catechism devoutly, recited my verses each Sunday, and prepared for "sword drill," but when my father was called back to Washington, I was pried from the church kitchen that was fueling the grease fire in my soul. My spirit slumping, I arrived just in time to be chosen to play a mute shepherd in a nativity scene on the Mall within a stone's throw of the White House. After one dispirited performance, I wondered if President Eisenhower ever had the Secret Service drop his son John off at Sunday school, the way my father often did, and then pick him up when it was over.

Even as I stewed over our most recent uprooting and worried about my father's soul, I found myself admitting that what I liked best about church were the hymns and pipe

organ. The music of the longhaired organist moved me, made the hair at my nape stand erect while the words of the close-cropped minister brushed them back down. In fact, the mountain-road oratorical manner of the ranting Rev. Valentine was distinctly unpleasant. The man was stone deaf to the whisper's clout. I never understood why he couldn't just speak to the congregation instead of roaring along trying to out-Jehovah Jehovah. I longed for a minister who could talk to me in the rational cadences of Mrs. Cooley, my senior English teacher.

After a brief but abortive attempt to get a degree in civil engineering at Georgia Tech in 1959, I enlisted in the Army for Germany. I honestly had no idea when I was seventeen that one could major in English or history. I figured that my father had studied engineering, so I should study engineering. I realized too late that my tacit acquiescence in the choice of a major was akin to my father's silent drift into confirmation class. In short order, the Army sent me to West Germany to gather electronic intelligence that slipped over the Iron Curtain. I tried attending several German churches, but the language barrier was insuperable. Fortunately, I was stationed with a company of college dropouts like myself, so there was more to off-duty time than carousing at the Enlisted Men's Club. I began reading paperback novels donated by the USO, fighting over the Stars and Stripes crossword puzzles, and going to the free movies in the mess hall. I also took several leaves to England, Italy, and France where I visited some of the great cathedrals, but to me they were marmoreal tombs, more interesting as art and architecture than spiritual havens. I began to wonder about the commitment of those within the church when I saw two nuns in Rome staring intently at wedding gowns in a store window. Wasn't it enough to be a bride of Christ? In Paris, I visited several of the big churches like Sacré-Coeur that reeked of urinous beggars, asleep but upright in the pews. The church custodians allowed people to sit or kneel, but anyone lying down got the bum's rush whether they smelled of vomit or Chanel.

When I returned after three years to the States, I was married and my wife was pregnant. The Army had given me time I never had in high school to read and think, but religion, I feared, in any traditional sense was fading from my life as acne cleared from my face. My German wife and I settled in Columbus, Georgia because my mother's family was there (though my parents and sisters were back in Germany), and several aunts and uncles had offered to help us get established while I returned to school. My maternal grandmother and spiritual mentor, however, had died just six months before we arrived.

Though my wife was nominally Lutheran, I convinced her to go with me to my old church—the First Presbyterian. The Rev. Robert McNeill who'd been an outspoken advocate of desegregation in the mid-50s had lost his job. I did not much care for his replacement, but we did like the assistant pastor and his wife who turned out to be neighbors in the next block. We soon became fast friends and made a special point of attending church when Roger was preaching. Early in 1965, he was embroiled in a battle with the church elders to permit the operation of a day-care center in the church's Sunday school rooms, which stood vacant during the week. Though the church was situated on the edge of a black neighborhood, there wasn't a single African-American in the church membership. Roger preached that the "church exists to give itself away," but the elders and the senior minister ("Beelzebubba," Roger called him), pulled rank on their assistant pastor, and plans for the proposed day-care facility were shelved. Disappointed, Roger and his wife decided to return to school to fix the world a different way—teaching history. In Roger's first letter from the University of Georgia to us, he said he had discovered to his delight

that in the Library of Congress cataloguing system, theology books are shelved in the BS section. When the church failed to support Roger on the day-care issue, I thought that the moral authority of the church had become more thunder than lightning. And Roger's veiled scatological joke implied that I had little to fear from the thunder either.

In the newspapers of the late '60s and '70s as I finished my schooling and took a teaching job at Clemson University, I read Dr. Billy Graham's confident measurement of heaven's 1600 square miles and Dr. Bailey Smith's equally confident claim that "God does not hear the prayer of a Jew." Marjoe Gortner, a former child evangelist, revealed how his mother would paint a crucifix on his forehead using a clear liquid chemical before revival meetings and then wait until the perspiration turned the cross a bright red as he worked up a lather "barking like a dog for Jesus." Only then would he pass the offering plate. Just a few miles away in Greenville, SC, the Rev. Bob Jones, III, was denouncing First Lady Betty Ford as "a plain slut." This rude condemnation came after Mrs. Ford candidly admitted to an interviewer on national television that while some of her grown children might have had premarital sex and smoked marijuana without her knowledge or permission, she still loved them. A year earlier, Dr. Jones had applied to the state attorney general for two .45 caliber submachine guns and two .30 caliber Browning automatic rifles because "the school has two thousand young ladies living on campus." The attorney general thought that the school's steel fences, security guards, and locked doors offered reasonable safety. He worried that the mile-plus range of the weapons threatened the well-being of the school's neighbors, and the application was denied. All four of these churchmen, not to mention Swaggart, Bakker, Falwell, and Roberts, left the communion wafer souring on my tongue.

My inability to swallow whole the body of Christ led me deeper into my literary studies. I decided that if God wasn't dead, as *Time* had famously wondered despite Nietzsche's self-assured declaration, then He might well be reading Faulkner or Hemingway. St. Aquinas had warned of the one-book man, a caricature that surely does not include the deity who inspired Mozart, Michelangelo, and Milton as surely as Moses and Matthew. Yet every Christian denomination I've ever sought to join has insisted on the divine status of the Bible despite Abraham's shocking readiness to cut his son's throat, Lot's willingness to sacrifice his daughters, and David's unholy treatment of Bathsheba. I simply refuse to take any book as dogma that argues for slavery, capital punishment, second-class citizenship for women, the tormenting of homosexuals, and the execution of witches.

Nevertheless, if the Bible is man-made literature filled with heroes and anti-heroes rather than a God-dictated white paper, there is room for it on my shelves with a host of others. But like Bertrand Russell, I will place an antidote next to the poison and stand Voltaire beside the Testaments.

To satisfy my spiritual appetite in my twenties and thirties, I sampled fare from a variety of church-picnic tables. I had a brief fling as a Deist after taking a course in eighteenth-century literature because it seemed that the Creator had, indeed, set and wound the sundials rather precisely once and for all. However, like so much standoffish classical architecture, Deism lacked the warm appeal I sought. Nevertheless, when I began teaching American literature at Clemson, I loved to engage my mostly Baptist and Methodist students in discussions of Franklin, Pope, and Dryden's notion that "Whatever is, is right." I would ask, for example, "What good is lightning? Lightning is real, so what makes it right?" Usually a budding forester would offer that lightning starts forest fires which burn

out the underbrush allowing new vegetation to sprout for wildlife. An agriculture student might offer that lightning fixes nitrogen in the soil thus providing free fertilizer. And a ham radio operator might recall that after an electrical storm, the airways are free of static. I then would say, "Well, if the lightning destroys a church full of people, is it still right?" Here's where the discussion became interesting, for most of my students had never considered that, as some wag said, "In the beginning, God said, Ha!"

I'll never forget one free-thinking student telling a class that Jesus might be the Antichrist because the gospels don't rule out the possibility of a breech birth. Furthermore, he said, Easter is a fraud because Christ said he'd rise in three days when, in fact, he rose in about forty hours. A devout classmate, who carried his well-thumbed Bible in a zip-lock bag, said, "Excuse me, please, in Jesus' name. Just because Christ rose from the dead in forty hours doesn't make Jesus or the Resurrection a fraud. He was put to death on a Friday, and he rose on Sunday! That is good enough for me and millions more." I never try to resolve or take sides in such disputes, but the discussion of these matters in and out of class is what college is mainly about. My old college friend Max Langley, who liked to quote Ernst Haeckel's definition of God as a "gaseous vertebrate," told me once in the Columbus College library that every thinking person eventually experiences a crisis of faith. After hearing that, I did everything I could to precipitate my own crisis and generally succeeded. Spiritual crises like runaway buses, it seems, are much easier to handle if you're driving the bus, not riding helplessly in the back seat with your jaw set and eyes shut.

Speaking of former students of a religious bent, the deepest-dip theo-Nazi I ever taught was a math major who argued with a colleague that "X equals Jesus." One day she came to my freshman composition class with the *Christian Student Dictionary* published by Bob Jones University Press. Having never seen this reference work before and being something of a lexiconophile, I asked if I might look it over while she and her classmates wrote an in-class essay. To my astonishment, her dictionary, published in 1983, did not have definitions for *skepticism*, *interracial*, *atheism*, *puberty*, *abortion*, or *cigarette*. I suppose the editors thought that if they ignored an embarrassment, it would disappear. After class, I suggested to her that a more complete college dictionary might better serve her writing needs. She begged to differ and reminded me that "Satan's biggest lie is moderation." Not to be outquoted, I mentioned Luther's observation that "it isn't necessary to swallow the Holy Ghost feathers and all." "Yes, but Luther was a Lutheran," she said. She had me there. Her analysis of Richard Wilbur's "Death of a Toad," incidentally, noted that since the poet's use of three, six-line stanzas was a subtle manifestation of the apocalyptic 666, the lawn mower, which had mortally wounded the toad, symbolized satanic technology. I failed the paper and wrote, "You have a friend in exegesis, but you haven't met him yet." The student dropped the class, and I never saw her again, but I can't say that I'm sorry.

As far as organized religion is concerned, I suppose the last straw snapped when my dying uncle sent the Rev. Jim Bakker several thousand dollars to reserve a time-share condominium at what some called "The Christers Theme Park" near Charlotte, North Carolina. Uncle Bill died before the facility was ever built (indeed, it has never been built), but his money was never returned. This uncle, however, was always one to cover his bets. For instance, he once "guaranteed" his winning the Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes Award by subscribing to one hundred and twenty magazines, all that were offered. He lost. That's when he put his money on a "red" Jim Bakker, but the number turned up "black."

The next stop at the church picnic table was a dish of asceticism. A powerful concert by the Japanese Kodo drummers, a small sect of Zen Buddhists who run twenty miles a day together, eat nothing but seaweed, and drum for hours on the beach of a small, God-forsaken Pacific island, reignited an old ascetic ideal in me in the early 1990s. I had longed to join the Peace Corps while I was in college in the 60s, but a family of three to support killed that dream. I had also dabbled in Transcendental Meditation for a while, but it proved too stressful in the long-run because I constantly worried whether I had enough time not to worry for forty minutes each day.

One day, a woodworker friend called and asked if I'd help him deliver a new communion table and pulpit to the Poor Clares' convent in Greenville. I leapt at the chance to explore the inside of a place ordinarily shut to those of fluctuating faith. After we had unloaded the new furniture and while the nuns settled their debts, I wandered off in the garden where a nun approached me and asked if I'd like to see the convent's beehives. When I agreed, she produced a veiled hat and a pair of gloves for both of us. As the sister opened the hive, she remarked on the perfect hexagonal cells, not unlike the small, tidy rooms in the dormitory. "The bees are exemplars of cleanliness, organization, industry, and loyalty," she said. "They appear to die in the winter and are reborn in the spring, so they naturally remind us of our Savior whose mercy is sweet yet whose judgment is sharp. We use their wax for candles and sell their honey." Naively I asked, "Don't you save any for yourselves?" "Oh, no, we never sweeten our food or drink." What a reproach to pleasure, I thought. If they could, these nuns would blot out the sun because its warmth feels good. Driving back to Clemson, my friend remembered the story of the Hindu monk who after twenty-five years of hard work and self-denial had taught himself to walk on water. "What a shame and waste of time," said the Buddha on meeting the renown ascetic. "For a penny, you could have taken the ferry." As my sainted grandmother, who loved candied yams as much as her Jesus, liked to say, "Blessed are they who expect nothing, for they will not be disappointed."

I wouldn't call cults a main dish on the church picnic table, but I did pick at one dish when a friend disappeared into the black hole of Eckankar. When I came to Clemson, I was assigned to Professor Bob Cross for mentoring. Bob and I hit it off from the start, but what fascinated me most about Bob was the relationship he had with his wife. The two were inseparable. Fortunately, there were no children, for a Cross child would have found the competition stiff for parental love. At work, they asked for and received one office with facing desks. At home, they read science fiction and took long walks together with their poodle. Perhaps I missed the warning signs, but Bob missed them as well, for we were both stunned when Joan announced, "Earth is the hell for all planets circling Alpha Centauri." She, for one, was moving to California to have her astral shoes "resouled" as the new editor of the *Eckankar Journal*. In her spare time, she and her fellow Eckankar disciples planned to travel to various planes of the Sugmad and serve their Eck master. In 1997, some twenty years later when I read of the thirty-nine Heaven's Gate suicides, I scanned the list of the deceased fully expecting to find Joan's name among those tailing the Hale-Bopp comet. Fortunately, Joan's name was not among the missing. About the only cult that impresses me now is the Frisbeeterian, not to be confused with the Presleyterian, which is interesting to me only in an academic, pop culture sort of way. The former faction believes that when someone dies, the soul goes up on a roof, and no one can retrieve it. It makes as much sense as leaving a devoted husband for the unexplored Sugmad.

I jest in earnest, of course, but where do I stand well past the midpoint of “a religious life”? Outside the church like a flying buttress or inside like a pillar? Both and neither. A few years ago as I prepared to teach a selection from “Matthew” in a humanities class, I decided to paraphrase and edit for myself the “Sermon on the Mount.” Here’s the result: “Good people are hopeful of a final reward, generous, unassuming, compassionate, modest, and forgiving. They mourn their dead and try their best to place the welfare of others before themselves. They actively seek peace among those who fight. They are aware of their own shortcomings. They’re willing to be martyred but only for a *good* cause. They are firm in their faith despite opposition. They swallow their anger (though they may manifest righteous indignation), are not lustful or deceitful, and keep their promises. They build strong families that are seldom split by divorce but recognize that, at times, separation is preferable to union. They pray and perform their charities in private. They suffer *small* offenses with forbearance. They recognize that the health of the spirit is worth more than material wealth. Food and clothing beyond the minimum needs are unimportant. They are not hypocritical or judgmental. Their paradigm is the Good Samaritan and Jesus himself. They believe all people are brothers and sisters.”

With regard to the infinite and eternal Creator, I do believe that whatever set all matter in motion has remained in contact with the Earth and humankind, but I do not regard this power as absolute, for that would negate human freedom, which is no more absolute than the deity’s is. I see God, His sleeves rolled, as a green-visored dealer in a poker game, shuffling the cards but giving man an opportunity to cut them. God then deals without knowing who is receiving which cards. There are times when God’s own hand is so poor that He folds His cards, stands, and walks around the green-felt table. As He makes the rounds without signaling any of His favorites, He sees who holds the highest hand, but He has no way of preventing someone with a weak hand from bluffing and occasionally winning. Nor does He have any way of keeping the player with the potential winning hand from folding. Since He called the game and dealt, He is the most powerful, and since He saw the hands after folding, He is the most knowledgeable, but He is neither all-powerful nor all-knowing. Most humans, on the other hand, are born with four cards of an inside straight and hustle most of their lives trying to fill it.

Finally, some Sunday morning when I’m not eating a Swiss-cheese omelet, reading the comics, or taking a bike ride in the Clemson Forest, I will visit Jerusalem—the Muslim Temple Mount, the Christian Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and the Jewish Wailing Wall. From each, I will take the best that I can. Should all three of these shrines be blown up tomorrow, you will not see me worshipping in any of the craters, for I’m confident they will be filled to capacity with the faithful. Still:

Without the church, much would rise in smoke.  
I believe in the faith of other folk.