Looking for Faith? Here's a Guide to Choosing a Religion.

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My parents ate health food in my youth, in the days before Whole Foods was everywhere, when seeking out even a veggie burger could require entering a subculture as exotic as any obscure religious sect. So it made sense that the vegetarian restaurant we frequented had an attached bookstore that mostly sold religious books and spiritual objects, with a New Age vibe but no doctrinal consistency. You could find crucifixes as well as crystals, Christian mysticism alongside astrological charts, Buddhist self-help and Judaica sharing shelf space with Wiccan texts, Bibles cheek by jowl with copies of "Women Who Run With the Wolves."

My youthful experience wandering in that bookstore of all religions has increasing relevance to where many Americans find themselves today. The long rise of the Nones,

Americans with no religious affiliation, has seemingly reached its limit, and a fascination with the numinous shadows our culture once again. Within the intelligentsia there is a wave of notable conversions and a striking nostalgia for belief.

But secularization has created a cohort with little acquaintance with organized religion, for whom the religious quest can feel a bit like entering a store where every faith has its wares on display.

And for such a seeker, the sheer breadth of those options could be a crucial obstacle to religious commitment. It's one thing to be newly open to the evidence for cosmic design and supernatural possibilities. But it's harder, in a pluralist society, to pick just one religious option as more likely than all the others to be true.

For the atheist, this difficulty is often invoked as an argument for general disbelief. "We are all atheists about most of the gods that humanity has ever believed in," Richard Dawkins has argued. "Some of us just go one god further." The idea behind this aphorism is that every serious religious worldview is a closed system and that to really practice and believe in one is to necessarily reject all the rest as incredible and false.

Even if it doesn't prove the case for atheism, this theory still

creates a problem for the religious searcher. With so many different options, so many faiths and churches, aren't you all but guaranteed to get it wrong? If religion isn't chosen for you, by inheritance or revelation, how can you credibly hope to choose one for yourself?

Fortunately for the would-be seeker, this challenge is overstated. The ultimate goal of the sincere religious quest is a relationship or an experience of grace that can't be obtained through reasoning alone. But for the open-minded person who hasn't received divine direction, a religious quest can still be a rational undertaking — not a leap into pure mystery but a serious endeavor with a real hope of making progress toward the truth.

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The starting place for this endeavor is the recognition that Dawkins is simply wrong about the requirement for believers to disbelieve in every other faith. The bookstore of all religions isn't necessarily a library of total falsehoods with one lonely truth hidden somewhere on the shelves, and embracing one revelation doesn't require believing that every other religion is made up.

A sincere believer in Hindu polytheism, for instance, doesn't need to assume that the singular God of the monotheistic faiths is just a fiction: Jehovah might be one deity among

many, whose powers were exaggerated by his adherents but whose deeds were entirely real. Or alternatively a Hindu might interpret his faith's pantheon as localized expressions of a single ultimate divinity and regard the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as a way of personifying that divinity as well.

By the same token, the believing Christian need not believe that people just worshiped figments of their imaginations before monotheism came along. Polytheism might be seen as an anticipation of the Christian revelation, seeded with divine and angelic encounters and intimations of the fuller truth. Or some of its gods might be seen as forces in rebellion against God — beings we're better off not worshiping but part of spiritual reality nonetheless.

So the religious seeker, looking out across a diverse religious landscape, should assume that there exist less-true and more-true schools of thought, not one truth and a million fictions. And this suggests, crucially, that even if you start in what turns out to be a wronger-than-average place, you can still draw closer to ultimate reality by conforming yourself to whatever that tradition still gets right.

Let's call this the Emeth principle, after a character in one of C.S. Lewis's Narnia novels. Emeth is a devout adherent of the religion of Tash, a vulture-demon, who ends up being welcomed into heaven on the grounds that in performing works of virtue, he has served the true god of Narnia, the lion Aslan, without knowing it.

This principle does not presume that all religions are identical, that there is no scenario in which any soul is ever lost. (Certainly it was not a matter of indifference to Lewis whether people worshiped Aslan or Tash.) The idea, rather, is that if God ordered the universe for human beings, then even a flawed religion will probably contain intimations of that reality — such that a sincere desire to find and know the truth will find some kind of reward.

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This doesn't imply, however, that a religious search should begin at random. Rather, you should start the way you would in any other arena, by looking for wisdom in crowded places, in collective insights rather than just individual ones, in traditions that have inspired civilizations, not temporary communities.

If this sounds like an argument that the more popular and enduring world religions are more likely than others to be true, that's exactly what I'm arguing.

Yes, if a new revelation suddenly arrives, there will be a moment when the truest faith will be one of the smallest. But if a faith claims to be much truer than the competition, it's reasonable to expect proof of those qualities to emerge on a reasonable timeline, to see world-historical and not just individual effects. So for the novice, it makes sense to start with religions in which those effects are already manifest and there's no question that the faith has staying power.

Especially since those big traditions have a certain amount of commonality and convergence notwithstanding their important differences. Some of these convergences are philosophical: The classical theist conception of a God outside space and time unites thinkers across all the Abrahamic traditions and includes pre-Christian and Eastern schools as well. Some are moral: If you follow the ethics of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, you will not be that far-off from the Noble Eightfold Path, and vice versa. Some are mystical: Overlapping experiences of divinity across the big religions suggest some participation in a shared spiritual reality.

These convergences are not just in the peace, love and understanding department that modern religious liberals tend to emphasize. They also include shared ideas about more unfashionable concepts, from sexual morality to the need for protection against dangers that might await the

unwary spiritual freelancer — namely, demonic powers and the possibility (whether eternal or temporary) of hell.

But convergence also obviously has its limits — and if you take the big faiths seriously, you shouldn't assume that their differences vanish when seen from the correct God's-eye perspective. Rather, you should assume that the questions that divide them reflect important divisions in how human beings might approach religion.

In which case, the best way to move from a narrowing of options to an active choice is take the questions seriously and let your provisional answers guide your quest.

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This is the point when the seeker's anxiety may become especially intense. There are so many varieties of Christianity, so many Buddhist schools — how does narrowing things down to just the big religions make things easier?

One answer is to imagine yourself approaching religion the way one might approach an ideological allegiance. Would it make sense, as an educated person trying to develop an outlook on the world, to say, "I can't decide whether to be a socialist or a libertarian because there are so many different historical versions of each position"? Surely not: The initial

general decision can be made on the basis of general ideas, and the choice among different factions can wait until you've had some experience of being a socialist or libertarian.

In a similar way, it's OK to initially let your answers to a few big questions condition your initial religious choices. You could develop, for instance, an opinion on Eastern ideas about reincarnation by reading theological debates or the literature on people who claim to recall a past life, and that decision could reasonably determine whether you're initially drawn to Buddhism or Hinduism, as opposed to Christianity or Islam, before you start to consider the different varieties of each.

Or the question might be personal: What are you looking for from religion? Are you desperate for a direct experience of God, unable to imagine believing without some personalized proof that divinity cares intensely about you? Then you probably want to seek out religious communities that are built around the promise of an enveloping personal encounter.

Alternatively, does too much supernaturalism place an obstacle in the way of belief? Then it makes more sense to initially embrace the religious traditions that emphasize human ethical action or obedience to God's law over and above miracle and mysticism.

Or the big question might be: How has God acted in history? In that case, you don't want to start at the end of things, comparing the systems that the followers of Jesus or Muhammad or Buddha constructed to explain the revelation. You want to start with the taproot — with the allegedly divine person, the allegedly sacred book, the historical credibility of the story and the immediate consequences for the world.

If you have no strong reaction to the core stories, you can step back and use other questions to chart your path. But if you find Jesus to be a remarkable figure and the Gospels shockingly credible, if God speaks to you through the Bhagavad Gita or the Quran or the Pentateuch, if Buddha's teaching seems like the answer to the riddles of your life — well, you probably shouldn't simply return to the more abstract questions.

No: If you feel yourself to have a completely open mind and suddenly a specific text or figure leaps out at you, then you should take the possibility that God is speaking to you seriously; at the very least, it's a signal that this is where you're supposed to start.

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But the place where you start may not be the place where you should end. The key questions separating the major world religions are urgent and important, but none of the

great traditions are islands from whose shores no other continents are visible. Any developed religious tradition will have places of overlap with its rivals that can be bridges outward as well, should you decide that something deeper and truer is present somewhere else.

This is also why it's defensible to make an initial religious choice without having definite answers to the questions I've just sketched. Especially since I can easily imagine a nonreligious reader complaining about the rigors of even a simplified agenda. *To pick a religious tradition, I just have to come to a definite view of reincarnation, decide on an attitude toward supernatural experience and develop a strong opinion on the historical Jesus, the historical Muhammad and the historical Buddha as well?! I'll just quit my job and get right on it!*

The snide answer to this complaint is that many secular people manage to find time to develop strong views on arcane subjects — the "Star Wars" universe, say — entirely unrelated to their eternal destiny. But many other people are genuinely harried and exhausted; many people can see multiple sides of even the most general religious question.

If that's where you find yourself, there is an argument for trusting in the Providence that you suspect might exist, and letting down your spiritual bucket somewhere close to where you are — maybe in an ancestral tradition, or maybe in a

tradition that somehow presents itself to you. Because it's the faith of your spouse or children. Because it's the faith of an attractive group of friends. Because you feel a special relationship to the civilization that sprang from its ideas.

If you assume — and you should — that the universe isn't a brutal cosmic trick, that God isn't somehow out to get you, then as long as you aren't throwing yourself headlong into a cult or engaging in elaborate self-deception, there are few truly bad reasons for abandoning agnosticism in favor of commitment. If you're out there looking and something feels like what you were supposed to find, you're generally better off crossing the threshold and seeing what's inside.

Because you never know where it might go. Consider the story of religious pilgrimage offered recently by the British novelist Paul Kingsnorth. Raised to experience his isle's Christianity as a hopeless antiquarianism, he found that spiritual interests grew naturally out of his environmentalism, which led into a commitment to Zen Buddhism, which lasted years but felt insufficient, lacking (he felt) a mode of true worship.

He found that worship in actual paganism, and he went so far as to become a priest of Wicca, a practitioner of what he took to be white magic. At which point, and only at that point, he began to feel impelled toward Christianity — by coincidence and dreams, ideas and arguments and some

stark mystical experiences as well.

But it would have been unimaginable to him at the start of the journey that the Christian faith imparted to him weakly in his childhood — that "ancient, tired religion" as he put it — could have possibly been his destination in the end. Only the act of questing delivered him back to the initial place, no longer old and tired but fresh and new.

"We shall not cease from exploration," wrote T.S. Eliot in "Four Quartets." "And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time." That's a nice encapsulation for Kingsnorth's journey. But for the general obligation imposed upon us all, as time-bound creatures in a world shot through with intimations of transcendence, a different Eliot line is apt: "For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."

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