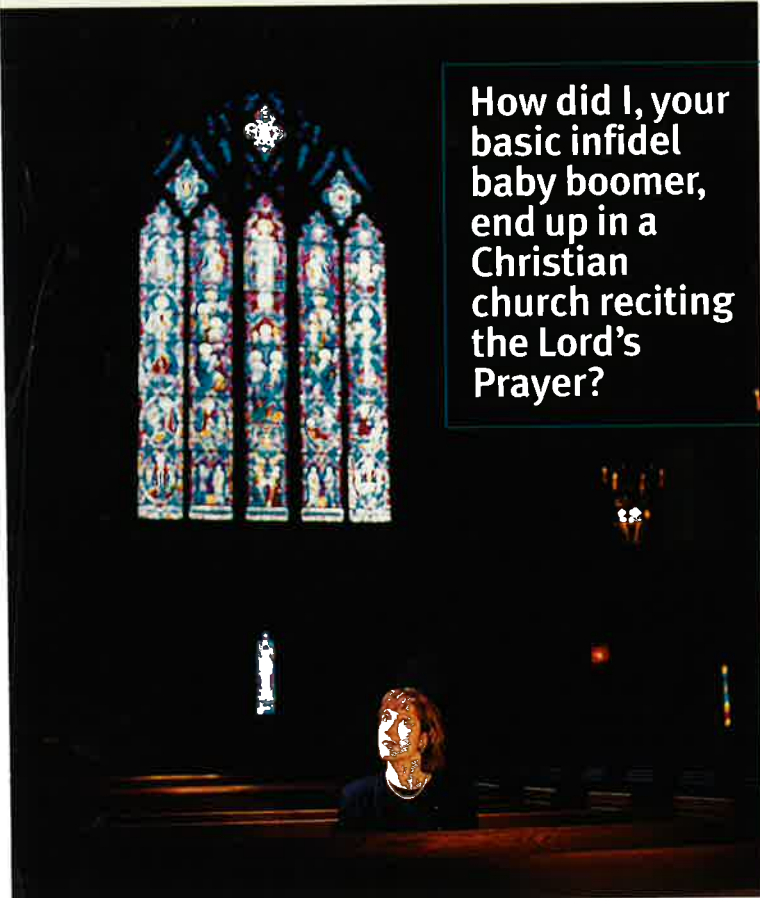


Finding My Religion

BY MICHELLE STACEY

At a dinner party I attended recently someone told this tale: Her son called from college to say he had news for her. "He's gay," she thought, unshocked, resigned—there were worse things. "Mom, I'm Christian," he said. Horrors! What on Earth would she find to talk to him about? Laughter all around, including mine. I knew as I laughed that I was being both completely true and utterly false.

I am going on my third year as a bona fide Christian, and I still can hardly bring myself to say the word. I was brought up to regard with scorn anyone overtly religious, devout, faithful—any term describing belief in the unbelievable. The words *Jesus Christ* never crossed my lips except as the occasional curse. But now a strange new dimension has opened in my life, and I have landed on the other side.



How did I, your basic infidel baby boomer, end up in a Christian church reciting the Lord's Prayer?

I am not offering this information in order to defend, promote or explain it—I can't—but rather in a spirit of bemusement. How did I, your basic infidel baby boomer, end up in a mainstream Christian church almost every week reciting the Lord's Prayer? Of all the fashion dilemmas I have faced, I never thought choosing a baptism outfit would crop up.

When I caught the spirituality bug, it was not in a bohemian tradition suited to my upbringing but in the most uncool way. While *Time* and *Newsweek* chronicle the national search for the sacred and friends learn Zen medita-

tion or reclaim the ancient mystical roots of Judaism, I'm in a church that can be traced to Calvinism, singing "How Great Thou Art." This can be embarrassing. Not only is Christianity kind of square, but in recent years its image has been tainted by the bigotry of a fanatic minority.

My first impulses to get inside a church were, I imagine, similar to those of other nonbelievers who have looked for a spiritual dimension to things. I think we all want to believe in something—some order, some wisdom beyond our own. Early on I told myself I would give my children the choice to believe in God before the world told them it wasn't so. I soon admitted that I was going to church for myself, and that belief is always an option, even for the most cynical.

By my mid-thirties, the hard edges I had so admired as a child began to look rather threatening. My parents were reaching 60, three of my four grandparents had died, and when my daughter came into the world exactly one month before my grandfather left it, the proximity of those two events seemed to underscore the implacable balance of things. Her birth, and later my son's, marked both my first exposure to true miraculousness and the first unequivocal evidence of my own mortality. In the two years after my daughter's birth I thought about death at least once a day.

In the midst of these newly perceived limitations I sought comfort. One spring I found myself simultaneously reading a book about Zen and slipping into the local Presbyterian church for Sunday services, where I discovered echoes of Zen ideas—acceptance, forgiveness, taking responsibility for one's experience. At times the literalness and paternalism of "God, the Father" and "Jesus Christ, our Savior" grated on me. At other moments I was surprised to sudden tears by the words in prayers and benedictions: "Know that we are no longer strangers and exiles"; "You can never stumble beyond the reach of His everlasting arms to catch you."

I tried to express some of these gropings toward belief to a few people close to me, and found that ideas that had clung together in my head dissolved like ether when said aloud. I was relieved to read in *A History of God* by Karen Armstrong that God's indescribability has been a given for aeons. If He (or "It") were describable, He wouldn't be God.

I'm beginning to understand that what matters is not the literal reality of God but the reality of how thinking about Him (or Her, or It) has changed my life. This thought process is what brings the unhip world of Christianity into the arena with less traditional forms of spirituality. It's about the ritual of dedicating time—in my case, Sundays—to an inner existence that has nothing to do with jobs or money or self-improvement but has to do instead with our small but resonant place in the world, the pressing difficulties of living with ourselves and others and the loss that inevitably follows love. What we question—Do crystals have powers? Is there life after death? Is God there when we speak to Him?—is ultimately a mystery. I think that's probably the point. ♣

MICHELLE STACEY is the author of *Consumed: Why Americans Love, Hate, and Fear Food* (Simon & Schuster).