

Dialogue 1  
**Loosing My Religion,  
Becoming an Atheist**  
By J. M. Beach

How does one begin to explain the first experience of learning? Those first conscious moments where the individual human being begins to not only see the world, but to know the world and to give it meaning. When are these moments? What is it that we really learn as children? For most of us our formative education comes as coaxing instruction from the immediate circles of our family, often a mother or father, teaching first words, how to dress, table manners, and the simple difference between wrong and right. No doubt this socialization process can be benign, at times even pleasant. But often parental instruction is delivered as a half-articulate, hands-shaking rebuke, rather than a time for teaching.

I think my first lesson learned was negation, the negative – thou shalt not! For me the word “no” and its derivatives were perhaps the greatest early lesson, often accompanied by raised voices, stern looks, threats, and sometimes, physical violence. Nothing teaches a child what is right or wrong so effectively as the swat of a spoon, the slap of a hand, the strike of a belt, or the snap of a cord. This type of educational lesson is pure B. F. Skinner: do right and be praised, or do wrong and be punished. A kid learns the “right” path soon enough just to avoid being hit. A powerful incentive for learning to be sure, and the knowledge gained a hard earned prize, but ultimately the lessons we learn as children are for the benefit of society and parents:

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<sup>1</sup> Some of this essay is based on material from my book *Studies in Ideology: Essays on Culture and Subjectivity* (Lanham, 2005) and some comes from a new book in progress, *Ethos*.

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we are socialized, not for our own good, but the good defined by the power of authority and tradition.

The threat of violence is perhaps the basis of all human morality and civilized law, as a cursory glance at most major world religions and judicial penal codes will demonstrate. I grew up in a strict Protestant home. The most important lesson that my father taught to me was found in the immortal words of Solomon, the wise king of the ancient Israelites: “The fear of the Lord in the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”<sup>2</sup> And as any good Christian child would know, the Biblical Jehovah was a sadistic and jealous god who gave life sentences of pain and suffering to Adam and Eve for disobedience, demanded death for disrespecting one’s father, gloried in bloodshed and war, and gave the ancient Israelites a blessed promised land only if they would first massacre every man, woman, child, and beast who happened to already live there. Then there are the later additions of the New Testament, largely influenced by the legalist mentality of St. Paul who told children to obey their parents, wives to obey their husbands, and slaves to obey their masters. And finally there is the bloody vision of St. John, who dreamed up a holocaust at the end of history when every non-Christian would be subjected to various horrors during the last days and then tortured in the fires of hell for eternity. If that is not enough to give a child nightmares, I’m not sure what would.

I learned early on that God’s divine and eternal punishment was something to be feared at a visceral level. I was terrified of God, always scared that I would cross some unknown line and risk an eternity of torture. I would wake up some nights petrified. I knew the anguish of an indeterminate and capricious salvation by my Lord’s grace. My fear of God instilled something akin to what Sigmund Freud once called *das Uber-Ich*, the “Over-I” or “super-ego.” I had a nagging voice of right and wrong mysteriously placed in my subconscious mind, and I was

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<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 1:7, *Kings James Bible*.

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judiciously driven by the terror of divine retribution and social approbation. We do “right” not because we want to. We do “right” because we fear the consequences of doing “wrong.”

The flip-side to this subliminal injunction is a type of pleasure. I think most children find it inherently pleasing to acquiesce to authority, groveling before those same dominating figures who dispense punishment. Most of us are taught to embrace the ingratiating self-effacement of bowing low to those with the power to crush us: parents, priests, police, school principals, and popular peers. This strong social tendency is perhaps more noticeable in Asian cultures where the bow and differential forms of address still sanction a strict social hierarchy. But every society still retains hierarchical structures of power and the accompanying relationships of respect and deference. There is a socialized satisfaction that comes through the self-denial needed to appease the higher authority.

The naturalness of authority and privilege are instilled in us at an early age, demonstrated in the differential power relations between parents and child, which are based on the traditional power dynamics of God and man, king and subject, ruler and ruled. One does “right” to earn a pat on the head, a smile, or the praise of the powerful. This is also the tyrant’s strength – hegemony – the soft power exercised through the willing cooperation of the lowly who want to please their master, subconsciously fearing to do otherwise. I believe this unspoken and often unnoticed power dynamic is a central part of human relationships. It has been represented and explained in various theoretical concepts over the past century. Some of the more important include, Sigmund Freud’s “super ego,” Antonio Gramsci’s “hegemony,” and Michele Foucault’s “bio-power.” We do what is right because we know it is right and because it is policed by the powerful. We cannot do otherwise. We dare not do otherwise. We consciously and subconsciously know the structures of authority that envelope and restrain us, and thus, for

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thousands of years the basis of human knowledge and right action was fear of the various lords who ruled over subject populations.

My parents were good people, acting on what they thought was right. They raised their children the best they could with the knowledge and experience they had. They were God's agents, acting on behalf of the distant liege they worshiped. They were to be respected and they were to be feared in their capacity to dispense justice, punishment, and love. I wanted to please them, I really did. But there was also something perverse in the very core of my being. I had an insatiable curiosity and a penchant for experimentation. I was deeply interested in life and different forms of experience. There was a deep injunction in my subconscious that told me certain words, deeds, even thoughts were prohibited, but I could not help fantasizing about their possibility, and sometimes indulging in the taboo. I was often told that these thoughts and inclinations were the work of the devil who often tried to tempt and snare the unwary. But I had a hard time understanding how the devil could seem so connected to my innermost being. The devil seemed to be such a natural part of my body that I was never sure who was in control. St. Paul's injunction to hate the flesh and the distractions of the sinful world were constantly uttered in my household. But the devilment of my inclinations was hard to deny, so the reprimands and stern warnings of God's agents seemed tyrannical, and early on I developed a split personality.

Because of this split personality, I learned to wear a mask, an external demeanor that would deliver what was expected of me – my public self. This public self was also subconsciously tutored by an inner voice of right and wrong that was constantly reinforced by parents, pastors, and the words of God. As I grew older and became instructed more fully in Protestant theology, grounded on a literalist and thorough reading of the *Bible*, this inner voice of right and wrong became melded with my conception of God's righteous presence. My parents

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and pastor fostered this association, as they would often justify their judgments by explicit reference to *Bible* as the final and ultimate source of authority. I grew to respect and strive for the “right,” while fearing the consequences of the “wrong.” Morality also came to seem quite natural, albeit not a perfect fit. My public self was my ideal self, and I often strove to be righteous. I lived in a clear moral universe. I was lovingly and firmly led by the Holy Book. I was constantly watched by the knowing disciples of God. And I felt always under the discerning gaze of my inherited Lord.

But there was also another self. A deeper, not fully conscious, more comfortable, yet somewhat dangerous self – my inner self. I’ve always had a perverse inclination to seek out the unknown, to experiment. One of my earliest childhood memories, reinforced by the anecdotes of my parents, was of a child of three or four reaching for the door to the outside, opening it, and breaking free of the confines of home to explore the great unknown. I did not get far, but I did get out. I’ve always had the need to reach, to get out. But not all doors are so easily opened, and the social gatekeepers are always close behind. Those moments of getting out, of exploring, were the most educative and exciting times of my youth – they were also taboo, and strictly prohibited.

I had many friends growing up, and my closet friends were not church going folk, or if they were, they were not as outwardly pious and domineering as were most of the church-going adults I knew. I spent as much time as I could outside my own home. Visiting the houses of my friends, I encountered the unknown, the explicitly taboo, the dangerous – the devil. I reveled in everything I was forbidden at home. I listened to popular music, songs about sex, drugs, and violence. I read risky literature: *Mad Magazine*, fantasy novels, and science fiction. I gaped at pornography. I watched television, including the newly invented evils of MTV and HBO. I

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hung out with girls, flirted, and played not so innocent games of physical exploration. I talked about sex and other naughty things. I used profanities and scatological humor. I snuck into unlocked liquor cabinets, wondered at the strangeness of condoms, and choked on the bittersweet smoke of a stolen cigarette. Life seemed pregnant with possibility, yet always with the hint of danger. My friends and I consciously stalked at the perimeters of morality, taboo, and legality to slowly break our way into adulthood.

But my childhood was constantly policed: by parents, by priests, by poverty, and by my own awareness of my powerlessness. The perimeters of my being were guarded and the inclinations of my inner self confined. But I still struggled against this confinement. I yearned to be free, to do as I wished, and on various occasions I did break free, if only for a few moments. But once my parents became aware of my dalliances with the dark side of my nature, they became ever more firm, watchful, restrictive. Certain friends were prohibited. Social activities were closely monitored. I was forbidden “secular” music or movies. The few tapes and magazines that I had smuggled into the house were confiscated and made an example of God’s power. I sat with my father watching my cherished contraband burn in the fire. We both half-expected demons screaming and rising from the ashes because my father had told me that such occurrences really did happen. I was forbidden most television shows. Books brought home from the library were censored. Those deemed un-Godly were confiscated and returned. Visiting the homes of school friends was strictly regulated. Without much power to rebel, I was often reduced to a smoldering fury of feeble rage, carefully waiting for a chance to be free.

Even as a boy, I was very practical. Openly rebelling was not an option. Such insolence would have been beaten out of me and what little freedom I had would have been reduced to nothing. I learned that sanity meant giving into the might of the powerful. Most of the time, I let

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my unobtainable dreams of freedom float away. I spent my childhood living up to my public self, scrutinized by the gaze of protective parents and a wrathful God. I tried to become a good Christian boy, which basically meant loving Jesus and doing what I was told. Gradually I embraced my religious life. There was no other option. Just as Kafka's ape embraced the imposition of human nature, I embraced Christianity as my only *way out*.<sup>3</sup>

Up until high school I faithfully went to church two days a week, sometimes more. The congregation met every Wednesday and Sunday, supplemented with extra services, meetings, community service, and social activities. I was an active and highly respected member of the congregation. Largely, I might add, because my parents held leadership positions in the church. They were extremely active in its myriad activities, which meant I was extremely active as a matter of course. As a dutiful son, I did my best to live up to the esteemed stature of my parents and to make them proud. I was a founding member of the church youth group. I helped start a Christian hip-hop band. I was actively involved in community service, especially projects that benefited the needy members of our congregation. I taught Sunday school to toddlers (my first real teaching experience) and was a camp councilor for the *Bible* camps. I was called upon every now and again to help issue the Holy Communion or take up the collection during a Sunday service. And on many occasions, *Bible* in hand, I went on evangelical missions near and far to help save souls for Christ. All in all, I seemed to be a model Christian. Much of the time I actually believed that I was a faithful child of God.

But throughout these times of professed piety, I also indulged in my perverse, private self. I found ways to sneak contraband into the house (books, movies, music, and magazines). I had many impure thoughts, obsessively thinking about sex, as all young boys do. I privately

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<sup>3</sup> Franz Kafka, "A Report to an Academy," in *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, trans. Malcolm Pasley (New York, 2000), 170-178.

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criticized certain aspects of Christianity that seemed unrealistic or overly harsh. And at times I even questioned the reality of God. I relished those times when I was away from my parent's confining gaze, especially in the company of secular friends, or even with my more liberal Christian fiends. Ultimately, I had troubling questions, an insatiable curiosity, and a growing rebelliousness that began to bubble up from the darkness within. Yet I retained my pious mask. I tried to find comfort in the rigid confines of Christianity, but always my imagination held hope for a different way of life and the possibility of broader freedom.

My parents no doubt suspected the darker side of my nature, and around the age of thirteen they locked me in an existential cell. My parents decided to pull me away from the snares of the secular world and cloister me in the confines of a strictly Christian education – I was to be schooled at home. Without much time to react, I was withdrawn from the public school system halfway through 7<sup>th</sup> grade. My parents didn't even wait for winter break. I was quite upset by this decision and forcefully tried to block its implementation. I even threatened to run away. But eventually I acquiesced because in reality, as in every other area of my life, I was quite powerless. I had no choice. I had nowhere else to go and no other way to survive. My parents held all the cards and I was smart enough to know that I was beat. All my secular school friends quite quickly disappeared. We moved to a new house. Although still living in the same city, I felt worlds away from my former life.

Academically speaking, home schooling was a waste of time and my talents. I was also socially isolated. My weeks were filled with monotonous routine. I was indoctrinated every day with a *Bible*-based curriculum (Christian English, Christian math, Christian art, and Christian history), supplemented by reading the *Bible* (in case I didn't get enough from the rest of the curriculum). My extracurricular activities included going to church, volunteering for church-

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related activities, or sometimes visiting other home schooled families. Had I completely conformed to this educational regime, I most certainly would have turned into a monk.

Most of my home school curriculum was designed by an Evangelical Protestant publishing company. It consisted of a series of workbooks and fill-in-the-blank tests, which ritualized a very superficial fact-oriented knowledge (although given its clear Christian bias much of the “factual” content was merely pre-packaged bite-sized dogma). The history was different. I read from a large textbook, which used a Biblical literalism to re-tell five thousand years of Western history from a Christian point of view. Yes, in case you’re wondering, the dawn of history begins with God creating the heavens and the Earth in six days. The remaining part of my curriculum was a more laborious and boring. I had to read the *Bible* cover to cover once a year. In case you haven’t managed to read this entire book, it’s overrated as literature and quite vague as a spiritual handbook for modern life. Perhaps that’s why my father’s bookshelves were filled with Biblical commentaries on every facet of this baffling book. Even the faithful get confused by its incoherence and contradictions. Of course reading the *Bible* at home was supplemented with reading the *Bible* chapter by chapter at church every Sunday and Wednesday. God’s Word penetrated my daily being, pervaded my consciousness, and seeped into my skin. I still sometimes sweat it out of my pores.

As far as anyone knew, I was a model Christian – baptized with water and “on fire” with the blood of the lamb. I half-believed it myself at times. I certainly played the part. This had been my way out of tyranny. Sent to Biblical boot-camp for the past few years and geared up in the armor of the Lord, my parents believed I had internalized spiritual discipline, becoming a soldier for Christ. They assumed my faith would withstand the snares of the secular world. But unbeknownst to them, I had already undergone a secular transformation. Before high school

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began, I was already loosing my religion. I had kept up appearances, diligently polishing the Christian façade, but internally this public face had cracked. During high school this façade would to crumble. I would come to sacrifice Christ for the secular sacraments of sex, alcohol, and rock & roll. My new secular environment unleashed a devilish spirit, and over the next few years I would let this beast run wild.

I pledged allegiance to a pantheon of pagan gods: athletics, intoxication, fornication, rebellion, and general mischief. We were determined to unshackle ourselves from the slavery of childhood by subversively, often illegally, engaging in the rituals of adulthood. The primary technology of teenage rebellion was alcohol, the golden nectar. Alcohol has long been used by mystics, divines, and pleasure-seeking fools. It breaks down inhibitions, brings on feelings of general wellbeing, opens the doors of perception, and allows for the spontaneous release of emotion and energy. As underage drinkers the most difficult task was acquiring this magic elixir, but it wasn't too hard.

I spent my first years of college drinking as much as possible, smoking massive amounts of weed, and going to parties four or five times a week. I was more interested in girls than grades. Often my friends and I would declare holidays in the middle of the week, cut class, and stay drunk for days at a time. I have few memories of this time, outside of the surprise visit by my prudish parents and their stern scolding – I'll never forget that! It was a wonderful time, but a rude awakening was looming. By the end of spring term of my sophomore year, I had failed several classes, I was on academic probation, I had been cut from the competitive athletic training program, and I was broke (drugs and alcohol can be quite expensive). I was at a crossroads and I didn't know what to do. The consequences of freedom had fallen like a hammer, smashing immaturity and youthful delusions into jagged shards.

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Since high school I had found freedom from restrictions, which enabled me to transgress youthful taboos and experiment with adulthood. But this freedom came barbed in consequences that I could no longer avoid. For the first time I was failing at life, falling helpless into a nameless abyss. At the end of my sophomore year at university, I vowed to make changes. I would take control of my life. I would party less, get a job, and take academics more seriously. I would examine life, choose a goal, and use my existence for some worthy cause. As reexamined my life, I enrolled in literature and history courses to repair my grade point average. This proved to be a fateful turning point. In forsaking an aimless *freedom from* restriction, I would find the *freedom to* become. Taking my life in my hands, I moved forward, stepping for the first time towards deliberate living.

I threw myself into my studies and eagerly devoured knowledge like a famished castaway who has been deprived of food for many years. I was intellectually starving, striving to fill my ignorance about life in an attempt to a purpose to which I would devote myself. A year later, I was helped on my quest. During the summer after my junior year, taking a summer-school course in French, I met two friends who shared my lust for knowledge and vital experience. We would spend the next year in a deep intellectual ferment that would change my life. One friend was British, a practicing alcoholic, a semi-practicing Buddhist, and wise beyond his years. The other was an African American who was recruited to play football at the university. He was a struggling Christian, a ladies man, a border-line black nationalist, and during our friendship he converted to Islam. The three of us had intense conversations that lasted a year. We discussed politics, religion, morality, philosophy, history – everything. We all went to the mosque together to learn about Islam, and we would frequently attend various lectures together at the university. We left few intellectual stones unturned. After we finished our undergraduate degrees, one

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friend went off to Thailand to study Buddhism and work at a school for handicapped orphans, and the other joined the Peace Core and went to Africa. I turned to graduate school. Our conversation stopped, but I was still burning for knowledge. All of my assumptions about life had been exposed, questioned, criticized, and I ended up rejecting almost everything that I was brought up to believe by parents, pastors, friends, teachers, and the media.

I rejected Evangelical Christianity, capitalist American society, and my narcissistic social life. I embarked on a passionate journey into the meaning of life. I wanted to know all about history, religion, philosophy, literature, psychology, and politics. I knew as sure as anything that I was not a Christian anymore and I knew Christianity was not the one and true religion, however, I didn't know if God still existed and what to make of other religions so I decided to find out. I read insatiably. I studied anything that I could get my hands on. I had my first semi-mystical experience when studying William Blake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Martin Buber. I felt total bliss and oneness with the world, which I later came to express in poetry, most notably "In Each and Everything a World." This would be the first of many epiphanies, arcane glimpses into the nature of life and being, and would become a cornerstone in my evolving life philosophy.

During grad school I became politically conscious and committed. I was involved with some very radical individuals and student organizations. I started a subscription to *The Nation* and later to *The Economist* so that I wouldn't be ignorant about the world any longer. There were a number of authors I found particularly enlightening and I devoured these writer's entire corpus: William Blake, Albert Camus, P. B. Shelley, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Allen Ginsberg, Walt Whitman, and light of all lights for me at that time, Friedrich Nietzsche. God did not exist, religion was sham, I was an atheist and I knew why. I was able to piece together my own life-philosophy. I was a humanist who believed that all ideas

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and all ways of life were constructs created by human beings in fumbling attempts at self-consciousness, selfishness, altruism, and power. The meaning of life was to discover the meaning of life, discover your own “self,” and to create your own meaning. I wanted to live a passionate and full life in sustainable relation to both human communities and the natural world, while teaching others to discover their own human potential. In short, I vowed to become a *bodhisattva*, a seeker of enlightenment who would teach others the mysteries of life and human being.

I was also an atheist. I knew that Christianity was not the one true religion, nor were any other world religions or spiritual cults. When I told my father, he said I “worshiped Satan,” I was a “crazy liberal,” and that I was “going to hell.” Thanks dad. I also became very sensitive to religious and political intolerance. News of conservative, fundamentalist Christians killing abortion doctors, beating and berating gays, browbeating anyone who did not profess to “believing in Jesus” fused together with my growing knowledge of the history of intolerant and blood-stained Christianity. For a time I became one angry atheist. But my anger was a liability and didn’t solve anything, so worked on developing a more conciliatory tone.

I willingly acknowledge that no one can “prove” that God does not exist, and I agree that there are many things that scientific reasoning cannot yet verify or reject. In gracious company I often take an agnostic stance, but I always leave the burden of proof on those with metaphysical or theological claims. Bigfoot, aliens, God, and Elvis might all exist, but I’m not buying it until there is evidence. I also reject the argument that humans need religion to live a moral life. I wrote a poem called “The Atheist Saints,” among others, in response to this claim. However, I do acknowledge the continued importance of religious belief and ritual in human affairs, and I

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seek to understand it and build bridges between the secular and the sacred. Regardless of the truth or falsity of our beliefs, we all have to share the same world and tolerate each other.

I am still on a quest to understand the nature of human beings, both the possibilities and the liabilities. I strive to perfect my own life and lead by example. And above all I share what I have learned with whom ever will listen. Inequality, ignorance, hatred, greed and superstition keep millions and millions of people from discovering and actualizing their humanity. I have come to mistrust and fear the human being, as much as I seek to understand and perfect my own humanity. Our capacity for savageness is as natural as our capacity to love. I fear for the future. Nuclear holocaust, imperial wars, intolerant religious fanatics, growing economic inequality, and environmental catastrophe are all possible outcomes. We are a species that often “burns the future to keep warm,” as I wrote about in poem. The fate of humanity rests on the decisions of our generation. I try to bear my responsibility and do my part. Everyday is a quest for new knowledge, new understanding, an open perspective, and the willingness to meet the demands of history.