

I've been traveling the last two weeks and during so I met up with a composer I've worked with on a couple of projects, William. He divides his time between Los Angeles, New York (where he went to graduate school) and greater London where he was raised. I was surprised when I learned during a past conversation that he went to Catholic mass each week. So I sent him written questions, then caught up with him in London to flesh out a couple of answers and get to know about his relationship with religion a bit more.

William, 50 y.o. Catholic

**1. How did you start practicing your religion? Was it passed down via family as a child? A discovery or rediscovery as an adult?**

- I only started practicing religion later in my life. I grew up in a non-practicing family, but was exposed to it as part of my cultural education. On family holidays in Europe, part of every city excursion would incorporate going into the cathedral. I was taken to concerts of religious music and art galleries with religious art. Aesthetically, catholicism has always been appealing to me. I started by attending mass occasionally or for special celebrations (Easter, Christmas, etc.). Growing up I didn't feel like I had to decide about religion -was I in or out?- and I still don't think I've decided conclusively about it. But for the last ten years I've been going to mass every Sunday, wherever I am.

-- *Entry into a religion can happen in many different ways. I suppose that via family tradition (i.e. kids joining the religion of their parents) is the most common way. But here William makes clear his entrée was via cultural events, visiting cathedrals on holiday, attending concerts of religious music, seeing religious art, etc. Certainly some religions invest heavily in these cultural attractions, especially Catholicism.*

**2. Was religion a part of your schooling?**

-Only nominally. We attended morning assembly daily and this would incorporate the Lord's Prayer and the singing of a hymn. This was a compulsory part of the national curriculum. Then, half way through my school career, this was made optional, so most schools removed it altogether. There was also Religious Education class, but it was generally not well taught and didn't really have much of an impact.

-- *I'm guessing that William is talking about saying the Lord's Prayer and singing a hymn from the influence in the schools of the Anglican (Episcopal) Church, which is the official church of England. That is also another common way for people to begin practicing a religion, through, school or other official exposure. I'll follow up when I speak with him next about how he (and his classmates) felt about that. But, it seems that didn't have as much influence as the cultural events that led him to Catholicism.*

**3. If brought up in the religion, do you feel you had a choice in whether to accept/reject/change from the religion of your parents. If you did feel you had freedom of choice, what kept you in the fold?**

- I was always given complete freedom of choice where religion was concerned. It may be because of this lack of pressure or coercion that I have felt attracted to observing it. I have walked through the doors of every church on my own terms.

-- *Many people I know, rejected the religion of their parents and either became agnostic, atheists or otherwise non-practicing, or they found a new religion later on as adults. This seems very common to me in America. It's interesting to know this may be the case in many other cultures as well. I would love to see research about how common this is in various cultures.*

#### **4. What are the main things your religious practice gives you?**

A place to put gratitude, guilt, accountability, hope, and faith. An aesthetic space in which to contemplate spirituality, mysticism/mystery and participate collectively in ritual, meditation and prayer. To devote time to something that is not oriented towards tangible goals or gains. A space for introspection in the context of imagined compassionate judgement. The ecclesiastical calendar punctuates points throughout the year with ritual. The sermons often provide me with food for thought for the week ahead, and I can contemplate the theme of each mass during the week. I like the solemnity of the Latin mass, the music, the silence, the light, gothic church architecture and the aesthetic, sensuous, and emotional effect of the way it is observed. It's also a space for doubt and questioning to be absorbed.

--*Some of these qualities that William cites, seem to be related to the way he got into the religion. The music, the silence, the light, gothic church architecture, all aesthetic considerations. They still have their pull for him. There's a sense of beauty in the world tied to the religious experience in general. That may be very cultural, where if you ask a Muslim or a Buddhist, they might site similar things but from a very different cultural perspective. But William points out that religion also gives a focus to human subjective experience that is less tangible than light or architecture or music, in how to channel feelings such as gratitude, guilt, or concepts like mystery. These may be tied to the very essence of why religions developed in the first place, a consideration of what to do with these feeling and concepts, how to focus them in our lives.*

#### **5. Would you characterize yourself as a strict adherent, regular practitioner, casual practitioner, or occasional practitioner (Christmas, Easter, special occasions)?**

-I would consider myself a regular practitioner, but not a strict adherent. I describe myself as an aspiring catholic.

-- *Most people I know are at a similar place, part of the religion but not a strict observer. Most of my Jewish friends fit this mold. It may just be where we are in our time, where for many people religion is a part of their life, but not the main part, or not the overarching or controlling factor of their life the way we read about it in medieval times, for instance where it seemed to heavily influence every aspect of a person's life.*

**6. How do you view the religion you belong to benefits the world around you?**

The charitable wings of the church are active globally and locally, helping the weak, the sick, and the suffering, etc. The religious structure also provides and reinforces a moral compass and can encourage its observants to be more selfless, more kind, more compassionate, and to try to do the right thing. A weekly reminder serves a harmonizing purpose in communities and around the world.

*--I'm not a religious person. But I get it on some superficial level. I've often said that I'm thankful for religion because I think most people need a weekly reminder to be kinder, better person. So I'm in total agreement with William's statement. I also used to have a post I made to my Twitter account pinned to the top that said, "I'm pro-religion when it keeps you from being an @\$\$hole; and anti-religion when it cause you to be an @\$\$hole."*

**7. Conversely, do you see any harm the church may do around you, and if so, what?**

The church is sometimes invoked by bad actors to justify an agenda. The church will sometimes cause division and alienate its followers when it allows dogmas and strict orthodoxies to pass judgement on political issues, for example, on abortion.

*--This, of course, is why I've not been a religious person myself, being raised in an evangelical household during my teenage years – I saw the evangelical church as corrupt and controlling. Every sermon, no matter what church we attended (we changed often) revolved around how the congregation needed to donate more money. I see it also as overly influential and involved in politics and other aspects of American Culture, so that's a bias that I know I hold. Although having nieces and nephews living in Oklahoma involved in the Southern Baptist Church I recognize that this IS their culture. If they were not part of this, they would have no friends. So I am open-minded and accepting of other people's religion, no matter how deep or shallow their devotion, as long as they don't try to evangelize to me. That is not to say I'm not spiritual, but I have a deep mistrust of organized religion, though, like William, I love the aesthetics of much religion. I love visiting cathedrals, am fascinated and reverential with mosques and various temples.*

**8. How is religion integrated into your life? In other words, how do you see the religious part of your life influencing your behavior or the rest of your life overall?**

Religion is integrated in my own life by way of accountability, like those stickers you see on the back of company cars and vans saying, How's my driving? Call..... Through metaphor,

religion provides me with role models and metrics by which to measure my actions, words, and behaviour. The precepts of a single prayer provide me with useful reminders; Lead us not into temptation, for example. Since I have integrated religion into my life, it's possible that I've become more self-aware, more self-controlled, more empathetic, and more confident about my potential to have a positive impact on the world, and on other people. It has also reminded me of what's most important and conversely, what is not as important as I once might have thought. A mass can sometimes be special and engender a feeling of transcendence for its duration. This little shot of awe sustains me through particularly arduous or wearying moments and can form a bridge over them. For the duration of the mass, I can quiet the mind and remove myself from the centre of my experience, opening myself; it can be like throwing open the windows and letting fresh air blow through...

*--The internal aspects that William mentions seem to be very common among religious practitioners, the self-awareness, the self-check on morality, the development of empathy, etc. I'm interested how these things manifest differently in various religions or if there are more commonalities. Maybe that's a good discussion topic with students, have them talk about these aspects of religion in their life (the positive side, I don't think I'd want to get into any perceived negative sides with students).*

**9. What effect if any do you think practicing a minority religion has on your perceptions of the world, or your community's perceptions of you/your religion – obviously. England has a long history of conflict around the Protestant/Catholic relationship. I wonder if this has any effect on you or the religion in general in your mind/life.**

There's a long answer to this, which I hope you'll forgive me for abbreviating here. On my perceptions of the world, I would say my religious practice has made me more of a pacifist. It also may have exacerbated my disillusionment with politics and society. It has also shown hypocrisy in sharp relief. Especially when someone prominent in political or public life professes to be a Christian, but whose values and words and actions for me completely contradict the tenets of christianity (i.e. the teachings of Jesus).

On a personal level, I like being seen by other people as a Catholic, because it may disrupt the impression of me that they may be forming -from my appearance, etc.

Culturally, and as part Irish, I like to go against the English grain, and Catholicism in a predominantly Protestant country allows me not only to do that, but to also identify more with the culture/religious practices of Southern Europe. Growing up with my mother, a lapsed Roman Catholic, and my father, a Protestant-turned-atheist there wasn't really any faith-based tension in the house, and any discussion about religion was wide open.

For me, there is more mystery and dare I say poeticism in the Catholic way more than the Protestant one.

*--This is the question I was most interested in asking, because there are a lot of people in minority religions in America. How does that shape their relation to their religion and to the society they're in? In William's case there's a common Irish feeling I recognize of wanting to stick it to the English for the oppression that they've endured for hundreds of years around their religion, identity, and language. We have a more pronounced version of that here, with anti-semitism, anti-muslim sentiment, etc. There is also a conflict he touches on between religious sentiment and behavior and the rest of society, often as people are part of an operating in both, even though the values of each can be contradictory, and therefore rife with hypocrisy.*

Overall, William's comments remind us that there are many ways people become religious. Sometimes it's not much more than a sense of beauty or other pleasures that gets us interested. Other times, it could be forced on us by family, or government, and we take the positive aspects of it and focus on them, letting the religious experience add something positive in our lives. It can also be an act of rebellion, like the Irish sentiment William feels in an English upbringing.

Religion for William, as for many (and I think the way we often think about religion) is as something that provides a moral compass, a weekly (or periodic) reminder to "be good." It's sort of a behavioral blueprint that guides us. It might also be in opposition to our other behaviors, and serves as a corrective. It can also be a source of irritation as we see the hypocrisy of people's actions against their self-professed religious views, or the societal religious views.

But it can also, just at a basic level, provide a sense of aesthetic comfort. A bit of cultural identity to ground us. A sense of identity can reinforce the belonging of being a part of a society, or be a rebellion against it, a strike of individuality. It's hard to get from interviewing one person, but it seems even from just William's answers to my questions, that religion can be a deeply personal, individualistic aspect of their, lives even while it seems outwardly communal. I get the sense if I asked ten people these same questions, I might get as many as ten different answers to each.