

Practicing Atheism at a Religious School

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I have increasingly come face to face with the hasty, yet ever present intersections of faith here at St. Mark's. Coming from a profoundly spiritual family and thus upbringing, I have had my fair share of a devout existence. I recollect the Bible classes I held during lunch periods throughout elementary and middle school for those righteous-and-faithful-as-I—my benevolence and giving seemingly ever imbued the institutions I graced. Alongside this humorous recollection, I recognize the intense satisfaction with which I approached my existence. The incongruencies of life that harrowed me were simply minutes devoted on a fated and thus grander reality; the one of God's. Nietzsche seamlessly examined this inclination for those of faith: "Other fears, other securities—Christianity had brought into life a quite novel and limitless perilousness, and therewith quite novel securities, pleasures, recreations and evaluations of all things. Our century denies this perilousness, and does so with a good conscience: and yet it continues to drag along with it the old habits of Christian security, Christian enjoyment, recreation, evaluation!" (Daybreaks. 57). Nietzsche's notorious anti-Christ rhetoric illuminates the cause of this deep satisfaction that paired my Christian belief systems. Religion of any number of theistic tradition acts as a levy with which one can resort to—"What we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory He will reveal to us later" (Romans 8:18). It is a truism that one suffers: to live is to exist in a perpetual act of dying. When one is birthed the fact of his death is not questioned. Thus my great joy with life is arguably a product of my step up the levy of faith, a step with which I can distance myself from the reality of a painful existence.

During the summer of eighth grade, after a series of adolescent fumbles, a breakup, petty family feuds, and weight gain, I resorted to the thickening of eyeliner, the psychedelia of The Smiths, and fundamentalist atheism. It seemed fitting, I could get back at the God, that I now didn't believe in, for the senseless suffering He slapped across my face. Upon arrival at St. Mark's, I signed up for morbidly dysfunctional clubs that could make apparent the soot that I thinly crusted over my infantile grunge identity: Openly Secular, the Young Communists Club, the Young Democrats, and conversely the Young Republicans. Through sporadic monthly meetings for Openly Secular, where frustrated teens just as myself gathered to rant, my understanding of faith at St. Mark's developed. Religion, consciously and unconsciously, is settled in the daily lives of St. Markers. In fact, our school website even claims the chapel program to be "rich in content and diverse in expression." Moreover, the school has introduced religious services, which take place twice a week and during special occasions, in order to be "responsive" to and "responsible" for a variety of beliefs. However, we St. Markers gather together on the Tuesday and Friday mornings to sing Episcopalian hymns such as "Sun of my Soul" as a community; we St. Markers say amen; we St. Markers celebrate the birth of the Jesus Christ, decorating the whole school with Christmas trees and entertaining ourselves with secret Santa and abounding the halls with Christmas carols; we St. Markers are provided the means to meet the needs of "varying spiritual needs", but in fact the only services shown to us are varieties of Christianity.

Elaborate festoons in celebration of a two-thousand year old man rings the halls of the institution. It only makes sense that I came to the conclusion for my secular self and others to label the institution as anything other than one of the syncretic mind, thus the bitterness that I mustered towards the Christian God was projected onto the school.

Interestingly, as I was daily exposed to Episcopalian rituals, and thus became wary of the vigor with which I projected my bitterness towards the religiosity of the school, I started to foster a view of the church, or all religious practices, in a more multitudinous and complex way. Alain de Botton, in his brilliant and consoling work, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion*, argues that when one

"examine[s] the causes of modern alienation in more detail...[it comes down to] how we are introduced. The public spaces in which we typically encounter others...conspire to project a demeaning picture of our identities, which undermines our capacity to hold on to the idea that every person is necessarily the centre of a complex and precious individuality: (25-26).

And that conversely,

"Religions seem to know a great deal about our loneliness...Catholicism...marks off a piece of the earth, puts walls up around it and declares that within their parameters there will reign values...A church...gives us rare permission to lean over and say hello to a stranger without any danger of being thought predatory or insane" (30).

When the St. Mark's community amasses in quotidian frequency in the bustling and seemingly irrelevant Belmont Chapel, one can only resort to such reflections as that of Botton's. The rituals that take place within the Chapel can be seen, at its bare roots, as a way to foster something so human as the recognition of a neighbor, may it manifest in the form of the constant rubbing of his shoulders due to the lack of space, the sharing of a hymnal, or the collective hearing of a VI Former's morning speech.

One can argue that the loneliness rampant and very much a way of life for a St. Marker is symptomatic of the psyches of students at all boarding schools, including the ones *The Tavern* has brought together. Thus to exist at a postmodern and aerial level of theological rejection stands as one unbased. One's secular being—and considerations for the humanistic axioms with which religion exists to coexist—is a state of being that can possibly jab at this fundamental human condition.