

How cafeteria Christians survive the holidays

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I often hear the term “cafeteria Christian.” It is a description of our current religious milieu. People pick and choose what’s important to them in their faith. It’s usually said with disdain—and a bit of eye-rolling.

Theologians, who construct systems of belief, want to think about theology as a whole. They are afraid that a generation is going to come along and jettison a couple thousand years of careful thought in lieu of what feels good to them. Like a fine chef who has relied on years of expert tasting in order to match the perfect wine with the entrée, they don’t want to see a red Dixie cup appearing at their table.

Other people don’t like the term because they’re saddened that their sons and daughters have chosen a different flavor of Christianity.

Many simply act as if thinking for oneself when it comes to matters of faith is a bad thing. It can become a control issue for us clergy. We went to school for years to learn this stuff. After all that studying, we have a mountain of student loan debt and the realization of how much we still don’t know. So no one is allowed to become an expert after spending thirty minutes on a wiki page.

All that said, I’m in favor of cafeteria Christianity. I’d be hypocrite if I wasn’t. God knows I’ve been sorting and choosing for about 25 years now. I appreciate traditions, but if I had bellied up to the table and eaten what my parents spooned out, I would still be a Southern Baptist and not allowed to talk during the meal.

One symptom of this picking and choosing is the number of blogs that have come out, with people talking about leaving evangelicalism. I’m a part of a lot of these conversations, because as a religious writer on the Internet, it’s difficult to get away from them. Also, because of my history. I went to a conservative Bible School before I became Presbyterian, so I’m part of several clandestine groups of people who are hashing out the pain and messiness of leaving their faith. The stories vary.

A woman tries to leave her abusive spouse. They went to a Christian counseling session, and all the blame sat with her. She needed to try harder.

A gay man is negotiating his fundamentalist family at Thanksgiving. He knows that if he is honest about his sexual orientation, then he might not be able to maintain his relationship with his nephews. He loves them. He doesn't want to be cut off from their lives.

A politically progressive white woman tries to explain why a mother might protest when she knows her black son is in danger by the police who are charged to protect and serve their community. Her sympathy is met with racist jokes on Facebook.

All of this can become harder when we enter the holidays. Usually, we can keep our lives in compartments—separating our past from our present in tidy locked boxes. But during these intense times, we sit at the table with people who don't know how much we've changed. They wink and nudge at news commentaries that make us nauseous. Our former beliefs collide with current convictions in innumerable uncomfortable ways.

And that's when we have to be gentle. Not with the abuse and bigotry. We have to be careful with our memories and ourselves. We cannot berate ourselves for being so stupid, believing the unbelievable, not leaving our spouse, not having compassion on the poor, or not being honest about whom we love. If we do, we will block out all the light that needs to come in. These stories of who we used to be are precious and fragile. They make up our lives. If we despise them too much, we will end up hating ourselves.

We have to crack ourselves open. We have to love the person we were, even though it feels like a betrayal of the person we have become.

So whatever table you find yourself around, be gentle with those memories. Those stories. Handle them and yourself with compassion.