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From Fundamentalism to Freedom

From 1970 until 1987 I was involved with a fundamentalist Christian group known as The Way International Biblical Research and Teaching ministry. One important point that its founder, Dr. Victor Paul Wierwille, taught was that the United States was a Christian nation founded on the Bible. In 1985, questions I began to ask concerning how we got the Bible, how translations are produced, and the history of early Christianity, brought me to the realization that much of what I had been taught in The Way could not be so. My questioning continued for two years until I disassociated myself with the group in 1987. In January 1988, I took a college course about United States government which began to show me the error in The Way's teaching that this country is a Christian nation. I learned that the founding fathers were not Christians, as I had previously believed. They did not claim this country for Christianity or any other religion, but rather were men forming a government --a state that allowed for individual freedoms including freedom of religion and worship. I realized I lacked an understanding of the very first phrase of the First Amendment of the Constitution, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion" (Cummins, Wise 713). This forbids Congress from making any religion the official faith of this country; however, I had been convinced that this country was founded on Biblical principles and was God's country destined to lead the world. Why did a group like The Way International teach this?

Not only did I want to understand why this ministry propounded this idea but more importantly for my own growth, I wanted to examine why I had believed it. I felt that in order to be a good citizen of this country, I needed to understand this aspect of myself. Someone told me it was Winston Churchill who said, "The further I look back, then the further I may gaze ahead." So I wanted a good look back at my life so I could move ahead with more confidence. For me, this look included a study of fundamentalism, the founding of this nation, and my belief in The Way's ideologies.

The Way and Me - 1970-1987

The Way International has its roots in Protestantism and specifically fundamentalism. I first took The Way's foundational class, Power for Abundant Living (PFAL), in December 1970. I was eighteen years old, idealistic, and ready to commit to a cause I believed was "of the Lord." The Way's founder, Dr. Victor Paul Wierwille, made promises of a Bible without contradictions that makes God's will known to us, and shows us how to have an abundant life every day. He claimed that he taught the accuracy of the Bible. He even went so far as to claim that God audibly told him He'd teach him the Word (the Bible) like it had not been known since the first century.

I was not raised as a Protestant. For the first 17 years of my life I was a Roman

Catholic with little Bible knowledge. In catholic school we were taught Church doctrine and traditions. For instance, I was told we were the one, true, holy and apostolic church with the Pope representing Christ on earth. The Roman church was my ultimate authority on life and faith. In high school, however, I made many Protestant friends who believed differently than I did. One of them invited me to a Young Life meeting, which is an interdenominational Christian youth group. It encourages Bible reading and a close relationship with Jesus Christ. My interest in learning what the Bible really said was ignited there, so by the time I met someone from The Way, I was ready to take their class. I did not realize, however, that I was getting involved in Fundamentalism, a kind of Protestantism. I left the Catholic Church and unknowingly entered a sub-group of American Protestantism called Fundamentalism.

The nature of Protestantism is schismatic. Over centuries, it has divided and subdivided into thousands of sects and denominations. One consequence of this has been a blurring of the lines that separate its more responsible or conventional elements from its extremist fringe. For example, one might live next door to a church which has advocated an unprovoked nuclear attack on the Soviet Union in the name of Christ and country, or which teaches that Americans” are God’s chosen people, and yet remain totally ignorant of this curious situation. After all, it is like any other church when viewed from the outside (Clabaugh 1).

Although I don’t recall any advocating of “nuking the commies”, I did hear many teachings promoting America as God’s country kept free by the guarantees of the Constitution so that the accuracy of The Word (the Bible), which The Way believes it teaches, could be spread throughout the country. This would bring the nation back to God and the principles of the Bible it was founded on. These ideas were expressed especially around the time of the Bicentennial in 1976, and as a result I felt God called me to help save America. From what? From Satan’s influences, whether they were as obvious as Communism, or a subtle as inaccurate teachings by other Christian groups. I did this by teaching fellowships and running PFAL classes. Dr. Wierwille was determined in this mission and so was I.

The United States of America is the central battlefield in a spiritual warfare being waged between the sons of God empowered and enlightened by His Word and spiritual wickedness from on high...we have been appointed and commissioned by God to carry the light of His Word to a nation desperately in need (Wierwille, The Way Magazine 1974).

One reason America was in need, was that it had turned from God’s way of doing things. “So we in the good old U.S.A. have been caught up in the efforts to replace our American Christian foundation with a man-centered philosophy” (Wierwille “By The Way”). I wanted to be part of the solution to the problems of this country so I would often go “witnessing”-- talking to people about God and trying to sign them up for the PFAL class. At times, when I did not witness faithfully at the mall, for example, but went shopping instead, I would leave the stores with a nagging guilty conscience. I felt I had let God down, was not bold enough to show people the truth about life from the Bible, and therefore didn’t really love them. Then I would get my Way Magazine in the mail and read an article by Dr. Wierwille, like this one for

instance.

How tremendous when we realize that we as God's sons can rise up to be faithful stewards and carry His Word and the prosperity it brings across our nation. Not only will this deliver our country, but it will provide a light of hope for the whole world. We have the God-given opportunity and responsibility to bring light to our nation. Let us be as Joseph in the Old Testament. Listen to God and faithfully carry out His Word. (Wierwille, *The Way Magazine* 1976, 21).

After reading that, I only buried my guilt deeper and rationalized my inadequate feelings; at my young age and inexperience, I certainly didn't question the validity of Dr. Wierwille's statements. I tried to convince myself that I was more of a teacher to the people who were already in The Way, rather than one who could reach people who were not. Instead of challenging the assertion Dr. Wierwille made, I accepted it and felt like a failure. I have talked to several friends who have left The Way and they expressed similar feelings of guilt for not living up to our responsibilities as perfectly as we were supposed to.

Why The Way promoted a Christian America

In trying to discover why Dr. Wierwille held these beliefs, I have had a few interesting talks with my friend, Margaret Lansberry, who left The Way around the same time I did. She had worked at The Way's headquarters in New Knoxville, Ohio for many years. When I asked her why Dr. Wierwille promoted the "God and Country" ideas, she said that he started it in the seventies, a few years before the Bicentennial Celebration. He came across a book, *The Light and the Glory*, which had a major effect on him. Many of the Way's leaders began teaching it in classes designed to show the importance of America in God's plan to get The Word over the world. This was the goal of The Way Ministry. In practice, it meant promoting the PFAL class and running Way fellowships in every country. She also told me that a staff person, who had worked closely with Dr. Wierwille, said that before this time in the 1970's most people on staff did not even vote. She remarked that the term "founded on" seems to be the key in understanding what people refer to when they say this country is Christian. In other words, when someone says this country was "founded on the Bible," they are usually appealing to the Puritan and other Christian influences of the early settlers, not to what the Constitution sets forth separating church and state (Lansberry).

Since I had never read *The Light and the Glory*, I found a copy and read the authors' basic premise. Our basic presupposition is that God had a definite and extremely demanding plan for America ... First, God had put a special 'call' on this country and the people who were to inhabit it. In the virgin wilderness of America, God was making His most significant attempt since ancient Israel to create a new Israel of people living in obedience to the laws of God through faith in Jesus Christ (Marshall, Manuel 22).

As I read along, I wondered how the authors could reconcile these statements with the First Amendment. They feel the early settlers had a correct understanding of the will of God for America, and that this tradition is still somehow alive today. In

Christians on the Right, I found further evidence of this way of thinking.

It was a God-given opportunity to do what they (the Puritans) had never been able to accomplish in the Old World: to establish a society which would be built entirely on their understanding of God's laws as revealed in the Bible (Kater 22).

The Way held similar beliefs. I realized I had been in a group which tried to indoctrinate others with its own idea of God's will just as those mentioned above. I saw that I had believed The Way's interpretation and understanding of the Bible should be accepted by everyone. Where was the freedom to choose in that? During my years in The Way, I did think we should be and were examples to the world of what it means for Christians to live together in love. We were convinced our goal was attainable. We felt so strongly about this that one of our aims was to influence decisions made by our government. Dr. Wierwille was very adamant about this. "Let us put men and women into office who stand for the principles of God's Word and let us rally to their support...get involved in the outreach of God's Word or see America die. (Wierwille, *The Way Magazine* 1975. 30). I admitted we had just been reenacting what the Puritans had done long ago.

Understanding Fundamentalism

In order to better understand The Way, I began studying Fundamentalism to learn about its way of interpreting the Bible. In James Barr's outstanding book, *Fundamentalism*, he paints a good picture of this kind of Protestantism, and I experienced all of them in The Way:

- a) A very strong emphasis on the inerrancy of the Bible, the absence from it of any sort of error.
- b) A strong hostility to modern theology and the methods, results, and implications of modern critical study of the Bible.
- c) An assurance that those who do not share their religious viewpoint are not really "true Christians" at all (1).

Another friend of mine who left The Way told me about a book called *The Roots of Fundamentalism*. This book puts together the history of the movement in the United States, with information about how this idea of a Christian nation came about.

Stemming from the Puritan conviction that the colonists were a chosen people and their commonwealth a 'city set upon a hill', reinforced by the War for Independence and the potentialities of the West, Americans vied with each other in producing grander and more glorious prospects for the United States. As early as the eighteenth century, the concept of America's destiny was influencing American theology, Jonathan Edwards himself leading the way as the first postmillennial theologian in United States history. The leaders of the largest Protestant denominations faced with the challenge of evangelizing the pagan west, and reforming the moral life of the nation without the aid of the state, plunged into their work with optimism about their efforts. And, as this campaign began to succeed, their confidence and optimism found expressed in no theme more common than millennialism (Sandeen 43).

Millennialism, from which Fundamentalism sprang, is a belief in the imminent return of Christ to gather his church out from the world (XV). It is supposed to be preceded by certain events (which ones they are seem to be different from one Fundamentalist group to another), found in Daniel, Revelation, the Gospels and some epistles in the Bible. This belief caused me to think Christ might return any moment. As a result, I felt pressured to win people to my brand of Christianity so they could be free. Since I felt that Christ is the only one who can set men free, and I believed knew I Christ accurately, the urgency of saving others became my life's focus.

A Fundamentalist named McIntire said, "It is our Christian nation that has given freedom to the world." He does not separate democracy from Christianity. In the book, *Christians on the Right*, where that quote originates, the author remarks about Mr. McIntire, "How he applies this to the American Indians or to the slaves owned by those Bible-believing founding fathers remains in doubt" (Kater 20). I admit I did not stop to think about that point when I was in The Way. In fact I cannot remember hearing anything about the deplorable and inhuman treatment that early Christian settlers perpetrated on Native Americans in this country.

So I learned that Fundamentalism has been influential in this country for a long time, and there have been many people like me who have been drawn into this movement. "Since 1950, the Fundamentalist movement, now calling itself Evangelicalism and rallying behind national leaders such as Billy Graham, has manifested an unexpected vitality and appeal" (Sandeem IX).

The Early Colonists and Religion

After I understood a little of how The Way promoted a "Christian America" and I learned some of the history of Fundamentalism, I looked at what my government text said about the attitudes the early settlers had regarding church and state. I was surprised at what I found. I had always believed they all came here for religious freedom, but there was much disunity and terrible religious persecution going on before the Constitution became the law of the land.

Nine of the thirteen colonies had an established, official state church. Although the colonists had, in many cases, fled Europe to find religious freedom, they were often intolerant of religious dissent. The Massachusetts Bay Colony executed four Quakers who had returned there after being banished for their religious convictions. In Virginia, the penalty for breaking the Sabbath for the third time was death (Cummings, Wise 33).

From another source I learned more.

Americans who were not members of an established church objected to having their taxes used to support a religion other than their own. They regarded the union of church and government as improper because it gave one group of people an advantage over another. Also, it allowed public officials to interfere in religious matters, and leaders of the official church to meddle in the affairs of government. The first Amendment forbade Congress to set up an official church or otherwise to favor one religion over another (Fincher 21).

I used to hear references about religious freedom while I was with The Way, but it

preached in the context of The Way's freedom to exist being threatened in some way. I rarely heard any respect for other people's rights to the same freedom I had to choose my beliefs; it was hard to respect others' faiths because I thought mine was the accurate one, the one God had especially designated to represent His true message on earth. Obviously, that attitude only bred intolerance in me. I looked down my nose at other people as if they were choosing to eat garbage while I was eating steak. Sometimes I felt sorry for them--how righteous that made me feel!

I was on a very narrow road, blinded to the fact I was doing just what I used to do as a Catholic--think I was in the only true Church. Now that I have branched out, trying to be tolerant of others' views, I'm grateful to live in a country where I can do it without being hung for it; I can choose to worship or not in a church, or simply explore and learn as I am doing now. I owe this freedom to the founding fathers, though some would have me thank the Pilgrims.

The Founding Fathers

What exactly did the shapers of our government think about religion; how did they provide for it in the Constitution? Were they Christians? They were aware they were breaking with pious tradition of former state documents, such as the Mayflower Compact, that referred to God and the Christian faith. These ambitious men were of course, the children of European culture, and Christianity was the dominant religion of that culture. But, they were also progressive children of the Age of Reason, of enlightenment, of skepticism, and of burgeoning science. They were in the main, deists (McKown 14).

Deists are rational thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries who held that the course of nature demonstrated the existence of God, while they rejected formal religion and claims of supernatural revelation. Voltaire, J.J. Rousseau, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson were deists (Columbia Encyclopedia). Being deists, however, did not mean the founding fathers were against religion or Christianity.

They saw no reason why religion, freely adopted by individual citizens, should not flourish and prosper under a secular government that rigorously restrained itself from intruding into the affairs of conscience and the free exercise of religion...they left no room for religion to intrude into the affairs of secular government than they left for government to intrude into the fancies and other affairs of faith (McKown 15).

Rousseau, the French writer who influenced the writers of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, believed strongly in the natural rights of human beings received at birth. 'The right to life freedom and possessions' is a way of stating the claim Rousseau made for the human race...Voltaire, who also influenced the founding fathers, believed in freedom of thought and worshipping freely without punishment (Fincher 13). What they provided for me is a country where I can decide whether or not to attend a church service or stay home Sunday mornings. They had seen the consequences of official religions in the different states, and resolved to separate church and government in the Constitution which bound the states together into one nation. The phrase, "separation of church and state" is found in the Federalist Papers, which are a series

of letters written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay to explain and bring about ratification of the Constitution. James Madison and Thomas Jefferson were strong advocates of the Bill of Rights, which without it, some states were not willing to ratify the Constitution. The entire First Amendment reads:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people to peacefully assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. (Cummings, Wise 713).

“The free exercise clause forbids the government from setting up a national religion” (Mabie 61), therefore, if someone believes America is Christian, as I did because Dr. Wierwille taught it, then it is his or her belief, not a statement that can be proven with evidence that carries any authority over the Constitution, which is the law of the land in America. The Bible certainly doesn’t say America is Christian, though some would have us believe even that.

Religion herein (in the First Amendment) is treated generically, as it were, with no specific religion or religious tradition being singled out (McKown 14).

In fact, George Washington stated in The Treaty of Tripoli of 1815, that the United States is not founded on Christianity. The first phrases read., “As the government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion; as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility of the Muslims...” (McKown 15). It was hard for me to argue with the first President of the United States who was also the president of the Constitutional Convention.

In Joseph Campbell’s book, *The Power of Myth*, I gained more insight into what men like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin believed.

This is the first nation in the world that was ever established on the basis of reason instead of simply warfare. These were eighteenth century deists, these gentlemen. Over here (on the dollar bill) we read, ‘In God We Trust.’ But this was not the god of the Bible. These men did not believe in a fall. They did not think the mind of man was cut off from God. Reason puts you in touch with God (Flowers 25).

I talked to another friend, who also left The Way, about his reaction to Dr. Wierwille saying the founders of this country were inspired by God to write what they wrote. He told me he had read a lot of history and knew about them being deists, but when Dr. Wierwille said those facts (historical records) were forgeries, he figured Dr. Wierwille knew what he was talking about. I’ve also talked with two girlfriends who had both been in The Way for at least 10 years and they told me that because they did not know anything to the contrary, as I did not either, they saw no reason to question Dr. Wierwille’s interpretation of history. We took it for granted he was right.

In short, a great many of us cannot tell the difference between the pilgrim fathers who came to the New World for religious reasons to live in British colonies, and the founding fathers who, more than one hundred years later, created a revolutionary new government (McKown 13).

Why I Believed in a “Christian America”

I used to feel especially chosen by God to be part of His plan for America to be His country even when I didn't try and convince other people of it as I thought I should. If I had allowed myself to think, as I do now, that America is a nation among many on the face of the earth shaped by its political decisions, it would have been too threatening for me. I was young, and was very ignorant of politics and the ways of the world. I wanted an authority telling me that God was on my side and vice versa; that belief made me feel safe and fed into my youthful sense of immortality. I even believed that there could not possibly be a nuclear war until Christ returned and gathered his people out of the world first. If I had thought, “What if there is a war with Way believers on both sides, which side would God favor to win?” I would not have had an answer. It was just too complicated to deal with. Now, I feel I can face the uncertainty of life on this planet and still go on purposefully. I have made my peace with the fact that man is imperfect and there can be no utopia on earth. I think part of the reason I clung to these beliefs so long was due to my feeling I should be committed to what I perceived as God's will.

Growing up as a Catholic in a small town and attending Catholic school for eight years, I developed a strong loyalty to the Roman Church. I later seemed to have transferred that loyalty and obedience to authority over to Dr. Wierwille and his Bible teachings, including his certainty of God's blessings on a “Christian America.” He influenced who I voted for, even providing me a bus ride to the local polls to vote for Republican candidates in the early 1970s. Looking back, I see that I had a similar strong authority figure in the Catholic Church -- the Pope. It was his so-called infallibility that gave the church guidance. The Way had its strong leader, a charismatic leader, a fundamentalist, Dr. Wierwille, who I revered.

There can be no doubt that the thought of infallibility provided many believers with a great sense of religious security all through life. In order to deal with the most important and crucial questions, Catholics were given answers which were beyond dispute and hence imparted stability and freedom from anxiety. The dogma of infallibility went a long way towards relieving emotional pressures and softening the impact of reality, as ideologies often do. From a psychological standpoint, the object of belief is secondary, the fact of belief is what counts... people were (are) afraid of uncertainty--and of freedom. (Hasler 277).

The Way provided a shelter from the threatening uncertainties in the world. It is similar, also, to the Christian Right, exemplified by Rev. Jerry Falwell who maintains a black and white world outlook as I used to have.

It (the Christian Right) sees the world as a battleground between two absolutes, God and evil, and Christians know which side they are on. No skirmish holds any ambiguity or room for doubt; all is light and darkness, and the only choice that matters is which side we are on. It is a vision of the world, and of Americans and American Christians in the world, as warriors for the right--and for the Right. It is an image of reality painted with broad strokes and clear alternatives ... it is a way of life which holds out certainty in

exchange for faithfulness (Kater 20).

For me, however, that certainty ripped apart when I outgrew The Way's dogmatic boundaries. I was like a root-bound plant in The Way's small pot of beliefs. Now on the outside looking in, I see that I needed The Way's securities for a time, but that many of them were only dreams not securities at all. Living in America has become a reality I don't want to miss out on because of any misperceptions of it. Although it has its faults as any other nation on earth has, I'd rather live here than anywhere else. I have the freedom to choose my beliefs and continue on in my life. My hunger for a broader perspective of the world has taken me on an adventure in learning that I hope lasts a long time. Joseph Campbell describes very well the stage of life I am enjoying right now.

If you follow your bliss, you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. Wherever you are--if you are following your bliss, you are enjoying that refreshment, that life within you (Flowers 91).

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