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Article

## How I found my Faith ...

**... then lost it, rediscovered it, left it again, joined a revival church, had another reminder from God, escaped from Mormon missionaries, and finally figured out where I belong!**

ARRIVING AT university in October 1995, I somehow found myself at a Bahá'í fireside, quite by accident – and muttered to a friend afterwards that those Bahá'ís seemed like nice people, but I'd never have gone if I'd known it would be "religious". I might not have been a complete atheist at the time, but I was certainly a very uninterested agnostic, from a non-religious family. Religions, as far as I was concerned, were for people who couldn't understand science. There were so many of them in the world, and they didn't agree with one another – how could anyone ever choose one? "Obviously," I thought, "all of them must be wrong."

By the following summer, some of my attitudes had changed. I wasn't so sure any more that science had all the answers, and I felt that something was missing. I didn't discover what that something was until one rainy evening in June; I met my Bahá'í friend in the college courtyard and somehow got into a conversation about God. Finally, here was an explanation of God and religions that made sense to me, and it turned out they could all be right! It seemed that what I'd thought was just my crazy dream of a peaceful, united world was actually shared by over six million people. I couldn't believe it. I asked question after question, and all the answers felt right.

The conversation went on for most of the night, and at about 4 am, my friend asked me what I thought of it all. "If you agree with all that," he told me, "you're a Bahá'í."

"Fine, I'm a Bahá'í, then."

He looked a bit startled, but recovered quickly. "For just a few seconds, you were the newest Bahá'í in the world."

The next morning was one of the best days of my life, meeting members of the Bahá'í community and laughing at the puzzled faces of the ones who'd seen my friend the previous day. They all wondered why he hadn't told them about this new seeker who was about to declare. One of my other college friends asked why I was looking so cheerful all of a sudden, and was sure I was only teasing when I told him the reason. It was a time of one new discovery after another – prayers, the Writings, Feasts, Holy Days, the Fast, teaching projects...

It was after about two years that it all started to go wrong. There were two questions that kept nagging at my mind, and wouldn't go away. The first was, "Why can't women be members of the Universal House of Justice?" The second was, "What's wrong with homosexuality?" Heavily influenced by friends who prided themselves on their liberal views, and on respecting all religions without committing themselves to any of them, I started to rebel mentally against the faith. I still attended Feasts and Holy Days, but deep down, I was losing my Bahá'í identity. I even wrote to the National Spiritual Assembly, requesting that my name be taken off the records, but never quite took the final step of sending it

In June 1999, after finishing my degree, I was offered a job as administrator for an international conference on herbal medicine, to be held in Arusha, Tanzania. I fell in love with Africa, on one hand, and with the eldest son of my host family, on the other. He and his brothers were strong Christians, and invited me to join their church, which was a Pentecostal or "revival" movement. As soon as I entered the church, and heard over a hundred people enthusiastically singing and praising Jesus, a strange feeling came over me. "If only they knew," a voice inside me seemed to say. "If only they knew that Jesus has already returned! The Bahá'í Faith is true!"

I didn't have much success in trying to explain this to the people around me, who thought that the problem was my grasp of Swahili. "I'm a Bahá'í," I told them. "Bahá'ís believe that Jesus has already returned." But they kept on correcting me: "No, no, not has returned, Jesus will return." When they finally accepted that it was an issue of beliefs, not language, they managed to find an English-speaking missionary to show me the error of my ways. It was too much for my already-fragile faith to cope with. I didn't know how to find Bahá'ís in Arusha town, to get the moral support that I needed, and I certainly couldn't ask my host family. In the end, I gave in and joined the church.

Ironically, the revival church took a more extreme position on homosexuality than the Bahá'ís, and the lack of female leaders was still an issue. At the back of my mind, there were even more questions: "what about Bahá'u'lláh, then? If he wasn't a Messenger of God after all, then who...why...how...??" But I ignored them all—it was easier just to get on with life, and I didn't want to risk my relationship by rocking the boat. I got baptised by a family friend, joined a gospel choir, and donated money to a church that announced to its members "God will raise you out of poverty, but if you want to receive, first you must give!" (It didn't occur to me until later that selling salvation was a bit dubious). On meeting a charismatic pastor who was visiting from Dar-es-Salaam, I was told that I was possessed by demons, and was duly exorcised with much shouting and praying in tongues.

The choirmaster's wife ran a small secretarial bureau, and often let me use her computer in exchange for help with some of the typing work. One day, some Seventh Day Adventists came in with a document that they wanted me to type: it was all about the biblical prophecies relating to the end of the world. According to their beliefs, a momentous event—the "cleansing of the holy sanctuary", signifying the beginning of the Last Days—had already occurred in heaven. When? In 1844!

It was too much to be a coincidence, and I knew I had to try again to be a Bahá'í, but I was still attached to my Tanzanian boyfriend. After the conference, he accompanied me back to England, and we lived together in a small apartment in Oxford. We both realised quickly that it wasn't working, but I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to throw him out on the street, wasn't ready to marry him, and felt too ashamed to tell anyone I was a Bahá'í when I wasn't upholding the laws. In the meantime, my boyfriend had discovered the Latter Day Saints, and missionaries were calling at the flat every week to read the Book of Mormon to us both.

It was after the third session of pretending to be interested in Mormonism that I finally decided enough was enough. "I'm a Bahá'í," I told my boyfriend, in tears. "I can't do this any more. I'm tired of pretending. If you don't like it, that's up to you."

"But nobody asked you to pretend anything," he said, surprised. Less than two months later, he left me, although not for religious reasons. At the time, I was devastated, but there was still a part of me that seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. At last, I was free to be whatever I wanted to be, and to talk about the faith to friends without worrying about the huge gap between my deeds and my words.

Since then, I've been a Bahá'í. Not a perfect one—there's no such thing—but, at least, a committed one. I know my various tests have strengthened my faith, and given me a better understanding of Christian spiritual movements. I realised eventually that God

me a better understanding of Christian revival movements. I realised eventually that God has His reasons for giving us particular laws at particular times, and we can't expect to understand them all. In the context of the whole faith, which I didn't want to live without, my questions seemed unimportant in the end.

I've decided to share these stories now, in the hope that they might encourage someone else who's been having doubts about their faith. It seems that often, we're given the impression that declaring is the major turning point in life, and from there it's a one-way street to the Abh Kingdom. But on the back of the February Journal, I read a review of a book called "Falling Into Grace", described as "not so much 'what to do' as how to forgive yourself and try again when you fail to do what you already know needs to be done." I haven't ordered the book yet, but the review reminded me of my own stories and inspired me to write them down. I hope they help someone. I hope the book does, too.

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