

The brine of Christianity

I don't go to church anymore, but the faith I was pickled in still shapes me.

by [Alejandra Oliva](#) in the [September 2023](#) issue



Century illustration

I was probably halfway through divinity school when I turned to my husband and said, “I think I have a very fundamentally Christian mind.”

My husband, raised in an almost completely secular home, looked over at me, eyebrows raised. “What on *earth* does that mean?”

I couldn't really explain it then, instead gesturing to some weirdly strong reactions I had while learning about some early trinitarian heresies. But the thought lingered,

and it came to the foreground again after a recent conversation with a friend. We were eating french fries in the park, catching up after some six years of distance—we had fallen out of touch after we graduated and I left New York, and we had gotten back in touch during a trip there. In the middle of dishing about our lives, work, and mutual friends, she asked how going to divinity school had changed my relationship to my faith. When I described myself as having been “pickled in Christianity” as a child and wanting to understand the brine a bit better, her eyes lit up in recognition.

Over the next hour, we compared and contrasted faith journeys. Both of us were raised in fairly conservative religious households—mine evangelical, hers Orthodox Jewish—and both of us were brought into congregational life as infants. Now as adults, we felt both distant and close to the faiths our families raised us in, and yet nonreligious partners had shown how close we actually hewed to these early ideas. Neither one of us describes ourselves as practicing, but where I talked about a kind of brine that had become a part of my essential substance, Adina mentioned a foundational layer in her brain of Judaism, a foundation that colored everything built above it.

“I don’t think there’s ever a time or a situation where I’m not somehow thinking about religion,” she said, and again, I knew exactly what she was talking about.

Let me see if now, a few years out of divinity school, I can explain a little better. My brain is fundamentally Christian because for as long as I can remember, that has been the center and the source of the vast majority of the moral teachings I’ve received—from my parents, from youth pastors, from *VeggieTales*. The earliest examples I had of goodness and righteousness were Christian examples—but also of the quieter virtues: patience and kindness and compassion. Even now, there are hang-ups I have around talking about donated money or acts of service, hang-ups I can trace back to Matthew 6:1. When I reapproached the church in adulthood, these were the things that resonated, that struck chords inside me that had lain silent for years.

However, there’s also the other side of the coin: the things I felt and knew even as a child were morally harmful but were presented as part and parcel of the faith I was raised in. The time my youth pastor instructed my church’s parents to “tell your sons you’re proud of them and your daughters they’re beautiful.” The countless times I was told my virginity was the only thing that mattered about me. Being told to “love

the sinner but hate the sin” without considering the right of everyone in the room to consider their love sacred and beautiful. The way that, even though we lived in a semi-diverse college town, the church we went to throughout high school was a largely White space. Sermons that described doubt as a failure of faith instead of a normal part of a believer’s journey.

My brain is fundamentally Christian because these harms were normalized and minimized, because they were presented as moral good alongside or above values like truthfulness and the uplifting of the oppressed. Separating these twin strands of holy and harmful has been the work of a lifetime. It’s the kind of work that I engage in whenever I find myself sitting in judgment of another’s life or choices, when I find some part of myself rejecting difference or newness. I call my mind fundamentally Christian because it is these shuttering judgments that feel like the default, rather than the curiosity and openness I long for.

I don’t know that this is the fairest characterization of the role that Christianity has played in my life, but I know that when I’ve shared bits and scraps of it before, joining wider conversations about faith deconstruction or simply about leaving the church, others have chimed in with their own experiences. I’ve met so many people who were in that same process of picking at the individual threads in the tapestry of their childhood faith that had, in some way, spoiled the whole thing, trying to take a step back and reconsider the bigger picture, place it into some wider spiritual or political context. Some of us were practicing, others were not.

I’ve come to understand over the years that this is a problem with the church, not God. I have my own separate issues with God, issues that are in no way unique. But the grappling I do with God is all done on my own. I don’t trust churches to be places of safety for healing or exploration or questions, because for so many of the years I was involved in them, they were sites of anger and ignorance and papering over the values that mattered to me in favor of a narrow prescription of Christian life.

So instead of finding my spiritual home in a church, I find it on a park bench, eating french fries in the sunshine.