

The Naked Eye

I Wish I Was a Christian

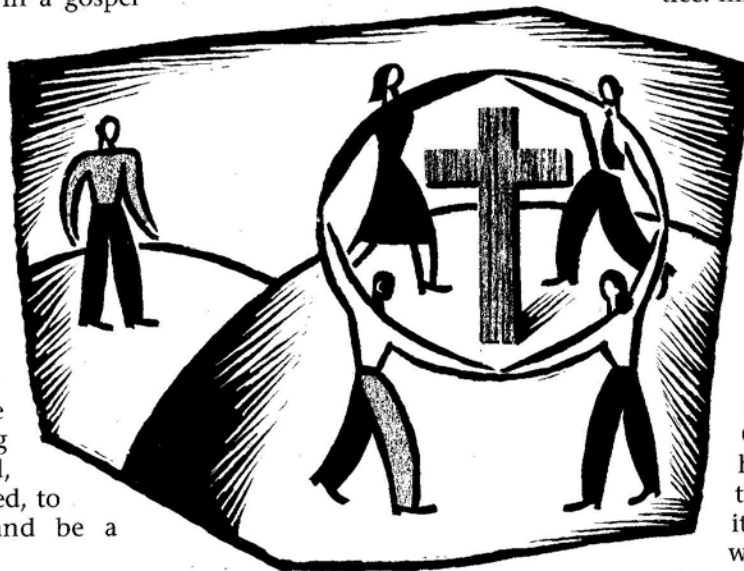
BY MARK MATOUSEK

It's hard not to envy the "Apostle's" loud and fervent relationship with God.

I don't often envy movie heroes, but leaving the theater the other day after seeing "The Apostle"—Robert Duvall's complex portrayal of a God-driven man overflowing with faith and dangerous passion—I felt a little green inside. I've had shades of this particular envy before: seeing the joy in a gospel singer's face; reading Thomas Merton or Simone Weil; hearing friends reminisce over magical moments spent in church, smelling the incense, reveling in the beauty of the psalms. At such times, I'd feel the ache of a foreigner in someone else's country, an outsider pressing his nose to the window, longing to belong. I wanted, traitorous as this seemed, to wake up one day and be a Christian.

This seemed like a betrayal for several reasons. In the neighborhood where I grew up, which was nicknamed Little Israel, Gentiles were the enemy. Although we were California Jews, assimilated to the point of undetectability, Christians were still considered *trafe* (like bacon, gin, and Hostess cupcakes). The line between us and them was as deep as it was meaningless, and stuck with me into adulthood. What's more, I disliked the church's doctrine, especially its approach to women, gays, family values, and faiths other than its own. Finally, I'd never be a joiner. As a seeker, a writer, a lover, a voter, I'd taken my own path, steered away from

groups and "isms," pledged no allegiance to any single teacher, dogma, or way. I'd viewed myself as a free-thinking man, who knew too much about too many paths to give fealty to only one. In the words of Krishnamurti, I saw the truth as a "pathless land."



But sometimes this pathless land made me lonely. Sometimes the work of inspiring myself through so many different sources, creating my own practice, seemed convoluted and illegitimate, lacking tradition and credentials. I longed for a single, powerful focus, a single belief, a single hero, and felt crazy sometimes from too much choice. Bouncing between the Bhagavad-gita, Caroline Myss, and Nagarjuna, I yearned for a simpler venue, a label to pin on my soul—to "dig in one place," as Meher Baba advised, and penetrate to deeper riches.

Any legitimate path would do, but Christianity had a special

appeal since it came with the blessing of most of our culture. For someone like me used to feeling estranged, such acceptance looked like coming home. No Eastern religion could afford this comfort in quite the same way, however universal its scope or adapted its practice. Imported faiths are forever *other*, and while this foreignness appeals to people turned off by their childhood faiths, adopting them comes with a price. To be a converted Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim in this country means relegating yourself to the fringe, inviting accusations of faddishness, pretension, or masquerade. To be a Christian, on the other hand, is to be *real*, close to the breast of the family itself, the very heart of what makes America tick.

When a seeker is used to feeling estranged, the in-crowd looks very appealing. Mystically speaking this is absurd—spirit knows no boundary or creed—but community does factor into my envy. More than that, though, is my hunger for Duvall's *experience*, his rock-like faith in a living Christ, handed to him from his ma and pa, and from their parents before them. This heritage aspect of faith, connecting a man to his people, place, past and future—religion as womb and root and context, with Christ its unequivocal point man—seems wonderful. What would it be like to have such focus, to condense the

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Illustration by Timothy Cook

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awe for a hundred masters into one vibrant relationship? Watching Duvall storm around his room, yelling at Jesus, telling jokes, arguing, pleading, promising, emerging after a long night of torment with an answer to his prayers, I marveled at the intimacy between the apostle and his savior, the *personal* nature of faithful love. I felt a kind of bachelor's hunger for one special body to hold, an ear to take in all my secrets, some *One* to love with my whole heart rather than some grand impersonal *It*.

I'm making this sound too romantic, I know. Christians have their own problems. Trying to walk hand-in-hand with Jesus, no less struggling to obey the Church, could certainly drive a person nuts. But the Christians I know don't seem to mind. Faith is ordinary to them, nothing to make much fuss about. When it comes to their religion, they seem uniquely secure and happy. Take my neighbor, Mrs. Monroe. Every Sunday I pass her in the elevator, beaming, dressed to the nines, on her way to church. She usually has some goodies with her, home-baked pies or knick-knacks for the rummage sale. And she always seems to be humming, rain or shine, like someone who just won the lottery. I follow her down the block sometimes to the prettiest building on lower Fifth Avenue and look inside at the people gathering, hugging each other, laughing, shaking hands with the priest, taking their places among the pews, opening prayer books, crossing themselves. I imagine going in to join them, to share this spirit that holds them together. But although I'd be welcome, I never do. I stand out on the street instead.

That's because I'd feel inauthentic inside their walls, an imposter among the flock. I'm too skeptical to accept the Word as gospel or to take allegorical stories as law. If faith means taking on belief what I haven't seen with my own eyes or felt in the depths of my own gut, then I can't make that leap. Call it

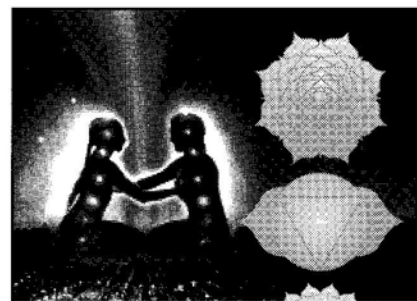
pride or a weak imagination, but I've never been able to accept a truth because an authority said it was so. The notion of surrendering my inner power, which I take to be one and the same with the Creator's, to some force higher or separate from me goes against my intuition. Without being able to make this distinction between what's mine and what's God's, I can't seem to worship as Christians do (or Jews or Muslims for that matter); *faith* seems the wrong word for how I connect things. Hard as I try, I can't see Christ as the one true Messiah, greater than the other prophets, or pray to him

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to save my soul when I don't believe that my soul needs saving. I can't pretend to be a Christian except in my own anarchic way, so I have no choice but to stand back and marvel.

It's my loss, I know. I wish I could change. But you've got to play the hand you're dealt. This time around, I can envy the faithful, and see this envy as something worthwhile, not just sour grapes. Call it a blessed longing, a sacred desire. That's not bad, I tell myself; maybe envy is faith *in ovo*. Robert Duvall would say it was. He'd have a good laugh at the stubborn guy staring up at the theater screen and roll his eyes at the guy upstairs.

Contributing editor Mark Matousek is the author of *Sex Death Enlightenment*, a memoir. His new book, *Almost Human*, will be published by Riverhead Books in 1999. He welcomes responses to his column at MMATOUSEK@aol.com



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