

## Leaving church

Religion is often misleading when we follow it, unnecessary once we have truly understood it. Religion or faith seems to work best when we do not question it, but accept it wholesale. Religion is mostly highly imaginative stories concocted by theologians and teachers. A good fiction writer is like a blind man spinning yarns about a non-existent black unicorn in a pitch-dark room. A theologian is one who actually finds that unicorn – at least, he thinks he does, and wants others to believe him, too.

We start maturing spiritually when we realize that most of religion are highly imaginative stories. When we begin to understand the meaning of these stories, we don't need them any more. This is certainly the pattern we see in many people across religions who deeply care for their faiths, even starting off with a fiery fanatic faith. Yet, as they grow old and grow up, they stop looking at the pointing finger, but at the direction in which it points. They don't need the map any more, as they are living in the heart of the territory, now so familiar to them.

In 1996, **Charles Templeton** (b 1915), published *Farewell to God: My reasons for rejecting the Christian faith*. The blurb on its dust-jacket speaks for itself:

“For more than 25 years, Charles Templeton was a major figure in the church in Canada and the US. During the 1950s, he and Billy Graham [the leading evangelist of the time], were the two most successful exponents of mass evangelism in North America. Templeton spoke nightly to stadium crowds of up to 30,000 people. However, increasing doubts about the validity of the Old Testament and the teachings of the Christian church finally brought about a crisis in his faith, and in 1957 he resigned from the ministry.”

In *Farewell to God*, Templeton speaks of such things as the Creation fable, racial prejudice and second-class status of women in the Bible, Jesus' alienation from his family, the illusion that prayer works, and why there is suffering and death. Yet, he concludes on a positive personal note: “I believe.”

Another evangelist who rejected Christianity of the church is **Bart D Ehrman** (b 1955), the James A Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, USA. He is the author of over 20 books, including the *New York Times* bestselling *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (2005) and *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question — Why We Suffer* (2008). In his writings, Ehrman, who regards himself as a “happy agnostic,” reveals what scholars have unearthed, as stated in the blurb of his book, *Jesus Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (And Why We Don't Know About Them)* (2009):

- The New Testament authors have diverging views about who Jesus was and how salvation works.
- The New Testament contains books that were forged in the names of the apostles by Christian writers who lived decades later.
- Jesus, Paul, Matthew, and John all represented fundamentally different religions.
- Established Christian doctrines – such as the suffering messiah, the divinity of Jesus, and the Trinity – were the inventions of still later theologians.<sup>1</sup>

Around the same time, **Barbara Brown Taylor** (b 1951) published her spiritually empowering book, *Leaving Church: A memoir of faith* (2006). She is an American Episcopal priest, professor and theologian. In 1996, she was named one of the twelve “most effective” preachers in the English-speaking world by Baylor University.<sup>2</sup> She later left parish ministry and became a full-time professor at Piedmont College in

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<sup>1</sup> For a special reflection on Ehrman, see “[From Born Again to Not Again](#),” R98, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth L Woodward, “Heard Any Good Sermons Lately?”, *Newsweek*, 4 Mar 1996.

Demorest, Georgia, USA, and an adjunct professor of Christian spirituality at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. In *Leaving Church* (2006), she writes:

“I know that the Bible is a special kind of book, but I find it as seductive as any other. If I am not careful, I can begin to mistake the words on the page for the realities they describe. I can begin to love the dried ink marks on the page more than I love the encounters that gave rise to them. If I am not careful, I can decide that I am really much happier reading my Bible than I am entering into what God is doing in my own time and place, since shutting the book to go outside will involve the very great risk of taking part in stories that are still taking shape. Neither I nor anyone else knows how these stories will turn out, since at this point they involve more blood than ink. The whole purpose of the Bible, it seems to me, is to convince people to set the written word down in order to become living words in the world for God’s sake. For me, this willing conversion of ink back to blood is the full substance of faith.” (Taylor 2006:78 f)

She is neither unique nor alone amongst the growing numbers of well informed spiritual people of all faiths (or none) who renounce or reject organized religion for a more meaningful and purposeful personal faith, teaching spirituality to anyone who would listen and live as if life matters, and to see truth in all things, and goodness in everyone. The thought that moves us to renounce organized religion in this way opens a spaciousness where we are all to ourself, all alone, yet not lonely – like the lone Buddha sitting radiant under the Bodhi tree.

Renunciation is, of course, is the very lifeblood of early Buddhism. As we wise up with age and acumen, we see our thoughts and views as autumn leaves, letting them fall and fly in the worldly winds. We are ever less defined or troubled by them.

With more open information, courageous scholarship and honest spirituality today, many concerned and informed Buddhists know very well, for example, that

- The authors of the Buddhist sutras have diverging views about who Buddha was and how enlightenment or salvation works.<sup>3</sup>
- Most of the Buddhist scriptures, especially the non-Pali, contain texts that were composed in the names of ancient teachers and scholars, or from non-Buddhist sources,<sup>4</sup> by Buddhist writers who lived decades, even centuries, later.<sup>5</sup>
- The leading Buddhist teachers and schools after the Buddha mostly represented fundamentally different religions.<sup>6</sup>
- Established Buddhist doctrines – such as the different cosmic Buddhas and Bodhisattvas,<sup>7</sup> the divinity of Gotama,<sup>8</sup> and the Buddha-seed (*tathāgata, garbha*) doctrine<sup>9</sup> – were the inventions of later Buddhist theologians.<sup>10</sup>
- The later sutras, such as the Lotus Sutra,<sup>11</sup> the Diamond Sutra,<sup>12</sup> and the Amitabha Sutras,<sup>13</sup> are not found in the early Buddhist canon, and were compiled by later Buddhist writers. Much of such texts often contradict early Buddhism.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See eg Guangxing, *The Concept of the Buddha: Its evolution from Early Buddhism to the Trikāya Theory*, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> See eg A Studholme, *The Origins of Oṃ Maṇi Padme Hūṃ*, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> See eg Jiang Wu, *Enlightenment in Dispute: The reinvention of Chan Buddhism in 17<sup>th</sup>-century China*, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> See eg Piya Tan, *How Buddhism Became Chinese*, SD 40b.3: <http://dharmafarer.org>.

<sup>7</sup> See eg Paul Williams, *Buddhist Thought*, 2000:181-191.

<sup>8</sup> See eg **Mahāvastu**, translated by J J Jones, 3 vols, 1949, 1952, 1956.

<sup>9</sup> See J Hubbard & P L Swanson (edd), *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*, 1997:165-173.

<sup>10</sup> See eg A Proffitt, “[Pure Land Buddhism and the Construction of Buddhist Studies](#),” NEXT 1, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> See eg Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 1989:141-155.

<sup>12</sup> See eg Alan Cole, *Text as Father*, 2005:160-235.

To compound the problem, many people think or claim that they have found God or Buddha in such scripture, in books, in buildings, even in other people. That is to say, they take religion (including Buddhism) as a social activity or a personal pursuit. So, going to church or temple is mainly about socializing, keeping up appearances, or, if we are economically minded, keeping our network of business contacts viable and profitable. While it is true that some of us may have found the true Dharma in any of these places, we may not see it joyfully present all around us – and peacefully within us. We still need to look within.

Then there is meditation, one of the most vital practices in Buddhist training. Instead of seriously doing our own personal practice and respecting those of others, we often seem to be more concerned over whose meditation is the best, or even the “only way” to enlightenment. This is clearly a fixation to views, which hinders us from proper meditation. Indeed, if we understand Buddhist meditation and practise it well, we will find that any kind of meditation worth its name is easy to do. Our real task is to cultivate our inner peace and clarity, and lovingkindness, to others.

As the crowd talks and talking crowds begin to fall silent in our minds, and our hearts open up to growing lovingkindness, we begin to see ever more goodness in others and their potential for rising above themselves. We then feel that we must prepare ourselves well to inspire them to come and see the Dharma directly, in their own hearts. In short, as we understand the Dharma, we feel the need for less and less views and rituals; we see our doubts clearing themselves up in our own inner stillness.

As we understand Buddhism better – and the best way is to spend at least some time studying the suttas alongside our meditation and mindfulness practice – we would realize that Buddhism actually gets easier and simpler. In fact, any of us (of any religion or none) can practise Buddha Dharma right where we are. For, our body is the true temple, our speech the sound of Dharma, and our mind a vision of the Buddha. We may not yet awaken to nirvana, but our sleep is one of sweet dreams. No views, no rituals, no doubts – only joyful peace that embraces all.

R364 Revisioning Buddhism 108

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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<sup>13</sup> See eg Paul Harrison (tr), *The Samādhi of Direct Encounter with the Buddha of the Present*, 1990.

<sup>14</sup> See esp J Hubbard & P L Swanson (edd), *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*, 1997. [Review](#) by J Stone. Some may zealously point to the recent discovery of ancient Mahāyāna texts in Gandhara (now in the Schøyen Collection) as evidence of Mahāyāna being as “early” texts, even earlier than early Buddhism, but we are talking about *fragments* of texts here, and possibility of the earliness of such texts, and not Mahāyāna as a whole, or even particular Mahāyāna schools or sects. Textual critical studies remains the main tool for affirming the earliness of any text.