

A Unitarian with a Dash of Baptist

By

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Although I didn't grow up in a churchgoing family, I wouldn't say my parents were completely nonreligious. I got the feeling that religion made my mother uncomfortable, not because she didn't know much about it or thought it was all bologna, but because she carried a lot of shame and feared what might happen to her in the afterlife. I feel confident, if there is more, that she would have found comfort and love, not more shame or suffering. My father, on the other hand, whom I'm confident was an undiagnosed, untreated paranoid schizophrenic, often spoke in religious terms, though only about his version of an authoritarian, punitive God of the Old Testament, and never about Jesus or as if he considered himself a Christian. In his mind, he was God's anointed agent, a delusion of grandeur symptomatic of his illness, and, in our home, he acted as if he was God.

That, for a long time, was all I knew about religion, that it was about reverence for an all-powerful paternalistic deity watching over me. It was to this god I prayed whenever I felt frightened, especially when the house deity was raging through the place with a fury. But nobody ever talked about Jesus or about being a Christian, so, at age 12, when I saw the movie *Oh God!*, starring George Burns and John Denver, it made complete sense to me when God was asked if Jesus Christ was his son and he answered, "Jesus was my son, Buddha was my son, Muhammed, Moses, you, the man who said there was no room in the Inn was my son, and so was the one who charges 11 dollars for steak in this one. Let's march on."

There was a short period before then, after the neighborhood Baptists knocked on our door, that my father thought it would be a good idea for my younger brother and I to go to church to represent our family. I don't recall how old I was, but the first time I attended the Sunday School teacher had a timeline of the future on the wall depicting a period when God would free Satan from the chains of Hell and allow him to roam the Earth torturing Christians. "You mean, even if we're good, he'll still let him torcher us?" I asked in horror.

"Yes," the Sunday school teacher said, "in order to test our faith." The entire notion seemed as crazy and confusing to me as it was terrifying. After Sunday School, we then went to our first church service, which convinced me there really is a Hell. Sitting still for an hour while the preacher nonsensically droned on made me think, perhaps, Satan had already begun torturing me. So, after a couple more attempts, my brother and I finally found an old sewer entrance buried in the hillside near the church that we sheltered in during services instead. We didn't have watches, so we waited until we saw everyone leaving to know when it was time head home. I often jest that when I was a kid I'd rather hang out in the sewer than go to church. The real point here, however, is that during my first introduction to formal Christianity, I heard nothing about Jesus, but only more about the punitive, authoritarian, if not sadistic, God my father believed in.

When I was nearly 15 years old, this began to change. To make a long story short, I became part of the Jesus Movement in 1979 and spent my first year as a Born Again Christian attending an Evangelical Free Church in Brisbane, California, an offshoot of the Lutheran faith. A year or two later I started attending a Southern Baptist Church within walking distance of my home and almost across the street from my high school. So that, in brief, is how and why I became a Southern Baptist, as a matter of convenience. I remained so, however, because my church family taught me a new way of being with others, one in which those who are supposed to care about each other, really do. It gave me the sense of belonging and support and, dare I say, love, that I needed in my life, for which I will always remain humble and grateful.

Unfortunately, even as I was being embraced by those who shared my new faith, I was being taught to exclude those who did not. I was becoming rigid and closed minded, believing I had all the answers to life's most important questions all figured out. That remained my attitude when I began attending Howard Payne University, a Southern Baptist College in Brownwood, Texas, just five years after becoming a Christian. Thankfully, HPU, to make another long story short, is where the Baptists educated the Baptist right out of me. My professors, though Baptist ministers themselves, taught me to think critically, to ask questions, and to understand nothing is certain. So, even though I'd been ordained as a Southern Baptist minister just before moving to Louisville, Kentucky, to continue my education at Southern Seminary, it wasn't long before I realized the Southern Baptist worldview had become far too small for my expanded consciousness. Further realizing I no longer believed any of it, that the Bible is the inerrant authoritative Word of God, that Jesus was born of a virgin, walked on water, and rose from the dead, I dropped out of seminary after just one semester and renounced Christianity soon thereafter.

Peggy and I got married around this time. She was also a former seminary student and x-Christian, and we both found we missed having a church community but didn't want any of the doctrinal baggage that goes with it. So, in 1989, we decided to try out the liberal Unitarian Universalist church we'd heard a little about. We've pretty much been Unitarian Universalists ever since, and I reentered the ministry as such a decade later, in 1999.

Jump ahead to just last month when, just after I'd spoken at the Climate Change Rally downtown, a Lutheran Minister I know approached and said, "I see you still have a bit of Southern Baptist in you after all. I could hear it in your cadence and in your call and response to those listening." I've heard this frequently over the years as a Unitarian Universalist Minister and never take any offense by it. I'm glad to still have a fire in my belly when I speak, although, these days, I try to balance my passion with intelligence and evidence. I don't simply allow the fire to rage out of control, trying to stir up the emotions of others for no good reason.

During the past 25 years, the Southern Baptist Convention of Churches, the largest Protestant denomination in the world, with nearly 15 million members, has become almost synonymous with fundamentalism. We hear news stories about their resolutions requiring wives to submit to their husbands, or calling for the conversion of Jews to Christianity, or

their Seminary Presidents saying Christians shouldn't practice yoga, or that we should genetically alter fetuses to prevent homosexuality, or denounce science in favor of Intelligent Design, and it all sounds pretty extreme. Although it would be hard not to define Southern Baptists as traditionally conservative, however, its current association with such extremist views is far from the faith I was once part of.

The Southern Baptists and Unitarians, in fact, share the same historic roots, the Anabaptists, a group of 16th century Christians who believed people should be free to choose their religion when they are ready. For this reason, they didn't accept the legitimacy of infant baptism, given that infants, and children in general, are not yet free of capable of choosing to become Christians. So, they began practicing adult Baptism, which gave them the nickname, Baptize Againers, or, *Anabaptists*, a crime the Catholic authorities considered punishable by death. Yet, because of their respect for freedom of conscience in religious matters, they also practiced autonomy of the local church, free from hierarchical authorities, and the right to ordain and choose their own ministers. These were the reasons other Christians, both Catholics and Protestants, despised the Anabaptists and persecuted them into extinction. In 1535, tens of thousands were drowned, burned, or beheaded in the City of Münster alone, and the remains of some of their leaders were placed in a cage and suspended from the church rafters for more than 350 years. Talk about institutionalized bias!

Those remnants who survived went on to become Baptists, Mennonites, and Unitarians, all of whom continued to focus most on religious freedom and respect for individual conscience. Nowadays, as Unitarian Universalists, we express this through principles promoting the *worth and dignity of every person*, and the *free and responsible search for truth and meaning*. The Southern Baptists refer to these same principles as *autonomy of the local church*, *freedom of the pulpit*, and *priesthood of the believer*. As autonomous congregations, there's supposed to be no outside authority dictating what individual members must believe, who their ministers will be, or what they must preach. Nor is there any need for a priest or other intermediary between the individual and God, meaning each person is supposed to have the right and freedom to decide theological matters for oneself.

Until recently, they were so committed to these principles that in 1936 the Southern Baptist established the Baptist Joint Committee, the only faith based organization devoted to the separation of church and state and to religious liberty for all. As the BJC says on its website, "God has made us all free—free to say yes, free to say no, and free to make up our own minds about our spiritual destiny," and that, "religious liberty is best protected when church and state are institutionally separated and neither tries to perform or interfere with the mission and work of the other."¹ Established specifically as its public relations arm, this means that in 1936 the Southern Baptist Convention believed its greatest responsibility was to insure religious freedom and separation of church and state in our country.

By now you've got to be wondering what on Earth happened? How could it have gone so far to the right? In many ways, what happened to the Southern Baptist Convention and its

¹ <http://bjconline.org/>

member congregations foreshadows what seems to have happened to our entire nation—there was a hostile, no-holds-bar, takeover, or coup, if you prefer. It all started with the emergence of Fundamentalism, a term invented by ultraconservative Christians in the 1920s to distinguish themselves from other Protestants by making the inerrancy and literal interpretation of the Bible their core doctrine. In 1967, a couple of fundamentalist Southern Baptists, a Seminary student named Paige Patterson and Judge Paul Pressler, met at the historic Café De Monde in New Orleans to determine a strategy for taking over the nation's largest protestant religion. Their plan was simple, to help elect fundamentalist leaning Convention presidents who would have the authority to appoint fundamentalists majorities to all the boards overseeing their six seminaries and twenty other institutions, a strategy they openly announced in 1980 and that was realized by 1990. This is comparable to Paul Ryan “dreaming,” in his words, of eliminating Medicaid while he was still in college, then rising to the rank of House Speaker where he might actually make it happen; or of the GOP's 2008 gerrymandering strategy, Project Redmap, that, likewise, concentrated on electing conservatives who would have the authority to redistrict America's political landscape after the 2010 census, resulting in huge GOP wins during the last two national elections.

The Southern Baptist fundamentalists achieved their victories by using the inerrancy of Scripture as a divisive issue to get the votes they needed. Think, again, about how wedge issues like abortion, gay marriage, and, now, transgender bathroom laws have been used on the national scale in the same way. For the Southern Baptists, these strategies worked without a hitch. Between 1979 and 1984, five fundamentalist Presidents were elected to oversee the Convention and its institutions. In 1985, those members calling themselves “moderates,” organized an effort to stop the takeover, culminating in an annual Convention meeting in Dallas, Texas with more than 47 thousand delegates in attendance, which remains the largest deliberative body ever assembled anywhere. The moderates knew if they couldn't stop it then, it couldn't be stopped. They offered an alternative list of nominees, but were ruled out of order by ultraconservative SBC President, Charles Stanley, who also refused to recognize anyone attempting to oppose the takeover. When Rev. Charles Swenson, for example, who had come more than 1,200 miles to be there, began speaking up for what he called, those “voices that have been ignored,” Stanley ruled him out of order and cut his microphone off so he could no longer be heard.

Nearly half the delegates, almost 20 thousand, effectively voted against the fundamentalist takeover, but, prior to this pivotal Convention, the fundamentalists had sent out 36 thousand letters claiming Seminary professors were teaching students the Bible is wrong, which was enough to garner the votes needed to complete their plan. As the Rev. Cecil Sherman, leader of the moderates later reflected, “It was in Dallas that I first allowed myself to think of losing the SBC to political Fundamentalism.”² That was the end of the Southern Baptist faith I had been part of, and the beginning of the Southern Baptist religion that stands today.

Since then, the Southern Baptist Convention, despite its prior emphasis on religious freedom, began enforcing creedalism in hiring practices; reigned in the Baptist Joint Committee's

² <http://www.bpnews.net/44919/1985-dallas-sbc-a-watershed-moment>

efforts to maintain religious freedom and eventually stopped funding it altogether; began advocating for the restoration of prayer in public schools; made the inerrancy of Scripture the official doctrine to be taught in its seminaries; passed a resolution elevating ministerial authority and denigrating the priesthood of the believer; encouraged students to record professors and report any doctrinal violations; forced the resignation of moderate Seminary professors and presidents, including Molly Marshall Green, the only female Theology professor it ever had, in addition to adopting a policy against the ordination of women ministers, despite the historic autonomy and right of every church to ordain and choose their own ministers; tried to prevent delegates from the church Bill Clinton attended from voting in their Convention; eliminated their School of Social work from Southern Seminary; and has done lots of crazy things, like boycotting Disney for promoting “immorality” in its movies and being gay friendly, as well as other resolutions like I mentioned earlier.

Of course, I left the Southern Baptist faith and renounced Christianity a couple of years before the takeover was complete, mostly because I’d simply outgrown it. I was no longer a believer, moderate or otherwise. Although, I would have to admit, my apostasy is the direct result of my ministerial education in the Bible Department at Howard Payne University. By teaching me the Bible is not inerrant and that I should question it and everything else I’m told, especially about religion, my Southern Baptist professors opened my mind to other possibilities, and pointed my way to the exit sign. So, if the point of the takeover was to prevent professors from teaching students to think for themselves, then I’m glad I got out when I did, and, to this day, remain inexpressibly grateful for the intellectual integrity of those Southern Baptist professors who opened my mind before it was too late.

Today, obviously, my theology is radically different than it was back then, but many of the values that once drew me to the Southern Baptist tradition remain my core values, and, I think, our core values as Unitarian Universalists. We may refer to these values a little differently, as the *worth and dignity of every person* and the *free and responsible search for truth and meaning*, but these are little different in meaning than *the priesthood of all believers*, the notion that every person should be free to determine their own theology as agents of their own destiny. And like Southern Baptists of old, we too value our autonomy and the right of our congregations to govern themselves, free from the tyranny of any authority that would force its beliefs upon us, or forbid our own freedom of thought. Although it is true, the Southern Baptists have never ordained a female minister, they were getting closer prior to the fundamentalist takeover, as evidenced by the appointment of Dr. Molly Marshall Green as a Theology professor, hundreds of women enrolled in their seminaries preparing for ministry, and even winning preaching awards over their male counterparts. Even then, the Southern Baptists had arguably been free to ordain female ministers, but hadn’t yet broken with tradition to do so. Now they are forbidden to do so by their newly established hierarchical Church authorities. Yet we, as Unitarian Universalists, remain free to ordain and install our own ministers, and, thankfully, have a long history of breaking with tradition, calling upon women, gays, lesbians, transgenders, even a few atheists, to minister to us and to occupy our pulpits.

I have shared this history with you today in the hope that you too might recognize a kinship with our Southern Baptist relatives, with whom we share a common heritage and common values. Keep in mind, both the Southern Baptists, who are underrepresented, and the Unitarians who are overrepresented in this way, have each had four U.S. Presidents in office, and that three of the four Southern Baptist Presidents, Harry Truman, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton, were Democrats. Jimmy Carter, you may recall, left the Southern Baptist Convention in 2000 after it decided to officially exclude women from ministry. So, again, you can see from all of this, that the relatively recent fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention, perhaps indicative of a more general swing to the right that has overtaken much of our entire country through the same kind of unscrupulous, unethical political maneuvers, isn't the way it always has been, and, hopefully, isn't the way it always will be.

During my life, I watched as a small group of men successfully and openly conspired to conduct a hostile takeover of one of human history's largest organizations, with ease, in a relatively short time. Then I saw members of that very group use the same strategy to successfully take over our entire nation, again, in a relatively short time, by using unscrupulous, unethical political maneuvers to silence some voters, while bolstering the power of their own electorate, resulting in the power to change the political landscape in their favor and to control key committees and institutions, including, more recently, the U.S. Supreme Court. On an even larger scale, I fear the same thing is happening to our entire planet as Oligarchs help put authoritarian dictators into power round the world.

It was my experience among the Southern Baptists that helped me first recognize this pattern, and to take it seriously. Today, I am a Unitarian Universalist, still committed to many of the values that have carried over from my previous faith, though newly committed to taking on the injustices in the world and to fight for freedom and equality for all, but I will always do so with a hint of Baptist preacher in my words, and a fire in my belly I hope will continue to rage until the day I die.