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Nicole Chabot

Michelle A. Luff

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A Believer and a Skeptic Agree in a Postmodern World

Nicole Chabot & Michelle A. Luff¹

Through distinct personal narratives we will compare our religious discoveries from childhood to the present day. We will explain spirituality as a pivotal part of our self-realization throughout college and our initial inspiration to search for our respective higher beings. We attempt to explain our drastically different religious and spiritual backgrounds while also presenting parallels that allow us to find a common understanding of faith.

This article is the result of a conversation between a believer and a skeptic, centering on the ideals of religious pluralism. As both of our stories of religious and spiritual discovery are told, we hope to model the ideals defined in an article written by Robert J. Nash (1996), *Fostering Moral Conversations in the College Classroom*. The ideals explained in the Moral Conversation express a commitment to being true to oneself as well as respecting the truths of others. Living with a postmodern perspective (life without absolute truths), we attempt to best express our experiences of finding our place in a pluralistic society. Our ultimate goal is to explain the implications of faith identity development in higher education.

Pre-College Religio-Spiritual History: Through the Eyes of a Skeptic

Some may call me a non-believer. I, however, know I believe. What it is that I believe is the question that I have struggled with answering. In fact, the idea of organized religion has always brought with it a sense of insecurity, fear, and unsettlement. Being baptized for traditional family reasons in the Episcopal Church is the extent of my childhood faith experience. To this day, the term Episcopalian holds no meaning to me as I have never learned or practiced the religion. I never used my Christian label as a means to identify myself, but rather identified with the notion of not practicing at all. My father's immediate family members are all practicing and devout Catholics; he was raised strictly Catholic and chose to separate himself from the Church, his parents' belief system, when he was of the mature mind to do so. My sister and I always knew that we were different from those other members in our family who all maintained their Catholic faith.

Attending Catholic Church services with my family members throughout my life has been stressful and consistently intimidating, as I have had no knowledge of the practices, rituals, and meanings that existed. One of my most vivid memories is standing in church with my grandparents, dreading the time for communion. I hung my head, not wanting them to see my insecurity and fear and waited to see what would happen when it was time to leave the pew. What if they made me go with them? How would I accept the communion? Would the priest know by looking at me that I didn't belong? They did not ask me to walk up to the altar, but standing alone in the pew, as the rest of the congregates proceeded, was just as isolating. I had no knowledge of the Bible, songs, scriptures, or the Jesus spoken of in them. Everything in church was new and threatening. Religion held little meaning to me; I never felt the need to learn more.

Pre-College Religio-Spiritual History: Through the Eyes of a Believer

As a member of a large Catholic family, religion is something I have always incorporated into my life. Understanding the Catholic faith and its role in my development as a person is something with which I continue to struggle. I have always been hesitant to share my insecurities with others. I have not retained much of the knowledge I was taught in my many years of religious education. It is assumed that I am supposed to know everything about what it means to be Catholic and have strong beliefs in my Catholic faith; I am not sure if I do. My parents are both Roman Catholic, as is mother's entire family. Growing up, just about everyone in my schools and my town were also Catholic. My location limited my interactions with people of other faiths, until later in my life, when I would inevitably meet people from other faith

Nicole Chabot, currently a first-year HESA student, was born and raised in southern Maine. She received a bachelor of arts degree in sociology from Bucknell University in Lewisburg, PA in May of 2003. She looks forward to pursuing a career in student activities or leadership.

Michelle A. Luff graduated from Millersville University in Pennsylvania in May 2003 with a bachelor of science in communication/public relations. After completion of The University of Vermont's Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration master's program, she hopes to obtain a position as a student affairs professional.

backgrounds through college and other travels.

My first significant memory of my life in the Catholic Church is of my First Communion. After being baptized, this is the next step one takes in the journey in the Catholic faith: the first time one takes the Body of Christ (the host) and drinks His blood (the wine). Despite many hours of Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD), all I knew was that I was going to have to wear a white dress, have my picture taken, and celebrate this landmark day with a party. I went through the motions of this event as I continued to do with other significant events in my journey toward becoming a member of the Catholic Church.

I began taking CCD classes in first grade and continued until I was sixteen. I found CCD courses to be monotonous and I desperately attempted to skip class every chance I could. However, once I was close to my confirmation (the day a person becomes an official member of the Catholic Church), I was informed that all students were required to have a set amount of hours in CCD class. There would be no way I could get out of attending class unless I was not going to be confirmed, which was not an option according to my family. Everyone in my family is a confirmed Catholic; there is just no alternative. Since I was not interested in CCD class, I spent the ten years I attended CCD classes trying to figure out various ways to avoid them. When I should have been learning about my religion and my place in the Church, I was daydreaming about everything in my life except my religious education experience.

Time of Question: A Skeptic's Struggle

What causes you to question yourself when you are comfortable in your beliefs (or skepticism as the case may be)? In my case, I questioned not because I was comfortable in my beliefs, but in the ease of maintaining them. A sudden death in my family my sophomore year of high school, a tragic accident, brought about the necessity to challenge my lack of faith and to also realize that the faith I did have was legitimate. The priest for the ceremony, Father John, through his passion, love, and faith in the Catholic Church showed me that people could make a difference. His intense awareness and care for myself and other members of my family was truly touching as he sat with us and helped us to process our grief. For the first time, I associated that passion and grace with a religion. This one-time encounter made me question my decisions; I believed for a short time that the answer to my confusion was to consider conversion to Catholicism. What I eventually realized was that it was not the religion, but the person with whom I had connected. While my desire was short lived, it provided a starting point, a spark, to realize that deep down I wanted, needed something more.

Not until college, however, did this desire return. Moving to a new community, a community more diverse than any I had ever been a part of, forced me to redefine myself in all areas. As I began defining who I was as a college student, I realized I had no definition under the category of religion. Questions began flowing in my mind. I pray, but to whom and why? What do I believe? I say I believe in God, but who is he/she and what connects me to him/her? Interactions with other members in the campus community, class discussions, and involvement in student groups provided me with enough exposure to religious diversity that, for the first time, I felt the need to find my answer. I did not know, however, how to find the answers to such a pivotal question in this new and already overwhelming college environment. The task was too ominous, and the question too big, and one I was not willing to tackle as one student out of 3,200. I felt a loss of connection with these other students over my confusion and did not even know where to begin. There were too many other things pertinent in my life as a college student, and no pressure to determine this one aspect of my identity; therefore, it fell in importance. What helped me to regain this passion, this need for discovery was a three-week study abroad trip to Northern Ireland following my junior year. Watching an entire community of people destroying each other over their religious beliefs forced me to think: What are the beliefs that I hold so strongly that they would be worth dying for?

The answer came clearly to me, so much so that I wondered why I had not realized it before: it was my belief in spirits, in an afterlife. It was my faith in my Uncle Bill, a man I had never met but always felt connected with, watching over me, guiding me through life, and answering my prayers. I realized in that moment that my faith was centered around him, around spirits, around people, spiritual and actual. I felt him at all the most intense moments of my life, and it was him I went to for help in times of need. I am not sure why I did not connect him to my spirituality before, but in this foreign environment of intense religio-spiritual truth, it was impossible for me to ignore. What was left now was to define this in a way that made it real and made it my own.

Time of Question: A Believer's Struggle

The summer before my senior year of college I was an orientation leader at my university. I helped introduce new first-

year students to the university as well as provide them with an opportunity to meet some friendly faces they would soon see on a semi-regular basis. My interactions with the incoming students, as well as with my staff, formed an everlasting impression on my life. With their help, I was able to subject myself to new experiences that would aid me in defining my spiritual self. I decided that I had been ignoring my struggle as being an uninformed Catholic for too long and it was time for me to take control of my situation. Since I had neglected to take my religious education seriously, I simply went through the motions in church. I never fully understood why I was at mass, while at the same time I thought I was the only one in the room feeling this way. I began to question my definitions of God and what the Catholic Church meant to me. I decided that I needed to compare my experience with religion to that of other individuals and their beliefs. I was extremely fortunate to have friends who were open to being questioned and volunteered to help me in my search.

I attended different church services and compared them to my experience with Catholic mass. I went to a modern Christian service in a church called *Running Waters*, a Baptist service, and an Episcopalian service. As unsure as I was with being Catholic, I had never considered comparing my religion to a non-Christian religion. I did not know anyone who was a member of other religions or faiths, mostly because I did not live in an area that was inclusive of many religions. My family was also not extremely supportive of someone leaving the Catholic faith. After attending the various services, I found myself missing traditions of Catholic mass. During my visits to the other churches, I felt uncomfortable and simply wanted to be in the Catholic service. Maybe I missed mass because I did not understand what was going on in the new setting or maybe I missed it because my true calling was to be in Catholic mass.

Once I realized I belonged in the Catholic Church, I then had to figure out where my priorities existed. Unfortunately, at the same time of my religious exploration, I was dealing with multiple deaths of loved ones and friends, all within a short period of time. It was through my renewed belief and dedication to the Catholic faith that I was able to find the strength to get through this rough time I was experiencing. Being able to discuss my fears with my family and other Catholics, I was able to find comfort believing that those who had passed would be in a better place.

Finding Our Common Ground: A Skeptic's Journey

I left my undergraduate experience with a more solid understanding that I had a need to believe and a small awareness of what that belief was. I was given the opportunity to find myself in my new place, however, I found few situations where it was acceptable to talk liberally about what I was experiencing. While I had experiences with students and staff of many different religious backgrounds, hearing their religious stories was seldom part of any conversation; religion seemed to be a topic that was hidden, suppressed, and even feared by many students. This is an assumption based on the silence that existed, however an assumption that I quickly internalized as true.

I was provided an environment where these conversations could finally take place in graduate school in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program at The University of Vermont. With the introduction of the Moral Conversation, a concept created by Professor Robert J. Nash (1996), my classmates and I began to learn how to enter into an honest and open dialogue surrounding difficult issues, one of which was religion. Out of class, in small group conversations centering on class material, I finally began to make sense of everything I had struggled to believe for so long.

My classmates and I all seemed to be searching to find comfort in our own beliefs as well as comfort in our difference with others. I found myself looking back to college and to childhood to make sense of what I had believed in the past and what I was questioning now. The honesty that our discussions required was difficult and emotionally draining, however it was also necessary to find our common and uncommon ground. Ironically, I found my most common ground with a classmate, the believer, raised and confirmed in the Catholic religion. The religion I have always feared most was now the one with which I could relate with the most.

A believer and a skeptic were connecting over something so sensitive, so personal. We had questioned similar things and had similar struggles with identifying ourselves under this umbrella of religion; these resemblances ultimately led us to be able to understand each other's faith. As we discuss our religio-spiritual experiences, we continue to come back to the fact that we shouldn't have had to wait this long for these conversations to be acceptable. If nothing else, the college atmosphere should be created so that these relationships, these discoveries, can be fostered. As we go on to discuss how our separate paths have merged in this meaningful and intense way, it is imperative to know that it was an open environment and supportive setting that allowed me to be comfortable with defining my own faith. I now feel that I only have to know my faith for myself and not my family, not my peers, not my teachers, just me.

Finding Common Ground: A Believer's Journey

Today it greatly upsets me that I did not dedicate myself to my religious educational experience to obtain a richer understanding of the Catholic faith. My religious journey in college was necessary for me to realize that the Catholic faith was an important part of my life. I had always felt uncomfortable with my lack of knowledge in the Catholic religion. However, once I arrived in graduate school I was no longer faced with barriers constricting my religious exploration. The inclusive and pluralistic environment that my experience thus far in graduate school has offered is extremely comforting. A pluralistic environment is conducive for all backgrounds, as long as those involved work to create a safe place. As I discuss my beliefs with my classmates, I am supported in my religious struggle without feeling that I will be judged or convicted for my thoughts. I am invited to speak honestly and freely, without feeling that my comments will set up barriers for my success in graduate school.

In my deliberations concerning religion and the experiences of others, I soon realized that I was not the only person with reservations about my faith. Feelings of discomfort, isolation, and uneasiness were common to other people who believed in different faiths. I became at ease knowing that to consider myself Catholic, I did not have to know everything about being Catholic or believe everything the Catholic faith offers its believers. I only had to be comfortable with what being a member of the Catholic faith entails for me. I have been able to connect with various people about my struggle in my beliefs. However, I never imagined that my strongest connection would be with a religious skeptic.

I find it amazing that the person with whom I most connected considers herself to be a skeptic. Never previously having had a positive religious discussion with a self-defined skeptic, I was taken aback by how many similarities we found in our struggle to identify ourselves in terms of spirituality. At times we were both not sure who we believed in or what/who that was. Each of us was able to understand the other's faith and not feel threatened or vulnerable by the conversation. This sort of encounter is one that people of all religious backgrounds should be experiencing at some point in their lives.

Losing the Barriers: Let's Talk About It

Fear of the Unknown

Each of us was uncomfortable in our definitions of faith and what that meant to us. It was through our fear of not being secure in our beliefs that we were able to enter a conversation about our uncertainties. Through our dialogue we discovered that the fears of a skeptic's *blank slate perspective* in terms of religious identity were parallel to that of a believer's identity development within a predetermined and structured religious system. All of our fears pertained to a lack of knowledge in what we were presumed to believe. At times we were hesitant to enter into a dialogue explaining our faiths because we were not confident that we knew enough about our faiths to properly identify ourselves. Despite fear in our lack of knowledge and understanding, it was our underlying need to question *what* is that brought us together to converse about *what could be*.

Life Changing Events

As we reflected on our religio-spiritual journeys it became obvious that it was in times of severe distress and discomfort that we each developed a need for *something more*. As disclosed in our personal narratives, it was a combination of lost loved ones and societal religious conflict within our college experiences that sparked our desire for an identity based in spirituality.

Outside the realm of uncomfortable experience we sought comfort in our new diverse environments on our respective college campuses. These interactions forced us to continue questioning our place in a pluralistic society. Through this persistent uncertainty we were able to define our value of faith within ourselves; however, a timid and stifling environment that discouraged open conversation existed and restricted us from exploration. Because religion and spirituality remain undisclosed issues in the college environment, students and professionals have difficulty exploring and engaging in non-threatening dialogue concerning these topics. We would have been more secure in our religio-spiritual experience if we had the opportunity to take part in a moral conversation prior to our entrance to graduate school.

Faith in People

As we began our initial exploration of our *higher beings* and who or what that meant to us we discovered our belief and faith in *higher people* versus a *higher power*. Through our conversations, a common theme surrounding the influence of people on our spirituality was discovered. We concluded that we have a strong belief in beings, whether that is faith in a deceased family member or faith in God, a faith centered on the notion of having someone greater than the physically

tangible *matching over you*.

One belief is based on an abstract realm of spirituality, in comparison to the other, which is based on a traditional structured belief in God, but both are faiths in something greater than *what is*. Our faiths are unique because they are individually constructed within us, and not a direct reflection of any other individual or organized system. Our belief in our *higher people/higher power* may not be fully understood by a congregation, but it does require validation by others to be considered real. We believe in a postmodern world that allows each of us to live within our individual narratives, instead of an exclusive meta-narrative (Nash, 1996). Through our experience we have found comfort in our own definitions and the ability to discuss our views with others without fear or insecurity.

Application to Higher Education and Student Affairs

As religion and spirituality become the forefront of identity development on college campuses, it is imperative that we as professionals and students know how to engage in appropriate dialogue to challenge and encourage others to define their faiths. In creating this engaging environment, it is necessary to incorporate the ideals of the moral conversation: honest dialogue, an open mind, and a willingness to accept that your ideals may be incomplete (Nash, 1996). All of this occurs with the ultimate goal of adopting a common language under which all truths can exist (postmodern theory). These truths are never final or absolute but all truths can co-exist in a pluralistic society. The beauty of a postmodern, pluralistic society is that truth comes from within oneself; there does not need to be a pre-existing truth that one must closely identify.

In approaching religio-spiritual discussions, we must all understand that the intent is not to change another's beliefs. Instead, it is simply to create a space where everyone can express their own beliefs and be comfortable with differences. As students enter higher education institutions, their identity will undoubtedly come into question. Part of this development revolves around how they identify with their religio-spiritual selves, including all levels of belief and non-belief. As university community members, it is our responsibility to create environments where this type of questioning and conversation can safely occur.

If two students from completely different religious backgrounds can find commonalities in their experiences, it is possible for students with various beliefs to eventually find a common ground. It is our hope in the future that students on college campuses can mirror our positive experiences of not only self-discovery but also mutual understanding of religious pluralism and faith identity.

As we reflect on our journeys, we realize that we struggled with the absence of moral conversation more than the absence of faith. Without our self-initiation to define our spirituality, we never would have had the external motivation to do so. In incorporating the moral conversation, all members of the university community will be able to benefit from this dialogue. While it may not be immediate, with dedication and compassion students will benefit from the opportunity and encouragement to further define their religio-spiritual selves.

Reference

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