

A None's Story

*Searching for Meaning Inside Christianity,
Judaism, Buddhism, & Islam*

CORINNA NICOLAOU

Columbia University Press
New York

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Introduction

I'm a "None." When I say this out loud, people think I've said "I'm a nun," as in a habited woman who lives in a convent, which I find both funny and a little ironic because I'm actually sort of the opposite of that kind of nun. I'm one of the Americans who on recent national surveys claim no religious affiliation, who answer "none" to the question about what religion they are (this is why pollsters call us "Nones").

I have not had the opportunity to declare such an affiliation on an official document as I have yet to be randomly selected to participate in one of the few national surveys that measures religious attitudes. One such study is the American Religious Identification Survey, which has been conducted periodically since 1990, allowing for scientific monitoring of change over time. Because the U.S. Bureau of the Census is constitutionally prohibited from inquiring about religion, it relies on these results and has included them in the Statistical Abstract of the United States since 2003. If you are selected to participate in the study, a pollster will ask you a slew of questions by telephone. For example, on the "religious screener" portion of the form, you will be asked, "What is your religion, if any?" The list of possible responses is exhaustive and includes such options as Rastafarian, Wiccan, and Druid. Way down at the bottom (option number 95) is the one I would select: "No religion / None." Apparently this answer has become one of the most popular in recent years.

The number of religious services I attended growing up could fit on the fingers of one hand with enough left over for a peace sign. I never officially learned about the Bible, I did not study religion, and I was not baptized. I did not marry my husband in a church. My parents didn't teach me anything biblical—save, perhaps, for a secular version of the “Golden Rule.” I managed to go through life almost completely ignorant of the specifics of religion besides what I picked up on in popular culture or through schoolyard gossip. Until recently I hardly knew a Catholic from a Protestant, let alone the belief systems of other world religions. Schools are, after all, legally required to avoid most aspects of the subject.

Granted, not all Nones are so uninformed about religion. Some grew up attending church but distanced themselves from their faiths as adults. Others may still attend religious services but do not identify as members of any one religion. Then there are those, like me, whose lack of religion was inherited. Both of my parents were raised with a Christian affiliation but were Nones by the time I entered the picture.

I married a fellow None, though you could say we are a “mixed-faith” None couple: my broken affiliation is with Christianity, and my husband's is with Judaism. Phil's parents were both raised attending synagogue; his father even participated in the Jewish coming-of-age ritual of the bar mitzvah. But both his mom and dad were leaning toward Noneness by the time Phil was born—though, officially, his parents would have still identified as Jewish. Like a lot of None couples today, Phil and I feel a greater affinity with Noneness than our seemingly divergent religious backgrounds.

Phil and I don't have children, but if we did, in all likelihood we would raise them as Nones. It's not uncommon today to find third- and fourth-generation Nones—kids whose understanding of religion may be more meager than my own. A None friend of mine told me not long ago that when her seven-year-old asked, “What happens in church?” she was stumped for a few seconds as she searched for an answer that seemed age-appropriate. Yes, what are they doing in there? Singing about love? Celebrating friendship? Practicing kindness? She offered a medley of honorable intentions, which seemed to satisfy her little None—for now.

According to the Pew Research Center, the ranks of the Nones have ballooned in recent years, making “no religious affiliation” the fastest-growing category among religious affiliations. Between 1972

and 1989, about 7 percent of Americans identified as having no formal religious affiliation. However, between 1990 and 2012, that figure jumped to 19.6 percent. Among people under age thirty, just over 30 percent say they have no religious affiliation. At the same time, the percentage of the U.S. population that identifies as Christian has experienced a steady decline, and other faiths have had modest growth at best.

One might assume that Nones are atheists, a categorization known for its denial of deity; for the most part, this is not the case. Growth in atheism has not kept pace with the rise in Nones. Less than 15 percent of the country's 46 million unaffiliated adults go on to claim atheism as their viewpoint of choice, a number that has remained relatively stable over the last decade or so.

In fact, most Nones agree that churches and other religious institutions benefit society and that they personally feel religious or spiritual in some way. A special study by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life, conducted with the PBS television program *Religion and Ethics News Weekly* in 2012, found that 68 percent of Nones say they believe in God. More than a third (37 percent) classify what they feel as "spiritual," and over half (58 percent) say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth. Perhaps most surprising is the number of Nones who report communing with a higher power: 41 percent say they pray at least once a month, and half of this group says they pray every single day.

Robert Putnam and David Campbell, who discuss religious trends and attitudes in their book *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, characterize the sudden rise of the Nones as the most significant trend in our country's religious landscape in the last fifty years. They find that, for the most part, Nones mirror the population at large in terms of education, social standing, gender, and race.

So what is causing this seemingly sudden religious disassociation among a large subset of the American population? The only explanation that seems to make sense, the authors suggest, is political. The one characteristic many Nones share is that they lean left politically.

Putnam and Campbell state that the rise in Nones appears to be tied to the perception that religion and conservative politics go hand in hand—and I have to admit, this sounds about right to me. On a national survey, Nones report disassociating from organized religion at least in part because "they think of religious people as hypocritical, judgmental, or insincere." Many also report feeling that religious organizations

“focus too much on rules and not enough on spirituality.” In general, Nones believe that religious leaders do not treat certain social issues, particularly those regarding sexuality, with enough acceptance. We can’t wrap our heads around a God who is more concerned with our private parts than with the content of our hearts.

But by disassociating with religion, are Nones missing out? I’m told religion has helped people be happier, kinder, more inclined to see “the big picture.” It’s been credited with keeping believers grounded, reducing anxiety and the compulsions that often lead to self-destructive behavior. In times of great difficulty, it may be the only thing that keeps a person afloat until things get better. Religion is touted as a doorway to the eternal, helping us understand our role in the cosmos.

I wished to know what the faithful knew, but I was scared.

Eventually I had this thought: What if I conquered my fear and walked into those places of worship and attended the services and maybe even communed with believers? What divine wisdom would I gather along the way? What, if anything, would I get from these experiences that I’m not getting by staying firmly planted in a secular world? I was also interested in how religions are practiced in the United States and what this says about our country and the citizens who inhabit it. The account presented here wasn’t initially conceived as a “journey,” but it picked up steam along the way. Early on I happened on a quote by Max Müller, a German-born scholar who lived in the 1900s. He advocated for the study of comparative religion, famously stating: “He who knows one, knows none.” I took his words to heart.

According to the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, 76 percent of Americans identify as Christians. The next most numerous religious identifications (aside from “none”) are Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam, which collectively make up as much as 5.5 percent of the adult population in the United States. While this percentage seems relatively small, when you consider the world as a whole, the significance of these religions becomes clearer. Christianity has around 2.1 billion believers globally, and Islam is a close second with roughly 1.5 billion followers. Both of these were built on the foundation of Judaism, so even though only about fourteen million people around the world identify as Jewish, the theological influence of the faith is far greater than this number might indicate. The inhabitants of the planet who call themselves Buddhist number 376 million. All told, almost four billion of the Earth’s seven billion inhabitants claim an affiliation with one of

these four religions, which suggests that even if the followers of these belief systems do not account for huge portions of the U.S. population, they are tapped into a way of thinking so pervasive on a global scale that it transcends quantification.

In this book I make my way through four of the world's greatest wisdom traditions—Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam—which also happen to be the most practiced religions in the United States. I let demographics and availability shape my work. Most of the U.S. population is Christian, and, within this segment, a majority is Protestant. Therefore, I started my churchgoing with Lutheranism, as Martin Luther is credited with being the “father” of the Protestant Reformation. From there, I roughly follow the chronological order in which denominations developed. Within the other faiths, my visits to places of worship were shaped by what is most readily available to faith consumers. For example, Zen is the most popular version of Buddhism in the United States, Reform Judaism is the most widely practiced in Judaism, and most followers of Islam within the United States (and in the world) are Sunni. Therefore, I grounded my explorations in the most prevalent traditions while also including within each faith category as many variants as were available to me.

Despite my efforts to visit as many places of worship as possible and to place each in a theological context, I would not characterize this book as “academic.” Never once did I think of it as a “study.” Nor would I characterize it as “investigative journalism.” I never attempted to conceal my identity or act like someone I wasn't. I did not feel any reason to do so because, throughout, I considered this a personal quest to acquaint myself with religion. I said as much to anyone I met along the way. I shared all the real particulars of my life, including my ignorance about religion. However, while I did share that I was a writer, I never told anyone I was working on a book because, at the time, I wasn't. I may have dreamed of such a thing, but no such offers were on the table. To the extent any of this was “research,” it was all a private effort to learn as much as possible. If anything, its scale and scope are evidence of a deep desire to know more.

Because I've come to see the importance of starting any journey right where you are, I began my explorations near my current home, which is a relatively small town in the Pacific Northwest. I also returned to the places I'd lived in the past—California, Texas, and Washington, D.C.—for additional experiences and to further enrich my understanding

of the various religions. I've selected these cities in part because, for the particular faith I explore there, they offer a healthy range of options. More importantly, each played a part in my "None story": from my introduction to Christianity in Texas, my first encounters with Judaism in Los Angeles, and the full embrace of my Noneness as a college student in the San Francisco Bay Area to the aching that started to tug on my heart as a young professional in Washington, D.C., which led me to the Pacific Northwest and, ultimately, on this path.

Christianity

Like a lot of stories, this one begins on impact. Specifically, American Airlines Flight 77 slamming into the Pentagon. Counting the terrorists, 189 people were incinerated there: 59 passengers and 125 employees for whom it was a normal morning until a Boeing 757 ripped open their workplace.

That day I was not far from where the plane hit—about two miles as the word flies. I was in another sturdy behemoth nearer to the Capitol. At the time I worked for the federal government in a branch of the U.S. Congress. My desk was part of a vast bank of cubicles next to windows. Here's how that particular morning unfolded: My coworkers and I gathered in a conference room to watch on a television the collapse of the towers in New York City. In a state of disbelief, I returned to my cube. My mother called from Austin, Texas. She told me about the Pentagon. I hadn't heard about that, so I told her she must be mistaken. Then we received orders from higher-ups to shut the blinds.

With the blinds closed, it was hard to do anything other than speculate about why we had been told to shut them. They were thick Levolors, and they were always open, streaming in daylight. Now a hundred pools of light emanated from individual desk lamps, but above was a thick layer of dark. Was closing the blinds meant to protect us in some way? I hated to think our best defense was window treatments.

Next we were told it was up to us: remain at work or go home. Up to us? It was only noon. I really wanted to stay because I thought doing so might make the day normal. So I told myself I would continue working, and as soon as I made that decision, I left.

A couple days later, I craned my neck from the passenger seat of my friend's car to get a look at the damaged Pentagon. I felt compelled to see it in person, and my usual form of transport—the Metro—was underground, so I asked my friend if she'd drive. Turns out she wanted to see it too and was glad for the company. We managed to stay upbeat on the way there, but neither of us was prepared for the sight of that blackened hole. Our squat, durable superhero was bleeding from a still-gaping wound.

During those next weeks, the experience of living in the District of Columbia changed. The airspace over the city was shut to commercial flights. I had never realized how integral the muffled roar of far-off jetliners was to the symphony of city noise. Now the most soothing of the background sounds was replaced by the disturbing chop-chop of helicopter propellers. Residents were encouraged to stockpile enough provisions for several days in case we were ordered to remain indoors or quickly flee. My roommate and I gathered a mound of necessities, which we kept in an out-of-the-way corner of our living room, growing like some hungry goblin we fed protein bars and jugs of water.

After 9/11 the popular discourse about faith shifted noticeably. In this country's short history, I don't think there's ever been so fierce and public a takedown. On a national scale, people felt emboldened to criticize religion. Between 2004 and 2007, a slew of books railing against faith took the best-seller lists by storm. Collectively they added up to a cultural trend given the nickname "New Atheism," and their authors became the movement's spokesmen. Perhaps the most prominent of the New Atheists was the journalist and professional curmudgeon Christopher Hitchens, a Brit who claimed D.C. as his honorary hometown and whose penthouse was a short walk from my apartment.

Hitchens was not so much presenting a new argument as giving an old one fresh fight. He claimed that atheism in itself did not imply hostility toward religion. Rather, as a statement of disbelief, it was neutral: no evidence suggests the existence of God. An atheist might privately hope for such confirmation. Hitchens preferred his atheism with a bit more bite. He hoped to popularize the term "antitheist" to refer to a nonbeliever who is grateful for this lack of evidence. In his book *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, he insists we are all better off without religion, which he decries as "violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism, tribalism, and bigotry."

The youngest and perhaps most eager of the New Atheists was Sam Harris, an American. His book, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, was the first out of the gate in 2004. He began writing it in the days after 9/11, inspired and horrified by those events. In its pages, he lashes out at all faiths for being “pervasive sources of conflict in the world,” but it seems to me he reserves his most pointed barbs for Islam. He writes that one cannot believe what a good Muslim is supposed to believe and not perpetrate violence. Islam, he claims, is not compatible with a civil society.

I assumed the New Atheists must be very knowledgeable about religion. These were well-educated men (all were men) making claims in public forums. Hitchens had been raised with religion: first within the Church of England and later at a Methodist boarding school. He says he knew by age ten it was all untrue; I figured he must have gained enough familiarity with the Bible and its teachings to speak with such authority. Harris claims a secular upbringing, but apparently he had absorbed enough understanding along the way. He holds a Ph.D. in neuroscience from UCLA; certainly he wouldn't say such things without a thorough understanding of the subject matter. His was a world where one didn't make claims without convincing proof.

What is a good Muslim supposed to believe? I had no clue. I didn't even know what a good Christian or Jew might believe. I had gone through a phase several years earlier when I called myself an atheist; I thought it was the only alternative to thinking the world was run by a giant grandpa sitting on a cloud. Later I realized I knew too little to rightfully claim atheism; to reject something, it's necessary to have a working knowledge of what you reject. I had no such knowledge. Perhaps many religious people conceived of God as a much more complex entity than I imagined. Who was I to say evidence to prove them right didn't exist? Perhaps everything is evidence.

Jesus Is a Start

Ten years later, and for the first time, I feel it: not the presence of Jesus, but a stirring in my heart that tells me I'm beginning to sense his purpose. I'm sitting in the sanctuary of a Methodist church a couple miles from my house when it happens. I've been at this churchgoing thing for several months now. So far I have attended the Sunday services of a handful of Christian denominations that include Lutheran,

Presbyterian, Reformed, Episcopalian, and Baptist—almost all of what I’ve come to understand are the “mainline” Protestant denominations whose theological roots can be traced directly to Europe—and while I have picked up bits and pieces of wisdom from each, I have not until now felt anything. On the contrary, I have maintained my stance as passive and wide-eyed observer, unable or unwilling to let any aspect of the strange concoction of music, ceremony, and prayer reach the sturdy enclosure of my heart.

Why am I, an individual about as alienated from religion as they come, sitting in this church? Here is the short answer: I realized I am a fragment, and that’s why the panic has returned.

Let me explain.

A few years earlier, I had moved to a small town in the Pacific Northwest. This happened because I answered in the affirmative to a series of life-altering questions.

“Will you marry me?”

“Yes!”

“Will you quit your job, sell your condo, and move to the middle of nowhere?”

Oh. Hmmm. Wait, let’s think this through.

Ultimately, I was willing, happy even, to make these changes because it seemed like life was handing me what I needed at just the right time. Hadn’t I been secretly longing to step off the hamster wheel of worldly ambition? Then the events of 9/11 had sent me into an existential tailspin. I was exhausted and mildly depressed, wondering, “Is this all there is?” But I wasn’t bold enough to plan an escape route, and then along came Phil: Ph.D. student, wonderful man, soon-to-be professor in a remote college town, and, suddenly, fiancé.

As I made the transition from old life to new, I felt like an archaeologist brushing away layers of dirt and grime to get at some prized artifact: the “real” me. Away went the city, the bustle, and the endless distractions. I cleared the need to be at a specific location for ten hours a day working hard at something that was not necessarily my passion—along with the paycheck that went with it.

What remained was unscheduled time and a stillness to my days I had never known. No tall buildings divided the air; no city blocks organized the land; no regular job structured my day. The more irrelevant crud I removed, the more evident it became that what I had hoped would be the complete and pristine vessel of my true self was actually a jagged little edge, curved just so and embedded in the earth so that it

only appeared to be whole. I would find myself standing at a window, looking out on the wheat fields that surrounded my little neighborhood and wishing desperately for a crazy, active city to materialize so I could lose myself in it. A tight squeeze of panic would rise in my chest, and I would need to lie down and repeat a collection of short sentences: You are okay. Everything is fine. You are not dying.

It wasn't that I was unhappy with the direction my life had taken. I was content with my decision to leave the big city. Even quitting my good job, while difficult, felt right. The problem lay deeper, I realized, because all of these changes, while easing one kind of suffering, had uncovered another. As an adolescent and then again in college I suffered a frequent low-grade anxiety that occasionally peaked in bouts of panic. I had thought these were gone for good, but now I realized whatever caused them had simply been buried under layers of distraction. Which is why this churchgoing project has taken on such significance: I'm on a desperate search for the bits and pieces that might make my pot whole.

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When I arrive at the Methodist church this morning, I'm several Sundays into this adventure and Jesus is about the farthest thing from my mind. I am preoccupied with having left the house at what seems like an unreasonably early hour for a Sunday. I feel a little nervous, as I always do before entering a new place of worship. I wonder how long the service will last and if there will be snacks afterward.

In sermons and readings over the last few months, Jesus has appeared in one of two guises: as a sweet man walking the earth or as an interchangeable component of the Holy Trinity, a synonym for God or the Holy Spirit. I've heard preachers call him "our savior," saying that he "died for our sins." But why or what this means, I wasn't quite sure—and no one had yet to elaborate. I'm hoping to find out because this information might shed light on my personal struggles.

At the door to the sanctuary, an elderly gentleman in a brown corduroy blazer, his full head of white hair neatly coiffed, welcomes me politely and hands me the day's program: one eight-and-a-half-by-eleven piece of paper folded in half. From the outside, this church looks like a ski chalet circa 1970, the kind where the roof reaches all the way to the ground, but inside it is more of a cavernous barnlike space with a raised altar/stage at one end. As expected, decorations are minimal—a couple

of chunky wooden candelabras affixed to the walls on either side of the room, a big shiny cross hanging against a row of golden organ pipes at the back of the altar, a funny little bowl-on-a-pedestal contraption that I guess is the baptismal font. Two big fans turn slowly where the ceiling reaches its most dramatic height. Mesmerized by the long steel blades, I keep glancing skyward, which makes me feel pious.

A choir of about ten strong wearing ordinary clothes is practicing as I take a seat in a row of chairs near the back. Several voices soar like doves and help the unremarkable ones reach greater heights. They are going over the day's hymns as people trickle in.

Two raised, flat screens on either side of the altar display an image of a painting of Jesus in what appears to be a post-crucifixion moment of reflection. He's sitting hunched and naked except for a strategically draped loincloth. His knocked-over crucifix lies nearby. His back is a mess of ripped flesh; a halo backlights his head, gently illuminating his somber profile and the twist of thorny brambles crowning him.

The heading reads: "Torture and Humiliation: Man of Sorrows." Uh oh. I think, "It's time to face the grim aspect of this Jesus thing."

One afternoon when I was a kid visiting my great-grandmother's house in Cockrell, Texas, my cousins taught me the words to the song "Jesus Loves the Little Children," and we marched up and down the driveway belting it out. They showed me an illustration of Jesus. He had rosy cheeks, a gentle smile, and the same long, wavy locks Grandma and Grandpa hated on my dad. I didn't understand why the look was okay on Jesus but dad needed a haircut.

As little as I've thought about Jesus since then, I must admit there have been times in my adult life when I have loudly cried out for him. This has usually occurred following a night of too much alcohol, when I find myself curled up on the bathroom floor or hugging the toilet for dear life. I have misjudged my tolerance for mixed drinks, and now I am violently sick and it's my own damn fault and I really, really, really do not want to die, although death is surely imminent, and, much to my surprise and that of anyone who may be within earshot, I shout, "Oh, Jesus!" or "Jesus, help me!" Which may indicate that some barely conscious, even primal, part of me trusts in this notion of Jesus and automatically reaches for it at times of great need.

So it is with heartfelt curiosity that I approach the story of Jesus now. The main event is so ubiquitous that one need never step foot in church to know the basics: Jesus is nailed to a cross and killed. The image of him hanging up there is almost too pervasive for me to actually feel anything in response.

A bloody young man drooping from planks of wood? Just Jesus.

It is Lent. Before this, what I knew of Lent came from my elementary and middle school years, when a classmate would proudly announce she was “giving something up for Lent.” It might be chocolate or video games or, if she was super hardcore, television. I thought this was a fascinating and impressive endeavor, especially as it seemed to come out of nowhere, like a little personal challenge of willpower. My secret feelings about my own worthiness lent a certain logic to the notion that people might deny themselves something they loved: a self-inflicted punishment for whatever deep badness lay hidden inside.

I’ve recently learned that the purpose of Lent is to move past the desensitization about Jesus’s death, to dive deeper into the painful aspects of the story. In fact, in some cultures a decadent party is thrown before Lent to help sweeten the bitterness of this “Season of Grief.” Carnival in Brazil is an example, as is Mardi Gras in New Orleans—just think of all those partying Nones participating in the preparations for an ancient Christian ritual without even knowing it.

The Methodist minister seems as good a guide as any to lead us into the storm. He is an absent-minded-professor type with a trim beard and a lazy eye: one looks at us, the other is trained forever on the unknown. In his sermon he explains that when Jesus was summoned to Jerusalem to stand trial for his crime, which was his supposed claim of divinity, he was greeted as a hero. The crowd adored him and knew he had never been anything but exceptionally kind to everyone; he had lived his days practicing the love he preached. The people lined the streets and cheered as he entered the city. They spread palm fronds on the ground so that the hooves of the donkey he was riding wouldn’t touch the ground. But after his conviction, they spit on him, kicked him, ripped at his clothes. They clapped when he was lashed and cheered as the spikes were driven through his palms and feet.

I knew Jesus was crucified, but I hadn’t realized the abuse he suffered beforehand from his “friends.” How would I have felt to be in Jesus’s shoes? I believe I would have been terrified and pissed; I would

have been furious at those people; I would have gone down with the bitterest anger in my heart and the worst expletives spewing from my mouth. But Jesus goes willingly, with nothing but love for every one of those jerks. Then I think, what if I were one of the crowd? Would I have stood up for Jesus? Doubtful. All my information would have been through the grapevine: this man says he's God. I wouldn't buy such a claim now; what makes me think I would have bought it then? Even some of his most loyal followers turned their backs on him. In every person exists the same capacity for cruelty. Jesus knew it, but he said he loved everyone anyway.

I think about the many public examples of greed in our culture, the CEOs who take million-dollar bonuses when their businesses have just been bailed out by taxpayers and all the smaller versions of selfishness we perpetrate, and how Jesus's actions and message were the antithesis of this behavior. I glance at the whirring fans, hoping to blink away whatever this is rising in my chest.

In his ultimate act, Jesus was so painfully vulnerable—and yet he demonstrated amazing courage. Here, in these little outposts of devotion, something similar is happening: people show up to search their hearts and confront their own frailties. Perhaps they find ways to turn weaknesses into assets. I don't know. But I sense that somewhere in Jesus's story is a message I desperately need and that each time I conquer my fear and enter a new place of worship I get closer to understanding what that lesson might be.

This moment feels like a victory—a small step, but forward movement nonetheless. I can't possibly understand the essence of Christianity unless I get Jesus. I have yet to tackle the biggest challenge: how to wrap my mind around God. But Jesus is a start.

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I dab my eyes with my shirt sleeve to absorb the few tears threatening to travel down my cheek. I don't want anyone to get the wrong idea about me. I'm not having one of those ridiculous "coming to Jesus" moments you hear about—I don't think. I am just moved, that's all.

The minister invites us to return later in the week to go through the "stations of the cross," which he says he'll be setting up throughout the sanctuary over the next couple of days. I have never heard of "sta-

tions of the cross,” so at home I look it up. It’s a Catholic tradition of erecting “shrines” (usually fourteen), each dedicated to one event in the last twenty-four hours of Jesus’s life. The idea is for the faithful to experience step-by-step that fateful day. It’s not a Methodist custom, but the minister said it’s something “he’s trying out.” I’ve read that a trend is afoot in which mainline Protestants are embracing elements of Catholic tradition they once distanced themselves from, and I suppose this is an example of just that. I decide to return on Good Friday, the day Jesus’s crucifixion is traditionally recognized, to walk through the stations.

I spend several days obsessing over Jesus like I need to prep for a blind date with him. By all accounts, he was a real man, a carpenter and a Jew who was interested and knowledgeable enough in religion to be called rabbi. Just from the Bible snippets I’ve been hearing over these last several weeks, I know he preached love and equality, even stopping to talk with individuals considered so lowly that his friends wondered what he was doing. All of which makes me like him very much. Yet I’ve never quite come to terms with his claims of divinity. Why is he exalted as the Son of God when others making similar declarations are locked away in loony bins? When I was twelve, my friend Julie confided in me a painful secret. We were walking home from school and I could sense something was wrong. She was the first good friend I had made since mom and I moved to Dallas. Finally she spat it out. She said, “My dad is in the mental hospital.” I knew she was referring to her biological father, a talented artist whom she saw infrequently. She called her stepdad by name.

Her face scrunched up. It looked like she was in physical pain, like the time we stepped barefoot in cactus needles. “He went crazy. He thinks . . .” She couldn’t say it, whatever it was—it was too horrific. Her face was a map of agony. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. “He thinks he’s Jesus!”

I didn’t know how to react. Judging by her face, it was about the worst thing imaginable, and I got the sense it wasn’t the crazy part that so disturbed her—it was the Jesus part. Her misery was apparent, and I wished for something to say to make it go away. She made me promise not to breathe a word to our school friends. I wouldn’t dare. I had my own angst to worry about. My dad had left for California, which was the reason mom and I moved to Dallas. We needed to be closer to my grandparents. That vague sense of unworthiness I felt as a kid in

Austin, the sense that made the denials of Lent sound reasonable, had blossomed into full-blown shame.

So why have so many people over the last two thousand years accepted the actual historical Jesus as the Son of God? I decide it is time: I must go back and read every word Jesus said. It sounds like an enormous task, but really it isn't. All the dialogue he is purported to have spoken would fit in fewer than a hundred pages and, by some accounts, would take a person about two hours to recite if she were to perform it as an enormous, disjointed, and somewhat repetitive monologue. But it can't possibly be exact quotes can it? The words attributed to Jesus were written down fifty or more years after he died and, then, not necessarily by the original guys to whom he spoke them. After that, copies of the originals were made by hand until the printing press was invented; the texts also went through translations into modern tongues—all of which can make it seem like some epic game of telephone has been played between the original source and us contemporary folks.

I pore over the Gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John, the books of the New Testament where the bulk of the Jesus story is told. It's amazing what I learn. Again and again, Jesus lets others draw their own conclusions about his identity. He asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" and they're the ones who say "messiah." He asks several times, "Who say the people that I am?" When rulers call him "King of the Jews," he says, "If you say so." I find it truly remarkable that I've gone through life thinking that Jesus went around saying, "I'm the messiah," which has colored my impression of him despite his many good qualities. I just bought what other people said about Jesus as words he said about himself.

One quote stands out. He's giving advice, like loving neighbors and avoiding false prophets, when he implies that our obligation to make these morally responsible decisions stems from the simple fact that we are among the living despite odds too slim to imagine. He says, "Because strait the gate, and narrow the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:14).

I read the line again, and the truth of it hits like a lightning bolt to my heart.

Think of all the human pairings that had to occur since the dawn of human pairings and then within those couplings all the millions of potential seedling combinations. If just one of those had gone

a different way: no you. Being alive is like winning the cosmic lottery, he's saying. I think each of us recognizes the truth of this, even if just subliminally. But our default setting isn't gratitude. Instead we are fearful, somewhere deep inside, of not being good enough, of being unworthy of this life we've been given.

I had been trying to figure out why I carried around such a heavy burden of shame as a perfectly normal kid. I had always attributed my feelings to my situation, as if my lack of goodness were exactly proportional to the difference between a conventional family and mine. But now I wonder if my shame didn't stem from a more universal source, if I would have smuggled the sense of being not quite good enough into a perfect nuclear family if those had been my circumstances. The more I talk to people from various backgrounds, the more I realize how others struggled with similar feelings that began around the same time. Perhaps it's the greater self-awareness that occurs between the ages of, say, eight and twelve that brings with it a dawning comprehension of one's own potential shortcomings. I've known some people who, exposed to religion and hoping to please God, became fervent during those years. Others, like me, pinned their nascent feelings of insufficiency on whatever scraps they could find. This phase marks the onset of a general level of anxiety, manifested in errant behaviors such as random bed-wetting or compulsive handwashing or other small acts of self-admonishment. Who didn't announce at least once during those years, "I wish I was never born!" (Interesting tidbit: the American Religions Identification Survey measures a respondent's religious affiliation at two points: current and at age twelve.)

Could these feelings go hand in hand with what Christians call "original sin"? Technically defined as the guilt all humans carry due to the disobedience of Adam and Eve, I'm beginning to wonder if this concept speaks to the widespread sense of shame written into the human condition. That it is tied to the Bible's first man and woman seems to indicate this feeling is a birthright and that each of us, by virtue of having been born, suffers to some degree. It's the guilt we feel for nothing we did, but simply because we got here. It's a form of survivor's guilt for having won the cosmic lottery.

Apparently, Jesus was trying to talk to people about this more than two thousand years ago.

But then we receive the second half in the one-two punch of the human condition: just as we come face to face with the wonder of

our existence, with the enormous responsibility this honor seems to demand of us and the terror that we'll likely do nothing to prove ourselves deserving of it, we start to sense an end point lurking.

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I arrive at the church at noon expecting to go through the stations alone because the minister mentioned that they'll be numbered and easy to traverse. I don't really know what to expect. I picture a Halloween haunted house with little vignettes—some frightening, some merely creepy—set up around a series of darkened rooms. Here is a ghost that pops out at you; here is a bowl of spaghetti that feels like human brains. Are you sufficiently terrified? Why, yes, I am, thank you.

When I walk into the sanctuary, a small group is assembled near the altar, three older women and a man plus the minister. I recognize one of the women; she sat next to me at the Sunday service. I told her I liked the enormous fans above us, and she explained they were the kind used in dairy barns. She also explained that the concrete floors had recently been exposed and polished so the sanctuary would look “more modern.”

She spots me and waves me over. Her short white hair surrounds the adorable face of a Cabbage Patch Kid doll grown old. “We're just getting started,” she says, putting her arm around me and giving a squeeze. As soon as my shoulder presses against hers, I realize how relieved I am to have companionship on this strange little journey. I wrap my arm around her.

The stations are not crosses or carvings like the pictures I saw online. These are computer printouts, with simple designs and mostly words, laminated and taped on the walls at intervals. The course starts on one side of the altar and takes us around the perimeter of the sanctuary until we end up on the other side of the altar. When I join the group, they are standing at the first station: Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. The minister reads a short paragraph about this brief respite that Jesus and three of his disciples take as they walk into Jerusalem. Jesus knows he's going to die soon, and he's suddenly overcome with grief; until this moment, he had seemed stoic about his fate. He tells his companions, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death: tarry ye here, and watch.” He asks them to stay with him while he prays for one hour. When he looks up, his friends have fallen asleep, and for the first

time Jesus is upset. In this personal moment, he expresses his disappointment to his friends. He says, “Sleepest thou? couldst not thou watch one hour?” The minister finishes reading, and our little group stands quietly, letting it sink in.

How would I feel knowing it was the eve of my own death? I remember being thirteen when the idea of death first wrapped its long, ugly fingers around my neck and squeezed—it went from an abstract notion that happened to other, mostly old, people to being something that would happen to me eventually. It was nighttime, and I was lying in bed when this thought entered my mind: someday I will be gone. I felt so permanent; how could it be? I found the thought preposterous and, then, horrifying. I imagined all the years that would go by after me and how I wouldn’t know what was happening because I would be one of those people in a graveyard, just someone who lived long ago. I gathered fistfuls of bedding and kicked wildly at the air. I was throwing a tantrum directed at . . . what? God? When the notion strikes just right I still get a flash of disbelief followed by a wave of suffocating panic. I was terrified by death then, and not much has changed.

I ponder the complexities in this simple event: Jesus wanting companionship as he struggles to accept mortality, while his friends, despite all good intentions, encounter their own human frailties. Jesus is momentarily disappointed, but he doesn’t dwell on it. Not long after, he tells his friends his two hopes, which seem to be all of Christianity in a nutshell: “That my joy might remain in you, that your joy might be full” and “That ye love one another as I have loved you.”

Over the next several stations Jesus is arrested, judged, and condemned. It occurs to me as we’re going through these steps that the real crime here—the reason Jesus faced such a harsh consequence—comes from the beliefs others had about him. Anyone can say he is divine and simply be dismissed as a lunatic. What set Jesus apart, what made him a true threat in the eyes of the leaders of his day, were not the claims he may or may not have made but what existed in the hearts and minds of those whose lives he touched.

My little group is now facing the grim downhill slope. I offer my friend a wan smile. If I were alone, I would race through these last stations and make a beeline for the exit, but I slow my pace to that of the group’s. I recall a statement made by the rector at an Episcopal service I attended a couple weeks earlier. She said, “If you’re willing to look directly at the grim death of Jesus, you’ll find it creates spaciousness

in your heart.” What a strange and mysterious thing to say, I thought at the time. What did she mean by it?

Then, like a motley crew on a turbulent sea, we forge ahead: Jesus is scourged, crowned with thorns, forced to carry his own cross, and, finally, crucified. Jesus says, “Be not afraid.” It is the same simple instruction he has offered on many occasions over the course of his ministry, but it takes on new significance as he now offers it from the other side of death.

The last station is a life-size wood cross that has been set temporarily in the middle of the altar. Now Jesus is in his tomb, and the cross is draped in black cloth. I stand directly in front of this crucifix. It is taller than me, about the size of a doorway. Jesus said, “I am the door.” I close my eyes and imagine this big cross as something I can open. What’s on the other side? Can it be as expansive as the Episcopalian priest suggested? I see my hand on the knob as I twist and push.

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I decide to skip the churchgoing on Easter Sunday. I know in a way I am cheating myself. I endured the gloomy crucifixion only to miss the celebratory conquering of death. Part of the reason I decide to take the day off is I’m not quite sure what to think of the supernatural aspects of the Jesus story: making blind people see, feeding a crowd of thousands with a few fish, and, the biggest of all, rising from the dead. I’ve read that some modern theologians insist these events have been fabricated or embellished; the stories about Jesus were told by word of mouth over many years until they developed these fantastical elements. I haven’t sorted out what I believe—or if it even matters that I form an opinion on the subject. But, to be honest, that’s more of an excuse. Here’s the truth: a group of my pals is meeting for brunch. After several months of reserving my Sundays for God, I’m feeling homesick for my old ways. For Nones, Sundays are for getting up late, lazing around at home, and if we do go out before noon, we are most likely to be up to one thing: having brunch with friends.

I wonder, as I am downing a couple of mimosas, if we aren’t more Christian than we realize—even those of us who might balk at the suggestion. We may not be overtly religious, but in ways we might not even recognize, Christianity shapes our day-to-day lives. Our very

concept of historical time: we organize our calendar years into “before” and “after” Jesus. Even the word “holiday” comes from “holy day.” I accept Jesus’s main teachings on an instinctual level, as do the people with whom I’m close. From a very young age, I understood that others are no different from me and that anything I do or say is experienced by them in the same way I might experience it. I also understand that every person is a significant and equally valuable being. So integral is this to my way of thinking that it’s difficult to imagine a time in human history when this reasoning wasn’t the norm, when certain people were considered no better than lion bait, existing for the sole purpose of being ripped from limb to limb for entertainment. I can imagine that Jesus’s Golden Rule must have seemed like a novel idea back then. But have we evolved past this? Could it be that the spiritual exploration and evolution of our ancestors has accumulated in our DNA or “collective consciousness” so that what were once alien teachings are now fundamental to who we are?

I read about a recent spate of billboards an atheist group paid to have erected in a few key cities. They show smiling individuals with the quote, “I can be good without God.” I have no doubt this is true, that the people pictured are kindhearted and well-meaning, though I might argue that technically the “without God” is a bit misleading as they are likely leaning on the spiritual work of previous generations. So while these individuals may personally be taking a break from thinking about God, their great-grandmothers and great-great-grandmothers probably spent quite a bit of time honoring the divine and whatever wisdom they gathered they passed down to their children who passed it down to their children and so on.

But this billboard raises an excellent question for me personally: isn’t religion about a lot more than being good? I hope so because I’m not looking for motivation to be good—like the atheists on those posters, I don’t think of myself as particularly in need of help in that area.

I am shooting for something more along the lines of inner peace.

I want to learn what, if anything, Christianity offers to soothe deeper and more personal afflictions. Already it’s forcing me to examine obvious causes of suffering, like the idea of death. But another source had never occurred to me: having been born. So much anguish is tied to these twin realizations—existence, granted and revoked. Each of us will tussle with them again and again throughout a lifetime, giving rise

to bouts of guilt and fear, two sides of the coin of life. Perhaps the idea is to familiarize ourselves so intimately with these truths or understand them in such a way that someday we can move beyond this struggle.

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Several months after moving with Phil to our new town, I started to notice the churches. Almost like one of those digital-patterned images in which a prominent shape emerges if you gaze with eyes relaxed, the churches in my neighborhood began to stand out. I counted six within a mile radius of my house—three if I went one direction and three if I went the other. The older neighborhood that surrounds the college campus boasted even more churches—historic brick and stone buildings nestled on almost every block. They also popped up in unexpected locations, between retail businesses in strip malls or amid doctor’s offices in a medical complex.

I would stare as I drove past, wondering what was going on inside. I’d see their crowded lots on Sundays, the parked cars spilling into the residential streets. I’d also see churches whose lots were half empty, and I’d wonder about those too. It struck me as extraordinary: in every neighborhood in every town in this country sit command posts of attempted transcendence. What exactly did they do in there? Why was I not with them? Church has been the stepping-stone for newcomers since this country was founded—first when European settlers arrived and then as pioneers made their way west. Whatever new place has been arrived at, church has helped people plant their roots and establish relationships—with God and with each other. Those happened to be two types of relationships I was interested in cultivating, so why should I disregard this tried and tested means of adjusting to, and perhaps even thriving in, a new place?

But where does one begin when no beginning has been mapped? How was I, a second-generation None, meant to make sense of this sea of choices without benefit of having been handed an affiliation by birth, marriage, or some other unique circumstance? The extent of my knowledge in this arena involved that old childhood game of putting my hands together, digits intertwined, index fingers up and reciting the lines, “Here is the church. Here is the steeple.” Then “opening the doors” and crying, “And here’s all the people!”

I plucked the Worship Directory out of my local paper. I usually swept right past it, but suddenly there it was: an entire page dedicated to listing the places of worship in my community. I studied it carefully. I found names I recognized but knew almost nothing about, then the denominations splintered into groupings that were foreign to me. In alphabetical order, the list read: Assembly of God, Baptist, Bible, Catholic, Christian Science, Church of Christ, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Church of God, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal, Evangelical, Foursquare, Full-Gospel, Lutheran, Methodist, Nazarene, Non-Denominational, Presbyterian, Quaker, Reformed, Seventh-Day Adventist, Unitarian Universalist, and United Church of Christ. (I also noted a listing for a mosque and a “Jewish community” that doesn’t have a synagogue but gathers for worship and fellowship.) Most headings boasted more than one church to choose from.

Overwhelmed, I thought I could satisfy my curiosity and avoid the churchgoing issue by taking a page from the life of a poet I admire: Kathleen Norris. She writes about moving back, in her thirties, to her ancestral farming town in South Dakota after living in New York City. I was drawn to her story because it seemed like an extreme version of my own—her urban experience more urban, her small-town experience more rural. Her relocation was accompanied by a spiritual shift as well. Raised with regular church attendance, she had come, for a time, to consider herself an atheist. Her pull toward home was more than an attraction to her family homestead; it was also a return to her religious roots. She rejoined her grandmother’s Presbyterian Church. In addition, she takes sojourns to a Benedictine monastery, staying with contemplative monks who practice Catholicism.

I decided to copy Norris. Preferring my destination to be within a day’s drive of my house, I went online and searched “Benedictine Monastery Washington State.” This little “spiritual vacation” wasn’t meant to be the beginning of anything; it was supposed to be the entire journey. I imagined it as a divine car wash: in one end I would go with the jangled nerves and disconnectedness of modern life; out the other I would appear with the serene smile and beaming aura of the Virgin Mary. What were the events that I thought would transpire in between? I had no idea. But I was pretty sure angels would sing.

Immediately I hit upon the website of a monastery that fit the bill; it seemed almost too easy, as if it had been founded in the 1970s for

the sole purpose of one day being at the receiving end of my Internet search. Unlike the one Norris visited, this was a 300-acre farm and the “monks” were all nuns. It was as far away from my new town as possible while still being part of the same state; though, technically, it wasn’t even touching the state—it was several miles offshore, on a small island. Online photos showed habited ladies atop tractors and lippy llamas smiling for the camera. I read that visitors are welcome, especially when they help with chores. I loved the idea of working on a farm, especially if what the website said was true—that it was a “form of prayer.” To arrange a weeklong visit was simple enough: click to e-mail a nun.

I drove my car onto the ferry. As we pulled away from the dock, I felt like I was entering a dreamscape where seals might pop up from the murky depths to lead the way. I imagined I would be a sort of “temporary nun,” one of the gals making my way down the monastery halls to the light of a flickering candle. I would eat my meals sitting elbow to elbow with the sisters; we would work in the garden side by side, fast friends giggling at the absurdities of the world. The nun atop a tractor in the picture from the website? I’d be sitting right next to her, her field-plowing copilot. All the while, they would take me under their billowy sleeves and teach me the divine lessons they had gathered over a lifetime.

Once we hit land, reality whooshed back.

The monastery itself—where the nuns lived—was behind a high wall. The guest accommodations were located down the road in the original house built when the property was a secular farm. My companions for the week were not nuns at all but other visitors staying at the guesthouse: two young women interested in organic farming, a middle-aged woman deciding whether to become a nun, and a teenager from Seattle trying to kick a drug habit.

Between the nuns’ quarters and the guesthouse was a little chapel, the interior made entirely of wood harvested from the nearby forest. Big windows overlooked the sheep pasture. I only saw the nuns at the two daily worship sessions I was invited to observe—morning mass and evening vespers. (Occasionally, I spied a nun as she drove by in a pickup truck.) After mass I waited at the door of the chapel to receive my daily assignment. Our days were very structured: two hours of morning chores and two in the afternoon, time for silent contemplation (a walk was encouraged), and meals to be shared communally among visitors. (The nuns ate the same food together in the monastery.)

During my stay I sifted compost, planted hundreds of tulip bulbs, and pulled bushels of mustard greens. I enjoyed the work and the reassuringly rigid timetable of our days that enforced quiet retreat. I savored the periods each day that I sat in the simple chapel. The nuns would sing and pray while the candles coaxed a golden glow from the wood surfaces, and I would get faint glimpses of the transcendence of faith, but these were as ephemeral as one of those delicate paper lanterns that float into the sky on the heat of a single flame and then burn up and disappear. I returned home with a sense that religion offered something substantial, enough to sustain those women on that remote island, but I had not grasped what it was.

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Back home, the Worship Directory still sat on my desk, growing crispy from the sun. As I read through it again, I realized some options were missing; a church just down the street wasn't listed. I consulted the phone book to fill in gaps. The religious landscape was even more confusing than I initially realized. I counted about fifty options within a short drive of my house.

Did my new town have more than its fair share of churches? In 2001 the Pacific Northwest earned the nickname “the None Zone” after the American Religious Identification Survey found a disproportionate percentage of Nones residing in the region—63 percent compared to the national average of 41 percent. More recent studies show that Vermont and parts of New England have since surpassed the Pacific Northwest in percentage of Nones. Still, even within these “None Zones,” exist pockets of religious zeal. My community is home to two public universities, which fill these waters with proverbial fish, and I have seen old letters between church officials agreeing that outposts should be established here if they are to keep a “hook in the sea.” So my sense that this community hosts an inordinate number and variety of churches may not be far off.

I would visit them all, I decided. The wisdom of this solution was twofold: I could quench my thirst for spirituality and address the religious ignorance I had felt so acutely in the wake of 9/11.

Before going forward, I needed to tell Phil what I was doing. I couldn't just wake up Sunday mornings and leave the house with my husband wondering where I was headed. When I told him that, at least

for a while, I would be gone for a portion of every Sunday he furrowed his brow and muttered, “That sucks.” He grew more supportive over time when he saw my determination. By the time Sundays turned to Saturdays and, eventually, to Fridays, he was cheering me on.

I told my grandmother, my dad’s mom and my only living grandparent, over the phone. Grandma is the most religious of my remaining family, although her association with the Greek Orthodox Church in Dallas has become mostly cultural: christenings, weddings, funerals. I explained that I was going to stay in a monastery for a week, and she cried, “They’ll rape you!” Her hearing is not so good, though it turns out she heard me just fine. I eased her into the idea over several conversations, but she remained skeptical.

My parents were the ones I was most worried about. When I was growing up, we had a family friend who became a “born-again” Christian and it was with a mixture of pity and sorrow that we spoke of her. She may have been reborn someplace else, but she had died on our side. They took the news of my project stoically, though with a bit of confusion at first. It helped when I couched it as “research” and explained I was going to many places of worship and exploring several religions. How would they feel if I selected a religion with which to identify and became a member at a single place of worship? I had a feeling that would be much harder news to break.

A Man Who Changed the World

Phil plunked his beloved *History of the World* into my lap. “Read,” he said, pointing to the open page. “The Protestant Reformation,” announced the heading. Over several paragraphs I learned the condensed version of the story: the devoted monk in medieval Germany whose dissatisfaction with the Catholic leaders of his day led him to challenge their interpretation of Christianity. His bold gesture of posting an outline of complaints to his local cathedral door is credited with starting a wave of religious rebellion throughout Europe. Had I been taught the broad strokes of these events in high school? It rang a faint bell.

I went online to order a book about him. I selected one entitled *Martin Luther: A Man Who Changed the World*. It was a little on the pricey side, but I decided to go for it. I pictured a weighty tome like Phil’s *History of the World*. I would keep it on my bookshelf and, years from now, reflect that my journey into religion had been shaped by this dense and dusty volume. I would heft its bulk into my lap and relive my beginnings as a self-made religious scholar.

Several weeks later a package arrived. Too wide to fit in the mailbox, our mailman propped it against the garage door. It was about the shape of a record in its cardboard jacket, perhaps a hair or two thicker.

I ripped it open.

It took me several seconds to understand. It was my book, *Martin Luther: A Man Who Changed the World . . .* but it was for kids. I had accidentally ordered an illustrated children's book.

The cover, realistically rendered in gloomy colors, showed an unsmiling young monk pressing an old scroll against a wood door. I didn't know what was more frightening—his intense watery eyes or his bald dome ringed in bangs.

I would learn later that Luther said, "God likes to perform miracles in order to mock and trick me and the world." He was referring specifically to his unexpected marriage, at age forty-two, to a former nun, Katherine Von Bora. Who would have thought they would deviate so drastically from their monastic vows? Yet they embraced their new lives and celebrated them as a divine gift. By all accounts they were extremely happy together and had six children.

At first I was annoyed about the book mix-up: I needed to repackage and send it back, hassle with customer service. Then I paused. Something clicked, some spark of recognition, and I promised to take note of all the goofy and insignificant things that happened along the way—even if they were ridiculous or seemed to take me backward instead of forward. I was bound to learn as much about the divine from these "failures" as I was from what I might consider the successes.

I opted to keep the book and prop it up where I could see it every day. Over time I found the whole thing funny. Could this be one of God's little tricks? If so, God is hilarious.

I also decided to obtain the rest of my reading material from the local college library.

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As I pull into the parking lot of the Lutheran church, the first stop on my journey (second if you count the monastery), I am sweating. I feel like a poorly trained FBI informant on an undercover mission, a bulge of wires strapped to my chest, a lumpy dead giveaway that I am not to be trusted.

As I approach the church doors, I have comedian Dana Carvey's "Church Lady," in my head. In an interview I read recently, he explained

that he based that character on the women in the Lutheran church he grew up attending. Prim and judgmental, I can picture her interrogating me. “You’ve decided to attend church after all these years? And you’re how old? Well, isn’t that *special*?”

The first person I see greeting people at the door is a middle-aged man who looks vaguely familiar. Perhaps I’ve seen him at the grocery store or post office. His droopy eyes and full mustache give him the appearance of a walrus; he even has the soft, seemingly boneless physique. He is perhaps the least intimidating person imaginable, and I can feel the tension in my shoulders release.

“Are you a student?” he asks me. It’s the second-to-last weekend in August, and the fall semester has just begun. On a table are red lunch bags, rows and rows of them, each with its own little sticker: “Welcome, Students,” they announce.

I shake my head apologetically. “Community member.”

He looks disappointed.

I feel like telling him I’ve been a student for most of my days on earth. In fact, this is the first time in my life I’m not a student—officially, that is.

A pained expression comes over his face, as if he’s struggling with a moral dilemma. “Well, we made these bags for students, but I guess you can have one? Since you’re a visitor.”

“No, I couldn’t,” I say. I wave away his offering. I imagine busloads of students will walk through the doors any minute. “Save those for the students.”

Now that the pressure is off, he seems eager to give it to me. He opens the mouth of the bag to let me look inside. Among the photocopied leaflets, I spy a plastic baggie of homemade cookies.

“Well, now that you’ve shown me those cookies,” I say, taking the bag.

I’m so focused on making my way into the sanctuary that I don’t notice the ladies passing out stacks of paper. I’m a few feet inside, standing at a basin that looks like an empty wishing well and surveying the room. Here’s what I’m preoccupied with: the chapel is a giant circle. There’s no “altar,” just a small raised area in the center, and no traditional pews, just rows of identical chairs like you might see in a hotel conference room. They are set up so that short aisles radiate out from the central platform.

I'm captivated by this configuration because it bears little resemblance to the image I had concocted in my mind of churchgoing in Luther's time. To understand his dissatisfaction with worship in his day, I created an imaginary scenario. In my daydream I am a regular lady of the town of Wittenberg (in current-day Germany), a hausfrau going about her daily chores when the church bells toll, indicating to everyone within earshot that services will begin imminently. I corral my wayward pig and tighten the strings on my bodice and begin the ten-minute walk to church. By the time I get there, it's packed. I find a seat in the last pew. In the front, at the altar, the priests and other church officials have begun the ceremonial rituals: the movements and prayers that look familiar to me, as I have seen them performed my entire life. Even so, I have no idea what they mean as the words are in Latin, a language only the educated study (basically just the "men of the cloth"). So I sit quietly, enjoying the intonation of their voices. I inhale the woody smoke of incense, and appreciate the smell even as it further obscures my already poor view of the holy stuff happening up front.

Of course, my hausfrau alter ego has never actually read the Bible, as it has yet to be translated into common languages from Greek and Latin. However, I have been told about God, the ruler of the universe, and it is my understanding that I can do specific things to please Him. This is the only hope I have for my animating essence—my soul—to live on after my body dies. Furthermore, I have options to improve the quality of my eternal life. For example, I can give money to one of the traveling religious officials collecting donations to take back to headquarters in Rome and, depending on how much I give, the number of days that I have to wait to gain admittance into heaven after I die will be reduced, which seems like money well spent if you ask me, as I will have an official certificate of this purgatory-reducing transaction.

But the most important reason I'm here is to participate in the holiest of the holy: communion. This is when the priests turn bread and wine into the real flesh and blood of Jesus and, by eating it, a person ingests God—this merging with the divine is where an individual is meant to feel closest to the Supreme Being. Not that I get to eat the bread and wine myself, mind you. No one in the congregation gets to do that, as the elements are too precious to be handled by regular people. What if the wine were to spill? That would be Jesus's blood! The good men in robes grow close to Him on our behalf.

A tap on the shoulder snaps me from my medieval revelry. “You forgot this,” says a bright-eyed woman. I look at her offering. “Today’s program,” she says. Ah, the Xerox machine: just one of the many ways the churchgoing experience has become more accessible since Luther’s time.

A quick glance at the program indicates how different today will be on account of Luther’s ideas. It was Luther’s own struggles with depression that forced him to reconceptualize the churchgoing experience and, most importantly, his relationship with God. He admitted he hated the God the church was presenting because it seemed as if nothing was enough to satisfy Him. He thought becoming a monk would alleviate his anxiety—at last he would feel as if God were pleased with him—but even in his devout monastic life, he felt rotten.

My children’s book does an excellent job of conveying Luther’s torment; in fact, I probably wouldn’t have understood how bad it was without the realistic illustrations. For the first half, in every picture, the guy looks absolutely traumatized. He’s on his knees in a thunderstorm, woefully gazing at the heavens. Turn the page and he’s on his knees again, this time furiously scrubbing the monastery floor. The accompanying text reads: “Brother Martin was surprised and saddened that the harder he tried to keep God’s commandments perfectly, the more he felt like a failure.”

Then, in a quiet moment while reading the Bible, everything changes—such a simple and private act that it doesn’t warrant an illustration in my picture book. Luther suddenly understands that God’s love is free for all who wish to receive it. It dawns on him that nowhere in the Bible does it say donations of money are required or that priests are necessary go-betweens.

He experienced elation at this realization. Of this moment, he later recalled, “I felt as if I was entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through gates that had been flung open.” (Legend has it that this “Aha!” moment actually occurred while he was on the toilet, which is perhaps the best argument I’ve encountered for reading in the bathroom.)

Luther wanted to share his revelation and remove fear from people’s motivation for attending church. He wanted them to show up to be loved. Given that the natural human default setting seems to be unworthiness, this small difference was extraordinary. Perhaps it alone put the “revolutionary” in the Protestant Reformation. He hoped

others would go directly to the source and make this joyful discovery, so he personally translated the Bible into German and, luckily, the invention of the printing press helped him get the word out. Luther wished to empower people to do their own spiritual work and for churchgoers to form what he called a “priesthood of believers.”

I take a seat in the last row, but it’s still only a few rows back from the center. Already I feel an inclusiveness the monastery chapel lacked. My time there gave me a sense of what it must have been like to be a churchgoer during Luther’s day. The area where the nuns sat and conducted the services was separated from the pews by a wood lattice, more of a symbolic divide, as I am almost certain I could have ripped it from its ceiling hinges. It was a reminder to them and to me that we occupied different worlds. The nuns sing-songed all the prayers, the words to which were provided in a little booklet, but they were in Latin; even as I tried to follow along, I didn’t understand it. For me the daily services were a show, a lovely show for sure, but nothing more than something to be passively gazed on. As a non-Catholic, I was asked not to partake in communion. So I watched during mass every morning as each nun stuck out her tongue to receive her wafer, followed by the nun-in-training and then the two organic farming volunteers, both apparently Catholic, and I felt like the kid not invited to the party, just a tiny bit like they were sticking out their tongues at me.

The more-level playing field Luther wanted is apparent today in the minister’s central location, his simple white linen robe, and his casual demeanor. He seems more a master of ceremonies than a special conduit of God. No need for him to hear our sins and forgive us on behalf of God; he instructs us to take a moment to confess silently and then leads us in reading a prayer of forgiveness printed in the program. He hands the microphone to a young woman from the congregation who reads a passage from the Old Testament and then to an older man who reads from the New Testament. He cues us when it’s time to sing hymns.

At today’s service the program clearly states that everyone is invited to participate in communion, but I decide to abstain. Luther may have argued with many practices of the Catholic Church, but he never contradicted the meaning of the Lord’s Supper: that in consuming the bread and wine, one is consuming Jesus’s flesh and blood. He made only one small amendment. Whereas the Catholic Church claimed that the bread and wine transformed completely into the body and blood of Christ under the authority of the priests, Luther argued that both

body and blood were united with the bread and wine; they coexist in the communion elements. From an outsider's perspective, it is a slim difference: Jesus *is* the bread and wine or is *in* the bread and wine.

I can see why the nuns at the monastery forbid outsiders from taking communion. I'm not sure how I feel about eating Jesus or why it's necessary. Is it because he "conquered death"? I suppose I'd be lucky to have even the tiniest bit of whatever made that possible reside in me. Will it make me stronger? Or just more accepting of my weaknesses? Maybe it's the kind of thing where it's impossible to imagine the benefits until you do it.

As I exit the sanctuary after my first church service, I'm feeling proud of myself for having overcome my fear and entered those mysterious church doors. Now for my reward: an ice cream social in the church lobby. Someone has set out tubs of vanilla and chocolate with little bowls of toppings and squeeze bottles of caramel and fudge. I marvel at how many enticements have been added to the churchgoing experience, yet fewer people seem to be showing up. The chapel was about two-thirds full, and out in the lobby more than half the welcome baggies for students remain in neat rows. Five hundred years ago, regular folks weren't allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper. Now we can wash Jesus down with a free sundae.

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For individuals who are supposedly spiritually complacent, my None friends sure are hungry for religious information. They know I've set out on this quest, and now every time we see each other they want to shake me down like some giant tree of knowledge. But I'm not even a sapling yet.

"Where are you now?" Kelsie asks when I see her at a party.

"Pentecostal," I tell her, raising my eyebrows up and down real fast like this is some sexy info I'm letting her in on. "Speaking in tongues?" she wants to know. I shrug. "We'll find out Sunday."

They requested every detail after I visited one particular church in our community whose pastor is a controversial figure. He is something of a local celebrity, though infamous among my peers for having gone on record several years ago suggesting that American slavery may not have been such a bad thing because it exposed Africans to Christian-

ity. (Never mind that many abolitionists were Christians.) Of all the churches in my local Worship Directory, this one had me the most wary.

“Yuck,” Emily mutters. “That guy.” She’s the only one I know who claims to have seen the actual video footage where he made this remark.

“You went *there*?” Sueann asks incredulously, though I’m not sure what surprises her more: that I got in or that I was able to get out.

To prepare myself, I visited the church’s website where I spotted an advertisement for its upcoming conference. Using a medieval-looking typeset (where “u” looks “v”), the title read, *The Institute of Awesome: Keeping Calvinism Sassy for the Next 500 Years*. I chuckled: a bit of Protestant reformer humor, and I’ve come far enough to get the joke.

Going to the library to find books about John Calvin, I scratch my head at how many there are and how broad the titles: *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*; *Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics*; *Calvinist Roots of the Modern Era*; *Calvinism and the Capitalist Spirit* . . . several shelves that include Calvin but then expand into social concepts much bigger than any single individual.

I had no idea Calvin was credited with developing the foundational structures we in the United States hold dear—you know, little things like our version of democratic representation—and how closely these are tied to the history of Christianity. If such basic activities as voting and accumulating wealth can be considered derivative of Jesus, can any of us really claim to be a None?

Calvin, who was just a few years younger than Luther, entered the picture just as many Europeans were expressing a growing disenchantment with the Catholic Church’s current leadership: its bishops and pope. In a classic instance of “right time, right place,” the detail-oriented Calvin decided it was up to him to develop a new governing structure for the churches. He would create a system that could take the place of Rome and allow the gist of Luther’s ideas to be practiced on a wide scale sustained over many years.

His idea was for each region to have a church guided by a group of elders (“presbyters” in Greek—which is why churches modeled in this vein are often called “Presbyterian”) selected by the congregation; a few chosen elders from each church would meet in a larger body to discuss issues on a regional scale. A leader would be selected from these chosen elders to head the whole operation. It was a bottom-up structure versus the old top-down—an embodiment of Luther’s “priesthood of

believers.” Basically, he developed the blueprint colonists used when they formed the U.S. Congress—a wee fact you’d think I would have learned as a political science major who was employed for several years by the federal government.

While the church with the pastor my friends find distasteful shares theological roots with Presbyterianism, it goes by the more generic Calvin-inspired label of “Reformed.” This word suggests devotion to Calvin’s theology but permits a dodge from the overarching governing structure he developed. Instead, this church belongs to a looser affiliation of like-minded churches that seems to better suit its maverick leader.

He established his church in the 1970s, then slowly expanded its network to include local private-education options from elementary school all the way through college. The college, which enrolls about two hundred students a year, offers a “classical education in light of scripture” and is located just a few blocks from the state university, in a building on Main Street—though I had no idea it was there until someone pointed it out. It occurs to me that kids born in this congregation whose parents are inclined to send them to its series of private schools could grow up having almost no meaningful contact with the outside community.

In addition to the education system, several local businesses are affiliated with the church, some more forthrightly than others. The most well-known is a café (named, I realize now, for an obscure Protestant reformer) just down the street from the college, where cappuccino is served in honor of the Lord. The latest is a bustling clothing shop. This business savvy is a realization of Calvin’s belief that every aspect of society, including the economy, could pay tribute to God. My None pals give those establishments a wide berth if they can help it.