

Jerald F. Dirks, Former Minister of United Methodist Church, USA (part 1 of 4)

Description: The early life and education of a Harvard Hollis scholar and author of the book "The Cross and the Crescent", disillusioned by Christianity due to the information learnt in its School of Theology. Part 1.

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One of my earliest childhood memories is of hearing the church bell toll for Sunday morning worship in the small, rural town in which I was raised. The Methodist Church was an old, wooden structure with a bell tower, two children's Sunday School classrooms cubby-holed behind folding, wooden doors to separate it from the sanctuary, and a choir loft that housed the Sunday school classrooms for the older children. It stood less than two blocks from my home. As the bell rang, we would come together as a family, and make our weekly pilgrimage to the church.

In that rural setting from the 1950s, the three churches in the town of about 500 were the center of community life. The local Methodist Church, to which my family belonged, sponsored ice cream socials with hand-cranked, homemade ice cream, chicken potpie dinners, and corn roasts. My family and I were always involved in all three, but each came only once a year. In addition, there was a two-week community Bible school every June, and I was a regular attendee through my eighth grade year in school. However, Sunday morning worship and Sunday school were weekly events, and I strove to keep extending my collection of perfect attendance pins and of awards for memorizing Bible verses.

By my junior high school days, the local Methodist Church had closed, and we were attending the Methodist Church in the neighboring town, which was only slightly larger than the town in which I lived. There, my thoughts first began to focus on the ministry as a personal calling. I became active in the Methodist Youth Fellowship, and eventually served as both a district and a conference officer. I also became the regular "preacher" during the annual Youth Sunday service. My preaching began to draw community-wide attention, and before long I was occasionally filling pulpits at other churches, at a nursing home, and at various church-affiliated youth and ladies groups, where I typically set attendance records.

By age 17, when I began my freshman year at Harvard College, my decision to enter the ministry had solidified. During my freshman year, I enrolled in a two-semester course in comparative religion, which was taught by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, whose specific area of expertise was Islam. During that course, I gave far less attention to Islam than I did to other religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, as the latter two seemed so much more esoteric and strange to me. In contrast, Islam appeared to be somewhat similar to my

own Christianity. As such, I didn't concentrate on it as much as I probably should have, although I can remember writing a term paper for the course on the concept of revelation in the Quran. Nonetheless, as the course was one of rigorous academic standards and demands, I did acquire a small library of about a half dozen books on Islam, all of which were written by non-Muslims, and all of which were to serve me in good stead 25 years later. I also acquired two different English translations of the meaning of the Quran, which I read at the time.

That spring, Harvard named me a Hollis Scholar, signifying that I was one of the top pre-theology students in the college. The summer between my freshman and sophomore years at Harvard, I worked as a youth minister at a fairly large United Methodist Church. The following summer, I obtained my License to Preach from the United Methodist Church. Upon graduating from Harvard College in 1971, I enrolled at the Harvard Divinity School, and there obtained my Master of Divinity degree in 1974, having been previously ordained into the Deaconate of the United Methodist Church in 1972, and having previously received a Stewart Scholarship from the United Methodist Church as a supplement to my Harvard Divinity School scholarships. During my seminary education, I also completed a two-year externship program as a hospital chaplain at Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston. Following graduation from Harvard Divinity School, I spent the summer as the minister of two United Methodist churches in rural Kansas, where attendance soared to heights not seen in those churches for several years.

Seen from the outside, I was a very promising young minister, who had received an excellent education, drew large crowds to the Sunday morning worship service, and had been successful at every stop along the ministerial path. However, seen from the inside, I was fighting a constant war to maintain my personal integrity in the face of my ministerial responsibilities. This war was far removed from the ones presumably fought by some later televangelists in unsuccessfully trying to maintain personal sexual morality. Likewise, it was a far different war than those fought by the headline-grabbing pedophilic priests of the current moment. However, my struggle to maintain personal integrity may be the most common one encountered by the better-educated members of the ministry.

There is some irony in the fact that the supposedly best, brightest, and most idealistic of ministers-to-be are selected for the very best of seminary education, e.g. that offered at that time at the Harvard Divinity School. The irony is that, given such an education, the seminarian is exposed to as much of the actual historical truth as is known about:

- 1) the formation of the early, "mainstream" church, and how it was shaped by geopolitical considerations;
- 2) the "original" reading of various Biblical texts, many of which are in sharp contrast to what most Christians read when they pick up their Bible, although gradually, some of this information is being incorporated into newer and better translations;
- 3) the evolution of such concepts as a triune godhead and the "sonship" of Jesus, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him;

- 4) the non-religious considerations that underlie many Christian creeds and doctrines;
- 5) the existence of those early churches and Christian movements which never accepted the concept of a triune godhead, and which never accepted the concept of the divinity of Jesus, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him; and
- 6) etc. (Some of these fruits of my seminary education are recounted in more detail in my recent book, *The Cross and the Crescent: An Interfaith Dialogue between Christianity and Islam*, Amana Publications, 2001.)

As such, it is no real wonder that almost a majority of such seminary graduates leave seminary, not to "fill pulpits", where they would be asked to preach that which they know is not true, but to enter the various counseling professions. Such was also the case for me, as I went on to earn a master's and doctorate in clinical psychology. I continued to call myself a Christian, because that was a needed bit of self-identity, and because I was, after all, an ordained minister, even though my full time job was as a mental health professional. However, my seminary education had taken care of any belief I might have had regarding a triune godhead or the divinity of Jesus, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. (Polls regularly reveal that ministers are less likely to believe these and other dogmas of the church than are the laity they serve, with ministers more likely to understand such terms as "son of God" metaphorically, while their parishioners understand it literally.) I thus became a "Christmas and Easter Christian", attending church very sporadically, and then gritting my teeth and biting my tongue as I listened to sermons espousing that which I knew was not the case.

None of the above should be taken to imply that I was any less religious or spiritually oriented than I had once been. I prayed regularly, my belief in a supreme deity remained solid and secure, and I conducted my personal life in line with the ethics I had once been taught in church and Sunday school. I simply knew better than to buy into the man-made dogmas and articles of faith of the organized church which were so heavily laden with the pagan influences, polytheistic notions, and geo-political considerations of a bygone era.

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