

Playing Pool at the Beginning of the Universe

When I was 16, the headmaster of my high school told me a story about a childhood acquaintance of his: Lawrence. “Lawrence,” my headmaster explained, “was the best Christian I’ve ever met. I didn’t realize it at the time. In fact, we used to pick on Lawrence at school because he was so strange. He was strange because, by the time he was in middle school, he had unshakable faith in Jesus Christ and was completely content with the world.” Whenever my headmaster or other kids would pick on him, Lawrence would just smile and say, “God bless you.” The one memory of Lawrence that my headmaster remembers the most vividly is an accident that happened when he, Lawrence, and several of their schoolmates were being taken on a drive in an open top jeep in the Maine countryside. It was a windy day, and as they passed under a tree, one of the branches broke off, fell, and hit Lawrence in the face. He wasn’t seriously injured, but most people would have been alarmed if they had been hit in the face with a solid, flying object. Lawrence, on the other hand, said “Praise Jesus,” and he said it in total seriousness. His faith was so strong that he believed that God had willed that branch to hit him, and, therefore, that it was part of God’s plan, and therefore that it was good and praiseworthy.

Although it took me another year or so before I became Christian, that story always stuck out to me as what a faithful person was: someone who believed so completely in the power of God that they wouldn’t waver, even if they experienced bodily injury or some other unfavorable circumstance. Their belief trumped everything else in their life, including their own wants, desires, needs, and thoughts.

The headmaster who told me that story was the headmaster of Chop Point School. I had come to Chop Point as a sophomore in high school, after one year of public high school education in Bath, Maine. I was small and scrawny for my age, and the public high school was not a good fit. I got picked on and was very depressed, and the school was also just generally sketchy. One month, we got four bomb threats. This prompted the administration to start searching everyone’s backpacks for weapons and bombs every morning before we were let in the building, which took several hours out of each day. I hated it there, so the next year, I went to Chop Point, this tiny, private Christian school down a two-mile dirt road in a rural neighboring town. It wasn’t my first choice for a school, but I had decided too late in the summer that I wanted to switch schools, so it was pretty much my only choice. It was a big change. Although my parents were Congregationalists, religion hadn’t been a very big part of my childhood. I went to Sunday school when I was little, but Congregationalism is pretty liberal and my parents weren’t very religious. By the time I came to Chop Point I would have probably considered myself Christian, but I honestly didn’t care about religion that much.

My years at Chop Point were the beginning of a phase where I grew a lot as a person, and significantly changed my values and outlook on life several times in a very short time span. I was exposed to new ways of thinking that I hadn’t experienced before, and each time this happened, my views on a lot of things—including faith and reason and their relationship to each other—changed as well. I think I learned a lot from these

experiences, so I want to give a brief narrative of that phase of my life and then talk a little bit about what I learned from it.

After my first year at Chop Point, I was even less interested in religion and having faith than when I came in. I had just discovered the comedian George Carlin, who believed that the problems in the world had started “when the high priests took over.” He was very libertarian and had a very dim view of religion. Conservative and Christian though Chop Point was, it hadn’t rubbed off on me enough yet to really change my views, even though I had Bible study class several times a week and we began every morning with prayer. There was one class that really influenced me, though: economics. The teacher was a successful businessman whose kids went to Chop Point, and he taught school in his spare time. He was also a die-hard libertarian, so the culmination of the class, we read *Atlas Shrugged*, the novel by Ayn Rand that illustrates her libertarian philosophy of life.

Rand made very clear what her opinion of religion was. At one point in *Atlas Shrugged* she called faith “a short-circuit destroying the mind.” To her, the human capacity for thought was paramount. To think was the noblest thing that one could do, and thinking necessarily implied rational thinking. To use faith, she argued, was to bypass thinking, to accept something without thinking about it properly. Therefore, faith, and faith-based religions, including Christianity, are nothing short of evil to her. Lawrence, who would trust his faith even if it didn’t seem to make sense at the time, was exactly the sort of person that Ayn Rand despised.

Around the same time that I discovered Ayn Rand and George Carlin, I discovered George Orwell and the dystopia genre of literature—*Animal Farm*, 1984, *The Giver*, *We*, *Brave New World*—these were all books that, while not strictly libertarian or anti-religious, were partly about what happens to the individual when a powerful institution such as the church or the government gets too much power and control, so these novels fit right in with Ayn Rand, George Carlin, and my economics professor.

All together, the combination of these things was life changing. They made such perfect, elegant sense, and their focus on the importance of the individual was so empowering for me, that I became a libertarian. Although I didn’t completely go anti-religion, I became very skeptical of religious claims. I thought that the services and prayers at my school were generally silly and pointless, and I would argue with my more religious friends at the school about how their faith was unjustified.

My libertarian phase was the first phase I went through, and lasted about a year or year and a half (my sophomore year in high school to mid-junior year). It was short-lived, I think, because I went to a Christian school, and you can’t be in one of those places for a long time without it having an effect on you. Slowly, I began to start accepting bits and pieces of conservative Christian culture. I started to not find it so weird when people would talk about Christian rock music, or the different Christian youth groups that they were part of, or how they went to Christian summer camp every summer, or how their parents wouldn’t allow them to read Harry Potter because they thought it was actually teaching kids witchcraft. That stuff became normal to me. Faith was the hardest part for me to accept, though, especially since I was using my headmaster’s childhood friend Lawrence as my model of a faithful person, which seemed like a lot to live up to.

But gradually, as I started to accept those other pieces of Christian culture, I began to have faith, too. I don’t remember waking up one morning and suddenly being

Christian, but I think by the middle of my junior year of high school I would have called myself Christian. During this time libertarianism was still influencing me, but I had accepted that maybe one could have faith about some things, like God, just not things like economics. I started wanting to learn more about my friends' churches and youth groups, and I started taking Bible study more seriously. Eventually, in my senior year of high school, I agreed to go to a youth convention with one of my friends. This was a key turning point in my life. He said it would be perfect for me since I was only recently converted. For those of you who have seen the movie *Jesus Camp*, the convention was a lot like that, except that it was for older teenagers instead of young kids. It was in a hotel, and the activities took place in a conference room in the basement. For most of the day there were planned activities where we would play what were basically party games, except they were meant to teach us about Jesus. The best part was the sermons, though. Every night after dinner there would be a sermon, and I've never experienced anything like that, before or since. I call them sermons, but they were more like a cross between sermons and pep rallies, and were specifically designed to get us really fired up about our faith. And get me fired up they did. They were extremely well done, and made me very excited to be Christian. After the sermons there would be less structured activities where we could basically just hang out and do what we wanted.

It was at the end of this convention, after the final sermon, that I received the Holy Spirit for the first time. For evangelical Christians, receiving the Holy Spirit means that they lose themselves completely to God. All the mental barriers between them and God are broken down, and they become filled completely with God's light. This usually happens during or after sermons, hymns, or any other particularly intense spiritual moments. The evidence of this happening is speaking in tongues. The person begins speaking in a different language that they don't know, in accordance with a passage in the New Testament somewhere that talks about believers "being filled with the Holy Spirit and speaking in many tongues."

Receiving the Holy Spirit was a sort of rite of passage for a convert like I was, because most of those people had been listening to sermons and receiving the Holy Spirit since they were young children. They would receive the Holy Spirit several times in a service, becoming very animated, sometimes even running around or going into convulsions in their excitement. I, on the other hand, still felt like kind of an outsider. I was very shy and nervous about doing something wrong, and they knew this, so when I received the Holy Spirit, it was a big deal. The other youths from my church who were at the convention were ecstatic, and the different chaperones and ministers who were there all came up and told me how happy they were for me. I had only babbled something incoherent, but I definitely felt different, almost trance-like. It's kind of hard to describe what it felt like, but it's a lot like how the Jules character (the character that Ben played) describes his experience of the miracle in the *Pulp Fiction* dialogue: you feel the touch of God, God gets involved.

I started attending my friend's church regularly. He went to an Apostolic church. The best way I've been able to explain the Apostolic denomination is to compare it to other denominations. On a scale of one to ten, put the hippyest, dippiest, touchy-feelyest, most open religion you can think of as one (think Unitarian universalism), and the most zealous, conservative, bible-thumping, fire-and-brimstone-preaching fundamentalist Christianity as ten. On that scale, Apostolicism would be roughly 11. People talked in

tongues during the sermons, the women and the girls in the congregations had a strict dress code for everyday life that forbid them to cut their hair or wear anything but dresses, and everyone who wasn't a conservative Christian, they believed, was going to Hell. This list of people who were going to Hell also included gays, liberal Christians like my parents, people who had sex out of wedlock, and everyone else that you would think of evangelical Christians as condemning. It was basically your stereotypical evangelical Christian church, and then some.

I went to this church for maybe 8 months, and in that time I quickly became a fundamentalist Christian myself. I started praying for the souls of my friends who weren't saved. I informed my parents and sister that they were going to Hell if they didn't repent of their sins and believe. I started arguing with people on the Internet that the Bible was the infallible word of God.

Faith, at this time in my life, was very important. To an Apostolic, faith encompasses not only the belief that God is omnipotent and omniscient, but also the specific belief that as people, we are all sinners. We were born with original sin, inherited all the way back from Adam and Eve, and therefore are tainted, imperfect. The goal is to get to heaven, a place of eternal bliss and oneness with God, but one can't get into heaven unless one is free of sin. The only way to get into heaven is to, first, accept that you're a sinner. Then, believe that Jesus came down from heaven in human form, was crucified, and died on the cross. By dying on the cross, he forgave all of humanity for their sins. To accept this forgiveness, and effectively wipe the slate clean, one simply has to have faith that he died to forgive one's sins, and that is enough.

This salvation through faith is what the apostles are explaining to the jailer in the passage that Hallie read: all you have to do is believe, and you'll be saved. You just have to believe that Jesus died for your sins, and you'll be forgiven and can get into heaven. This is what I believed. Faith was the most important thing in my life then, because if I had faith, then I could get into heaven. Reason and rationality, like Ayn Rand preached, were important, but if reason seemed to contradict something that the Bible said, then the reasoning was incorrect, because it was believed the Bible was infallible.

So, by the end of high school, I was a fundamentalist Christian, but immediately after I graduated I left for Japan, and studied abroad there for a year, then came back and worked for a year at Bowdoin College in Maine. During that two years I didn't read or think about Christianity much at all, and just not being around it as much and being around other viewpoints made me lose some of my fervor for Christianity. After those two years off I then came here. I would say by the time I came here I was no longer a Christian, but more of an agnostic. Just like in high school when I first developed my faith, losing my faith happened as a gradual process as well. There aren't too many fundamentalist Christians in Japan, and the Japanese view of religion in general seems to be a lot looser than my view was. To the Japanese I met, religion was something to be incorporated into a normal life, not something that should completely take over one's life. There were holidays where religion was important, but that was about the only time the Japanese made a big deal about it. With no support for my beliefs, I eventually stopped thinking about them. I distinctly remember that I got a Facebook account pretty soon after coming back to the states in 2005, and being unsure what to put for my religious views. I eventually settled on agnostic, and I only grew farther from Christianity during that year that I worked at Bowdoin.

Now, I'm a philosophy major, and philosophers have had a lot to say about faith and reason. The philosopher that probably had the most impact on my religious views is Immanuel Kant. Kant wrote a book called the Critique of Pure Reason, and the point of this book was to determine the limits of reason. Kant argued that reason did not have the power to get to, let alone prove, the existence of things such as God, or the soul, or the nature of the beginning of the universe. Such things were beyond reason's capacity. Other things, on the other hand, were perfectly suited to reason. I always thought of pool as being the perfect situation in which to use reason, because pool is all about calculating the angles and velocities of the balls. So for Kant, faith and reason would never conflict, because they each have their separate domains. Reason should be used during pool games, math, physics, and other parts of everyday life, and not for such things as the beginning of the universe, or God, or the nature of the soul. These things beyond reason's capacity can only be reached with something like faith. Obviously, I'm grossly oversimplifying Kantian epistemology here, but that's the general idea.

So, if you noticed, my beliefs changed drastically depending on the environment that I was in. I went from a liberal household, to immersing myself in libertarian thinking, to immersing myself in conservative Christian culture, to living in Japan and being immersed in that culture and those cultural values, to coming back to my liberal household and working at a liberal arts college, to coming to a very liberal liberal arts college and studying classical philosophy and biology and being exposed to all the values associated with those disciplines. My beliefs and values changed with each change in environment. But they also got deeper, richer, and more complex with each change. My view on faith, for example, is mostly influenced by Kant at this point, but I still have the experience of Ayn Rand, George Carlin, and Christianity to inform that belief, which I think makes my view on faith much fuller and more complete.

Realizing how my environment influenced my beliefs was just as valuable as the beliefs themselves. The constant change in values that I was surrounded by made me constantly reevaluate and think critically about my own values. I realize now that I was extremely lucky that I was challenged like that. I believe that having one's views challenged—especially if those views are important and/or taken for granted—is extremely important, and I'll give a couple examples as to why.

I got really mad at one of my atheist friends here a few times when we debated about Christianity. He would say that Christianity was really bad and controlling and untrue and all this stuff... but he's never studied Christianity or Christian theology. He grew up in an atheist household, and all he knows about Christianity he read from Nietzsche, who hates Christianity. So I would always tell him, how can you argue against something that you don't really know anything about? You've never been exposed to Christianity except filtered through Nietzsche or other people who are reacting against it, so of course you don't like it; you've never known anything else!

For another example, my friends who have studied feminist theory and post-modernism get mad at me sometimes, because a lot of times my gut reaction is to disagree with points from feminist theory or post-modernism. And it's easy to see why: for all the different philosophies and cultures I've experienced, none of them were influenced very much if at all, by post-modernism or feminism, and most of them, in fact, were based on modernism, enlightenment thinking: libertarianism, conservative Christianity, classical philosophy, science. All of these things are what feminism and

post-modernism are reacting against, so it's easy to see why sometimes my gut reaction is to disagree with certain points in feminist theory or post-modernism.

To have informed opinions, my friend has to go to church, read some Christian apologists and theology, and somehow experience Christian culture, and I have to do the same for feminist theory and post-modernism.

So, after all this time, I still believe both faith and reason have their strong points and their weak points, and I use both. Faith is great for giving hope and support, and it drives people to do wonderful things. The downside is, as was seen in the *Pulp Fiction* dialogue, that, when it comes to dealing with other people, there is no way to prove that one's faith is correct. Julian can't prove to Vincent that what they experienced was a miracle, so, most likely, Vincent will continue to not believe, and it will remain a matter of disagreement. At the end of *Pulp Fiction*, Julian decides to retire from the gangster lifestyle because of his faith. Vincent thinks this decision is ludicrous. Jules' decision doesn't really affect Vincent directly, so it's not too much of an issue that they disagree, but when people make decisions based solely on their faith that seem to go against reason, then that can cause problems for people that don't have faith that are effected by those decisions. Christian science is a good example of this: parents will have such a strong faith in God that they will deny medical treatment to their children, choosing instead to have faith that God will heal them. This shows how strong their faith is, but it goes directly against reason, and if their children get hurt or die from it, which does happen, the only justification they can give is that they have faith that it was God's will that things happened that way. That's not a good enough justification for a lot of people (myself included), and really demonstrates how the unreliability and inherently personal nature of faith can be a problem when it comes to dealing with others.

Reason, on the other hand, is great for communicating with others, because it can be broken down, analyzed, and explained relatively easily. If disagreements arise, they can more easily be worked out. Because of this, reason is good for teaching and working with others. It can be just as blind as faith, though, and can also undermine the role of emotion, which is bad.

As I said, Kant has had the biggest influence to date on my conceptions of faith and reason, so they don't conflict very often. Unless I'm playing a pool game at the beginning of the universe, I think it'll be okay.