

## Religious Nuts and Jesus Freaks

A short time ago I did not have much respect for the “religious” people who, as I understood it, “forced” their religion on me. Maybe you know the type: your co-worker in the next cubicle, the lady that never appears to be moved, her workspace plastered with Bible verses. Before my conversion I began to believe this life might be the last, even though I grew up attending church services.

Erika, my older sister, and I used to share a bedroom growing up. Erika was my hero. She would teach me what she learned in kindergarten. She could always amaze me. When I was around five I was confronted with death. Someone in my family must have died. I figured Erika would know, since she was an “intellectual” second-grader. She showed me a book that had colorful pictures to tell the story. She pointed to a man wearing a white robe. There were hundreds of people of all ages standing before this man. This man, Erika told me, had to do with God and lived in a place called heaven. As I looked closer I could see that he was placing crowns on the heads of the ones before him. Erika said if I die this man Jesus would give me a crown and I would get to live in his land after I passed away. I asked if my mom was going, and she assured me “yes,” and I was so delighted that I must have spent weeks sharing with people that I wished I were dead (I don’t know what people thought of our upbringing!).

Around this time one of my parents began taking us to church more regularly. We were soon baptized and attending Sunday school, but the church we attended rarely had us use our Bibles. There was not much talk about the Bible or God at home; church became something we did only on Sunday. I soon lost the luster of receiving a crown.

About this time I went off to kindergarten, where it was found that I had a learning disability. My teachers suggested that I repeat first grade. I was bullied regularly. I never felt like I fit in anywhere. I was quiet by nature and I considered myself an “ugly duckling,” underweight with an overbite. I became an outcast not by my own choice; I always wanted someone to pal around with.

The girls that lived in my neighborhood were the ones my sister and I hung around with. The Thomas girls were part of a large family, eight children all together. They were very involved in their church. They invited my sister and me to go along to the different activities they had at their church. Their church got me thinking about my own spiritual life. It began how I now relate to God. Their pastor spoke on inviting Jesus into one’s heart. At my old church I thought a person automatically went to heaven. During church school there we would use our Bibles to find the answers. In contrast to my old church, this church focused on what the Bible had to say.

I went home petrified every night fearing the Lord's return. For some reason I believed I would not like it in heaven. I told Erika of my troubles and she stood by me as I prayed about it. I came to grow very bitter towards the people of that church. They appeared to me to have this carefree life. A life that one could only have in a dream. I made sure to pray to God every night asking him if I could "rejoice" in his land after I die. My spiritual life was stagnant for many years. I did not seek God in any way except for my bedtime prayer.

The years went slowly by. I wished for a happy family. There were times as a youngster that I refused to listen to my parents, and when I moved into adolescence I became very hostile toward my parents. The things that came out of my mouth could kill. School was still hard; I was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder and needed to be on medication. At the age of fourteen I was diagnosed with scoliosis and had to wear a back brace for twenty-three hours a day. My teeth still were not straight. During my sophomore year in high school I was home-schooled half the year because of going through surgery to correct my overbite. Three surgeries and a lot of scars later, I had a new face. "Did aliens abduct you?" one girl asked when I came back. The responses I got were backward glances and double takes. My peers who at one time made fun of me were now my friends.

My junior year I became involved with the drama club. I met all kinds of colorful characters there. I came in contact with guys who wanted to be girls and girls that wanted to be guys. One of my friends from drama club also considered herself straight. We both had our wild dreams of maybe becoming famous.

About this time Erika was in her sophomore year in college. She had checked out the party scene and found no true satisfaction in it. Then she started becoming more and more involved in her school's one Christian group. One of the girls began to disciple her. Some of the students from Bucknell University's fellowship traveled forty-five minutes to attend a church in Williamsport. Since this is where Erika grew up she decided to go and visit herself. When I heard she was going to an Orthodox Presbyterian Church in town I was dumbfounded about the name. Orthodox? I tried to imagine what the pastor of that church must wear during the services. My sister assured me nothing bizarre happens during the service. These people appeared to me to be "quacks." I hadn't yet met them but I had already made up my mind — "freaks." Erika told me about the hospitality these people had showed her. She began to attend regularly.

During her junior year Erika went abroad to England. Some time after she arrived there she began to feel discouraged. Erika told a Christian friend back here about her feelings, and she in turn gave her the name of a man here known as a “prayer warrior,” committed to praying to God for people. This older man and my sister corresponded throughout her stay, and he prayed for her and my family.

When Erika returned to the states we welcomed her home at Kennedy airport. We shared with her that my grandfather was declining in health. Erika had been thinking about asking my grandfather if he had ever accepted Jesus into his heart. She wanted to do so soon. The very next day we went to visit Poppy. We prayed in the car on the way that God would give us a window of opportunity to speak to him. However, we found Poppy drifting in and out of sleep and went home expecting to do it another time.

The next day at school I was called into the office at school, where the secretary told me that my grandfather had passed away. Erika came to pick me up. We were both speechless; we felt like God had betrayed us. The next few days were the worst.

Many people came out on the night of the viewing. At the end a man came in and asked for Erika. He introduced himself and Erika leaped to her feet and embraced him. This was the man who had been praying for her in England. She thanked him for coming and began to explain to him how she feared our grandfather was not saved when he died. He assured her that he was. Erika wondered how he knew. He told her that he had known my grandfather for about twenty years. He told of the time over the past summer when he felt lead to share Jesus with my grandfather. He took the pastor of his church along and they asked Poppy if he died that day did he know where he would go. My grandfather was unsure so they prayed about it and Poppy accepted the Lord at his word. Then this man asked me the same question he had asked my grandfather. I dedicated my life to Christ that night.

It has been nearly two and a half years since my conversion. One of the first requests I made to the Lord was to have Christian friends. He blessed me with plenty. I became involved with Campus Crusade for Christ, a nationally known ministry that reaches college-age students. I am on the leadership team and co-lead the women's Bible study. I used to dread sitting down with a Bible. I feared that I wouldn't understand it, plus I didn't have any desire to read it. Now I can sit for hours reading the Bible or about it. I have given up a lot of my ungodly habits, but I have gained so much more valuable knowledge. The Bible isn't a book of do's and don'ts; I have learned that applying what God has said in his word is useful and worthwhile even in the twenty-

first century. I am living proof of what the one, true, living God will do. I found that Christians face trials of every kind, but I have found that God is always with me and I need not fret.

If you have accepted Jesus to be Lord of your life, then dedicate yourself to him. I hope you will find an everlasting comfort in knowing that the Lord of the universe is with you always.