

You can't make this up: The limits of self-made religion

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [September 20, 2011](#) issue



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A man recently told me about his faith life, as people are wont to do with ministers. He said, "I'm spiritual but not religious. I want to give you my testimony about why I do not attend church."

Now when

I meet a math teacher, I don't feel the need to say I always hated math. When I meet a chef, I don't need to let it be known that I can't cook. When I meet a clown, I don't admit that I think clowns are scary. I keep that stuff to myself. But everybody loves to tell a minister what's wrong with the church—and it's usually some church that bears no relation to the one I serve.

Like many Americans, this man had made several stops in the religious marketplace. He was raised a Catholic but felt injured by that tradition. His questions weren't answered or welcomed by the church, he said, and the worship, rituals and preaching seemed irrelevant.

While he was in the army he was drawn to a conservative Baptist church. He joined that church because he

liked the people who were in it, and he accepted Christ as his personal savior. But later he realized that the church held all sorts of strict moral beliefs that he could not adhere to, the worst of which was a prohibition on dancing—not to mention a prohibition against sex before marriage, which, as you know, often leads to dancing. What kind of God would not want me to use my body to move? he wondered. He drifted away from that church.

After marrying he joined the church in which his wife was brought up, a liberal Protestant church. He described that experience as the equivalent of getting a big warm hug. This church did not frown on dancing and drinking nor on his theological questions. He was encouraged to think critically about scripture. His questions, even his doubts, did not shock anybody. In fact, he was told that his questions made him a very good mainline Protestant.

But

his marriage ended, and he began to feel that the church was more his former wife's than his. He found himself spending Sunday mornings sleeping in, reading the *New York Times* or putting on his running shoes and taking off through the woods. This was his religion today, he explained. "I worship nature. I see myself in the trees and in the cicadas. I am one with the great outdoors. I find God there. And I realized that I am deeply spiritual but no longer religious."

He

dumped this news in my lap as if it were a controversial hot potato, something shocking to a minister who had never been exposed to ideas so brave.

Of course, this well-meaning Sunday jogger fits right in to mainstream American culture. He is perhaps by now a part of the majority—the people who have stepped away from the church in favor of running, newspaper reading, yoga or whatever they use to construct a more convenient religion of their own.

I was not shocked or upset

by the man's story. I had heard it many times before—so many times I

could have supplied the details. Let me guess, you read the *New York Times* every Sunday, cover to cover, and you get more out of that than the sermon? Let me guess, you find God in nature? And especially in sunsets?

As

if the people who attend church had never encountered all those psalms that praise God for the beauty of natural creation, and as if we never left the church building ourselves. God in nature? Really? The theme can be found throughout the Bible. When you push on this self-developed spirituality, you don't find much. God is in the sunset? Great, I find God there too. But how about seeing God in cancer? Cancer is nature too. Do you worship that as well?

The spiritual-not-religious are likely to say they see God in their children, at least when they are doing loving things or saying something winning about God. These spiritual-not-religious adults don't want to hear about God at church, but they seem never to tire of hearing about God from their own children. These are the people who keep sending out the e-mails with "cute things kids say about God."

"My kid said, 'Mommy, I think God is like the rainbow.' Can you believe the wisdom of that?" says the proud spiritual-not-religious parent. These people's children are always theological geniuses.

I presume that like most children they are parroting back their parents' values. The children see God in nature—and because they are children and have bigger eyes and high voices, they do so in much cuter ways. "I think there will be doggies and birdies and grandma's candy bowl in heaven." But let's take that idea a little further. Will there be sharks and snakes in heaven too? How about vampire bats? How do you like that, you little junior theologians?

These kids who apparently are teaching their parents with homespun aphorisms are being poorly served. If they went to Sunday school on a regular basis, they might learn to think about the bats and

scorpions. At least they would have a chance to ask about cancer when a grandparent gets sick. They would have a place, a spiritual community, in which to go a bit deeper into these matters.

But their

parents, so afraid that the church will force their kids to accept its answers, have made sure that no such formation or guidance is offered. This approach works as long as there are rainbows and the kids are happy, but it doesn't work so well in the face of tantrums, selfishness and—dare I say it?—sin. Most self-developed Sunday morning rituals have little room for sin.

Or for disaster, for that matter. Suffering in these self-made spiritualities is something we can overcome by hard work, exercise and reading the op-ed page. But worldwide disaster—how do you wrestle with that?

Here's how one man wrestled with it.

Realizing that his pastor was desperately in need of reeducation, he explained how his own son had bowled him over with a great insight. He said: "Listen to what my son wrote: 'Children are starving with empty bellies in faraway lands. They have nothing to eat. All around them they hear the sounds of gunfire and bombs going off. And it made me realize that we are so lucky. We are so lucky to be living here and not there.'"

"I

had tears in my eyes when he said that," the parent went on to say. "I was blown away and I realized that he gets it, he really gets it. It was gratitude. That's our religion—gratitude. And at that moment, when he recognized all that suffering and how fortunate he was, I could not have been prouder."

Never been prouder? Really? I can see being proud that your kid watches the news and understands that he has privileges many other people do not. I can see being a little relieved that he knows that not everyone goes to bed with a full stomach and that he can at least imagine the fact that war causes enormous pain. But the punch line of this religion of gratitude is this: "We're so lucky that we live

here instead of there." Really? That's it?

What's missing from

that worldview—and this is no fault of the teenager—is something you might get in a Christian community, a perspective that would take you from feeling lucky for not being hungry to actually doing something to feed a hungry person. This dad was happy to stop with the self-made religion of gratitude, like a person who fills up on the deep-fried appetizers and doesn't order anything else from the menu. He may not feel hungry for dinner now, but that snack will not sustain him.

I

am guessing that this family gives to charity and has a good supply of PBS tote bags. But when you witness pain and declare yourself lucky, you have fallen way short of Jesus' vision and short of what God would have you do.

At some point, the worldview based on luck just doesn't pan out, and you figure out that you long for something as outrageous as a new heaven and a new earth.

I'm not against gratitude any

more than I am against finding God in a sunset or a child's eyes. Those are all good things, along with puppies, rainbows, super vacations and birthdays. But none of that constitutes a religion. And contrary to popular wisdom in the age of the spiritual-not-religious, we need religion and we need the church.

I remember a family that was new

to our church and whose child had only a year of Sunday school under his belt. At a rehearsal for his second Christmas pageant, the boy cried out in indignation: "Do you mean to tell me that we are doing exactly the same story we did last year?" Today that youngster is grown up and has been blessed by the yearly repetition of church life that gives his chaotic days meaning. In a world that demands that everything be a one-time-only original production, the church remains a place to remember that there is someone much better than we are at original creations.

When that father told me about his son, it finally hit me what was bothering me about the religion he had invented. He hadn't invented it at all—it was as predictable as the rest of our self-centered consumer culture, and his very conceit that his outlook was original or daring was evidence of that very self-centeredness.

If we made a church for all these spiritual-but-not-religious people, if we got them all together to talk about their beliefs and their incredibly unique personal religions, they might find out that most of America agrees with them. But they'll never find that out, because getting them all together would be way too much like church. And they are far too busy being original to discover that they are not.

In church, we hear scriptures like the one in which Jesus says to ordinary, fallible Peter, "Upon this rock I will build my church." In other words, you people are stuck with each other.

Now there is much in the church I do not want to be stuck with, including Qur'an-burning, pistol-packing pastors. It's no wonder that many good people are like the pop singer Prince: they want to be a person formerly known as a Christian.

The church has done some embarrassing things in its day, and I do not want to be associated with a lot of it—particularly when I have been personally involved in it.

But—here's a news flash—human beings do a lot of embarrassing, inhumane, cruel and ignorant things, and I don't want to be associated with them either. And here we come to the crux of the problem that the spiritual-but-not-religious people have with church. If we could just kick out all the human beings, we might be able to meet their high standards. If we could just kick out all the sinners, we might have a shot at following Jesus. If we could just get rid of the Republicans, the Democrats could bring about the second coming and NPR would never

need to run another pledge drive. Or if we could just expel all the Democrats, the fiscally responsible will turn water into wine, and the church would never need another pledge drive.

But in the church

we are stuck with one another, therefore we don't get the space to come up with our own God. Because when you are stuck with one another, the last thing you would do is invent a God based on humanity. In the church, humanity is way too close at hand to look good. It's as close as the guy singing out of tune next to you in your pew, as close as the woman who doesn't have access to a shower and didn't bathe before worship, as close as the baby screaming and as close as the mother who doesn't seem to realize that the baby is driving everyone crazy. It's as close as that same mother who crawled out an inch from her postpartum depression to get herself to church today and wonders if there is a place for her there. It's as close as the woman sitting next to her, who grieves that she will never give birth to a child and eyes that baby with envy. It's as close as the preacher who didn't prepare enough and as close as the listener who is so thirsty for a word that she leans forward for absolutely anything.

It's as close as that teenager

who walked to church alone, seeking something more than gratitude, and finds a complicated worship service in which everyone seems to know when to stand and when to sing except for him—but even so, he gets caught up in the beauty of something bigger than his own invention.

Suddenly

it hits that teenager: I don't need to invent God, because God has already invented me. I don't need to make all this up for myself.

There's a community of folks who over thousands of years have followed a man who was not lucky—who was, in the scheme of things, decidedly unlucky. But he was willing to die alongside other unlucky ones, and he was raised from the dead to show there is much more to life than you could possibly come up with. And as for the resurrection, try doing that for yourself.

With the humbling realization that there are some things we simply cannot do for ourselves, communities of human beings have worked together and feuded together and just goofed up together. They come together because Jesus came to live with these same types of people. Thousands of years later, we're still trying to be the body of Christ, and we are human and realistic enough to know we need a savior who is divine.

This essay is based on a sermon delivered at the Festival of Homiletics in June 2011.