

# *Michael Milburn*

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## This Believer

A doctor once suggested that I use hypnosis to gain access to a self-critical inner voice that has plagued me since childhood. She said that the issues that had led me to seek treatment were unlikely to respond to conventional talk therapy. While the prospect of a cure appealed to me, I worried that any attempt to hypnotize me would be met by opposition from my rational mind. Over time, I came to agree with the therapist's prognosis and accepted her offer. As our first session approached, my skepticism gave way to excitement: the reflexive disapproval that had sapped my self-esteem for so long might finally be silenced. Yet from the moment the therapist began to talk, my mind clung to its bearings in the physical world—cars passing outside, a door closing in the hallway, an itch on my foot. After several tries, she gave up. I wasn't proud of my resistance, and still wonder what effect a successful treatment might have had on the thoughts that continue to get in the way of my happiness.

“If the grace of God miraculously operates,” William James writes in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, “it probably operates through the subliminal door.” The same qualities that led me to try hypnosis but kept me from surrendering to it also seem to govern my response to religious influence, in particular my ability to have faith in someone or something intangible. I pray regularly, but without any clear sense of whom I am addressing or whether I am being heard. My prayers help me, but I'm also guilty of using them as a hedge against the possible consequences of not praying—lightning strikes, health crises, my plane going down the next time I fly. (Perhaps this kind of superstitious thinking underlies all religious belief.) As for the existence of God, I can't bring myself to discount it, though I find arguments in favor of atheism incontrovertible. It's this contradictory nature of my faith, unfounded but unshakeable, that makes me want to figure out more precisely what I believe and draw comfort from it.

I identify my faith primarily through process of elimination—I can't imagine living without it, so I must have it. But just as I can't commit unequivocally to atheism, I also can't conceive of an abiding, life-ordering faith, particularly in a deity such as Christ, who despite (or because of) my Christian upbringing is only perceptible to me in representations on stained glass windows and New Testament book covers. I don't feel Christ directing or protecting me, or have a realistic relationship with him such as devout Christians claim to have. The idea of nature as a source of spiritual power appeals to me, but nature only inspires me with its beauty, not the transcendent qualities that Emerson or Spinoza claim for it. ("All thrills and no work" is how C.S. Lewis dismisses religions that find God in nature). So if the faith that I possess is not derived from or directed at nature or Christ or any other deity, then what or whom do I have faith in? Who is my "God as we understand him," as Alcoholics Anonymous calls its higher power so as to encourage non-believers into its fold?

My acquaintance with two people at opposite ends of the faith spectrum helps me to address this question. Joan is a devout Christian who attributes all the events in her life to God's will. She prays for good fortune and refuses to complain about or challenge adversity. Watching her endure a boyfriend's mistreatment with Christ-like passivity, I can't help but see her as deluded. As much as I respect and even aspire to theistic faith, I'm wary of anyone who invests a deity with unconditional power. At the other extreme, George, a high school senior, wears his atheism loudly and proudly. For him, the lack of evidence for God's existence is sufficient proof of religion's folly. He strikes me as no less naïve than Joan about the myriad forces at work in the universe. As both a skeptic and a believer in the power of prayer, I place my own faith midway between these two poles.

On a visit to New York City last summer I took the subway uptown to stand outside the Church of Corpus Christi, where Thomas Merton was baptized. I had just finished Merton's autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which chronicles his path from unbeliever to Catholic convert to Trappist monk. Having identified with Merton's quest for faith, I wanted to see where he first followed through on his religious calling. I imagined him hurrying down the sidewalk on 121<sup>st</sup> Street, borne forward by a mysterious force ("I finally answered an impulsion that had been working on me for a long time," he

writes. “I was filled with a growing desire to...go to some kind of church”). But as usually happens in the cases of converts whose intellects I admire—Merton, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Robert Lowell—I couldn’t fathom how he could surrender to belief in an unsubstantiated entity, even if doing so would make him happier and give his life purpose.

In her book *Doubt: A History* Jennifer Michael Hecht includes a “Scale of Doubt” quiz consisting of thirteen questions designed to identify one as an atheist, agnostic, believer, or something in between. Taking the quiz twice in the span of a few months, I received identical assessments: *You are an atheist, but you may have what I will call a pious relationship to the universe.* At first this verdict surprised me, but it makes sense in light of the quiz’s wording. I had earned the atheist label by answering “No” to whether I believe that a “thinking being consciously made the universe” or that “an identifiable force holds it together.” “Yes” answers to “Is there a realm of higher meaning?” and “Should feelings about things be admitted as evidence in establishing reality?” demonstrated my piety.

For all my skepticism about the existence of a deity, I do believe in a human being’s “spiritual or immaterial part,” which is how my dictionary defines the soul. Addressing God in the following passage, St. Augustine links these two concepts—deity and soul—in a way that both convinces and inspires me:

But you are no body. Nor are you soul, which is the life of bodies; for the life of bodies is superior to bodies themselves, and a more certain object of knowledge. But you are the life of souls, the life of lives. You live in dependence only on yourself, and you can never change, life of my soul.

An empirically minded atheist would stop at the first sentence here, but Augustine’s extrapolation from the tangible body to the intangible soul to God makes sense to me. My soul makes itself known to me through a force separate from my body, so why shouldn’t that force be called God, even if I have no concrete idea, much less an image, of who or what it is?

My question echoes one asked by the writer and psychiatrist Robert Coles in an interview that I read in my late twenties, when I was feeling increasingly aware of my faith but confined by the Christianity I was brought up with. Asked how God looks to

him, Coles names people he has known “who are in their own ways incarnations of whatever the deity is,” including his mother through her kindness, his father through his moral sensibility, and his friend Dorothy Day, the Catholic social activist.

If God somehow isn't connected to Dorothy Day, then I don't know what God is. And why shouldn't I as a human being in my visual life and in my intellectual life and in my imaginative life and in my emotional life connect God with someone such as Dorothy Day?

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I don't remember feeling or witnessing genuine faith growing up. My mother went to the local Episcopal church most Sundays, but gave no indication that those visits influenced her behavior for the rest of the week. God's will was never invoked in our house at times of crisis or celebration except in my father's irreverent jokes and profanity. Still, there was a veneer of religion in my daily life—I was required to say my prayers each evening and go to Sunday school, though when the latter began to conflict with my ice hockey practices, my parents allowed me to miss class and eventually stop going altogether. I attended often enough, however, that if the story of the Resurrection or my memorization of the Ten Commandments had been going to spark my Christian faith, it would have done so.

Reciting the Lord's Prayer and “Now I Lay Me” before bed, I wasn't expressing faith; I was mouthing words while thinking of things that had nothing to do with them (“a few memorized prayers babbled once over lightly” in Flannery O'Connor's words). “Now I Lay Me” only took on personal meaning at the end where I appended several “Please bless” requests covering my brother in Vietnam, sick grandparents, deceased pets, and anonymous unfortunates. I realized that my words might affect people and events, but this power felt more magical than spiritual. If I tried to sneak in a more worldly favor—a plea for a school snow day or nudge to my father about a bike I had spotted in a local store—the Catholic nanny who oversaw my bedtime promptly shut me down. Today, I haven't outgrown my penchant for petitional prayer, and still try to cover as many different people and pending outcomes as possible while drawing the line at coveting merchandise and success.

At fourteen I left home for St. Paul's School, an Episcopal boarding school where students attended daily chapel services and took required courses in world religions taught by two full-time chaplains. Elaborate ceremonies marking Christian holidays featured white-robed student acolytes swinging incense as they processed down the aisle. Ironically, the ubiquity of God at St. Paul's, symbolized by its two Gothic chapels, may have been partly to blame for my apathy toward Christian faith while I was there. The school seemed to think that supplying the trappings of religion was enough to start its students on the path to God, and in some cases it was. Many of my classmates discovered their faith in those surroundings while I departed with only a lifelong appreciation for the aesthetics of Christianity—its architecture, glasswork, music, and liturgical and scriptural language.

Gene Robinson, the former bishop of New Hampshire, says, "I think people often come to the synagogue, the mosque, the church looking for God, and what we give them is religion, and I think that is a huge mistake. And sometimes we let our fussing around with the institution get in the way of what people came for, which is help in facilitating their access and relationship with God." Although this observation applies to my experience at St. Paul's, I wouldn't have wanted it otherwise; I wouldn't have been any more welcoming of the school's Episcopal chaplains prodding me to find my faith than I am of Mormon missionaries knocking on my front door. Thanks to the school's non-coercive approach and eclectic curriculum, I acquired a patient attitude toward faith and a sense that if and when I discovered it, it would not necessarily have to correspond to Christ's teachings.

Not that I was indifferent to spirituality growing up. For all his mockery of religion my father was an avid reader of spiritual self-help books as well as writings and biographies of Merton, Albert Schweitzer, and Gandhi. The summer before my junior year at St. Paul's I came across his copy of a guide to Transcendental Meditation and threw myself into mastering the practice. Sitting cross-legged in my bedroom, I tried to detach myself from the fractious sounds of family life while repeating a mantra that I had invented. Once or twice I attained a state of absorption that wasn't quite wakefulness or sleep, and even saw a bright light at the end of a tunnel, which I decided must be a premonition of my death. Part of the book's appeal was its promise of relief from my

chronic anxiety, but I also loved the idea of a realm of consciousness that transcended my day to day perceptions, a realm that William James calls “the fountain-head of much that feeds our religion.”

Faith is such a vast topic and has spawned so much discourse that it’s intimidating to write about, especially for someone like me in whom it’s a vague and tentative force. As I watched the recent investiture of Pope Francis, my gropings toward faith felt puny in the face of such opulence and assurance, as if my uncertainty must arise from ignorance. What encourages me at times like these is that faith, unlike religion with its scripture and scholarship, is no more accessible to the erudite than to the ignorant. One can be learned about religion and lacking in faith, or ignorant about religion and rich in faith. I remember this when I arrive at work each morning. The school where I teach adjoins the Yale Divinity School, and as I pull into my parking spot divinity students hurry to class. It heartens me that for all of their motivation to learn about faith, they have no advantage over me in acquiring or understanding it on a personal level. “Feeling is the deeper source of religion,” James writes. “He who lives the life of it, however narrowly, is a better servant than he who merely knows about it, however much.”

In his book *God is Not Great*, Christopher Hitchens makes a persuasive and well-documented case for atheism. A reader shaky in his or her faith could be forgiven for succumbing to Hitchens’s argument, but it’s hard for me to see this happening. If faith depended on evidence, it would cease to be faith and become knowledge. “If we can show that a set of beliefs can develop the spiritual side of man,” Hubert Harrison asks, “why should we refuse the aid of the belief just because it doesn’t correspond with the facts?” It’s not proof of God’s existence that doubters need—he will never be tangible and therefore never provable—but confidence in his credibility as an object of faith. “My desire was not to be more certain of you but to be more stable in you,” Augustine writes. I’m no more likely to renounce my faith based on an onslaught of facts than I would fall out of love with my wife upon discovering that she had embellished her past.

One reason that I’m comfortable agreeing with Hitchens’s arguments but not tempted to adopt them is that what draws me to my faith is forgiveness. I don’t mean that God will forgive me for my sins because I am his child and he loves me, but that I need to forgive myself for my mistakes so that I don’t walk around lacerating myself. Tolstoy

called faith “that sense by virtue of which man does not destroy himself.” For example, I pray for release from guilt over not having spent more time with my son, who lived apart from me during his childhood. Ideally, I would generate self-forgiveness on a rational level (I kept in regular contact and spent every other week-end with him), but failing that I turn to an idealized, externalized part of myself capable of doing so. The way that I imagine and pray to this ideal makes it as close to a “God as we understand him” as I can conceive. James writes:

The individual, so far as he suffers from his wrongness and criticizes it, is to that extent consciously beyond it, and in at least possible touch with something higher....Along with the wrong part there is thus a better part of him....It is primarily the higher faculties of our own hidden mind which are controlling.

Some writers claim to gain access to this “better part” through their work. The English poet Geoffrey Hill claims that his poems are finer and more loving than he is, and Salman Rushdie says, “There’s a writing self which is not quite your ordinary social self and which you don’t really have access to except at the moment when you’re writing, and certainly in my view, I think of that as my best self.” I come closest to understanding the nature of a calling when I think of it in terms of a writer’s creative impulse, and wonder if an artistic calling can fulfill the same need as a religious one. Merton recalls feeling torn between his literary and “contemplative” vocations when he entered the monastery at age twenty-seven. “There was this shadow, this double, this writer who had followed me into the cloister....There are days when there seems to be nothing left of my vocation—my contemplative vocation—but a few ashes. And everybody calmly tells me: ‘Writing is your vocation’.”

My forgiveness-based faith may sound lonely, more like a philosophy of self-reliance than a solace. On the other hand, it could be compared to Robert Coles finding sanctity in the exemplary qualities of his loved ones, or to a Christian’s quest for Christ, which may explain my attraction to Christian aesthetics. Even if I don’t believe in the tenets of Christianity, its architecture, iconography, and poetry express the human desire for and belief in forgiveness, reminding me of my capacity for it.

let  
Me live to my sad self hereafter kind,  
Charitable; not live this tormented mind...

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Finally, because my prayers are framed as the Christian prayers that I said as a child and as a student at St. Paul's—addressing “God” and “Lord” feels natural to me—they also put me in mind of the Christian quality of benevolent forgiveness, helping to quiet my self-critical voice. No deity is involved; rather, the backbone and perhaps even the object of my faith is my trust that it will benefit me. James defines a viable religion as one in which “something is effected for the better when you throw your life into its hands.”

When I say that my prayers put me in mind of forgiveness, I'm describing a meditative benefit rather than a petitionary one, closer to the inner peace that I sought in the transcendental meditation book than to the favors I requested in “Now I Lay Me”—in the former case, I'm not asking for any blessings that I am not able to confer upon myself. So why do I still attach so many petitions to my prayers, lobbying for good fortune and forestalling bad? I'm not cultivating self-forgiveness then; I'm as good as pleading for intervention by an alternately wrathful and beneficent deity whom I invest with the power to inflict illness and award writing grants. For someone who claims not to believe in such a deity, and scorns born-again types who accept all good and bad experience as “God's will,” it's the height of hypocrisy.

My petitions suggest either that I do believe in this conventional God or that I'm superstitious. Since I feel so skeptical about them, and observe their outcomes with a gambler's fatalism rather than a disciple's credulity, I have to blame superstition. I'm tempted to apply the same verdict to my appeals for help in working on my marriage or teaching well or being an attentive father, which also seem to presume that there's a force looking over me and deciding whether to intervene. Or is this another instance of me turning to an idealized, externalized self? Unlike my materialistic requests, which bear fruit about as often as birthday wishes, my self-improvement petitions consistently affect my behavior by motivating me to do well by other people.

I began this essay hoping to define my faith more explicitly and embrace it more confidently. I felt troubled by my readiness to accept the arguments for atheism, and

even by my inability to worship a deity: St. Paul's School had conditioned me—by example, not instruction—to think of faith in theistic terms. Now I question whether I want to change my relationship to faith at all. Asked why he prayed, Wittgenstein said, "I do it because it satisfies me." I suspect that my satisfaction with my faith has kept me from subscribing to religion on any level but an aesthetic one. James again:

To find religion is only one out of many ways of reaching unity; and the process of remedying inner incompleteness and reducing inner discord is a general psychological process, which may take place with any sort of mental material, and need not necessarily assume the religious form....The range of individual differences in this respect is enormous; but whatever the mixture of yeses and noes may be, the person is infallibly aware when he has struck it in the right proportion *for him*.

As he succumbed to cancer, Christopher Hitchens wanted his readers to know that he did not recant his atheism on his deathbed. From the accounts of his last days that I have read, his family and friends surrounded him with the kind of comfort that more isolated people might not have access to, causing them to turn to, even invent, God. Given the possibility that my faith will change as I confront old age and death, it's important to me to clarify my relationship to it now. I also don't want to look back and think that it could have served me better or was an illusion. For me, an important part of sustaining faith is questioning it—"If you are searching for God, then you have found him," Pascal wrote—regardless of whether this process yields answers or just more questions.