

RELIGION WHERE ART THOU

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THE LONG AWAITED Christmas Eve came—long awaited that is for my grandchildren; for on this eve they would sing in the choir group for tots four through eight. The church stood large and white in the center of a medium sized New England town. I was not one of its parishioners but had been here several times to witness my cherubs sing and perform. I arrived a half-hour before the service started to insure that I had a seat with a view. The pews just behind those reserved for special guests were vacant. I had a clear vision of the altar. At the appointed time the children assembled in the front of a large hall in front of the plain protestant alter. A few moments passed as the choir director assured that everyone align for best performance. Robin was on one end and April, her older and taller sister was in the center. The group began with The First Noel. I was moved but wondered what I really believed in about this. I concluded my newfound sense of spirituality had to do with the miracle of my grandchildren rather than in some supreme being. Perhaps, the spirituality I felt stemmed from my witness of the daughters of my blood. I can believe in this self-evident thing. If that truth manifests god, so be it. Do I need to know more? The children sang, the minister preached, the penitents prayed and dead spirits communed in this sequestered hall that celebrated the recurrence of life and death as I wandered into and out of a timeless reverie that intellectualizes what I do and do not feel about a god.

For hundreds of years Old World families maintained the cyclical of the Christian faith in the Feast of the Circumcision, Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, All Saints Day, Christmas, and then over again. But in a place like the New World, mainly after the war, the fabric that once wove these rituals into a unified whole began fray and inevitably the last threads that held the cycle intact unraveled. Both sides of the family were Catholic. My paternal grandmother and her daughter attended church regularly. As for my immediate family, my father never went to church (or mentioned the word god) and my mother who mentions God a great deal in greeting cards, only spent Easter or Christmas there. I, on the other hand, did attend church regularly as a child, ordered to.

Unlike their modern counterparts, the churches of my childhood were from the Old World and another millennium, and in fealty to that origin faced eastward. Their design intentionally permitted morning's light to enter the sacred basilica and cast God's beam over a tiny missal we all carried. Once morning passed the vacuous hall became dark once again, foreclosing the written word, and forcing our concentration on the Rosary, where you only needed to feel the beads strung along a loop that inevitable lead you back to the beginning, the Crucifix. Candles outlined the outer aisles and served as the main source of illumination in the small vestibules, where they burned beneath the feet of some revered icon in a reminder of the duality of fire, both

as a symbol of God's kingdom and the devil's perdition. Magnificent halls of Baroque and Classic Italian architecture where huge marbled columns lined granite aisles, down which generous, but mostly poor, humble and somber penitents marched forward and backward and toward forgiveness and ultimate salvation, in a daily struggle to be perfect and human at the same time. And, importantly here the capped channelers baptized, wedded and ultimately funeralized our ghostly spirit. We ritualized our presence on earth so we might find freedom in an after life. The altars represented the last vestige of an ancient rite, solemnized in a Latin mass for the masses whose vernacular long since diverged from any comprehension of the sacred soliloquy. My fascination with the mystery of it all consumed my quiet time, the time when I talked inside my head so only I could hear my thoughts or commune through prayer with a reticent Trinitarian God whom I would later believe dispensed justice according to an odd prescription of predestination. Or as Saint Augustine would rationalize, God may be inequitable, but certainly not unjust! History certainly has its share of intellects smitten by superstition.

In the nineteen forties, churches in most northeastern cities symbolized the ethnic make up of its neighborhoods. In their structure we see a reflection of the various group's strengths, hopes and aspirations. Where I lived, a red brick Russian Orthodox church sat on the tallest hill in the Russian enclave, a granite Slovak church, squat in the Slovak section. Saint Patrick's church presented an austere looking and overall brighter edifice than its Italian counterpart. There were two Italian churches the Holy Rosary and St. Raphael and both yellow brick. Perhaps the yellow reminded its members of Italy and its many bright pastel colored villages. The Holy Rosary, resembled a miniature of IL Duomo in Florence, it had its own golden dome. St. Raphael's had been resurrected in the early fifties as a less ornate patrician church of solid granite floors, highly polished marble pillars, gold leafed cornices and the usual statutory assemblage of the more popular Italian saints to guide us through the ever complex human travail, safely and if not safely, spiritually.

In St. Raphael's I received three of the five sacraments I could expect over my lifetime, the other two, being marriage and extreme unction. This last one I would assiduously try to avoid. The priests conferred the outward signs of the Lord's inner gift of Grace: Baptism, First Holy Communion and Confirmation. In this last ceremony, I knelt before and then kissed the golden ring of a corpulent bishop sitting on a gilded red velvet throne (I beamed in god's approval). In the hallowed halls of the cross erected for the good parishioners of St. Raphael's, I a child of seven, without sin, would feel guilt, and thence methodically recite the Confiter:

"I confess to almighty God, To Blessed Mary, ever Virgin, To Blessed Michael, the Archangel, To ... that I have sinned exceedingly, In thought, word, and deed, Through my fault, ...Therefore I beseech the Mary, ever Virgin, ...Pray to the Lord, my God, for me."

At seven I had already assumed that sins unknown to me consciously must nevertheless exist and I must confess them, and ask a cadre of saintly agents, whom I have never met, to intercede on

my penitent behalf. Everything from how we live our lives, to how we celebrate the rituals of confession, birth and death must involve these paradoxical incorporeal and ethereal beings. This early spiritual connection with beings I had never encountered, except buried deep within the imaginary pockets of my cerebellum, has had much to do with my sense of right and wrong, so that in my inner self, in that place of sanctified solitude, I should feel guilty, for perhaps not having a sin to report for not to have sinned could constitute a sin (the church needs to have it this way, for after all if people stopped sinning the church would go out of business and that cannot be good). I also strangely began to look forward to a solitude that reflected the growing need to find peace at the tender age of seven.

After my First Communion at the age of seven, the good nuns from St. Raphael conscripted me into altar boy service. They would teach me Charity, Faith and Grace, subjects that only metaphysicians appreciate. But, I took my duties seriously, the first of which I learned to navigate the altar, transport the holy water, focus the candles, fan the incense, dress in the black and white clerical vestments, and to respond to the priest's Latin liturgy. These differed for the several kinds of celebrated masses, one set of general muttering reserved for Sundays, but customized for each of the religious seasons. Another set of muttering for the common couple's wedding and another for those of influence, funerals (the same), and so on. I say muttering, because the priest recited mass in a dead language no one understood. I muttered, too. I had to learn a dozen different stock responses to the priest's incantations. I could not keep straight when to move the Gospel from one side of the altar to the other, or when to light the candles, or ring the bell or genuflect. In my desire to take orders perfectly, I often became befuddled and lost clarity of mind. I could not remember the difference between the stole and the amice. I could not remember when to announce the coming of Jesus by ringing the bells and beating my chest at the same time. But, here I learned that the rituals played out in this temple, were not unlike the rituals I would later observe in all manner of institutions, the military, the corporation, the court and prison. You must learn the language, the times you can cross from one place to another, when you are permitted to light the candles, ring the bells, when to genuflect and say may I. And, loose that habit of befuddlement. In fact the greater part of success in life depends on one's ability to perform all manner of rituals. I found this later in the adult world of government and corporations, all in which I frequently found myself lighting candles, ringing bells, moving things from one side of the altar to the other, muttering, looking up to the idols and always, always remembering to genuflect in their presence.

In 1950 after my family moved into the north end of town, a ten-cent bus ride would take me to the church to first memorize the Latin phrases, and then later to serve the mass. I saw the yellow brick convent secured behind a steel page fence, seeming to incarcerate the mother superior and her habited cadres of beatific teenaged nuns not only as a sanctuary, but also as a prison. I had the feeling of both security and suffocation, of faith and agnosticism, of hope and despair. Awed by their austerity, sanctuary, myths, miracles and intermediating Madonna, I wondered if I could ever aspire to priesthood. I wondered if I would go to heaven. I asked the icons that lined the

chapel, I beseeched the Holy Ghost, I prayed for an answer. I wondered if I would ever memorize the solemn phrases, but eventually, the last wonder would quell in the quiet of the small dimly lit convent foyer, I finally memorized the Latin that to this day I cannot erase from my memory, even though I still don't know what it all means. It's better left that way, but in the convent's celestial atmosphere of pedagogical insignificance, it still casts an everlasting notion of my catholicness (intended small "c"), even though I, like my parents before me, would someday only attend church occasionally for baptisms, weddings and funerals. For nearly a year, patiently, the saintly nuns at St. Raphael's bathed my childlike mind in the sanctimony of their innocent outlook, leaving me with a residue of both veneration and dread, which to this day arouses me every time I find myself in church. In years past my heart would beat fast and my eyes would gloss over tear-like. As I now find my self in the grip of old age, I have concluded that my tears flowed because the Madonna, Mother of the World never answered. I have concluded that the idea of her represents only an image, the image of a black abyss, an abyss that delimits the beginning and the end of my life as difficult as it is to accept this thought.

The church shaped my outlook regarding rituals of guilt, death, and serving idols. Like all cults, the ecclesiastical order moves its novitiates from mere lambs to staunch lions for a god, his apostles, disciples, popes, cardinals, bishops, monsignors, priests, nuns and then the saints, archangels, angels and guardian angels in that order. Religious programming serves to foster the ceremonies, observances of traditions and its deities. More importantly it informs us of the sacrifices we need to make to exorcise the demons from our soul. When we deviate from its prescriptions, we feel guilty—in this the church, our parents and schools have done a splendid job. The Catholic culture, like all cultures, passes down its moral traditions in the parable or its religious stories, the prayer, the Gospel, and the Catechism. I leave out the Bible, because in the Catholic Church only the priests have access to it, the church considers the laity too ignorant to interpret it correctly (considering the wide spread belief in creationism among U.S. politicians, withholding the Bible may not be a bad thing). The pope must have realized this sometime during the Reformation.

Beyond holy significance, our religious culture defines our day-to-day behavior, how we ritualize birth and death, and how we respond the ought and naught of secular exigencies. These rituals inculcate the religion's orthodoxy of values of fairness, justice or sin that get converted into a civic order. Eventually these become the moral, ethical and legal foundation for our lives. It drives important decisions: whom we marry, how many children, how we earn our living, how we see suffering, crime, punishment, equity and duty. It serves to guide our actions in individual and collective ways, sometimes for good and sometimes for evil. It establishes the grounding, upon which we resolve to fashion our race, our tribe, and our society.

Contradictions, paradoxes and doubt summarize my theological insights. If a god exists, it defies logical explanation. We have no ability to comprehend Him or It on rational terms. In the late 90's, a group of old men were executed in Kosovo, and five young teenage girls were beaten and

raped in the same town by the rebel forces sympathetic to the Serbs for no apparent reason, except that they were Moslems in a Christian world. More recently the Iraq War pits Moslem sect against competing Moslem sect. Terrorists attacked us on 9/11 in the name of Allah. But, it's not just religious zealotry that shocks us. In another report, a woman and her four children walking along a Connecticut railroad track at two o'clock in the morning are killed. A six-year-old fires a gun and kills a six year old. It's not death that contradicts god. It's the manner of death, its meaninglessness, harsh random, casual and cruel causation that contradicts him. god's presence, his teaching, His power never explains why good people often suffer the brute forces of Nature or why decent people die at the hands of despots crazed by ideological war or zeal, or at the whim of common criminals. And, why evil people may live lives of comfort and die in dignity and tranquility. Do we take it on Faith that he embodies Divine Justice?

I struggle to disavow the notion that predestination is god's gift of Grace to some and not others, that he has favorites, or that he chooses one over the other, as He chose Jacob over Esau. Does he choose friends and relatives of mine to live excruciating lives or to die excruciating deaths? Not a day goes by without hearing about some accident, epidemic or natural disaster reducing an otherwise healthy population. In the Balkans, Middle East, Sub Saharan Africa, Chechen Republic, Iraq, Darfur, and selected infernos of hell on earth, women and children succumb to the wars of mechanized killing at the hands of zealots, demigods, and diabolical politicians (mostly men). If there were a god, what is he thinking! Is he really just making room or deciding something else?

The deacon and his staff passed out lighted candles and we all headed for the front gray granite church steps. The December night was cold and windy, but the congregant's demonstrated the will to sing one last verse of Silent Night. I held one granddaughter in each arm. We shivered with the rest of the chorus. The singing swelled my heart. In the words of the philosopher cleric Kierkegaard: "...if God does not exist it of course would be impossible to prove it; and if he does exist it would be folly to attempt it." So after an evening of listening to my granddaughters sing their little hearts out, we sang the words of a song that made me no wiser, but perhaps as joined together, warmer and richer.