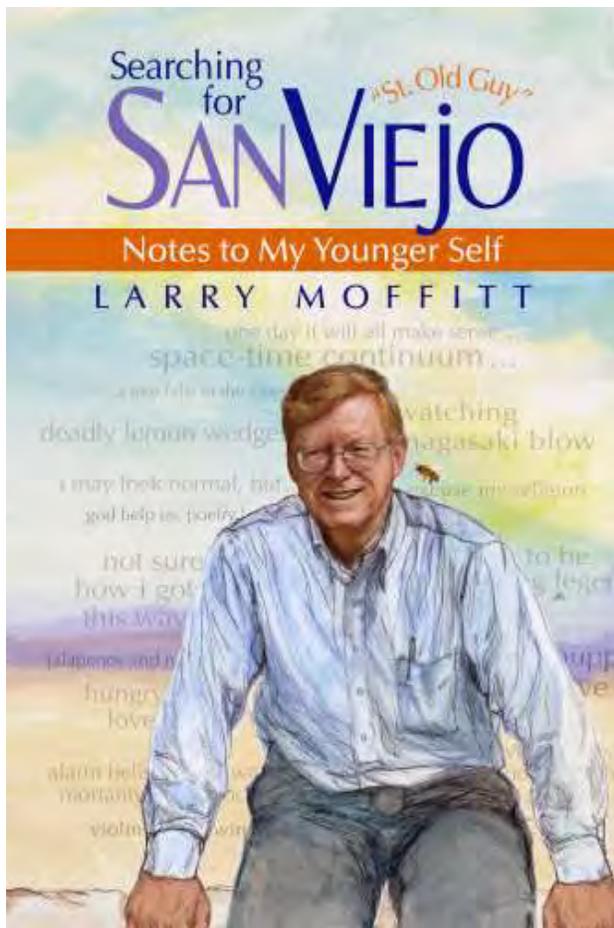


Excuse My Religion While It Slips into Something More Comfortable

Larry Moffitt
April 29, 2019



I was speaking with the minister of a very large Christian church in Houston. We were in his office discussing the enigmatic lightning rod personality that is Reverend Moon, who was still living and quite active. He asked me by whose authority was Reverend Moon ordained a minister? A legitimate question. I replied, "Jesus spoke to him on Easter morning in 1935 when he was fifteen, and gave him his mission. So I guess that was his ordination."

The minister's back stiffened. He glared, making fists in his pockets. "Jesus did not speak to Reverend Moon!"

"I see," I said. "I have to wonder how you could possibly know that." I spoke evenly and without a hint of disrespect. If it's audacious for me to believe that Jesus actually spoke to him, isn't it also audacious for someone living on this side of the veil to be confident about what Jesus does to fill his time on the other side? Does he putter in the garden? Write music? Continue to guide people's spiritual lives? I should have followed up with these questions because at least he knew what Jesus does not do: He does not speak to people.

"Well, God also spoke to him," I added helpfully.

Surely this would clinch it because God has gone on the public record many times. I mentioned as examples, Noah, Moses and John the Baptist, in whose honor this minister's church was named. It's well-documented phenomena, so surely it would be easy for him to accept that God can speak to people if he wants to. But alas...



Larry Moffitt

"God doesn't do that anymore," he said, slamming the door on the conversation.

"Oh," I said, and thought, *Who gets to make all these rules?*

So I did exactly what you, gentle reader, would have done in such a situation. I wrote to the Federal Department of Things God Doesn't Do Anymore (FDTGDDA), and they sent me their list:

1. God doesn't speak to people to reveal his will. He used to, occasionally, but that was then and this is now.
2. Prophets are old school and God doesn't send them to teach us things anymore.
3. God definitely doesn't start new religions. The religion slots are all filled because we already have all we need, thank you.

So now you know. Our tax dollars in action.

Jesus got into big trouble by declaring that while Moses said "An eye for an eye," Jesus said to turn the other cheek. This was startling new information and the learned elders were properly gobsmacked. The high priests told Jesus as well, "God doesn't speak to people anymore. He stopped doing that after speaking to me and my colleagues." It raises a huge question: How, then, does a living God communicate in real time, issue updates and make course corrections for us, His rowdy, errant children?

Thanks to the experience of Jesus and other prophets, we now know the answer. God delivers updates and reminders through new teachers with either new ideas, or some new expression of existing truth. Every word they utter makes them heretics to the existing way of doing things, and so the new prophet suffers mightily. Think of it as being like a high school where the seniors feel called by God to haze the incoming freshman, usually with death. The new top-dog religion, which has risen up to become large and in charge, develops amnesia concerning the abuses they themselves endured.

What's wrong with this picture?

Well, nothing in America, if you're comfy in Christ. If you're the pastor of a megachurch in upscale Northern Virginia, life is good. But what if you're God? How frustrating that must be. God has been kept in a straitjacket, hammered like sheet tin into man's image by first one linchpin religion, and then by its successors.

Funny hats and costumes

Religions pick up a lot of baggage in the course of a couple thousand years. The beginning is often looked back on as being the best part, something like this: A small group of people, we hold hands in a circle around the fire, getting revelations and one-on-one attention from our young, vibrant prophet. Everyone is brother this and sister that, first names only. We break bread together and share all we have. Then we grow a bit and set up folding chairs in someone's basement. We're still on first names, but with nametags in the larger meetings.

After a long period of fundraising, including checks from wealthy individuals who were told by God to help us out, we finally bolt down permanent chairs in our very own building. Tears of joy flow when we cut the ribbon and dedicate the sanctuary with holy salt. More people join so we get a bigger coffee maker. An inscrutable half-Asian bookkeeper is appointed. She opens a spreadsheet to track donations. We put in some stained glass. We acquire really cool rituals, the best of which are in foreign languages that only an elect few can understand. We establish a priesthood and over the course of decades and centuries the clerical leaders gradually acquire interesting costumes and funny hats. Now we are Reverend and Bishop, and such and such Your Eminence. We are big and comfortable.

Although childlike in our faith, we're not children, and God doesn't expect us to be. Religions come with doctrine, and doctrine requires interpretation and application and some type of orthodoxy enforcement. Keeping everything scriptural is serious business. We usually baptize in the river, but sprinkling on the forehead might be okay too, yes? No? Someone questions the use of musical instruments to accompany worship, citing correctly that our founding prophet never strummed a guitar or was never seen dancing. Although it was a very long time ago and it's hard to really know.

Theological questions are settled and the answers declared canon. Or there is a schism and the group divides and the schismatic members create their own canon. Each faction expresses sadness that the other faction is hellbound. The issues spoken of in the schism revolve around who gets to wear the tallest and funniest hat, while the unmentioned driving force is ego. The battleground is somewhere near the bookkeeper's office.



And so we divide and then divide again, like zygotes and gametes. We do it with rancor, separating bitterly into disparate enemy camps: Church of the Funny Hats vs. the Reformed Church of the Funny Hats.

Again, doctrine and scripture, or is it scripture and doctrine? We love God with all our heart, and we never tire of reminding one another that our own understanding of things is also God's. We fall into the deepest possible divide, a classic Sunni-Shia split and we willingly drown in a black pool of fetid theology clogged with doctrinal deal-breakers, worded such that there can never be resolution. You're either with us or against us, and therefore is it still a sin to kill those with incorrect beliefs? (Of course

not, starting with the dung-eating infidels in the Reformed Church of the Funny Hats.)

On a good day religions make us better people, but people come with shortcomings and glitches. You have politics within a church. One's personal biases and agenda creep into their interpretation of God's will. If a religion wanders half a degree away from God's true north, it can end up far afield a millennium down the road. Swish goes the sword. Bow-wow goes the dogma. Boom goes the canon.

The marriage of power politics and our aforementioned glitches have produced the cruelest episodes of bloodshed history has ever seen. Nobody does genocide like a religion.

Now for the hard part

Jews and Christians should be closer than brothers. They both hear God's voice from the same book. And Jesus was a Jew for christsake.

A little patience would help as well. Religion is a 600-year startup. Every one of them endures their "cult" phase -- Christians, Mormons, Islam, all of them. They take seemingly forever to settle into a groove and, at best, religions are clunky work-arounds of God and man to help us deal with our awful separation from the Creator. We have to curl ourselves into a ball, focus our minds, scrunch our eyes and pray bullets of sweat in order to commune with God. Prayer results are hard to quantify. Revealed "truth" is open to debate. If humankind had never left its true nature by falling away from God (most religions have their own version of the Eden story), we should be able to see and speak with God as clearly as you and I sit and talk across the kitchen table. It's not natural that our own spiritual selves should be so hazy and indistinct to us.

Why do members of the top-dog religion in charge torture members of the church of the underdog? First of all, because the underdogs are *clearly wrong* and second, because they *can*. But not only because they can, but because they think they *must*. If you're in the One True Church, you may think it's your job to protect the world from heresy. The fact that the people chosen by God to receive and follow the Messiah sent by God Himself, are quite capable of killing that very same Messiah, shows that even the most special of elected people have a spotty record of hearing God's voice.

Don't point fingers at the Jews. All top-dog religions have this failing. It helps explain why, after all these millennia and after all this religion, we still don't have a very good world. Many would say things have gotten worse.

We should have learned to expect that God needs to shift gears now and then. He sometimes has to punt, approach us from another angle, re-explain things, send a new prophet who can speak the lingo. The coming of Abraham and then Moses were tweaks of the status quo, as was the coming of Jesus. Heavy flack was likewise encountered by Muhammad, Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, Bahá'u'lláh, Zoroaster, En no Ozuno, Confucius, Pythagoras, Adi Shankara, Basava, Hamza ibn-'Ali ibn-Ahmad, Joseph Smith, Ann Lee, Jakob Ammann, Ellen G. White. And many, many, many more. Precedents abound.

Since human nature shows no signs of improving, we should expect further tweaks from on high will be needed, and we should not get so bent out of shape when a new prophet emerges who may sound a teeny bit heretical. Oh, but you know we will. I'm not saying you have to drink the Kool-Aid offered by everyone who shows up applying for the job of New Prophet. It's just that being slower to act in opposition than we usually are, would be a big help. And stop disowning your children who bring home a stray messiah now and then. Talk to your children, love them, keep the door open. And pray for your own understanding.

I never thought I would say aloud that I am grateful to be a member of a persecuted faith, because the day-to-day of it is certainly no picnic. But I am. I used to send Godward this daily prayer:

Lord, if Jesus and Mohammad and Buddha are really in favor of a movement to get all the faiths working together in harmony (such as ours), why can't they have a word with their followers who are daily beating the crap out of us? Thanks, it's me again, Larry. Amen.

I doubt that the top people in the most influential religions are bored with their power and influence. One gets used to being in charge. Who doesn't enjoy attention and advantages? But we know what absolute power does absolutely, don't we?

Therefore, I no longer pray for God to fix the contest for me, to magically place my chosen faith in the winner's circle. While I have no wish to spend my entire life suffering for my choice in religion, I do see a certain value in this "walking a thorny path" stuff. It's a conundrum. There's no question that having your prophets martyred, the followers scattered and hunted down, being hounded by the IRS, or merely being spat upon while street preaching in Times Square does strengthen one's character and resolve. Persecution actually improves religions and even helps them grow. Go figure, but it's true. Personally, I have been fire-hardened into a man with a clear sense of who I am, and I can flip the middle finger (with a loving heart) at anybody who might benefit from that.

Being a member of a pariah faith also has great theatrical shock value. When I attend a wedding with friends I haven't seen in decades, I get to watch their jaws drop open, one-by-one, as I tell them, "... and that was in '74, when I had this profound epiphany experience with God. I gave away all my cocaine and joined Reverend Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church." An eerie silence settles over the room that is actually kind of soothing, like the final stages of hypothermia, where everything is peaceful and warm, and nothing hurts.

Occasionally someone will light up and respond, "Really?! Wow, what's it been like? What kind of person is Reverend Moon when you get him alone?" People this unafraid to avert their eyes, and who are that plugged into what's going around them, are quite rare, and I love it when I encounter them.

The burden of being the new top dog

What happens when my religion becomes a numbered item on the short list of top dogs? What will happen when my religion finally becomes comfortable and gets a seat at the table. Or yours does, and you obtain that coveted country club membership that signals your arrival?

One day, after this happens to us and we're running the show, my great-great-grandson will come to his father to utter the words he has long dreaded to hear: "Pa, God spoke to me last night."

His father tries not to show how startled he is. "We'd better sit down, Son."

With his eyes on high-beam, radiant skin and heaven's own smile, the boy tells his father, "I was praying at the Holy Ground, and God spoke. She said we need to start doing such and such. She also said it's okay to marry outside our faith as long as we don't drift away from God. And, by the way, she's really tired of our hats."

"Um ... *she*?"

Persecuted faiths are truly blessed by God. I believe that. And with that blessing, one day many others will be attracted to their teaching as if the truth of it had been blatantly obvious all along. People will just stream in through the door. The way it is with Christianity today. This is what blessings are about.

Let me address all of you -- you Unification Churchistas, you Latter Day Saints, you Baha'is, you Jews for Jesus, you Quakers, you Falun Gong, you Buddhists, you Ananda Marga, you Nation of Islam, and the rest. You know who you are.

What will you do when you finally become comfortable, when your phone calls start being returned? Are you already there now? Will your religious institution and the way you've always done things loom so large that it disallows God to reveal to you some new expression of his or her eternal self, perhaps from some little nobody in the back row of your congregation? When your ship comes in, and blessings arrive in such abundance that you are unable to even list them, and your leadership becomes calcified by the perks of privilege and the adoration of the flock, what will become of you? And importantly, what will become of those who had opposed and persecuted you?



The Global Convocation of the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development in New York, November 2018.

Will you try your own hand at outdoing the excesses of the Inquisition? Will you burn at the stake, the Joans of Arc of your age? Or your era's Edward Wightman, the heretical English Anabaptist minister who insisted that Jesus was a man free of sin, but was not God himself?

Religious institutions, after they get comfortable, don't have a very good record of patience with the mavericks within their groups. And that's the shame of it, because these mavericks have included the various founders mentioned earlier, and scores more. Love them or hate them, it's your call, but whichever religion you adhere to, it's pretty certain the founder of it had to color outside the lines -- and then redrew the lines to fit what was needed for a new age to be born.

They were human beings, with their own issues, but each one contributed pieces to the big puzzle. And then there is the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, now deceased, with whom I have the most familiarity. His appearance coincided with the digital Age of Information, and so there aren't many who have not encountered him in the press and formed an opinion about him. Nobody would disagree that he is a maverick amid the comfortable status quo. I don't know about you, but when my religion becomes top dog, the rest of you infidels are toast.

Just kidding. Will you take a pledge with me to tolerate new ideas within and outside your faith tradition?

I hereby promise to hear out the mavericks within my church, and those who walk in off the street or crawl out from under the Holy Rock. I will listen with a prayerful heart to try to hear God's voice in what they say. In either acceptance or rejection of their message, I will still love them.

Some religions envision the eventual end of the need for even religion itself. I am seriously, totally one with them. In some future time when enlightenment is universally attained -- maybe there will come a kingdom of heaven on earth, when all the tears are dried, the lion lies down with the lamb, and in the words of the prophet Merle Haggard, "We'll all be drinkin' that free bubble-up, and eatin' that rainbow stew."

But for now, we're pretty much stuck with various churches and temples clogging the landscape. Ditto our rituals, our divisive costumes and funny hats. And I would say that for now, in advance of the coming heaven on earth, we actually sort of need religions and churches. What we really need, though, is for my religion and your religion to work together in harmony without each one trying to suck the other into our voracious maw.

There are things we can do to improve the situation. For example, let's park the hats at the door and use our institutions, dogmas and tax-exempt statuses to create more unity and less division between the faiths. And between the races, please. What is a racist? A racist is the poor dumb bastard who thinks humankind is made up of more than one race. Let us all slip into something more comfortable. Like respect for one another.

Postpartum

Along with our national deficit, I leave the problem of religious conflict to my great-great-grandson to solve. I chipped away at it but with few results. I'm sure he will come up with something perfect that will unify all humankind, even though his life will be made hell by jackbooted thugs in top-dog clerical garb. He will be martyred for it, of course, and I won't be able to meet and thank him in person. So let me do it now.

Thank you, Zebadiah Q. Moffitt (placeholder name) for never being comfortable with the idea of men and women of God hating one another, and for sacrificing all to finally help everyone realize the universal loving reality of God. I'm sorry you were (fill in the method of execution) in the village square at dawn.

Love, Gramps.

Larry Moffitt would rather be writing than working. This essay is from his book, Searching for San Viejo: Notes to My Younger Self, available on Amazon.