

My Soul is Like a Chiminea

My evolving Christianity and the reasons I still call myself one.

Jonathan Foster

"Chiminea," Gary Denham | Flickr



My soul is a chiminea by the sea. Complexity flames up like the sound of cracking mesquite wood. The fire expands and glows, releasing energy that converts my approach to faith, hope, and love. And in doing so, re-converts my approach to Christianity.

None of this has been anticipated—as if real life ever is—but now that I'm here, I have choices to make. Will the fire consume everything I once held dear, or will it provide new ways of thinking about my faith? Yes.

I'm learning, again, that *to get to the new, the old must pass away*. So, although much of my faith has changed, here are five

compelling reasons I am a Christian and continue to call myself one.

1. BECAUSE I WAS BORN INTO A LOVING CHRISTIAN FAMILY

Had I been born into a loving Hindu, Jewish or Muslim family, I would likely identify as Hindu, Jewish or Muslim. Humility compels me to say Christianity was my context. I had no choice. That's not to say I'm ungrateful. I've learned a lot. We are who we are due in large part to those who brought us into the world. People give us what we need, which is good. Well, as far as it goes . . . *because people also give us what we don't need.*

Much of American Christianity (or is it Christian America?) is hopelessly caught up in a web of sacrificial rules and fear, the result of which is the sacred formation of religious hierarchies and scapegoating. We're all contaminated. Which leads me to the next reason:

2. BECAUSE JESUS NAMES & REVEALS THE SIN OF THE WORLD: SCAPEGOATING

It is, to borrow language from Gil Bailie, our seemingly never-ending effort to purge ourselves of our sins by offloading our animosities onto others.

We've created a pretty exclusive club, us Christians, what with all the power we've created by talking about how all-powerful our God is and all. The exclusivity has gone to our collective heads, myself included. I'm as culpable as anyone. We're so enamored with power that we endlessly create and recreate systems that spew out victims. I'd like to think we do this unintentionally, but I'm not so sure. Jesus showed us a better way. He voluntarily stepped into our victimary machine and identified with the victim.

He became a victim to subvert the victimary machine.

He became a sacrifice to shed light on the absurdity of all our sacrificing.

He became a scapegoat to end all our scapegoating.

Considering the life of Jesus, and in particular, his *at-one-ment* with the victim challenged my assumptions of power. The implications spread like embers across the night sky. It changed what I saw, but even more, it changed me, for however one defines conversion or repentance, it must be an inward move before anything else. And maybe never any more than inward.

Too much outward movement can lead to overzealously naming things bad, impure, defective, and lead us to exclude the other person, blinding us to the truth: the desire to live by the power of excluding “the other” is something we learned well, *from the other!*

The French sociologist Rene Girard taught us that “the other” colonized our desire before we even knew of its existence. In other words. . .

Jesus became one with the other to free me from my desire to kill the other!

Now I am free.

Free to live. Free to love.

Everyone. Myself.

Especially myself.

You see, I basically thought the point was to get all of us on the “outside” into the “inside.” And like I mentioned, I have been on the inside all my life. Remember, I’m a Christian first because I was born into the tradition. I’m not saying my interactions with Jesus weren’t authentic. But I also don’t know where the authentic interactions began and where the desire to please my family ended. I

was a pretty well-behaved kid, and like lots of children, I just wanted to please my father. He said, “Be a Christian,” so I was. I made sure to be a part of the in-crowd.

Okay, fine, except, after I grew up, the more I watched Jesus, the more obvious it became that Jesus was hanging out with the people on the outside.

The more I watched, the brighter the chiminea burned. The fragrance of mesquite wood triggered thoughts: If Jesus is *out there* (with the one) who’s in here (with the 99)?

Who is in? Who is out?

I continued to read the story of Jesus. And it continued to read me. I recognized my hypocrisy: I claimed Jesus as my Savior

because of the cross but it was my blaming obsession that crucified him in the first place.

So, the reason I’m a Christian now is because following the way of Jesus releases me from the burden of scapegoating and the hell of putting myself in a position to tell others they’re out.

Speaking of which, the next reason I am a Christian is . . .

3. BECAUSE I BELIEVE CHRIST CAN REDEEM OUR MISDIRECTED THINKING ABOUT HELL

Freely draw your own conclusions, but I believe that what we tend to think of as hell is something that came to us by way of layers of shame-infested thinking over the generations.

Like so many strata of sedimentary rock one might uncover when excavating a section of earth, each layer contains elements initiated and propagated by theologians who meant well. But they were too overwhelmed with their own guilt and shortcomings to come up with anything other than a fiery, torturous, retributive, punitive place of judgment. Take Augustine, Jonathan Edwards and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* for example. It appears that all their guilt resonated with all our guilt.

We were given an inch of ideas about a hellish afterlife and took it the proverbial mile. For some reason, we’re all wired to think pain, fear and punishment more holy than health, love and grace.

Now that I’ve had opportunity to look into



this, *I'm of the persuasion that it's biblical to push back against all such talk of hell.*

One biblical writer said, *"He's not willing anyone should perish."* Another said, *"He doesn't count our transgressions against us."* Yet another, *"He came not to condemn the world but to save the world."*

Don't forget Jesus, who said, **"Love your enemies."** **Why expect us to love our enemies if God plans to burn his?**

So, yes, I'm suspicious of all the hell talk by religious people. I believe love is bigger than hell and will never stop working to connect and reconnect with us.

This is true for this life and all eternity. Neither the Scriptures nor my understanding of love leads me to believe that all decisions about eternity must be made in this life.

Eternity has already begun. It's happening now.

Love invites all of us, right now and for all eternity, to enter into its way. And for the life of me, I don't know why it's Christians who are so hell-bent on promoting the idea that one day, love will just quit inviting.

Aren't we the ones who are supposed to be forgiving?

Isn't grace a Christian idea?

Doesn't our sacred text say, "Love is patient"?

Please consider what you might do if, upon entering into the heavenly dimension, you discover one of your children is missing. If it's me, there's no chance—despite decades and centuries of theology telling me otherwise—that I would be content knowing one of my kids was out in the far country of darkness. I would cinch up the boots, pack my backpack and go after them with all my heart.

What motivates me to do that? Love! Love always goes into that far country. I think that's what love will do for everyone who's ever lived. It might take a long time. Ages even. But Love never gives up.

Which is good, because I'm going to need that perseverance in dealing with the next reason I'm still a Christian...

4. BECAUSE IT OFFERS A RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

Important distinction: a *response*, not an *answer*.

An atheist may say that suffering proves that there's no loving God. So they turn away. Which is fine. It is their prerogative. I don't blame them. But ignoring God doesn't change the reality of suffering. Suffering exists whether you believe or not.

However, I'm more sympathetic to the atheist than I am of the Christian who wants to explain away suffering. As if there is an explanation. Look, if you could explain evil, none of us would be able to label it as such. So, most Christians should probably just stop explaining things. Me too. I just gotta finish this article first!

Job is the most famous test case for suffering in the Bible. After forty-some chapters of Job's misery, what does God do? Well, he certainly doesn't explain.

He simply shows up.

God is present.

God was with Job.

It's the same thing all the New Testament writers insisted: God is with us. This may be the unique response to suffering that Christianity offers. We want answers, but what we really need is someone willing to be with us.

It's solidarity more than

solutions. It's entering into life more than explaining life.

For example, think of some of your favorite stories. There's always a moment when the protagonist recognizes they are in over their head. But in spite of the odds, they choose to move forward. With the complexity of their chiminea roaring into the night sky, they take the proverbial leap of faith. Not because they have answers but because they have friends. And you love it. It's why you call them your favorite stories.

Frodo and his *Fellowship of the Ring*, Katniss (*Hunger Games*) and her former victors, *Dora the Explorer*, with her monkey and talking backpack.

Solidarity is huge. Like fire being transformed into energy, it's possible for suffering to be transformed into hope. I don't know exactly how, I just know it can be done. This leads to the final reason:

5. BECAUSE IT GIVES ME HOPE

I don't deny death. Death is real. Grieving, lamenting, suppressing or cursing are all understandable responses. I've tried them all. I even tried some this morning. But ultimately, I need something more.

I need hope that this is going to get better.

The way of Jesus gives me hope. He alleviates my fear of death. It turns out that this was his mission all along. He wasn't merely born to die. It's just that the earthly powers couldn't take his commitment to life so they joined forces to have him murdered.

Jesus shows us how to be human in the middle of all the persecution he suffered. Even

more, he empowers us to be human because he conquered death from the inside out. It serves to remove our fear of death.

Eugene Peterson's *Message* translation says, *By embracing death, taking it into himself, he destroyed the Devil's hold on death and freed all who cower through life, scared to death of death* (Hebrews 2:14).

If the resurrection wasn't real, then death would be "The End."

But, if it is true, then I know there's nothing to fear. Actually, I don't know anything but I have hope. And that's the point.

We don't have to cower to despair. We can hold our heads high, live our lives, do the best we can, risk, love, laugh, and forgive. You do realize risking, loving and laughing are all synonymous?

Death does not have the last word.

It is not the deepest sting. The grave is not a dead-end. It's a corridor into whatever is next.

Peter Kreeft told me a long time ago that as the baby is inside the womb, and the womb is inside of the world, so we are inside the world and the world is inside of heaven. Death isn't the final act. It's the initial contraction of being birthed into the new creation. Behold, ***everything is being made new.***

This gives me hope. And I need hope! It's a major reason I still risk being labeled a Christian.

Will the fires of complexity be stoked tomorrow? Will the chiminea be asked to rage brighter? Maybe. And maybe I'll give it all up. Or maybe the energy of the heat will convert me all over again. □

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Keep Shining by Blair Baker

(cont'd from page 10)

My son, in his twenties, recently told me about a situation where a rough-looking man came up to him while he was having his lunch break. The man asked for some money, but my son offered to buy him lunch instead. My son is on minimum wage, so every penny counts.

He walked with the man to a fast food shop and suggested he buy him one of the burgers but the man got agitated and aggressive, saying he wanted the best steak meal. He began complaining about horrible and completely inappropriate things. My son quickly bought him a burger and left. He was quite shaken and felt that he'd been scammed. I doubt the good my son did was recognized by the man who probably felt entitled to more than the burger he got.

LOVE IS LIGHT

What then? Shall we stop doing good, stop reflecting the light because we may get it wrong or face ingratitude? I don't like the look of the world I imagine in that scenario.

I remember reading Billy Graham's book on the Holy Spirit years ago. He suggested that the good we now see in the world is because God's Spirit is at

work on the earth in people. And hell is wherever goodness is absent.

It scared me to think of such a place, and I'm daily reminded that though the world can often be a dark place, there is a tremendous amount of light shining. I want to be part of that. I'm always, always looking for the light!

Shining God's light is not just about giving. It's about *being*. 1 Corinthians 13 is a recipe for love. Love is light. Every time you forgive, you are *being* light. So forgive! Every time you are patient, you are *being* light. So be patient!

Philippians 4:6 tells us, "...in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God bring everything in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving to God." If you're not sure if you should give to someone, pray about it. There are other options for people, which don't always require our input. If you've had a bad experience and are tempted to pack it all in, take a deep breath, shake your head and remember Christ's words from the cross: *Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.* If they can't recognize the light, maybe it's because they literally can't.

So, keep shining, but be wise. For a world without light is a scary place indeed. □

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