

Passion Play: The Disconfirmation Of My Faith

I was a very good Christian until just before it became time to “confirm” my faith. Then I changed into a very shameless hypocrite. I’d lost my faith around the same time I acquired my male hormones. Lust makes hypocrites of us all.

Presbyterians aren’t exactly fundamentalists or fanatics. I think my mother belonged to the Drexel Park Presbyterian Church more because of its convenient location a few blocks from our home than from any particular commitment to this bland form of Protestantism. My grandmother, and my mother at home, was a Christian Scientist (that oxymoronically named sect), but there was no Christian Science church in the neighbourhood. Despite the fact that my grandmother would nightly read from Mary Baker Eddy’s *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* as well as the Bible, I was more influenced by the Sunday School lessons than the word of Mary Baker Eddy. The main idea I got from that bizarre sect was the crazy idea that sickness was all in the mind, and belief cured all. Nice idea, I thought, but I was more taken by the detailed Biblical stories that comprised our Sunday School lessons. I guess I was so fascinated by these fabulous fictions that it never occurred to me to doubt their veracity. I was more concerned with the narrative. So as a voracious reader, I did the logical thing: I set to reading the Bible from cover to cover, from Genesis to Revelations.

If you want to lose your faith, this is the way to do it. The Good Book is just too ridiculous—even for a prepubescent boy having only recently progressed into Piaget’s fourth stage of cognitive development: the formal operational stage where one can reason abstractly. I actually made it through the whole tome, although I’ll admit skimming the so-and-so begat so-and-so bits. The contradictions, the silliness, even nastiness, of so much of it just slowly eroded any credibility I’d once given this alleged Word of God. But more vivid in my memory is my extreme disappointment with the original versions of Biblical stories. They read like mere brief synopses of the elaborated stories I’d heard in Sunday School. Fiction achieves veracity through concrete detail. Plot outlines almost always sound implausible. The Bible seemed to me to just consist of just that: brief plot outlines padded out with a lot of meaningless gibberish and boring history—including those interminable begats.

I can’t remember if it was later or around the same time that I read Bertrand Russell’s *Why I Am Not A Christian*. But I do know that by the time I’d finished ploughing through the Bible, I was a doubter. (If I read Russell then, it was only articulate confirmation of why I shouldn’t be confirmed in my ‘faith’. I believe it was the Bible that originally made me a doubter.) Ironically, around this time I was making a name for myself in Sunday school for my Biblical ‘scholarship.’ I was awarded a Bible for memorizing in sequence all the books of both the Old and New Testament. I still have it. And I still remember resenting the fact they gave me The New Revised Standard Version. I’d read the classic King James Version. I must have already had some poetic sensibility, for this new version offended me with its childish, dumb-down style. Ironically, I also was a bit of pet

at the church, being given such honours as doing the mimeographing of the church newsletter on Saturday mornings.

And all this was happening while I, a recent graduate from Sunday School class, was now in “Confirmation Class”. So by the time I was ready for formal confirmation in my faith, I’d become an agnostic. However, I never expressed any of my scepticism in class, partially because I was shy and partially because I was bewitched by a lovely young girl named Karen. I still have an image in my memory of her perfection, her perfect skin, her radiant smile, her lovely legs, her big brown eyes. Fortunately I have no photographs to sully this idealistic image still vivid in my memory.

I never spoke to her. My ears were too big. My tongue too tied. But like Dante’s Beatrice, she inspired me. I know I wrote in my—thankfully long-lost—diary about her. Every night I went to sleep conjuring up her image in my mind. I’d invent scenarios where I saved her from some mishap and she rewarded me with a kiss—a kiss still being the ultimate consummation in my innocent mind.

Our “confirmation” consisted of taking our first communion in church, just like the grown-up congregation, followed by a bus trip to attend a live performance of the Passion Play. The communion went fine, but I remember that the blood of Christ was Welch’s Grape Juice. Real red wine seemed to me more mature, if not more plausible. (But then, my future wife’s Lutheran church used white wine, which is even more bizarre. At least the grape juice matched the colour of blood.)

The trip to The Passion Play performance was what mattered most to me. I plotted some way to be seated next to Karen on the rickety old school bus. I figured somehow I’d get up the nerve to talk to her. Well, it didn’t work out. The piling into the bus was too chaotic. I sat next to some skinny kid who wanted to talk about his coin collection. But I still had hopes I could somehow manage to get seated next to her at the performance. Needless to say that didn’t happen either, although I could see the back of her head several aisles down.

I attended more to her tawny ponytail than to the performance. Remember I’d read the book. It was, like the stories told in Sunday school, much elaborated and dramatized, but this time I didn’t appreciate this. It seemed interminable. For fear of missing the opportunity to somehow wrangle a seat next to her on the bus, I’d resisted the urge to empty my bladder before we set off. So when intermission finally came, I was in agony. As my mother used to say, my back teeth were floating.

The line up at the urinals snaked out of the washroom door. I clearly wasn’t the only one with a serious need to pee. I also wasn’t the only one to be shy. Here I refer to “pee-shy”, that inability to relax one’s bladder muscles when nervous. Each boy took far longer at the urinal than it should take to drain out even a litre of urine. Apparently most Presbyterian boys aren’t accustomed to peeing in public. When my turn at the urinal finally came, my no longer being a Presbyterian lad became obvious. I peed like a race

horse, starting almost before I could whip out—as a Catholic friend of mine called it—my “trouser snake”.

I think they extended intermission to accommodate us. Eventually we all returned to our original seats. So my last hope was the bus ride home. As the Passion Play drew close to its climax, I grew tense. Not because of the play, of course. For Christ’s sake, I already knew the ending! I could only think about how I could somehow manage to sit next to Karen.

Naturally, it didn’t happen. Some sort of territoriality instinct sent everyone back to the same seats they’d occupied before.

I don’t think I ever attended church after that. I been confirmed all right—confirmed in my disbelief in some all-loving God, for He didn’t even have the decency to let me sit next to my first love.

From *Freezing Fire* by Ken Stange (a work-in-progress)