

Faith over religion

I grew up religious, hard. I was raised Catholic by my parents who were also raised Catholic. I went to church every Sunday without question. I attended a private Catholic school for over ten years, from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Even my public high school boasted a predominantly Christian student body. My friends — whether from school, sports, or the neighborhood — were all religious, courtesy of my Bible Belt–residing town.

As such, my beliefs were never challenged — by myself or others — and, as a result, I lived a supposed religious life without ever knowing what that meant. It took leaving that world behind and coming to Duke to understand what the prayer recitals and religion classes and Bible camps couldn't teach me: Faith is something only I could only discover for myself.

My life back home had hinged on a religion that had been chosen for me, and I came to view it as a part of my identity over which I had no control. College gave me the chance to break free of that expectation and define that part of myself in my own way; away from family and friends, I no longer felt pressured, obligated, to follow the religious script I'd followed since birth. So I didn't. I stopped going to church regularly. I became a part of friend groups in which most were non-believers. I hardly prayed, and I forgot the creeds we invoked at mass. Not because I wanted to spite Catholicism, but because I wanted to see what the other side looked like. Turns out, I didn't like it that much. But, like Amish teens during Rumspringa, I needed to see it for myself.

I remained in this religious limbo until last semester. It was right before fall break, and I was staring down three tough exams in the span of two days. I had spent the entire week prior studying. Yet, no matter how much I prepared, I felt it wouldn't be enough — there was just too much material left to cover. I felt exhausted, overwhelmed, defeated. Desperate, I decided to

offer up a prayer: “God, please help me through these next few days. Help me to study as best I can and somehow do well on these exams.” Then I put my head down and got back to studying. When I came back from break, I was greeted with scores better than anything I could’ve hoped for.

Thinking the prayers might have worked, I kept it up. I sprinkled prayers into other areas of my life. I prayed to be healed of health issues no doctor could diagnose. I prayed to improve my relationships with my friends and family, to be more honest with them. Though none of my subsequent prayers have worked out quite as magically as that first time back, I gradually came to develop a certain confidence that, even though I couldn’t directly see it in the moment, God was gradually stitching together the visions of my prayers into the fabric of my life, one thread at a time. This newfound trust ultimately spurred me to return to Catholicism — this time, though, I was going to do it a bit differently.

Throughout my first nineteen years, I thought religion was the end goal. I thought of God only in terms of religious requirements: going to church, reading the Bible, etc. And I learned that doing these things would mold me into a good Christian and help me go to heaven. Yet, despite the supposed benefits, I could not find God through these things. Sure, I listened to priests speak about God, read about God, prayed prayers written for God. But I did not truly know him, only what my religion said about him; thus, my religion confined the extent of my faith. It was only when I discovered God for myself that I came to understand how faith transcends the boundaries of religion.

Through my time spent praying, I realized God doesn’t care how many times I’d missed mass or how many pages of the Bible I read each day. All God cared about was me. He wanted to know me, and in order to do that I had to talk to him and tell him what I was feeling and what

I needed. It was that simple. Armed with this revelation, I returned to church with a shift in perspective: I was no longer there to fulfill some obligatory duty put forth by Catholic leadership, but to be with God and feel his presence in a peaceful place. In this way, I was now in it for God, not some religious label.

My mistake? I misconstrued religion for faith. I thought religion alone was enough and ignored a relationship with God as a result. Religion is meant to be a supplement to your faith; it is not meant to be a replacement. Religion, by definition, brings together groups of people who share a set of beliefs in some higher power. Consequently, religion is inherently a collective experience you share with such a group. Faith, on the other hand, is an individualized experience, an exploration of a personal relationship with said higher power. Religion is thus incapable of giving you the intimacy required by faith. Instead, you must establish a personal relationship with your God — on your own.

I find going to church and prayer to be ways in which I can strengthen my faith and relationship with God. Maybe you're conventional too. Or maybe you go on hikes to appreciate nature or lock yourself in a pitch-black room to bask in the peace of silence and stillness. Whatever your *modus operandi* is, do it. The stipulations of a religion are not worth following if doing so harms your relationship with your God. Give yourself the freedom to pursue your relationship, your way. When you do, I promise you will be filled with a deeper sense of faith and belief that goes beyond the teachings of any religion.