

Why I Am No Longer An Agnostic

©2005 by Stanley J. Alluisi

I have enjoyed reading many articles in *Free Inquiry* over the years. Among the most interesting were the “*Why I am Not a _____*” articles. The various authors would typically explain their spiritual journey from the faith tradition of their youth or culture to a life without faith in a supreme being. The article that I never read was one where the author never really did believe but was too afraid to admit it to the world or even themselves. This person might have been raised in a tradition of faith and might have paid some lip service to this supposed faith, but struggled internally for years to begrudgingly accept and then finally proclaim that they really did not believe in God! That was my story. Since it would be silly of me to wait any longer for someone else to tell my story I suppose I must. Here is the story of my journey.

I was born into a middle-class family in the suburbs of Baltimore, Maryland in 1957. My mother’s parents were straight off the boat from Sicily making my mom a first-generation American. Her entire family was very Catholic. My father’s family had both Italian as well as Irish Catholic roots. Both of my parents were active in the church and participated in “extracurricular” church activities. Later, my father went on to become a lay minister and read scripture at Mass every Sunday. Thus, as I grew up I was steeped in the dogma of the Catholic church.

When I was five I attended a Catholic kindergarten. My only memories of that time was of nuns, playing “duck-duck-goose!” and stealing one of those giant pencils they used to teach us writing. The next year I entered first grade at my local parish school, the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM). I still remember my first grade teacher, Sister Mary George. I stayed at IHM school through the third grade but I did not do very well academically. The following year my parents enrolled me in the public elementary school across the street from our house. While I did not do much better in public school my father continually reminded me of one important fact: it was cheaper.

Since I was no longer receiving my regular dose of Catholic indoctrination at school I was required to attend Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) classes once a week after school. I attended CCD regularly through seventh or eighth grade as per the wishes of my parents. In retrospect I realize that my classmates and I were obnoxious little brats who made life very difficult for the poor guy who volunteered to teach us the basic tenets of our supposed faith. (As a matter of fact, I think I even mentioned my bad behavior in confession a few times...) I seriously doubt that any of the students in my class learned very much from the CCD classes. Nonetheless, I continued to attend simply to appease my father.

As I grew up I started thinking more and more about religion and my “faith.” I accepted as true all that was told to me as I am sure most young children do. When I did not understand something or when the story of Genesis or the wafer and wine turning into the body and blood of Christ did not make sense to me I blamed it on my youth and immaturity. I concluded that all of these mysteries would become clear when I grew older and more mature. Throughout my youth I

had this odd notion about the connection between age and knowledge, wisdom and judgement. Please allow me to digress on this point since it was central to my adolescent world-view.

While I was growing up I constantly wondered how my parents knew what to do and when to do it. How did adults know when it was time to buy a new (or used) car? How did one determine that it was time for new furniture or carpet or a major appliance? I reasoned that adults must be privy to some secret advanced knowledge that we kids did not yet possess. Somehow, I got it into my head that certain levels of this worldly knowledge and wisdom came to people at certain specific ages. Thus, a certain amount of this knowledge must become known to children when they turned sixteen, otherwise, how would they have the knowledge and wisdom to be trusted with an automobile? Certainly when a young man or woman turned eighteen various forms of this advanced and arcane knowledge simply must become available! For at eighteen one could (at least back then) purchase beer and wine as well as long guns and they could vote and legally leave home and join the military, all on their own! Finally, the Holy Grail: Twenty One. You could now buy hard liquor and hand guns and everyone agreed that you were now a full-fledged "adult." There simply must be something to these magic ages! End of digression.

So, throughout my adolescence I attributed my many, many doubts and lack of full faith to one simple fact: I had not yet enjoyed my sixteenth birthday. Being younger than sixteen meant that I had not yet become privy to the secret adult knowledge that would make the answers to all of my questions trivially obvious. So I waited and continued to try to believe as was expected of me and as I honestly thought I should. I must admit that even as early as sixth grade (either time - it was, after all, the best two years of my life) that I felt guilty that I did not fully believe in all that I was being told. But, again, I reassured myself that in the fullness of time I would understand and all would be well. It was during this stage of questioning but hopeful faith that I accepted the second and third sacraments of the Catholic faith: First Communion and Confirmation. I must confess that I felt like a fraud on both occasions and seriously entertained the proposition that if God was even half as nasty as the priests said He was I was soon to be struck down by a heavenly bolt of lightning.

My first real but feeble attempt at religious rebellion came in my early teens. Some friends and I were interested in aviation and we wanted to join the local Civil Air Patrol group. Unfortunately, the CAP meetings were held the same night as the CCD classes. Without any real pleading on my part my parents agreed that I could skip CCD and attend CAP. Mass every Sunday was now my remaining religious burden.

Throughout junior and senior high school I attended Mass regularly with my parents and Sunday was typically the only time religion ever came up for discussion. When I left for college in 1976 I was free to ignore church services for the first time in my life. But that is not to say that I was religion free. The "Navigators" quickly tracked me (and all other freshmen) down in the dorms and did their best to convert me to their flavor of Christianity. But now I was free to say no and argue religion actively as opposed to sitting passively. Being out from under the eye of my parents - but still too timid to completely renounce my "faith" (and for fear of irritating God) - I boldly staked out the middle ground and proudly declared myself an agnostic!

Interestingly, whenever I went home for visits or during breaks I would always attend Mass with my parents. During my entire life my father never once asked me “if” I wanted to attend Mass on Sunday; He simply asked “which” service I would be attending. While not yet a college graduate I was painfully aware of the source of my largesse and I had no desire to “press to test” on the subject of religion. My grades would provide plenty of ammunition on that account. So I bit my tongue and bided my time until graduation.

Throughout my extended tenure at the University of Maryland I was comfortable being an agnostic and honored my father (and hedged my bets) by attending church whenever I was home. What I was looking forward to with some anticipation was graduation and being completely on my own for the first time. Soon after graduation I would be on active duty in the Air Force and the true master of my own destiny. In other words - no longer financially dependent on my father. I was actually looking forward to the day when I would come home on leave and my dad would ask me “which” service I would be attending? For the first time I would have the courage (or rather the financial independence) to tell him that I would not be attending church this Sunday, but thanks for asking. I was fully prepared to accept my father’s wrath including the possibility that he might kick me out of the house (although I thought that a remote possibility). What I was truly hoping for was some real dialogue on religion and his acceptance of me as an adult. But, alas, it was not to be.

In the summer of 1980, six months before I was to graduate from college, my father died from lung cancer at age 52. I never got the chance to rebel even in my small way. My mother, sister, an uncle and I were all at his bedside when he breathed his last. My mom and sister cried. I felt relief. My father’s months of suffering were over. To me there was never any illusion about my father being in a “better place” or with God or about me “seeing him on the other side.” I simply found solace in the fact that my father was no longer in pain.

The small part of me that was still trying to believe questioned why God would so torture one of his humble servants as He had with my father? Yet I do not recall being consciously angry at God for his “bad behavior” toward my father. Being angry at God would have required me to actually believe in Him. As I ponder this in retrospect I realize that my actions belie the fact that I did not believe in God at that point despite my continued claims to agnosticism and being undecided on the issue.

After my father’s passing I never felt the same pressure to attend church from my mother. I did attend the funeral services for my father with her that summer and occasionally accompanied her to Mass when I was home in the fall. Finally, on Christmas, when I was home after graduation, I attended Mass with her for the last time. The following spring I went on active duty and made my own way. When I would come home on leave I never attended church and my mother never mentioned it to me. One way or the other I think she figured it all out.

After my father died my only two major religious entanglements were when my close friends asked me to be Godfather to their daughter and when I was married for the first time. In the first instance, it was not my religiousness that was in question. I simply had to agree to raise my goddaughter in the faith of her parents, should they meet an untimely demise. I accepted that

responsibility freely and, fortunately, have not had to exercise it. As for my first marriage, a church wedding was not something I dreamed about. Rather, my agreeing to a full Catholic church wedding was an expression of my desire to please my very tradition-bound bride-to-be. We attended an abbreviated set of pre-marriage classes and then staged the full Catholic wedding ceremony in my home parish. While I did not literally believe all that was said during the Catholic marriage liturgy, I still took the marriage commitment seriously.

After the wedding my wife and I rarely attended Mass. When we did attend Mass I did so simply to appease my wife who would occasionally insist that we attend. Our irregular attendance hinted that even she was ambivalent about her faith. In retrospect I think she was having feelings similar to my own - wanting to believe, not really believing, yet fearing the consequences of saying so openly. After two and a half years the point was moot: We divorced.

As I continued my Air Force career as a born-again bachelor I still considered myself an agnostic. I did not believe in God but I held out the possibility that since many other thoughtful and intelligent people did that there just might be something to it; maybe something I'd missed. I was humble enough to admit the possibility that I could be wrong. In any event, Pascal's Wager seemed like a safe bet, so to speak.

In retrospect I can easily see that I was merely hedging my bets, not because I rationally held out any hope that the God of my parents was real, but because I was simply afraid to deny that which I did not believe existed! I was too afraid to admit that not only did I not believe in God, but that I found the entire concept of God, especially the Judeo-Christian God, patently absurd! Yet whenever I would entertain such heretical thoughts I would feel guilty. Throughout my life I have deferred to authority figures, avoided confrontation and detested the thought of saying or doing anything that might possibly upset someone. My reluctance to admit that I was, in fact, an atheist stems directly from this aspect of my personality.

Slowly, during the late 1980's and early 1990's, I began to move from begrudging agnostic to born-again atheist. My accidental discovery of Free Inquiry magazine (via Skeptical Inquirer) finally solidified my convictions. Here were people who were unafraid to say publicly that they did not believe in God! I was no longer alone. I finally realized that it was not just me and Madeline Murray O'Hare against the world. I now understood that there was an entire community of good, ethical, like-minded people! It was (dare I say it?) an epiphany.

While I had always enjoyed debating religion with various close friends and the more liberal clergy I have encountered in my travels, I never had the courage to come right out and publicly state that I did not believe in God. I would usually hedge my bets for fear of offending someone or, worse, being ostracized for being "one of them." Interestingly, during my adult years I never once seriously feared God's retribution for my lack of faith; the only retribution I feared was that of my fellow man. I figured that if God really did exist He must be so much nicer and more understanding than those "fire and brimstone" preachers made Him out to be. He would certainly understand my confusion. After all, if He really did create this zoo I just knew He could take a joke.

Here I am in middle age. I still detest and avoid confrontation and I still dislike saying or doing anything which might upset someone. By and large I prefer to go along to get along. Although I must admit that I am honestly working on becoming more cynical and curmudgeon-like. However, I doubt that I will ever become a true cynic or curmudgeon. Nevertheless, today I am much less likely to let religious comments which offend me pass without remark. Usually, among friends, I can begin a dialogue which usually results in both of us having a better understanding of our respective beliefs and at the very least agreeing to disagree where necessary. But then there are those who are convinced that I will surly burn in Hell for being a God damned atheist. It is to this latter group that I must direct my most sincere thanks. For it is through their single-minded zeal to convert the masses by sowing fear and hatred that I both found my true nature as an atheist and discovered the courage to admit this fact in public.

In 2001 I found this courage in a young college student from Kansas. I met Mica White at the Free Inquiry convention in Los Angeles. He was self assured enough to take on his local city government for placing a stone ten commandments on display outside city hall. I found conviction for my own beliefs (and a bit of shame, I must admit, at my own history of inaction) in his willingness and ability to state his unpopular beliefs in so public a fashion at so young an age. His actions helped me find my courage to openly state that I am no longer an agnostic; I am an atheist.

I now see that my middle-of-the-road position, agnosticism, was morally bankrupt. I was using the valid concept of agnosticism as a shield against my having to make a real choice. I used it to deflect criticism both internally as well as externally. In reality I had already made my choice. To my own shame I now realize that I was simply too afraid to admit that even to myself, let alone others. Claiming I was an agnostic was simpler and safer.

I know there are many people who are honestly unsure if god exists. For these people agnosticism is their best choice. Agnosticism is their only honest choice. For me, however, agnosticism was just a crutch. It protected me from making a hard decision, it protected me from ridicule and it protected me from myself. I no longer need such protection so, finally, I can honestly and publicly state that I, Stanley J. Alluisi, am an atheist and damn proud of it.