

I was not raised in a religious household, and for several years in my adolescence harbored a strong disrespect for the concept. However, I have come to realize that, ridiculous as some religious stories may be, the true beauty in the tales lies in the comfort they bring to their followers. I found that the concept that brought me the strongest sense of spirituality was not anyone one religion itself, but the faith each religion spawned. Tales of people brought to heroism, self-salvation, and selfless kindness by the thought of their God made my heart swell.

I found myself specifically interested in physical places of worship. My aim was to create a representation of the warm home I have found in the faith of others. In exploring Omnism, the belief that each religion is “true” for all intents and purposes, my thoughts were almost childlike - I’d always pictured a scene of each deity gathered in a jolly haven, discussing their followers and perhaps even things that had nothing to do with religion at all. I painted my deities cooperatively, lightheartedly - religion has never been a topic of great severity to me, considering its purpose of goodwill.

In the end, I concluded that place of worship did indeed matter in religion beyond community and a location for prayer. In declaring something a place, we set it apart from its surroundings. By doing so we are able to capture the history that has occurred in that location, creating a figurative bridge in time and connecting us to our predecessors.

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I am a deeply religious person, if only due to my respect for the concept of faith. This personally-explorative narrative will delve into the fundamental necessities of faith, as well as discuss the importance of location in human spirituality. These studies will eventually answer my essential question: What is the significance of physical place of worship in a religious practice?

The subtle influence of Catholicism was present in my youth not due to my parents' religious affiliations - that is, they had none - but because of the gifts of my paternal grandparents. One of my favorite films as a very young child was the VeggieTales' *Jonah*, an agricultural retelling of the iconic Biblical tale in which God's pretentious prophet (here portrayed as a stalk of asparagus) learns the repercussions of intolerance. The unquestioned presence of God in the rudimentarily-animated film never struck any sort of chord with me - at least, not that I was aware of. Even so, I liked the songs and the film's edible anti-hero, so I watched it on repeat whenever we went to visit said grandparents at their home in Tucson.

Back home in Wisconsin were my books, which brought me just as much entertainment as any talking vegetables could. The usual fare of children's picture books were my particular favorite; piles of the skinny hardcovers could be found in stacks by my bedside each morning. But a stranger tome I once found my little head buried in was an illustrated children's Bible, another gift from my grandparents. Every few pages, one could flip to a huge swath of color and light, a pastel painting of the unforgiving Middle Eastern deserts upon which the book's protagonists walked.

The morning after I read through the whole of the children's Bible for the first time, I felt a strange need to tell my parents, inform them of the divergence I'd taken from their agnostic upbringing. They weren't angry, of course. They even offered to take me to church one day, if I so desired. But for whatever reason, I never took them up on the offer. I felt nervous about being a minority in my family, the only one that willingly prayed and assumed there was a white-robed God watching over me from somewhere up above. The presence of a higher power just felt natural.

Flash forward to fifth grade. I was in perpetual conflict with a boy named Thomas, and my loyal friends and I would pick at the things we hated about him, reproach the things he liked (even if we'd had no previous problem with them). Thomas liked the writings of Shaw, the pretentious stewball; I immediately decided that I preferred Shakespeare. All was superficial and meaningless until the day two of my friends heard Thomas mention his devout Catholicism. They criticized his belief for its supposed stupidity, and I, susceptible to peer pressure and easily convinced, agreed. After all, Thomas was a moronic weakling. If he believed in a God and the stories of the Bible, they couldn't have been true. I'd been misguided, I decided. The world in which I lived certainly had no presiding power over it - if so, that made Thomas wrong, and Thomas being wrong was ideal in my fierce fifth grade mind.

I spent upwards of four years in a haze of judgemental atheism. Any mention of religion made my blood boil with a feeling of defensive superiority; even my best friend at the time, a born-and-raised Catholic, was not free of my internalized contempt. The argument of Evolution vs. Creationism set me on violent rants regarding the pure *blindness* of the religious, and I laughed at the memory of my naively faithful days.

It wasn't until freshman year that a game changer came around, ready to sit patiently and wait for my mind to catch up. My brother introduced me to *The Book of Mormon*, a crass musical about the caricatures of two typical American Mormon boys and their comedic journey to a poor Ugandan village. I liked the idea from the get-go, even if all I knew of the story was formulated

from the soundtrack, and what my brother had told me - a Broadway comedy that mocked religion? What could be better?

I was rather shocked to find, upon finally getting to see the show for myself, that *The Book of Mormon's* intent was not to mock religion at all, but rather, to compliment its power. The show's conclusion features tender commentary on the fact that, however ridiculous some of the Mormon's stories may seem, their purpose lies in the comfort they bring to their followers.

"It doesn't matter if the stories are made up or not," the protagonist says. "That isn't the point."

I found myself made very emotional by this line: never had I been so struck by an epiphanous thought, and certainly never by way of such a peculiar vehicle. I wouldn't have expected to regain a respect for religion from the writers of *South Park*. But sure enough, the moment I left Stone and Parker's Tony Award-winning show, I knew that I'd been looking at religion from the wrong lens entirely. I was filled with a new feeling, a feeling of *faith* - and it wasn't in a God of my own. I found myself in love with the comfort that religion, no matter how outlandish, brought to others, especially lovably flawed characters - it was an indirect sort of spirituality. To connect on a religious level with a work of fiction was a skill I wanted to develop further, and more personally - that was how *Cling* came to be.

It was the end of my freshman year, just ten months after the fateful viewing of *The Book of Mormon*. I was in writing mode, having just dropped a novel-in-the-works due to its convoluted plot. In gym class one day, a new idea, a potential synopsis, sprung to mind - and these were the words I repeated over and over to whoever would listen that day:

"A super religious blind guy drags his super secular best friend on a pilgrimage in the hopes of gaining vision."

Even in its first few hours of conception, I felt passionate about the idea. This novel was going to succeed; it would be an ode to my religious journey.

Cling's stars became projections of myself, over the course of its transcription. The narrator, Michael, was intended to be representative of my relationship with religion, and how it had grown. Once a Muslim of unshakeable faith, Michael's spirituality would be destroyed, regained, shaken, and illuminated over the course of the novel. He would find peaceful relations with his perception of "God" in the end, just as I had in my own life.

But as the book and my religious research for it progressed, I found my present self relating more in a spiritual sense with Jonah, the book's protagonist. Jonah was an Omnist - one who believes all religions to be, in some sense, true. And not long after I decided to place Jonah in the practice of finding faith in faith itself, I too realized that the Gods I'd come to worship were those of the world around me. I borrow from others; I believe the world to be shared amongst deities from all different religions. Seeing the faith of others brings me comfort and reverence, be said others a cast of vegetables, a couple of Mormons, or a pair of thinly-disguised alter egos.

Michael and Jonah traveled to nine different places of worship throughout the Eurasian continent, each one acting as a checkpoint of their journey towards both literal and figurative sight. As their author, I traveled alongside them, spending hours at a time gazing at photographs and floorplans of these churches and mosques and finding myself slowly falling in love with the buildings. Omnism moved from a school of thought to a legitimate religion; I connected with each of the places of worship, finding myself fascinated by their physical and astral significance.

Now, seven months after the completion of my authoral journey and the drafting of the religious manifesto that is *Cling*, I have decided to create a place of worship of my own.

What is the point of constructing a place of worship? What is the significance of a building in a world-transcending concept such as faith? For my first attempt to seek answers to these questions, I decided to consult the obvious - a person of faith, a regular attendee of a place of worship.

You might recall me crediting Mormonism as the church that resurrected my respect for religion. This, aside from their obvious role in the musical that brought about the passion it took to reclaim my faith, was due to their participation in the tentative exploration I conducted of the parameters of organized religion. You see, the Latter-Day Saints have a website dedicated to answering any and all questions a person may have, whether or not they're outsiders in the church. I surfed through the inquiries on controversial topics, each replied to with eloquence and loving acceptance. In response to a question about sexuality, one Mormon informed their asker, "You should never be ashamed because of things beyond your control. If your same-sex attraction does continue into adulthood, those feelings don't make you any less worthy, any less valiant as a member of the church, as long as you try your best to follow God's commandments. Sometimes we do things that rightfully make us feel guilty, but we should never be ashamed of who we are, meaning those aspects of ourselves that are independent of our intentional choices" (All About Mormons.com).

Needless to say, such an open-minded response brought me to trust the characteristically-cheery church. I contacted one of their online representatives through the LDS website's chat feature - his name was Benson - and asked what the personal significance of his temple was. Benson had these words for me:

"The church is a place that I know I can go to feel the [Holy Spirit], and to know that I can be with others who believe in the same thing and are all working to live according to what God would have us do."

Clearly, Benson's relationship with his place of worship was one based on community. I'd assumed from the beginning of my research process that my searches would yield many preachings about the community of organized religion, but I wanted to look past what a place of worship holds in a literal sense. I have always held a deep reverence for physical locations, and my desire to create a personalized place of worship sprung from that. So after thanking Benson for the kind response, I moved on to further explorations, namely towards physical locations at their base value.

Civilizing Terrains: Mounds and Mesas, by William R. Morrish, features miniature blueprints of natural holy places, lines that mark cardinal directions towards Heaven and Hell, and paragraphs of small, cryptic print.

"The naming of the land," Morrish informs us, "elevates the community above the ordinary place of the soil and dirt onto a cosmic plateau close to Heaven." He then goes on to explain the concept of *centering*: "Centering defines the spatial realm within which an individual or culture defines its realm of influence and understanding. Centering oneself in the land initiates the building process" (Morrish).

I gathered from the rich writings of *Civilizing Terrains* that the declaration of a location was integral to its sanctity. After much time spent reflecting internally on that concept, I came to a rather cathartic hypothesis: I tend to hold locations in great esteem. They spur memories by merely existing; they are physical packages of thought and reminiscence. I propose that a physical place is a transcendence of our perception of time, if only due to the infinite quantity of memories and experiences from different eras and realities that exist there. By declaring something a *place* - centering, in the words of William R. Morrish - we are able to set foot in all

of the ocean of overlapping time. Are religions not based on worshipping a deity or idea that existed long, long ago, or in another reality, and connecting with them? A place of worship is a figurative and literal bridge.

Omnism, fundamentally, is a rather self-contradictory school of thought - or legitimate practice, in my case. A term coined by Philip J. Bailey in his 1839 poem *Festus*, Omnism is simply the belief that all religions hold truth, and that their deities and geneses coexist in a sort of multiverse-style harmony. In my childlike mind, Jesus and the Buddha sit side-by-side, each tending to their own crop of moral followers, guiding them to do good for themselves and others. Better yet - they may even offer each other advice now and then. But for the most part, the deities that people believe in are the ruling figures over their realities.

Omnism, to me, is both a religion of dedication and one of disconnect. On the one hand, I do not consider the countless Gods and prophets I believe in to be *mine* - but on the other hand, I do believe in them, which technically makes me a follower of each. I am not a member of any of the churches I've come to love, but I float neutrally between them, appreciating and gaining strength from the faith that their legitimate members are given in their practices. It's not necessarily a worship of a deity, but rather, a worship of faith itself - which is why I believe that parameters can be set on the pieces of religions I choose to see truth in. Any rule that targets an innocent group, devalues other religions - the obsolescence of those is legitimate, because they're not the component of religions from which faith springs. *Faith* is trust in that which we cannot prove; faith is the willingness to courageously seek moral betterment, emotional and intellectual enlightenment, and to find ways to bring comfort to others. Missionaries are often frowned upon by the nonreligious population, but their concept captures the necessity of faith that is worthy of worship: the desire to share what brings you comfort in the darkest times with those around you. The human race allows its perception of religions to be obscured by corruption within the organizations, the misinterpreted beliefs that create intolerance - but by looking at the fundamentals of what faith itself can bring to people, the beauty in religion becomes clear. I want to create a place of worship that pays tribute to the comfort I have found in that which brings comfort to so many others - I want to create a place of worship that worships faith.

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