

Consensus

Volume 40
Issue 1 *Student Paper Showcase*

Article 11

5-25-2019

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Recommended Citation

Sage, Katherine G. (2019) "Moving Beyond Religion," *Consensus*: Vol. 40: Iss. 1, Article 11.

DOI: 10.51644/HEJP4142

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol40/iss1/11>

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Moving Beyond Religion

Katherine G. Sage¹

This informal integration paper will describe the evolution of my personal faith, my openness to other faiths, my changing thoughts about Christianity and the inspiration I have gained through the Dalai Lama's idea of moving "beyond religion."

Like most of my friends, I went to Sunday School in the sixties where I was surrounded by other white, middle-class Protestants. I loved the chance to dress up, to hear the amazing Bible stories, to sing the hymns and, occasionally, to be led upstairs to the church service. As we entered the congregation, I remember feeling like an outsider. I felt that I did not belong. I was apprehensive and intimidated by the unknown rituals and bewildered by the minister's descriptions of God, who seemed to be loving, terrifying, strictly masculine, floating right above me and yet very distant, all at the same time. My head went down and my heart closed. Shortly after receiving my Bible and graduating to the congregation, I quit the church.

But I did not quit God. I started to read everything I could get my hands on about God and spirituality. By the time I was seventeen I had read some pretty deep spiritual books, like *Journey to the East*, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, *Siddhartha*, *Good News for Modern Man*, *What Matters Most*, Rumi's poetry and the *Bhagavad-Gita*. I shared most of that reading journey with my younger brother, Stephen. We spent many days listening to the music of the sixties and seventies – the ones about peace, love and social justice. We spent a lot of time walking through the big nature area behind our home and talking about what we were reading. Often we were silent, focusing on our personal experience of the natural world. Surrounded by nature, intently aware of the beauty around me, I fell in love with the mystical experience of God. I began to write, trying to capture what I was thinking and feeling, and to express my gratitude for my experience of God.

Those early writings were the seeds of my career as a writer and my lifelong quest to integrate my experience of God with the world around me. My early exposure to many different ideas probably eclipsed any personal motivation for me to find one "truth" and stick with it. My wide-ranging interests made me feel open and comfortable with different belief systems. Instead of feeling competitive or exclusionary, I developed a willingness to try to appreciate the love, wisdom, devotion, service, tolerance and ethical behaviour from other religions – and from music and the arts. I became interested and encouraged by the shared history and the many different articulations of love, God and spirituality. Ever since, the exposure to different faiths and ideas has helped me clarify my own values and beliefs, to understand what is most important for me. My guiding light has always been my personal experience of God. I think that my commitment to integrity in my faith has helped me understand and appreciate that goal in others.

My approach to religion and spirituality could be called a kind of mutualism, pluralism, or perhaps spiritually fluidity. For me, there have been great benefits to my personal kind of faith, although I am also aware that I do not have the deep understanding of one tradition

¹ TH663: Counselling and Spirituality in a Multifaith Society, Fall 2018.

that a lifetime of study and practice can bring. I am at peace with that now. I have become content in my ability to feel the reality of God while I was exploring spirituality from so many different angles.

Last fall, I saw my some aspects of my approach reflected in the intellectualism of Judaism. I come from a large family and I have learned to appreciate a good debate. The experience has taught me to be both bold and cautious. Just when I think I am “right” about some aspect of religion, I often pause to wonder: “But then again, it depends on...” I have often struggled with the ambiguity, wondering if the exercise of turning an idea around and around to see all of its facets is simply an exercise in relativism. But even as I write this I can hear a certain Jewish professor say, “well, that depends ...” I know that, inevitably, I will end up taking another look.

Although I enjoy the intellectual struggle of understanding God, my faith is much more deeply grounded in mysticism; in my experience of God as being both immanent and transcendent. For me, although God has an objective reality, there is no separation between God and all of us, between God and the natural world. We are all manifestations of God's energy, living in a spiritual world that seems solid and material. We are, however, subjective and limited in our understanding of God's world. That personal understanding takes me some distance away from the Buddhist and post-modernist view that everything is subjective, including God. It also takes me some distance away from my understanding of Christianity, which holds to an objective reality of both God and experience. In the dance between the nature of reality and God, I have found myself closest to yogic philosophy.

The deep personal and spiritual exploration and integration that yoga offers gives me the freedom to determine what is meaningful to me and make use of whatever practice is helpful. Through yoga, my faith in God has been strengthened through intellectual, devotional, disciplined, celebratory and humbling experiences. *Jnana yoga* encouraged me to increase my knowledge and integrate my insights into my life and character. I have also felt the incredible joy of devotional practice in song and meditation in bhakti yoga, which taught me to extend my love more fearlessly and openly to myself, to God and to others. *Karma yoga* showed me many of my positive and negative qualities; the ongoing battle against feeling resentful, entitled, superior or helpless within all the work of my life, as well as the triumph in winning some of those battles by bringing forward some of my better qualities, like humility, generosity and cheerfulness. Raja yoga brought me into the deeper mysteries within my mind, body, breath and relationship with God. It helped me learn to focus and at the same time to let go.

Yoga has been a great gift to me. I approach it with comfort and joy, knowing the gifts are there for the taking, without obligation or agenda. I feel a special kinship, a joy I cannot explain, with those who have some training in yogic philosophy. I return to the *Yasodhara Ashram* again and again, always glad and grateful to be with those who are willing to teach what they know and to be who they truly are.

Of course, the philosophy of yoga is only one aspect of the great Hindu religion, of which I know very little. Similarly, certain Buddhist insights and practices have been very important to my spiritual growth, although I do not know much about Buddhism as a religion. Both yoga and aspects of Buddhism have taught me something about the nature of the mind and reality, and given me practices that help me understand and appreciate mediation in its many forms. Meditation has given me the benefits of mindfulness, stillness, reflective insight, non-attachment, openness, courage, ethical behaviour and compassion.

I choose my spiritual practices because they bring me closer to my experience of God and my understanding of myself. I am committed to daily prayer, meditation and reflection, but see these practices as suggestions only. For me, the idea of being compelled to do a spiritual practice has never resonated with my understanding of God or the needs of our people and planet. While I do not believe in a God who is judging me on whether I pray or meditate or carry out rituals or religious customs, I appreciate that others feel very differently about their religious obligations. My unorthodox thoughts have, of course, influenced my choice to stay away from organized religion.

Which brings me back to Christianity. In some ways, I am still as bewildered by it as I was as a young girl. I am dismayed by the attitude that Christianity can claim to be the only “true” religion. Every claim of “truth” in religion seems to serve as an excuse for those in authority to seize more power over people, both individually and collectively. The abuse of power and the need for control within the organized Christian church has kept me from joining a congregation. But, through all these years, I have never stopped turning the idea of Christianity around, trying to look at it through different facets. Even though many Christians do not practice the Christian ideals of forgiveness and loving one another, the teaching still profoundly moves me. I know that Christianity is deeply integrated into my heart and mind, even though I object to much of its organization. Like my approach to other faiths, I find myself drawing upon the aspects of Christianity that resonate with my own understanding of God and Jesus. I often pray to my idea of the Christian God and I sometimes wear my baptismal cross as a symbol of my gratitude and love for the teachings of Jesus.

My experience of Christianity at Martin Luther University College has been deeply heartening. Instead of feeling exclusionary, this program allowed me to roam freely across vast realms of ideas and emotions. I have been able to integrate my ever-evolving ideas about spirituality into my training as a psychotherapist. Learning more about the history of the New Testament has become relevant to my understanding of the underlying psychology and social underpinnings of the Christian world and its lingering effects on people today. My exploration of forgiveness and compassion has become critical in my work with clients suffering from addiction and family pain. By thinking about what salvation means to each individual, I am learning to help my clients focus on what is truly most important to them. I have gained insight into ways that the pain of trauma can provide an opening to the comfort and security that lies in deep spirituality and a trust in a greater power. For these gifts, and many others, I am truly grateful.

My experience of the openness and welcoming of diversity at Luther has encouraged me to look again at the possibility of connecting more with the Christian community. I know now that it is possible for me to participate honestly without feeling judged for not being a “true” Christian because of my interest and practice of other faiths. I find that I was mistaken in my belief that becoming a Christian meant I was required to give over my soul to the church. At Luther, I experienced a Christian community that asked me to only honour what nourished my relationship with God. After my confused, intimidating experiences of being led up to the church altar as a young girl, I found this community to be a much more open, exploratory Christianity.

I have felt strengthened and encouraged by being part of a Christian environment that accepts me as I am. I have felt no judgment. Instead, at times, I have been brought to tears by a deep sense of relief, as if maybe I can come home again. For that, I am truly grateful.

So I have learned that I can change my understanding of Christianity. I have also learned that institutions can change. Nothing and no one is perfect, but I am encouraged by the changes I have seen over the years. I have been intrigued by what I learned about the Interfaith Grand River church. I understand now what I did not understand before: that some churches can really try to build bridges as an effort to put Christianity in action, to move beyond intention. For me, this is orthopraxy changing orthodoxy. As outlined in *Meeting Our Multifaith Neighbours* (Balmer 2006), I recognized and celebrated the evolution of Kitchener-Waterloo, where I was born and have lived for most of my life. Even here, in Waterloo Region, we have all had to face our fears, insecurities and attachment to what feels safe and familiar.

Even though my community has grown so much, I appreciate that we are still a relatively peaceful, inclusive space. Again, I know it is not perfect but I understand that the tolerance would not have happened without effort from community leaders, like Brice Balmer and many others at Luther, to build those bridges. I believe that those of us who are committed to creating a kinder, more just world, might be better off if followed their example and focused on the quality of our relationships instead of the “truth” of our ideas. I believe that addressing our own fears and insecurities, and being willing to lessen such fear in others, is the heart of compassion and the basis for every religion.

Which brings me to secular ethics. The Dalai Lama has argued that: “the time has come to find a way of thinking about spirituality and ethics that is beyond religion” (Dalai Lama, 2011, pp 17-22). Religion-based spirituality is a distinct realm, he writes, which is founded on our individual culture, beliefs and practices. Although religious beliefs may differ, we share common spiritual beliefs and obligations of being respectful, kind, truthful, caring and compassionate. The Dalai Lama would like to advance the idea of using these “secular ethics” as a way of organizing ourselves as a global society. Such secular ethics would include compassion, social justice and respect for inner values.

Promoting secular ethics above religious ambitions is an inclusive concept that can accommodate the needs of those who believe that God belongs in our social priorities as well as those who oppose links between religion and society. Adhering to secular ethics can be a practice of faith for some and an ethical practice for others. I agree with the Dalai Lama that our fears of “the other” would decrease if we could trust that both our basic values and personal religious faiths would be protected within a system based on secular ethics. This idea is congruent with Paul Knitter’s suggestion of forming ethical-practical bridges to increase religious tolerance (Knitter, 2002).

It is also congruent with my experience of learning at Luther. By placing the secular ethics of compassion, social justice and respect for inner values above promotion of a single religious view, the community at Luther gave me an experience of a forward-thinking Christianity. Instead of feeling intimidating, masculine and exclusionary, my experience of Christianity here at Luther has felt warm, welcoming and respectful. For me, that has made all the difference. It has given me the courage to approach the Christian altar once again. Although it is fifty years later, my head is once again high and my heart is open to the message and love of Jesus. This is what I have learned at this college. With gratitude, humility and all the music of my past, Luther has prepared me to serve others, in peace, love and social justice.

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