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## Well, What Are You?

Andrew Donlan  
*University of Iowa*

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WELL, WHAT ARE YOU?

by

Andrew Donlan

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in the Journalism and Mass Communication

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Don Mcleese  
Thesis Mentor

Spring 2018

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the  
Journalism and Mass Communication have been completed.

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Travis Vogan  
Journalism and Mass Communication Honors Advisor

# Well, What Are You?

An Exploration of Faith in Iowa City

By: Andrew Donlan



## Prologue

One day, I made my grandma very happy. I was around five years old. We were at a family party, and she had been a widow for a couple of years at that point. I was very blunt, as most kids are, and I told her that I had seen “Papa”— her husband—in the sky that day. From what I can remember, she just smiled. But my parents later told me that she cried when I walked away. It was a miracle! I had seen my deceased grandfather in the heavenly sky. Or did I? I actually remember what I saw, because I can still recollect the depiction I had created. I would take the image of Papa in my head and smack him like a sticker next to the clouds in the sky. It was because I was told that good people go to heaven, which I figured was in the sky, and that bad people went to hell, which had to be underground. Papa was a good person, so that’s why I saw him in the sky.

In a way, it was good. I was told Papa was “up there” and also that he was watching me. It sounds eerie now— that my deceased grandfather was watching my every move, but I believed it. I believed it because it’s what all the older people in my life told me, and I was really young. I also think they told me that because it made them feel better, especially if I believed it. In a way, they were continuing the legacy and memory of their father, husband, or uncle. On multiple occasions, I would think of doing something bad, and stop out of fear of Papa seeing. I guess you could say Papa was my first experience with God. That’s how I pictured him—omnipotent, at least in terms of my life.

My immediate family was much less religious than the rest of my larger family. It always made me feel self-conscious. For instance, at holiday dinners, I didn't know the prayers that they would say before meals. So I closed my eyes and put my head down and hoped that no one would notice. It really bothered me. I remember yelling at my Mom and Dad on numerous occasions after holidays about that.

I was very embarrassed when my friends would leave our hang out to go attend church with their families on Sunday mornings or Saturday evenings. I felt guilty, and less sophisticated. I often lied about the church I went to "by my grandma's house." It was the only church I was familiar with and I went there rarely to appease my grandmother on holidays. It was way out of our town, so it worked. It was similar to when a kid went away to camp and claimed that he had kissed and dated a girl, but she lived across the country and there was no feasible way of contacting her or proving her existence now. I elaborately lied about my faith in an attempt to conform at an alarmingly young age.

Once I had lied long enough on the outside, I started tormenting myself on the inside. I went through deep depression when I was young because I pondered life all too much. If I didn't believe in heaven or an after life, what was the point in living? To live, and then to die? I'll admit that this is not the usual self-talk affiliated with a 5<sup>th</sup> grader's mind, but it was for me. I told my mom about it and I remember she had trouble answering such questions. This goes for more than this time of my life, for

atheism—or any doubts about religion—can lead to a very lonely and frightening existence.

As I entered my high school years, I began to feel strongly about my doubts. For a while, I still told people I was a Christian, but I knew I wasn't. Eventually, I started saying it outright. "No, I don't believe in God." You can say a lot of nasty shit to people, and I have, but *nothing* gets more of a reaction than that simple sentence.

Astoundingly enough, a couple of my closest friends felt the same way. Once we verbalized our feelings, I felt better about myself because I had that comfort of knowing at least I wasn't alone. Eventually, it became just two of us. One of the others, who was originally of similar thought, became a "devout" Christian once he got to school. It was a pseudo transition, and that was especially evident when he would later team up with my college roommates to call me an atheist in a demeaning way. That was disheartening. But at least I still had one friend on my side. Ironically enough, it was my one Jewish friend. He was in a situation that I think a lot of young people today are. Yes, I am (Insert religion), but no I am not very religious. I grew up with him, and he took a lot of grief for being Jewish. I also grew up in a progressive area. I never made Jew jokes because, well, I didn't really even know what being a Jew meant. It became obvious that the people bullying him didn't either.

The best way I can describe the dynamic of our friend group when the two of us were around was a “Vine” that one of our bystander girl friends took. My friend group was arguing, as we often did, and she was experimenting with her new application. For those who don’t know, Vine is an application where you can cut clips of media into one six-second video. It sounds dumb, but the best ones capture a lot more than you think they could in that amount of time. The Vine consisted of three of my friends and I having a conversation about religion that had clearly gone on way too long and was boring everyone else at the party (yes, party).

The Vine begins with me, wearing a Chicago Cubs hat and a Notre Dame t-shirt (Ironic, huh?), saying, “*Well, what are you?*” in an annoyed tone of voice. My friend responded, “I consider myself a Christian, I do believe in God and Jesus Christ.” Then my Jewish friend, yelling, begged the question, “When’s the last time you’ve been to fucking church?” Then Vine worked its magic and cut off the religious friend as he answered, “I’ve never been...”

And that’s one of the things that radicalized me I guess. The word “radicalized” is a strong one, but that’s what made me so stuck in my beliefs for that period of time when I identified as an atheist. Here he was putting me down for my beliefs, but meanwhile, he doesn’t even do the dirty work of the religion. He doesn’t ever go to church. He didn’t volunteer. He didn’t read the Bible. He just subscribed to the religion to make himself feel better. Then, he went around trying to make people

like me feel worse about myself for not taking a half-ass approach to a religion just for the sake of it.

I would say this time of my life was what I would characterize as my freethinking awakening. Most people have it, I'd say, but not all do. The best way I could describe it is as the time I started disagreeing with things my Father said. My brother and I always joked that we'd see people on television sometimes when we got older and think *why do I not like him/her?* The answer was always that our Dad didn't like that person for some reason and it had infiltrated our thinking. We perceived everything that came out of our Dad's mouth as fact. When I started to debate my Dad about things other than sports—that's when I knew I had changed.

I regularly found myself in arguments with people about not only their religion, but also religion in general. I was convinced that religion caused more problems than it solved. I became a YouTube guru. If my recommended tab were up, it definitely would contain a lot of videos titled something like "Richard Dawkins EVISCERATES \_\_\_\_." I've always been opinionated and always loved to argue (maybe more than one should), but this was even more personal. It was almost as if I was the subject of a thriller where I was wronged early in my life and came back later to seek vengeance. Now that I had the intellectual capacity to talk about the things I was shamed for growing up, I took full advantage of it. Often, I knew more about the religions of the people who were arguing against me than they did. This was in contrast to earlier in life, where my knowledge of Christianity started and ended

with the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*. My mom loved *Jesus Christ Superstar* and would always sing the soundtrack while cleaning, in the car, and showering. I'll admit that I loved it too. I remember one of my greatest desires as a kid was to have the ability to go back and see what happened to Jesus. If I could have had one wish, it would've been to go back in time to see what really happened during those few special years, thousands of years ago.

In a lot of cases, I was just serving as provocateur of sorts. Looking back though, in other cases, I may have been over the line. I made at least a few kids rethink their faith. Whether that's good or bad, I don't know—but I was the arrogant atheist. Everyone knows one of them. That got tiring. I wasn't necessarily interested in arguing about it anymore and I think I had reached the point where I had quarreled enough to feel satisfied with the past. I was beginning to put other people down for their faith, and that's exactly what I set out to rectify for myself in the first place. It was hypocritical.

I was the victim of religious scrutiny, and then eventually became a proponent of it. I had to shift my thinking yet again. And this is the stage I am at now—the exploration stage. I now live in Iowa City, where I currently attend the University of Iowa. It's the perfect place to explore for this kind of project, a place with thousands of Millennials like myself.

Young people in the United States are significantly less religious than the older generations. According to PEW research, in 2014, only 80 percent of citizens born between 1990 and 1996 said that they believed in God. In 1966, 98 percent of all Americans were believers. Christianity—the most popular religion—has 20 percent less followers than it did in 1966, and that number dropped 8 percent just from 2007 to 2014. More young people are describing themselves as “spiritual” as opposed to “religious.”

Iowa City has a rich religious community. There seems to be a church on every corner. I’ve learned a lot more about religion—and not just one religion—since I became a student here. I have begun to wonder what makes each of these places of worship different from each other. Thousands of students walk past these places everyday, and most don’t consider going in.

It is still my goal to force people to question their faith. However, it’s not just aimed toward religious people. Instead, it’s a message relevant to all people. There are so many different avenues to take to find the right faith. Most people are stuck believing nothing or believing the same thing that they were told to believe in since they were born. What I ask of you in these coming chapters is not to believe every person that appears, or trust every congregation I visit, but to trust me as your guide during this exploration that we are setting out on together.

My experiences have put me in a unique position to tell this story. The key is to have an open mind, and that is easier said than done. Take me as an example. I was able to have an open mind at such a young age, to hear things and question and criticize them. However, it ironically led me to a point where I was as closed-minded as anyone. I doubted any belief but mine so much that I never considered doubting my own. I would not be fit to lead you on this exploration a couple of years ago. But I have let my guard down in order to pursue more. I hope that you will follow me on this adventure, taking place in a city that I find perfectly fit to host it. So come on this journey with me. I'll talk to people of different faiths, backgrounds, and ages. In the end, I promise we'll all know more about the people around us. And hopefully, we'll know more about ourselves.

## Diana Fritz Cates

Gilmore Hall is over 100 years old, and I could feel that from the inside. It was my first time visiting the building, which is in the middle of the University of Iowa campus. The stairs are indented from foot traffic just like the marble inside of Westminster Abbey, which gives it a certain aura. It gave me the same feeling as being in an art museum as a child—*Okay, everyone around me is smarter, and I feel like I shouldn't touch anything.*

I was intimidated walking toward Dina Fritz Cates's office. As the Departmental Chair of Religious Studies at Iowa, she has a prestigious background, and I had bothered her via e-mail many times beforehand. Plus, the door was placed awkwardly between open and closed. After brief contemplation, I mustered up the courage to rap on the door and she invited me in.

I'd worn sweatpants for the 145 (a conservative guess) weekdays preceding my conversation with Professor Cates. If I haven't convinced you yet that I was oddly nervous for our meeting, understand that I dusted off some uncomfortable khakis just to look more presentable (rethinking my wardrobe choices will be a common theme in the coming chapters). It was just my luck, however, that it started down pouring on my way to her office, drenching me from both the rain and the sweat that accumulated during my escape from the former, leaving me once again not presentable. At least I would have been comfortable in sweats.

Her office was just as you'd expect an important person in the religious studies' office to look (if you had expectations regarding such a thing). There were stacks of books on her desk, in her bookshelf behind, and on the floor. Morality, ethics, and names of religions caught my eye as I scanned the books of the room while setting up my audio recorder. There was a poster board with a picture of what looked to be Buddha, too. Her office was nestled in the corner of the top floor of the building. We sat across from each other on the table on the opposite side of the room from her desk, giving me confidence that she was willing to talk for a while. And we did.

As the Departmental Chair of religious studies, Cates is the liaison between her department and the dean. She gets studies approved, assesses whether or not professors should get raises, and writes letters of recommendation for grants and research leaves. Essentially, she does the dirty work for the department while also serving as a professor of many courses, ranging from "Religion and Liberation" to "Genes and the Human Condition" to "Longing for Freedom: The Search for Happiness in a Difficult World." She also has published work on a variety of topics. She has worked at the University since 1990.

Given her accolades, I felt privileged to pick her brain for any amount of time during her hectic schedule.

"I'm not on twitter, I don't know how people have time for that," she said.

I gave a disingenuous nod in agreement, simultaneously cringing at the thought of the thousands of tweets I'd logged in the past few years.

According to her online bio, Cates "works primarily within the Aristotelian-Thomistic moral tradition on the nature of self." Of course, that refers to the philosophies of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, but I only found that out by researching it beforehand. Still, I asked her to dummy down what exactly that meant.

"My training is in ethics, which is just reflecting on what is right and wrong, good and bad, a flourishing life and diminishing one. I need to orient myself relative to a tradition of thought in order to not have to reinvent the wheel all the time, and so the tradition of thought that is closest to mine is that Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition," Cates said, dummifying it down for the dummy in the room. "What makes that so attractive to me is that it's emphasis is on living a full human life and cultivating habits of character that make it easier for you consistently to see things clearly, to be moved emotionally in the right way as opposed to not moved at all by things you should be concerned about. The task for a lifetime is to cultivate those habits, and we call those virtues. Habits that orient you toward mistake in thinking and distorted perceptions and unruly emotions, those would be vices."

"So how do you teach religion given that description of your emphasis?" I said.

“What I want to know is what impact does religion have on all of that character-shaping activity? Do people believe that to be a member of say, a Christian tradition, they really ought to have a certain kind of character? Do they believe that being a good Christian means being humble, or compassionate? For the most part, though, what I do is analytical. For instance, if you are a Christian, and you believe this, then it is likely you will have this impact on your character formation,” Cates said.

Though the example she gave me was based on Christian faith, it’s not her primary study. She is most interested in Jewish ethics, Native American and African-American tradition, and Japanese culture. Given her position, though, she needs to pay attention to all forms of religion and ways of thinking, forcing her to be well versed in a myriad of ideologies.

“I never advocate one way or another for a tradition in my teaching, and as far as I know, no one in this department does. It’s something we agree is not appropriate at a state university,” Cates said. “What I help people do is understand their neighbors, and by trying to understand your neighbors, you realize you better understand yourself. So I want them to understand *why would people do that?* Why would they stand out there in front of the abortion clinic? What is in their belief set, or their mind set, or their perceptions that leads them to think that’s an important thing to do?”

Essentially, Cates does—if you will—God’s work. In a political and religious climate that gravely lacks the understanding of others’ beliefs and opinions, Cates’ teaching lays the groundwork for some basis of understanding of one’s neighbors. That’s why I started my exploration by sitting down with her. That way of teaching is juxtaposed with a college full of professors—and students—who are sometimes unwilling to think outside their own understanding of the world. If the basis of religion is to create a better living for one’s self and a better world for everyone, people in good faith need to consider others’ sides of things. I wished in this moment that Cates had been my professor when I was a stubborn 18-year-old. Some professors in religious studies share their religious affiliations, but Cates refrains from doing so.

“The reason I don’t do that is that I feel like especially for 18-22 year olds, psychology has shown that religious orientation hasn’t yet been formed in a mature way. It’s a key transitional period. I fear that if people know that if I have certain beliefs, then when we get to the section on that religion, they’ll assume that I am looking for them to agree. I find all the subtle dynamics that derive from that to be very distracting. I actually try to represent every religion I teach as if I did believe them. After teaching a tradition, I expect students to think that’s the one I subscribe to. It’s really irrelevant what I believe; it’s my professional responsibility to represent all religions as fairly as I can.”

It's so valuable for students at Iowa to be able to listen to a teacher who represents all sides of her field equally. I think most students would agree that it's easier to figure out a professor's religious or political affiliation on the first few days of class than it is to remember their name. I often joke that any success I've had on papers in my college careers is due to my understanding of what exactly the teacher wants to hear, whether it be a conservative, liberal, or specific religious viewpoint.

"I find it really problematic that people like to surround themselves with only like-minded opinions. They just sort of dismiss or trash their opponents without really making an effort to understand why someone would hold that view. I might find that view offensive, but they're not simply offensive people."

Cates' process of understanding others takes up to a year sometimes, but she's able to fully immerse herself in others' thought processes. How does she know she's there?

"Because it makes sense. And it's a little shocking then to step back and realize *we live in multiple worlds all at the same time and we don't even know it,*" she said.

Cates' absence of bias keeps her students from frequently sharing their own beliefs. That dynamic allows all the students to feel worthy in discussions, as opposed to a class where both the teacher and the majority of the students have pledged their

allegiance to one religion or way of thinking. It also creates a safe space for critical thinking.

“They almost never identify, because I don’t ask them. If they do, they may be struggling a bit. For instance, they may have been raised Catholic, and after reading more into Catholicism, they don’t agree with some things. I appreciate those personal conversations, and those are usually confidential. But I never ask them or press for it.

“Sometimes they’ll announce it in papers, but it’s pretty irrelevant in a paper, because I don’t care. I mostly want them to argue a point either from their own perspective or somebody else’s perspective. It doesn’t matter to me whether they believe it or not,” She said.

Iowa City is liberal, and its students are predominantly liberal. A point of reference is the 2016 election. Although Donald J. Trump beat Hillary Clinton handily in the state of Iowa, Johnson County (which includes Iowa City) was overwhelmingly blue, with Hillary Clinton taking home 65 percent of the vote. College towns tend to lean to the left. The statistics make sense given the rise in social consciousness that the younger generation has taken a keen interest in.

The 2016 election showed that approximately half of the country is still conservative. If a student can’t even fathom a worldview that approximately half the

country holds, how is this whole United States thing going to play out? Cates says she can tell the majority of her students have liberal ideologies.

“I think in my classes some students are disturbed that I give conservatives a voice,” Cates said. “For example, I used to teach a course on sexual ethics. One of the most influential voices in the world on sexual ethics is the Pope. Go back to Pope Benedict and Pope John Paul II. They need to know what those people wrote because their writing was globally distributed and every single parish priest in the world was expected to follow those. And if that text says that homosexual acts are intrinsically evil, people ought to know that that’s out there. I say if millions of people believe something you better darn well know what they believe and then think, why would they believe something like that?”

It also helps that Cates comes from a religiously conservative background. Although she does not share her personal story or affiliation with her students, she was kind enough to do so with me.

“I was raised in a really conservative wing of the Lutheran church. In junior high, going through confirmation, they were talking about different views on the wafer. Their view was that the wafer *is* the body of Christ and not that it just represented it. I raised my hand and said, ‘It’s not the body of Christ, it’s just a wafer, what are you saying?’ and they basically told me to sit down and shut up. That was really eye opening because then I became curious about everything.”

Cates believes that the irony of hostility towards other religions besides one's own is that people borrow different aspects from a bunch of different religions, whether they realize it or not. Her background and occupation has led her to a different approach to religion than most people.

"I think that's a trivialization of what most people are actually trying to do—find meaning in their lives. If a third of a religion doesn't make sense to them, what are they supposed to do, stay in it anyways and realize a third of their spirituality is being stifled? It's just a constant journey."

Cates rejects the notion that people can be "spiritual" and not religious, which many people in the younger religion claim to be, as the aforementioned PEW research shows.

"They're saying religion is that organized crap where people go to church in a not authentic way and do what they're told. Spirituality is that authentic searching, that's what they think. That's so rude—as if the people who are going to church aren't searching for the truth."

Cates most recently has gone to Catholic churches with her husband. Her husband was raised Catholic, but is disgusted by the church lately. They often change their

place of worship in Iowa City based on who is teaching and if their teachings connect with them.

“Iowa City’s religious community is very diverse. You have virtually everything, and you also have different options within each sect of religion.”

Cates view on religion is as open-minded as they come. As Departmental Chair of religious studies, it serves the young community well.

“That’s the most important realization of college for me—to open your mind to realize the world as you see it is not the world as such, it’s the world as you see it. That’s why I’m a professor.”

Cates was a useful tool for me at the beginning of my journey. She prepared me to be as open minded as possible from all angles moving forward. As for the 1,000 plus page books on St. Thomas Aquinas she recommended, those would have to wait.

## Campus Christian Fellowship

“Are we living a life with Jesus as our authority?”

Roger Charley looked in my direction, evoking temporary guilt and nearly forcing me to ask if he was posing the question to me specifically.

He wasn't. But that's what it felt like to be the 12<sup>th</sup> student at a Christian religious gathering and the 1<sup>st</sup> heathen butt that's sat on those benches in years. It felt similar to high school when I wouldn't do the reading and the teacher would ask the class for their thoughts on a chapter: *Don't just stare blankly, try to avoid eye contact, and make sure your face makes it look like you're pondering the question deeply.*

Charley is the state director of the Campus Christian Fellowship, a group that has chapters at the University of Iowa, Iowa State University, and Northern Iowa University. He lives near Ames, so he only makes the trip to Iowa City for gatherings once every few weeks.

He replaced John Johnson as the leader of the discussion that night regarding “Following Jesus”, which was this year's topic for the group. Johnson was the first out of many religious leaders that I contacted via email to get back to me, and he did so in a hurry. I had asked whether I could sit in on a gathering, and within 10 minutes he replied that they'd love to have me. Johnson was back at the CCF's offices

setting up an “escape room” for the students for afterward, leaving Charley to run the meeting. He had notified the members and the other leaders of my inquiry.

When I walked into Danforth Chapel, I was still in shock that the building was actually in use. It sits in the far right corner of the spacious Hubbard Park (if looking from the Capitol Building), and adjacent to the Iowa Memorial Union. I had always thought it was some old church that hadn’t been used in years. But when I entered, I was met with friendly, young faces. The welcoming nature of the community was a weight off my shoulders. Aaron Schweitzer, a young man whom I could identify as the Campus Minister from the website, approached me once I had sat down on one of the eight rows of benches.

“John told us you’d be here, we’re not exactly in the business of turning people away,” he said to me.

I explained my project and he either was impressed or did a very good job of making it seem that way. He had been on staff for the past year, and told me he was on a journey similar to mine as a masters student in divinity. In his program, he’d be learning about new religions he hadn’t been exposed to yet in his life. We talked for five minutes or so, and he introduced me to Charley before the meeting began.

The night kicked off with a couple of songs. A few students and Schweitzer—who was on the hand drums—performed them. There was Schweitzer’s hand drum, a

guitar, a banjo, and two students leading the vocals. We were all invited to stand and sing along, but I stayed sitting when I realized that a couple others opted to as well. The songs were admittedly some toe-tappers. They were effective in further soothing my heathen nervousness.

I was ready to clap after both songs were finished, but no one else did, so it's a good thing that I refrained from doing so. Everyone returned to their seats and Charley traveled to the front to lead the Bible study. He asked a few questions about what the students had learned at last week's gathering with Johnson leading, and decided we'd dive in to "Mark 12". The students split into groups, and the three students on my side of the aisle graciously asked if I wanted to join theirs. We were assigned the part of "Mark 12" labeled "Paying Taxes to Caesar." One of the group members, who had her annotated Bible handy, grabbed me one from the back.

Even though I've rarely read through the Bible, I figured I'd be able to extract some meaning from the verse even without being a pronounced follower. We deliberated over the meaning of the passage and came to an agreed upon conclusion. I mustered up the courage to explain my perception of our designated excerpt, and to my surprise, my group members and I were on the same page. We were ready to report out. *I'm not too bad at this*, I thought.

Besides being overdressed, I felt like I was fitting in all right at this point. I had worn khaki pants, my nicest button down shirt, and loafers. Everyone else was wearing

whatever they wanted—sweatpants, backwards hats, and t-shirts. It was only later when Charley started emphasizing Jesus being the number one priority in our lives that I felt a little misplaced.

“Are we living life with Jesus as our authority? In our classes? In our careers choices? In our majors? In relationships?”

Jesus has never played a part in my decision-making, even when I was a religious child who swore that he could see his deceased Grandfather in the sky. I don't feel guilty about living a life absent of religious persuasion, but I admittedly did a bit at that moment. Charley spoke of Jesus with conviction, and I could tell that he meant every word he said. His demeanor became more intimidating as he explained the importance of following Jesus.

The service ended as it started, with the singing of “Oh! Great Is Our God.” The communal singing made me feel warm, something I've only come close to experiencing while singing a cliché song like “Wonderwall” with my roommates at the end of a drunken night. My observations led me to believe the words of “Oh! Great Is Our God” were resonating more with the members in Danforth, though.

Afterward, Schweitzer stood up and thanked Charley for the leading the Bible Study that day and reminded everyone to head to the offices for the escape room for some

fun. I tracked down Charley and asked if I could ask him a few questions about how he became such a devout Christian.

“How would you pitch a free agent like me to join your congregation?” I asked.

“My pitch would be to take a look at Jesus, and see who he says he is. And we think he is who he says he is. The strength of this group would be our focus on the Bible. There’s a really good community—not a big one—but a really good one that’s committed to living out what the scripture says.”

As we were discussing, a student slipped Charley what looked to be like a roll of 20-dollar bills. I wasn’t going to ask what it was for, but it was a good segue for Charley to complete his pitch. The money was for a spring break trip to Houston. The students had organized a group from all three Iowa schools where the Fellowship is present to help with hurricane relief over Christmas break. The connections they made from that trip enabled them to organize another trip for spring break. Mission trips are planned throughout the year with the group, and their winter and spring break destinations change year-by-year based on what are of the world could use their help.

The Houston trip also made me feel guilty, reminding me that I could be doing something more useful with my week off of school than a trip to Cabo San Lucas, Mexico to drink and swim with my friends. It also made me recall my arrogant

atheist phase where I would sometimes demean religious people. Without a lot of these religious groups, there would be a lot less people helping others in times of need.

I wanted to know how Charley became so dedicated to Christ in the first place. How does someone like him get to the point where his entire livelihood is based on a religion?

“I didn’t want to be Jesus’ spit,” He said. It’s a good thing that he elaborated.

“I don’t remember ever not believing in God. My family was very churchy. My senior year, I got invited to a Church youth group. There really wasn’t much emphasis on the Bible growing up, partly because I think the minister was really boring. The leader of the Church group talked about Jesus as if the story was real and not just a story. It got me to do a lot of examining of what I believed,” Charley said. “I went to a service before I graduated high school, and the speaker read a excerpt from the last book in the Bible, “Revelation”. It said be hot or cold, because if you’re lukewarm, I’ll spit you out of my mouth. And at that point I think I was pretty lukewarm for God. And I didn’t want to be Jesus’ spit. I had no idea what he said the rest of the night. I just thought that I needed to say yes or no to Jesus. That summer I gave my life to Christ.”

I was appreciative of Charley's story and the entire church's welcoming spirit, but it was not enough to persuade me. I found the fellowship's most attractive aspect to be their charity work and mission trips. The following of the scripture was fine, but I would have to be convinced of the scripture's worth before that made me a passionate member of the Campus Christian Fellowship.

I put my Bible back where my group member had got it, and thanked Charley again for allowing me to be a part of the gathering that night. As I exited Danforth Chapel, I heard my name called. It was Schweitzer. He rushed threw the doors and reached into his pockets.

"Andrew, one thing I like to do is buy every student I meet here a cup of coffee," Schweitzer said. "I'd love to hear more about your project and talk to you about your journey anywhere on campus that sells coffee."

The Campus Christian Fellowship was looking for free agents like me, and they were willing to go the extra mile to get them there.

## Ratio Christi and Jo Vitale

Just a few days after I spoke with Cates, I came across an automated email from a University group. The subject line read “Is the God of the Bible Sexist?” Now that’s the kind of attention grabber you need to get me to delve further into the contents of your message! I (along with every other undergraduate at Iowa student, I assume) was invited to a discussion on that topic—*Is the God of the Bible sexist?*

After my experience at Danforth Chapel, I realized I’d be dealing with the Bible more than I ever had in the coming weeks, so it seemed like it would be a useful discussion to witness. I figured that the speaker, who graduated from the University of Oxford in England, would be arguing that it was.

Jo Vitale was her name. She is the Dean of Studies at the Zacharias Institute, which is a ministry dedicated to “reach and challenge those who shape the ideas of a culture with the credibility of the Gospel of Jesus Christ”, according to its website. They are headquartered in Georgia, but they have representatives across the world.

I strolled into the Iowa Memorial Union’s main ballroom begrudgingly for the third time in a month. I had gone to the premiere of Woody Harrelson’s *Lost in London* in early February and then I came back for the career fair later in the month. The former was bearable, the latter not so much. This time I strolled in at 1:57 PM on a Sunday, just three minutes before the event started. There were hundreds of chairs

set up, but the crowd was sparse. The attendees included a congregation of students in the front (who looked to be a part of whatever group was sponsoring the event) and then some curious elderly folk who must have also been notified and intrigued by the topic as well.

Once I sat down, pulled my notebook out, and looked up at the screens sandwiching the stage, I was able to gather the group putting on the event: Ratio Christi. I had never heard of the group before, but their mission statement online said they were a group “dedicated to serving the Christian community on and off campus by sponsoring cutting edge Christian apologetic events on defending the faith.” At that point I realized that the speaker would be arguing against the claim that the God of the Bible was sexist.

Vitale took the stage and immediately acknowledged her strong British accent through an anecdote about meeting her husband’s Italian-American family for the first time.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve been listening to you for five minutes and haven’t understood a word you’ve said,” Vitale’s father-in-law told her.

Her accent was strong indeed, at least strong from the perspective of both Italian-Americans in New Jersey and Midwesterners sitting in a ballroom in Iowa. She was

very charismatic, comfortably setting the stage for her lecture with remarks that evoked laughter from the small and eager crowd.

“Years ago, BBC released a report on the most misogynistic books in the history of the world. Do you know what they were? Well if you’re familiar with *50 Shades of Gray*, it was second. And what was first? The Bible!” Vitale said.

She then launched into another story about the time she spent on University of California-Berkeley’s campus years back. It was International women’s day, and Vitale said there was a feeling of anger in the air from hundreds of women protestors, some topless. One protestor stood out to Vitale and her colleagues—a topless woman with a bag over her head that read, “All five of my rapists are free.” Vitale assigned the name Sophie to this woman in the interest of keeping her identity private. She posed the question, “What would Jesus say to Sophie?”

Vitale would refer to Sophie throughout her story and was forced to answer tough questions regarding her situation after the lecture. But during her lecture, she framed the Bible as an empowering book for women; a piece of literature and way of thinking that was juxtaposed to sexist philosophies that had come beforehand. For instance, Plato’s view on gender was that the Gods created only men, and punishment for unworthy men was to be a woman in their next life. I guess given that precedent, the Bible being less Sexist than Plato’s ideology was not a tall task.

According to Vitale, Christian values approach Sophie's situation like no other ideology can, and it goes like this: what happened to her is objectively evil, and right and wrong do exist. This, I disagreed with, along with the sentiment expressed that "Only God can give us intrinsic worth." I hadn't followed a religion closely throughout my life, and from my perspective, I still felt I had intrinsic worth. I thought what happened to Sophie was just as wrong as anyone else in the room. *I don't need a religion to tell me that fact*, I thought.

The Bible, Vitale said, doesn't shy away from bad stories, and there was a reason for that. But she made a point to choose excerpts from the Bible, like "Genesis 1:27", which says that God created males and females. She pointed to "Deuteronomy 21.10-11", which outlines the rules in which a man can marry a woman besieged in battle. In the most dire of circumstances, she said, the Bible lays out specific rules: give the woman time to grieve, demand the man can only have sex with the woman if he commits to marrying her, and that rape is banned. She juxtaposed this with a 2014 pamphlet released by ISIS pertaining to a similar topic. Like Plato's view of women, I found this to be a favorable analogy to her position. Followers of the Bible follow guidelines that are morally superior to the world's largest terrorist organization... Gee, I hope so.

Vitale also pointed to "Matthew 5:28": "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." This,

in her view, was also empowering to women given its demands to be loyal to your wife.

“Jesus never looks at me as just a girl,” Vitale said.

Throughout the lecture Vitale also drew from the words of others ideologically across the aisle. For instance, she cited the writings of renowned atheist John Gray, who says that humanism is an illusion, and that faith will keep people more civilized than relying on humanity on its own.

“In a world where Hugh Hefner is celebrated and *50 Shades of Gray* is a best seller, look no further than the Bible,” Vitale concluded.

“Amen,” shouted one of the only attendees that picked a seat behind mine.

For devout Christians in the audience, there is no doubt that Vitale’s argument was well received and comforting. In the Q&A portion of the event, however, some audience members who weren’t sold challenged her.

A man pointed to the Bible to refute her conclusion that the Bible is empowering to women, citing “Corinthians 14:34”, “women are to be silent in the churches. They are not permitted to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they wish

to inquire about something, they are to ask their own husbands at home; for it is dishonorable for a woman to speak in the church.”

Vitale’s response was to point out an earlier excerpt from Paul’s book where he talks about a woman’s role being integral in the process of following Christ. She also said that the passage shouldn’t be considered as sexist, but just as a way to make the Church more focused and less distracted.

Vitale used similar rationale when asked why women are forbidden from higher leadership in churches. Just because there are different roles for different genders, she said, does not negate the importance of the roles that women are able to hold.

The final question gave Vitale an opportunity to wrap things up.

“Why did Jesus let these men rape Sophie?” A woman in the crowd asked.

Vitale said that one of her colleagues wrapped Sophie in her arms that day at Berkeley and said she would pray for her, and they both burst out in tears. God is not responsible for what happened to Sophie, she said, and he is as furious and as committed to justice as possible.

Vitale appeared to be smart, well versed in her topic, and clearly came from a place of good will. But her claims, while maybe not evident to the Christian audience, were

often fallacious. She presented false choice: Either you're with the righteous God of the Bible, or you believe that the Universe is inherently bad and there's nothing that can be done about Sophie's situation. She danced around tough questions, and omitted more blatant sexist rhetoric from her lecture. She begged the question in regards to Jesus and his teachings, assuming a premise to make her argument. And worst of all, she accused me of being an adulterer!

Vitale's strongest argument, in my opinion, was thrust upon the audience through her mishaps in communication with her Italian-American in-laws. The Bible was written thousands of years ago in a different language, thus making it unfair to hastily view the words of the Bible from a present day lens and label them sexist. The only issue was that she used her examination of the Bible to shape it in a way that was favorable to today's societal standards.

The Ratio Christi group is meant for people that want to have faith in Christianity. For some, it may be hard to in contemporary society. Most of the crowd seemed to agree with Vitale, but I don't think she changed any minds that day.

## Muslim Student Association

Khaled Kayali made me understand. Kayali, more than any other person of faith I'd talked to before, made me sit back and think *I get that*. He's the vice president of the Muslim Student Association. He moved back to Iowa after snipers were placed on the roof of his Syrian home.

The MSA meets every Tuesday and picks a new topic for discussion. The discussion, as I learned when I visited two weeks later, is the sort of conversation that professors could only wish for in their own classes. At times the conversation grew contentious, but for the most part, all of the participants were willing to reason with each other. The executive board of the MSA consists of 14 students, but I learned that many of them past the major ones (president, vice president, treasurer) can't even remember their exact title. This was evident when we all introduced ourselves.

When the introductions got to me, I had thought way too long and hard about beginning my greeting with "Assalamualaikum" like the rest had. After I came to the conclusion that I would no doubt make a joke out of myself if I tried, I made a joke of myself anyways.

"Hi guys... uh...," It was at this point I realized that the girls and guys were separated, each on their respective part of the room. I was on the girls' side. "I'm just going to be watching you guys and... uh... yeah thanks for having me."

“Assalamualaikum, I’m Andrew” probably would have been the better move.

Before I go any further into the discussion I attended, I need to retreat to my initial meeting with Kayali.

We met in the library. He was such a nice guy. He answered all my questions thoughtfully, unbothered by my ignorance in regards to Islam and the MSA. Kayali is from the Quad Cities. When he was seven years old, his family moved to Syria (where his parents were born and raised) in an effort to get him closer to his faith. Years later, when the Syrian Civil War broke out, the army set up a military base right by his house. It was just bad luck. That’s when the snipers took position on his roof.

“My time in Syria got me a lot closer to my religion,” He explained. “You realize how much a blessing living in the States is. Everyone is living in a safe environment—everyone has food and water.

“You get closer to death, so you feel like you need someone to talk to, or something to assure you that there is something after death.”

Kayali’s experience is unfathomable from an American perspective, and particularly my perspective. His experience reminded me of the old saying “there are no atheists

in foxholes.” In a place where you are so close to death, how could you not lean on something bigger than yourself? How could you not wish for something more in an afterlife?

Kayali views the Quran and Islam in the best manner possible. One thing he wishes outsiders would do is understand the context of the scripture, similar to Jo Vitale refuting the Bible being a sexist book.

“For example, one verse says about atheists ‘Kill them wherever you find them.’ But if you read the verse before that, it means to not seek them out but to defend yourself if they come after you. The Quran says there is not hate in religion.”

The misunderstanding comes from people who aren’t imbedded in the faith like Khaled. After all, it’s rare that someone reads a holy book that is not integral in their own religion.

These are the sorts of contemporary issues facing many religions relying on ancient books to guide them. It’s honorable that Kayali contemplates them and finds the best meaning in context, like Vitale, but it’s still frightening given that not everyone is as thoughtful as he or she is.

Kayali takes time to visit other religious groups on campus as well. When I spoke to him at the library, he had plans to meet with one of Christian groups on campus in

the coming days. He encouraged me to come to the MSA's first meeting after spring break. After our recorded conversation, we had a non-related conversation for the next few minutes, something I hadn't experienced anywhere else I'd been.

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On the Tuesday after break, I zigzagged around the Iowa Memorial Union looking for the prayer room that Kayali told me the MSA would be meeting in. I was drenched in sweat, frantically looking for the right room. Finally, I found the room. But as people entered in front of me, I saw them taking off their shoes and greeting the deepest voice I've ever heard. It sounded like they were addressing him as "Father." I was under the impression it would only be students, so I became intimidated. What if Kayali had not told them that I was coming. Finally, I awkwardly peaked around the corner. Thankfully, I was met by Kayali's welcoming face.

"Hello, Andrew!"

What a relief. I saw Kayali and there looked to be no adults in the room. What student had that deep of a voice? His name must have resembled just resembled "father." He later introduced himself as the treasurer of the MSA.

The second relief came when I saw that my socks were clean. That would have been embarrassing. I sat down on a chair, only realizing later that I would be the only one not sitting on the ground. By the time I realized that I had positioned myself on the girls' side of the room, it was too late.

Separation of the sexes is common in the Muslim world, although Kayali said he prefers the United States integration system to Syria's, which divides the two in school.

"I think deprivation of something only makes people want it more," Kayali told me.

Some of the girls were wearing hijabs, some weren't. Some were covering their feet with extra clothing, some weren't. Everyone was dressed casually. The president even sported a neon pink hat over her hijab. After everyone introduced themselves, she began the discussion.

"Today we're going to be talking about signs of the Day of Judgment," she said.

*Yikes*, I thought. What an ominous discussion to attend.

I found the "signs" presented to be extremely vague. She talked about earthquakes.

*There have always been earthquakes*, I thought. She talked about places being easily

accessible to another, a sign based on the Quran that the Day of Judgment was nearing.

“Flights!” She said. I wasn’t convinced.

One of the prophets predicted the fall of Iraq, so naturally, the invasion of Iraq by U.S. forces in 2003 came up.

The president herself even seemed unsure about the signs she was proposing. She often would stop and ask others to talk so she could look something up. This is when the real conversation started.

On the guys’ side, heated debate began between Kayali and one of the other members. Unlike Kayali, the man arguing with him didn’t seem all that reasonable and was gesturing condescendingly at Kayali’s points. What Kayali was pointing out was that Mohammed himself said he is just a human and does not know any better than anyone else when the Day of Judgment will come.

The members effortlessly transitioned from perfect English to Arabic, even adding authentic lisps to their dialect. When the group pointed to violence in the world as a sign, Kayali refuted it by saying this was the most peaceful time in history.

Everything he said made sense to me. His common sense approach seemed to anger the others, perhaps because it was contradicting to that day’s discussion topic.

From time to time, some of the members would halt the debate to ask if I knew what they were talking about. Often, I did not. When they talked about “Jinn”, which is the Islamic equivalent of demons, spirits, or ghosts, it took me a while to realize they weren’t talking about the alcohol (gin). Besides Kayali and a few others who seemed to silently agree but rarely spoke, the conversation often bordered on hysteria. They talked of signs and jinn, and it often seemed similar to a campfire discussion of spooky things.

Donald Trump came up in the conversation, his bad leadership qualities being a sign because the prophets warned of bad leaders before the Day of Judgment. Again, Kayali came to the rescue, because I wasn’t going to speak up.

“There have always been bad leaders, guys.”

Four guys mainly drove the conversation, and Kayali seemed to be the only one not driven by fear. The man arguing with Kayali in the beginning seemed to be strong in his faith at the beginning of the conversation, but weaker towards the end.

“In some places it says that having multiple wives is okay, and in some places it says that it isn’t, so what am I supposed to do?” He said.

It was a worthy question, but his tone had shifted from the beginning of the conversation. Earlier, he seemed to be asserting that the prophets had all the answers and that Kayali wasn't looking hard enough to find them.

This made sense. After all, they are taught to fear Allah.

"We need to love Allah, but in the end, fearing him is the most important thing," the treasurer with the deep voice asserted.

Even though Kayali's experience in Syria was driven by fear, his light-hearted nature seemed to push him away from his fearful colleagues during the discussion.

When I left, I was impressed by the conversation. It was meaningful, and for the most part, it was respectful. The discourse was clearly leading to growth, something that's important in any religious quest.

Everyone was kind as I put my shoes back on, and Kayali shook my hand with a big smile.

Kayali was one of the best people I had met on my journey. His experience would have made me closer to my religion. That revelation was crucial for me. But the unpopularity of his stances during the discussion made me realize I wasn't fit for the MSA or Islam either.

## Hillel House

On a brutally cold April night in Iowa City, a Mexican, Russian, a Moroccan, and an Ethiopian sat facing a bunch of hungry Midwestern Americans.

The four foreigners were all visiting from Israel on behalf of the group “Students Supporting Israel.” They had all emigrated to Israel, where they now lived, and were leading a discussion about the country. Their tone was genuine, their English broken, but understandable. Their reach, however, seemed limited.

In front of them were around 25 students feasting away at their free meal from the Hillel House, where the event took place, on the last day of Passover. Although the food, which included brisket, potatoes, salad, and matzo, looked as if it came straight from a display case in a cafeteria, it was devoured at a rate that contradicted its appearance. Free food is free food, I guess. I abstained because I had inhaled a sub-par pizza beforehand, allowing my full self to be slightly judgmental.

Perhaps the students were disengaged because of the free food in front of them, but their eyes were so distracted from the main event that I felt obligated to listen intently. In fact, the entire event, beginning with the service, seemed relaxed.

David, the director of the Hillel House, led the service dressed in a suit and a Yakama. There was a pile of Yamakas available to the members, but only a few

sported them. The dress code, or lack thereof, was clearly not strict. Some were dressed nicer, but others had sweats on and even backward baseball hats. Once again, I was a bit overdressed, in khakis and a collared shirt.

The director told me that the service's duration would be cut in half because it was Passover and the Shabbat. It would only take fifteen minutes. After it was finished, the director acknowledged his timing.

"Fifteen minutes, on the dot!"

I wasn't surprised by the remark, which the director said with glee. After all, the service was rushed. As the leader directed us to different parts of the Torah, he rambled the necessary readings—both in Hebrew and English—with the same tone as someone skipping through an article trying to find the point they were looking for.

The rushed and relaxed style of the service was on one side of the Hillel House's main floor. The spacious room is really split into three, its interior design allowing for the three parts to have different feels. The middle is a hang out area, reminiscent of a kindergarten classroom. The colorful chairs and signs on the walls added to that feel. To the left there was the dinner area, with the tables set. The right side was designated for service with a more formal seating, shelves of books, and a small stage. The director faced the same way as us as he led the service.

The fact that his back was facing me, and that at least half of the members seemed disinterested and casually dressed, relaxed me. Generally when I have visited places of worship, for at least the first half hour I feel uptight, not wanting to violate a rule without realizing it. It was different there. I spoke with the student president of Iowa's own "Students Supporting Israel" chapter, Isaac Jolcover, beforehand. At the time, I thought he was the president of the Hillel House. He was scrolling through his phone in between talking to me, telling me what they had planned for the night.

"I'm pretty reformed," Jolcover said as he gestured down towards his phone. "I use my phone on Shabbat and everything."

Followers of Judaism are encouraged not to use electronic appliances on Shabbat. It was clear, however, that most of the members who attended that night also considered themselves reformed.

After the short-lived service, the group fled to the dinner side of the room. They immediately began chatting amongst themselves and pouring the wine that was set out for them on the table.

A witty gentleman, who I also thought held a high position at the congregation when I met him beforehand, met me after the service.

“You know none of the songs, huh?” He said with an accent. “That’s okay, me neither.”

The man was very interested in my presence from the start, inquiring about the ins and outs of my project. Once he figured out I was a journalist, he began telling me about the various journalism movies he liked.

His name is Ilan Sinelikov, and he started “Student Supporting Israel” when he was an undergrad at the University of Minnesota in 2012. He has now expanded the group to almost 40 campuses nationwide. He also organizes speaking events, like bringing the four Israelites to speak for the students, on any campus that he can. He emigrated from Israel when he was twelve years old.

“When I was at Minnesota, I saw a lot of students and student groups saying things about Israel, and they were always bad things,” Sinelikov said. “I was from there, so I’d say, ‘what you’re saying is simply not true.’”

The anti-Israel rhetoric encouraged him to start “Students Supporting Israel” in order to tell his side—as well as Israel’s side—of the story.

The student group has nothing to do with Judaism, he insisted. Instead, it’s about shining a good light on the country he is from. Because he is Jewish, and because

everyone there (besides me, I assume), was Jewish, I asked how the student group wasn't associated with Judaism.

"We're here on a Friday night. We'd usually come to the student union, but who's going to come out to our event there on Friday?" He said. "We figured if we came here we'd be able to attract more students."

No one seemed all that interested in my presence besides Sinelikov and David. When I was straggling behind the rest of the group when dinner was being served, David approached me.

"Come on, you've got to eat!"

David wanted everyone to be happy and to enjoy their Passover Dinner. That was his main goal. The depths of Judaism, at least for that night, would take a backseat.

Initially, I was bothered by the lack of the attention the students were showing. After all, these people had meaningful things to say, and after my trips to other places of faith, they seemed secular in comparison. But as I surveyed the scene, I realized something.

Everyone was enjoying themselves. The Passover meal was a celebration they'd all taken part in growing up, and now they had a place to do it at Iowa. Perhaps they

gained something from the service and the Israeli group. Perhaps they didn't.

Regardless, they had a night to enjoy each other's company. They had a chance to enjoy Passover in a way that felt comfortable and meaningful to them.

"Students Supporting Israel" had a bigger audience than they would have fielded at the IMU. The group may not have been as attentive as they'd hoped, but that made sense. After all, it was Friday. And although there were serious topics to be discussed, and well-intentioned people there, it was just Passover. The students wanted to talk with their friends, drink wine, and have fun. There's a reason why the Hillel House isn't just a temple.

## Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church

The only thing distinguishing the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church from the rest of the modest, two-story homes on Governor Street is a sign marking its presence near the street. If the church needed an attention grabber, it had it in the sign, and its effectiveness was potent. The two paragraphs on the brown metal sign pitched the church to me in as magical a way I could imagine.

The sign read:

*In 1787, racial segregation was commonplace, even in church. One Sunday in Philadelphia, African-American church members praying outside their designated area were pulled from their knees and forced to move. Subsequently, they formed the Free African Society. In 1816, led by Richard Allen, a former slave who had purchased his freedom, a part of the society became the African Methodist Episcopal Church.*

*Built in 1868, the Bethel A.M.E. Church is one of Iowa City's oldest frame buildings and its only historically black church. James and Rebecca Howard, an African-American couple from Virginia and Pennsylvania, bought the land from C.H. Berryhill, a frontiersman who made his fortune in trade with American Indians. The first congregation's members came from as far away as Alabama, North Carolina, and Mississippi. The Missouri and Mississippi Railroad (M&M) transported many here, to a town perceived as hospitable to freedpersons and other African-Americans. Iowa City*

*was at the crossroads of two routes of the Underground Railroad. Two large communities of Quakers, deeply involved in the anti-slavery movement, lived nearby at West Branch and Springdale. The university attracted a more educated and liberal population. Still, racial tensions persisted. In 1859, the abolitionist John Brown had to escape an armed lynch mob of local Copperhead Democrats—sympathizers with the Southern secessionist states—by catching the M&M out of town at 3 a.m.*

I was so intrigued by the sign that I whipped out my cellphone, looked around, and snapped a picture of it before heading towards the church's front door. John Brown! He was the first abolitionist I ever learned about. I was obsessed with him in high school, and how he used his religion as evidence against the cruelty of slavery. 1868! I couldn't believe how long the church had been here, and how far people traveled to be a part of it. The crash course on the church left me incredulous. I couldn't wait to go in, but my nerves heightened after realizing the significance of the modest building I was about to enter.

The Bible study I had been invited to started in three minutes, so I crept cautiously inside. When I entered, though, I saw and heard no one. To the left, there was a room where they clearly held their services. No one was in there. There was a short flight of stairs on the right leading up to another room, but I didn't feel confident enough to go up there. Still a bit shaken by the sign, I walked out of the church, hoping that someone would come to get me, or that I could ride the coattails of someone else entering.

Finally, an elderly couple looked to be making their way to the entrance. I approached them, but they greeted me first.

“Well, hello!”

They acted as if they knew who I was and were expecting me, though that couldn't have been the case. They were a white couple—something I wasn't necessarily expecting—and they walked in with me, giving personal introductions. They belonged to another church, but when they had attended the Bethel A.M.E Martin Luther King Jr. service in January, they felt they had no other choice but to become dual members. After learning more about the historical background of the church outside, I imagined the MLK service must have been as glorious as they described it.

They led me up the stairs that were on the right, and to my surprise, there were already four or five people waiting in a circle formed by chairs. This part of the church is still intact from the 1800s, they told me. It was the original building that I was now standing in.

I immediately introduced myself to the man at the head of the circle. He was a handsome, six-foot, in-shape black man with a sharp gray beard and an impressive suit on. He stood up to greet me, and I informed him that I had spoken with Dianna over e-mail about coming.

“Oh, yes, yes, absolutely. Dianna is right back there,” He said, pointing to an older black woman only 10 or so feet away in the back of the small circle.

I went back to introduce myself to her, and that’s when the rest of the congregation rose to greet me. They all seemed excited that I was there.

When the meeting started, there was an impressively diverse group, and not just by skin color. The group was basically split between black and white, but there also was a variance in age. There were old couples, but also younger women who didn’t look much older than me.

The small group gave a sense of intimacy to the Bible study, and one woman passed around Oreo thins, insisting that we finish the package before it got back to her.

“Don’t worry now, those are half the calories than usual!” She said.

I didn’t want to eat the Oreos, but her earnestness would have made me feel guilty had I not.

Once the study started, I realized it wasn’t the Bible that we were discussing.

Everyone had books in their hands, a book that wasn’t the Bible. It was *He Chose the*

*Nails* by Max Lucado, a popular Christian author. It was essentially a book group, and the man in front, leading the discussion, was absolutely a teacher.

He sat with his legs crossed, allowing his bright orange socks to show. The socks added to his dapperness, matching perfectly with his tie. His charisma was immediately evident, and he commanded the circle, his charisma on display.

They were discussing chapters 14 and 15 from the book, and unlike a high school classroom discussing literature, everyone had clearly read, and everyone was eager to participate. Despite their eagerness, the clear admiration for the leader led the constituents to stumble over their words at times and struggle to make out coherent sentences. Regardless, the leader always responded with reassuring feedback, always using their comments to further the discussion and authorize their worth. His teaching style was gratifying.

My eyes wandered during the discussion, enamored by the building that once housed freed slaves looking for religious comfort in much more dire times. There was an altar in the back, which I was told was the same one that they used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and a bookshelf and television set in the front. The movies underneath the television gave me the idea that its primary use was to entertain children with Christian kids' films.

“Jesus was not lost in a sea of forgetfulness as other people during his time were,” the leader said. “Jesus wasn’t even liked, but here we are talking about him thousands of years later.”

He had a skill of simplifying the text even for someone like me who hadn’t read it. But he also had an incredible vocabulary, using words that I didn’t know (but understood in context) to lead the lesson with a contemporary focus.

Throughout the lesson, “Mhm” and “Yeah” and “Absolutely” could be heard from different parts of the circle. I noticed that those words or sounds of affirmation usually came from the black folk in the room. The white folk nodded, but refrained from verbal signals of agreement. Those verbal signals added to the discussion. They made the discussion feel purposeful; they made the room feel more like a community.

I noted that for a specific reason; I always thought black people did church better when I was growing up. I had a perception of them from movies and television shows, and I had my own perception of white church from actually taking part in it. There was a black church by my house when I was growing up, and I could always hear them singing joyously. If I had my choice, I would have gone to that church. The reassuring “Mhms” added a passion and a comfort to the lesson, one that I hadn’t come across in my journey yet, nor in my time in churches beforehand.

Even though the leader was clearly younger than some of the participants, the attention he commanded was like a harsh teacher in a freshman classroom. Of course, he wasn't harsh at all. His students would tell stories, often connecting the lessons to their childhood or own life troubles, and were always met with laughter or reassurance.

When the leader cautioned controlling wildlife, something that God himself had created, Dianna compared it to when she accidentally domesticated a coyote. The coyote, which was meant to be a dog, never could be tamed. The comparison was a stretch, but it was met with uproarious laughter.

"I told you we'd get a story like that from Dianna, Andrew," One of the members said to me as the laughter died down.

The man that I met at the door talked about the church he had recently visited for his brother-in-law's funeral, detailing the cross's significance there. The discussion had been about the cross as a symbol. I could see the hurt in his wife's eyes as he discussed it. After all, it had been her brother. The room responded with endearing eyes and more "Mhms", and then the leader again used the anecdote to add to the lesson.

When the meeting came to a close, we finished with another prayer, this time not led by the leader, but a younger man in the back who was a lawyer. It was an adlib

prayer, even more powerful than a premeditated one. When the leader inquired if anyone needed praying for, a couple people obliged, but the young man in the back had the most memorable one.

He asked that we pray for the church. After all, they would be losing a few people, it seemed. Once he finished, one of the younger women blurted out.

“Well I think we’re going to be just fine,” she said with contradicting uncertainty in her voice. The leader nervously laughed and just responded with “Alright, alright. Well thank you all for coming out.”

I was given context to the final call to pray afterward. The leader’s wife, who worked at the University, had been appointed as a dean in a college in Virginia. At the end of the year, he would be leaving with her to move out east. *What a loss*, I thought. It was clear how much he meant to them.

During the discussion, I couldn’t help but wish that I were religious. Not only did I want to be a part of this supportive group, but I also wanted to believe everything that they believed. Afterward, people came up to me, asking me to come to a service.

“Those are really fun,” the first woman I met told me.

Once I got home and watched videos on the church's Facebook feed, I was convinced that was the case, and I also felt comfortable about my claim—black church is more fun.

After the discussion, everyone stood up, but no one really left. They stuck around, asking about each other's children, talking about the nice weather. The man who led the final prayer rushed to the other room to grab me a pamphlet for more information on the church.

As I walked out of the church into the first nice day of the calendar year, I felt like I was leaving something special. If I wasn't graduating, I thought, I might start going to Bethel A.M.E regularly, whether I ever became a Christian or not.

## Epilogue

On my walk home from the Bethel A.M.E Church I felt warm. I had a wonderful time there, but nothing they discussed in relation to Jesus Christ resonated with me. I enjoyed my experience going to that church, so much so that I would go back regularly if I could, without buying into any of the religion attached to it.

Of course, there are religious ideas on my journey that I welcomed. Be kind. Love thy neighbor. Better yourself. All of these ideals are usually present in faith, no matter what religion or denomination. But when Roger Charley told me he became a religious leader because he didn't want to be Christ's spit, I was not persuaded. When the group sang "Oh! Great Is Our God" before that in unison, however, I relished in it.

On that ten-minute walk from Bethel back to my apartment, I thought about the disturbing thoughts that haunt every living human—*one day we're going to die*. What's with that? If a person believes in an afterlife, they're comforted. I've always been envious of that belief. But for someone who isn't sure, even for believers who still wonder what awaits in the future, the best thing to do is be around people.

When you're amongst friends or loved ones, you focus on that. You focus on shared experiences, and if nothing else, the one thing that you all have in common—your

humanness. Part of being a human is pondering this fear, and for some, conquering it.

This is the same reason that Khaled's story—the vice president of the Muslim Student Association—struck a chord in me. A man who had snipers on his own home in Syria, and was forced to flee, needed to be reassured by his faith.

At the Hillel House, I was originally skeptical by how little the group seemed to care about the religious service involved with the Passover dinner. They seemed to be there to tell their parents they were there, or simply to drink the wine and talk with friends. Later, though, I challenged myself to reconsider the night. Why did it matter that they only wanted to be amongst friends on that Friday night for a dinner they'd participated in their entire lives? I surely wanted to be with my friends on a Friday night, albeit with no religious implications.

It reminded me of what Diana Fritz Cates told me at the beginning of my journey. Until you immerse yourself within a culture, within a religion, and think like they do, you will dismiss it. That's what I had done at times. But it's how people grow up, and what makes them comfortable, that drives them to follow a religion.

Whether their religion is worth having faith in is irrelevant. That's something I came to grips with, and it was hard. But I understand when you follow a religion from birth; it's hard to have someone dispute your truth. It's disrupting what makes you

feel comfortable as a human. It's why Jo Vitale flew to the University of Iowa to reassure Christian Iowans that they weren't inherently sexist for following the Bible. Although I disagreed with her argument, I understand why she'd reach.

As I was sitting listening to a passionate discussion about Jesus Christ in the same room that housed runaway and freed slaves 150 years ago, I wished I believed what the members of the Bethel A.M.E church believed. That would have made the experience even better. But it didn't negate my experience. Because when I stood up to leave, and others grabbed me gently by the arm to say thanks for coming, I felt better about being a human, and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that.

But maybe I'll still be Jesus' spit. That, I don't know.