

Parenting Authentically in an Interfaith Marriage

by

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I learned at last, as I came to be about seventeen, that my father was an entire freethinker, as much as I am now. It shocked me much, because he never taught me anything, allowed me to pick up religion from any one around me, and then scolded me because I embraced beliefs which he knew must condemn him. I think this neglect to be honest with children is a terrible evil. I have lost years of thought, and wandered wide and done such unwise conceited things, and encountered risks for soul and body, all of which might have been obviated by his frank teaching.

—Moncure Conway

I grew up in a largely secular household, where books by Carl Sagan and Joseph Campbell punctuated our bookshelves. But like Moncure Conway, I “picked up religion” from those around me, eventually joining the Mormon Church, to my father’s great disappointment. Unsatisfied with the local public schools, my parents opted to send me to a private, Christian school from kindergarten through third grade—a time when children are most vulnerable to indoctrination. I loved the school, but there my child’s brain was infected with the tedious supernatural beliefs of religion, beliefs such as mind reading (prayer), vicarious sacrifice (the atonement), and survival of one’s own death (the afterlife). Once people’s brains have been infected by religious dogma, they are often crippled in their ability to think critically. I had caught a bad case of religion that I didn’t shake until my 30s.

Ever since I was a youth, I knew that I wanted to have children, and at the time, I thought the more the better. The day that I decided to join the Mormon Church was the day I watched the video “Together Forever” (1988), the LDS film that underscores the church’s emphasis on families. I figured that my likelihood of finding a woman who also wanted to have a large family would be highest within the church; the specific doctrines that I had to accept were of only secondary concern. I served a two-year mission and then went to Brigham Young University. Even though I truly believed, both decisions were calculated to maximize my chances of marrying and having children. When I proposed to one of my classmates, Roseli, while sitting around a large table for lunch with some friends at a beach house in Mexico, I told her that my major purpose in life was to have a large, healthy, prosperous family, and that I wanted God to be at the center of my family. “I want to raise my family with you,” I told her. She said yes, and we married in the Mormon Temple.

Three boys and much graduate education later, I no longer believed that the Mormon Church was the only true church. In fact, I no longer believed in God at all. Becoming an atheist did not happen overnight but was a long process, just as one doesn’t become an adult overnight but over time. I became an atheist when I decided to be honest and admit to myself that I couldn’t reconcile the supernatural claims of religion with my experience of the world.

When I told Roseli that I no longer believed in God, she understandably felt devastated. After all, the information came as a complete surprise to her. She cried. She

was angry. Her world had turned upside down. She insisted that we had agreed that we would raise our children in the church and that we needed to continue on this course. Yes, I countered, we began our family with the expectation of raising our children in the church, but there was no agreement that neither of us could ever change. I knew that I had to grant Roseli a good deal of time to adjust to my nonbelief and its implications for how we would raise our boys, who were 5, 3, and 1. She wasn't comfortable with me being honest with the children about what I thought concerning religion, but I was just as uncomfortable pretending to be religious. Such an arrangement meant that Roseli could be authentic, but I could not. Fortunately, the inequality and deception by silence that Roseli expected of me has diminished over time as she has felt more secure that I am still committed to the family and that I support our children's continued activity in the church.

I had a form of "coming out" with my then 5-year-old as we walked together through his empty school playground one weekend. I told him that I thought God was probably just pretend, and that I didn't have any good reason to believe in him anymore. I explained to him that some of the stories of religion just didn't seem possible to me. He seemed a bit surprised, but not upset. Like most five year olds, he was more interested in playing than in my theological opinions. My other boys were too young to comprehend that I had changed my mind about God, so I didn't have a coming out moment with them, but I feel committed nonetheless to being "out" as an atheist in order to inoculate them against what researcher Robert Nash has called atheophobia, or "the fear and loathing of atheists that permeate American culture." Being out to my boys and to others as an atheist helps to lighten the burden for the next generation. To children, "atheist" is just a word like any other, without all the stigma and baggage that American culture has burdened it with. It simply means that I don't believe in a god, just as I don't believe in ghosts. I figure that if I avoid the word, the avoidance implies a taboo, and taboo implies something too indecent or dirty to mention.

For a time after coming out, I felt a need to establish firmly my identity as an atheist by posting some of my thoughts concerning religion on Facebook. Many of my Facebook contacts were people from my mission, from BYU, or from church, and I didn't want to be in a situation in which someone incorrectly assumed that I was still Mormon. I was always respectful and thoughtful in my posts and comments, but the ideas still threatened many members of the church, who called me an antichrist, a Mormon basher, blind, ignorant, unrighteous, a waste of skin, and a waste of life, among other invectives. I imagine that those who made these comments replaced any semblance of what I'm actually like with a caricature of a scowling, hate-filled monster bent on abolishing the whole of Christianity. They assume that I'm immoral, and don't see me as a real person anymore, playing with my kids, helping our neighbor's 2-year-old get sand out his shoe, or momentarily diverting the spray of hose water from our newly-planted grass to our neighbor's strawberry patch that also needed a drink. They don't see me visit pleasantly with the store clerk wearing a cross necklace or put on my sons' ties on Sunday mornings. These are not moral behaviors of which only theists are capable—these are simply little acts of human kindness that theists and atheists alike perform every day.

In the early days after my coming out, there were some notable collisions between the differing worldviews that my wife and I were attempting to communicate to our children. One Saturday morning, the local congregation, or "ward" as it's called, had a

missionary-themed activity for the children. Our two older boys each received a letter with a mission call, one saying that he had been called to serve in the Bogota-Panama mission, and the other saying that he was called to serve in Thailand. At the activity, church members told the kids about the languages they had learned, the food they had encountered, the adventures they had experienced, and other stories designed that focused on the magic of these exotic places. Members who had served in the U.S. were notably absent, presumably because stories of serving stateside would be less effective at motivating children to want to serve a mission.

Toward the end of the activity, one of the primary leaders asked, raising her hand to model the correct response, “Who here wants to serve a mission?” Every child’s hand shot up, including our boys’. Later, I asked my oldest son, Ethan, “Did you raise your hand because you want to serve a mission, or because you want to travel?” He said he actually just wants to travel and that he had confused that with serving a mission.

The activity ended with a sinister dollop of psychic bullying. A new missionary got up to bear his testimony about missionary work, saying that he knows Heavenly Father is very pleased when we serve a mission. The implication, of course, is that God is very *displeased* in those who choose *not* to serve a mission. Then, one of the children’s leaders put on the LDS video, “Called to Serve.” Within the first 90 seconds, a boy in the film, underscored by sweeping orchestral music, says, “If you teach somebody the truth, I’m sure that they’re going to feel good, and you’re going to feel good, and Heavenly Father’s going to feel good,” again suggesting that the alternative also applies – that if you *don’t* teach others your “truth,” then you’re going to feel bad and Heavenly Father is going to feel bad.

I perceived these statements as childhood indoctrination, plain and simple, and during the car ride home, I shared with Roseli what I was thinking. “Telling children that God will be pleased with you for serving a mission is a form of psychological manipulation,” I said, “designed to make young people feel guilty for making decisions that might be different from what the church encourages. Let’s say I want to instill in my children a desire to go to college. I would never say, even if I believed in God, ‘Heavenly Father will be pleased with you if you go to college,’ because the opposing meaning is implied, that God will be disappointed in them if they don’t go to college. I’d rather take responsibility for my *own* hopes for them and tell them why going to college is a good idea, that they’ll likely earn more or become who they want to become with an advanced education. And if our boys decide to serve a mission, that’s fine, but I would want them to do so because they truly believe the church’s doctrines and not because of guilt trips and social pressure.” Having participated in the planning of the activity, Roseli grew defensive. Although she agreed in principle with some of my points, I could have chosen a better time and tone. After years of keeping silent about my slowly changing worldview, I was still on a learning curve of *how* to be open about my nonbelief.

With time, Roseli finally achieved a certain level of acceptance of my differing worldview and of my right as a parent not to self-censor on the topic of religion. There were still some uncomfortable moments, however. One morning during breakfast, Roseli began reading to the boys out loud from the *Book of Mormon*.

“Have ye walked, keeping yourselves blameless before God?”

“God isn’t real,” interrupted Joshua.

Roseli looked up from the book. “Who told you that?”

The answer was obvious. I never say it exactly *that* way. I don't believe God is any more real than the Easter Bunny, but I know that in our home I have to make it clear that this is my perspective, and not an absolute truth.

"Dad," answered Joshua.

"That's my opinion," I clarified carefully, leaning against the kitchen counter. "Mom has a different opinion."

"What Papai meant to say was that he belieeeeves God isn't real," said Roseli. "And I belieeeeve that God is real." I was impressed by how calmly Roseli was reacting to Joshua's comment. It wasn't long before that such a comment would send Roseli spiraling into a day-long funk.

"I made up my mind that God isn't real," said Joshua.

But you're only four! I thought.

"Well, God is as real as you want Him to be," Roseli said, looking down to continue reading.

What a devastatingly revealing comment this was! Later, I Googled "* is as real as you want * to be"? I found that the three most common results were "Santa," "superstition," and "opportunity," referring to a get-rich quick scheme, followed by "Jesus Christ." No one would ever think to say that something as undeniably real as, say, the sun, is "as real as you want it to be." The sun would continue to exist in the complete absence of human consciousness. Santa, superstitions, opportunities, and God, on the other hand, are socially constructed concepts, inventions of human thought.

Above the chatter of three utterly disinterested boys, Roseli persevered. "Wo unto such an one, for he is not prepared, and the..."

"I AM BUZZ LIGHTYEAR, AND I COME IN PEACE!" announced a toy, which I then tried, unsuccessfully, to coax from two-year-old Elijah.

"Yea, come unto me and bring forth works of righteousness..."

"READ, READ! READ-READ! READ, READ! READ-READ! READ, READ! READ-READ!" sang Elijah.

"...shall not be hewn down and cast into the fire..."

"TO INFINITY... AND BEYOND!"

"Notwithstanding a shepherd hath called after you..."

"BUZZ LIGHTYEAR TO THE RESCUE!"

Roseli persisted, finishing her reading for the day with these last two appalling verses on the page:

...and if ye will not hearken unto the voice of the good shepherd, to the name by which ye are called, behold, ye are not the sheep of the good shepherd. And now if ye are not the sheep of the good shepherd, of what fold are ye? Behold, I say unto you, that the devil is your shepherd, and ye are of his fold; and now, who can deny this? Behold, I say unto you, whosoever denieth this is a liar and a child of the devil.

I couldn't help it. I had to respond. "So every good Hindu, Jew, Buddhist, atheist—a majority of the world's population, in fact—are shepherded by the devil?" I asked. "Verses like these only serve to create an us-versus-them mentality. You either accept Jesus or you're of the devil! It's incredibly divisive!"

After a moment's thought, Roseli begrudgingly said, "That makes sense."

Well then why, I thought, would you want to read such verses to the kids? You know, selectively read the uplifting verses and ignore the distasteful. That's what most people do. I wasn't sure if Roseli agreed with me, but she seemed to understand how the verses could be understood the way I now understood them. Incidentally, I'm all for reading, including from sacred texts. The president of American Atheists, David Silverman, has said, "I gave a Bible to my daughter. That's how you make atheists."

Perhaps my willingness to apply critical thinking to religion gave Roseli the permission to do the same. About six weeks after the scripture reading episode, it was Mother's Day, and in Relief Society, the meeting just for women in the LDS church, the teacher read a quote about how LDS mothers are the best mothers in the world.

My wife spoke up. "I don't think that's true, she said. There are plenty of wonderful mothers who are not LDS and many lousy LDS mothers."

The teacher backpedaled. "I'm just reading a quote from the prophet," she said.

"I don't care if you're quoting Jesus Christ," said Roseli, as women gasped. "I don't think it's true, and I think it's prideful and divisive to say LDS mothers are the best mothers in the world." When Roseli recounted the event to me later, I told her, "Good for you!"

As I pulled the garbage bin to the curb the following Sunday evening, the weather was ideal, the boys had just gone to bed, and so I asked Roseli "Do you want to go for a walk?" Walking hand in hand, Roseli began to tell me the drama that had unfolded at church that morning. She had heard from someone earlier in the week that a family was moving, and when she ran into the woman who was moving in the hallway, Roseli attempted to ask her about the upcoming move. Now I wasn't there, but as Roseli tells it, the woman raised an open palm as if to say, "Talk to the hand," and said, "I don't even want to talk to you."

Roseli couldn't imagine what her issue was. Baffled, Roseli saw the woman again later during church and said, "Can we talk?"

The woman reluctantly agreed and they went into an empty room where she spewed forth about 30 minutes worth of angry, nasty, and vile comments about me on account of my disaffection from the church. According to Roseli, "Satan" was the least offensive name she had for me.

Now I actually liked this woman, whom I'll call Liz. I had found her to be warm, personable, sweet, and a great mom. I had no idea that she despised me so. Then she listed a half dozen other women who have decided to distance themselves from us as well because I no longer shared the same cosmic and theological opinions that these women did.

What is this, high school? I thought.

I felt bad that my sweet wife had to endure social consequences of my disbelief, and I found it genuinely puzzling that a mere difference of opinion about the nature of reality could generate such venom.

Roseli made a mental note of the list of women who had supposedly blacklisted us. She even had some fun with the image of some sort of list being passed around in Relief Society—the kind on which one signs up to feed the missionaries—but this list saying something like, "If you'd like to ostracize Roseli Zimmerman because her husband is an out atheist, and because you just never know how his skepticism might contaminate her, you, or your children by association, please write your name below."

A few weeks later, Roseli told me, “Well, I’ve talked to everyone on the list.” She found that each woman she talked to denied keeping her distance from us, and most expressed some anger that their name would even come up in such a way. This means that either all these women somehow managed to enter into a long chat with Roseli, despite supposedly ostracizing her, and lied, or Liz got carried away and was just making up lies to justify her own anger. Or perhaps the truth is a little more nuanced. None of these women seems to have ostracized us, but one family has stopped bringing over their children, of whom their oldest and our oldest had been good friends.

Earlier, I alluded to religion as a virus. To carry the analogy further, I believe that I have a responsibility to inoculate my children against supernaturalism. I think that protecting my children from religion and its symptoms—such as dichotomous thinking, the externalization of blame, and perpetual guilt—may be one of the greatest gifts that I can bestow. As my own upbringing illustrates, the mere absence of religion at home is not enough, just as keeping kids away from communicable diseases is not enough.

I suspect that some secular parents are hesitant to share their thoughts about religion with their kids because they fear that doing so would constitute its own form of indoctrination, indoctrination into a naturalistic worldview. As Dale McGowen has pointed out, however, indoctrination is the presentation of a single point of view to the exclusion of other opinions and the demand of unquestioning acceptance. Can atheists indoctrinate a child? Certainly, if they make it clear that they consider all religious people to be stupid, that religion is uniformly evil, and that any religious expression whatsoever is worthy of derision. In contrast, to *influence without indoctrination* is to present my point of view, letting my kids know what I believe, and then saying as often as I can that there are other good people who believe differently, and encouraging them to seek out those people.

I have described religious ideas as a virus, but I’m just not convinced that exposure to religion, at least the relatively benign strains of religion found in the U.S., is as detrimental as some atheists claim. Most people grow up to figure out what works for them. I regard exposure to religion in small doses as a form of inoculation. In medicine, the way to inoculate against a virus is through exposure to a weakened strain of that virus. On a typical Sunday morning, therefore, you’ll find me waking before everyone else and preparing breakfast for our boys, as I do nearly every morning, then dropping my family off at church. Roseli doesn’t drive, but she wants to take our boys with her to church as often as she can, which is just about every week. The lessons that my boys are taught are all available online, which I have accessed on occasion, giving me the opportunity to share with them a secular response to the ideas that they have been exposed to.

For example, when they are told that Jesus is the Son of God, I tell them that Romulus, Alexander the Great, Augustus, Dionysus, and Scipio Africanus are also described as sons of God. When they are taught of Jesus’ miracles, I share that people also believed that Vespasian’s spit healed a blind man, that Apollonius of Tyana raised a girl from death, and that Dionysus turned water into wine. When they are told that Jesus was born of a virgin, I tell them that Horus of Egypt, Attis of Greece, Mithra of Persia, Krishna of India, and Dionysus of Greece are also said to have been born of virgins. When they are told that they should be good because they are princes of a king, I tell them that they should be good because they understand that all people should be treated

with respect and because they'll lead happier lives if they are nice to others. When they are taught that the commandments help them to choose the right, I contrast the ten commandments, which reveal the egotism of God through such commandments as "Do not worship other gods," "Do not make any idols," and "Do not misuse the name of God," with principles that are more human-centered, like those presented in Dan Barker's *Maybe Right, Maybe Wrong*: "Respect the rights of others," "Try to treat everyone fairly," and "Try to be kind to other people."

In fact, I try to share some kind of thought related to religion or science with my boys daily. As an office elder on my mission and as a teacher at the church's Missionary Training Center, I had developed the habit of sharing an inspiring message every day. These experiences help me now as an atheist father to be intentional about opening my mouth, initiating conversations, and letting my boys know what I think. I have found a number a kid-friendly books, songs, and YouTube videos to be particularly helpful in fostering an appreciation of science, value in diversity, and skepticism of religion. My wife isn't thrilled about all of these resources in our home, but she has granted me the privilege of parenting in authenticity and in accordance with the dictates of my own conscience, and her own interest in science has been rekindled as a result. To paraphrase Carl Sagan, I wish to pursue the truth no matter where it leads, and I hope to influence my children to do the same. If they choose to accept a particular religious doctrine or philosophy of life that differs from mine, they are free to do so and I'll love them all the same. I simply want to equip them to think critically and rationally, which in my case has led me to reject supernaturalism in all its forms.

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| Dr. Zimmerman spoke on this subject at Harrisonburg Unitarian Universalists on December 28, 2014. |
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