

From Cat Stevens to Yusuf Islam: a Journey

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God changes. There is no one set image of who or what God is for all time. Yes, there are the images of God that have been handed down to us by artists, who in turned copied images of the Pagan gods and made them Christian. There are the ideas handed down to us from classic theologians. But again, what at first glance seems like it has been an immutable belief throughout time, turns out to be the product of a particular time and place in history. God changes; more than we usually realize.

Our images and ideas of God change throughout the course of our life. This is called our “Embedded Theology.” Our Embedded Theology is the ideas we have about God, or the lack thereof, that are homegrown. This is an understanding about God that we did not necessarily read in a book, but has evolved throughout the course of our life experiences. In a sense, we are all atheists. I bet that the God that you believed in as a child is a God you don’t believe in anymore. Even if you haven’t abandoned the idea of God entirely, your adult God is

probably very different than the one you prayed to in your youth. God changes, because we change, and our thoughts, ideas, and relationship to God change too.

Perhaps no one illustrates this evolution of God, our embedded theology, better than the singer Cat Stevens. He was born Steven Demetre Georgiou to Greek and Swedish parents living in London. So already in life he is off to a very international start. His upbringing was Catholic, but his religion was music. He was strongly influenced by the music of the Beatles, and had a desire to play music himself. As an adolescent he developed talent at the guitar, and at a young age became something of a pop sensation in Britain.

Cat Stevens was fairly young, sometime in his twenties I believe, when he contracted tuberculosis. Obviously that is a very serious life threatening disease, which required that he be admitted to the hospital for a number of weeks. Then he was required to stay home to help his lungs recover. And it was during this time, early in his life, that Cat Stevens first started to think about the big questions of life. The prospect of his mortality was presented to him very early on. He would see people coming into the hospital to get injections, and could sense that there was serious business of life and death going on.

Fortunately he made a full recovery. But that life experience sent Cat Stevens on a spiritual journey. At first he practices Zen and other

forms of Buddhism. Then he experimented with tarot, astrology and numerology. Eventually he would move away from these practices, but they were the first step away from his childhood religion and toward some unknown spiritual hunger.

So often in life it starts this way. We come having inherited something from our childhood; a belief, an image, perhaps a prayer we recite, and it invokes an image of God for us. Our childhood imagination elaborates upon this, trying to make connections to other ideas and experiences we have. Perhaps there are people who stay there – very content their whole lives. There is nothing inherently wrong with that. But so often life brings us some grand event, some moment, in which we are forced to confront the fact that we will not live forever, and that our most beloved loved ones will not live forever. This realization may be known intellectually of course but until now not felt or experienced at the heart level. It may be the most difficult, and yet the most spiritual, experience one has in life. Such experiences alter the ways in which we think about God; perhaps even abandon the notion of God. At any rate, our embedded theology, our personal homegrown ideas about God, shift as a result of that confrontation with mortality.

This would not be the only such confrontation for Cat Stevens. In the early seventies his songs Father and Son, Moonshadow, and Wild World become big hits for him both in England and in America. His combination of folk and rock music caught the zeitgeist that was

happening on both sides of the pond at the time. His albums were selling out at record levels. Soon Cat Stevens, the stage name he chose because his real name was too complicated, was touring and playing sold out concerts. He was a bona fide rock star.

One day, while swimming in Malibu California, he nearly drowns. He is confronted with his own death in a very dramatic way. Instead of the fight being against an unseen disease, his fight is now against the sea. In his most desperate hour, while struggling for his life, he calls out to God. He says, “God if you save me I will work for you!” At which point a large wave comes by and pushes him to shore where he safely recovers. As it happened, his brother had been traveling in Israel. As a gift, he gave Cat Stevens an English translation of the Koran. Stevens read this text voraciously. He finds in it the spiritual nourishment that he had been seeking.

Cat Stevens’ conversion to Islam happened in late 1978. He had grown disillusioned with the music industry at the time. His frustration with his chosen profession coincided with his own spiritual malaise. He consulted with some of his early teachers, Imams who are knowledgeable about the laws and practices described in the Koran. Stevens, who had changed his name to Yusuf Islam at this point, says that there is nothing in the Koran that says, “Thou shalt not rock!” It isn’t in black or white like that. But Islam does have practices that would seem difficult to maintain as a rock and roll star. Muslims abstain

from drugs and alcohol – both were very prevalent within the rock and roll scene of the late seventies. So too was the temptation by the opposite sex. These were temptations though, not outright violations of Islamic law. But what really did it for Yusuf Islam was the sense that playing in front of thousands of people was a kind of idolatry. Everyone hanging on your words, treating you almost like a God. Then he heard from one Imam that Muhammad had forbidden people to carry guitars. These factors together lead Yusuf Islam to give up his musical career at its height; at least for Western audiences. He would continue writing and performing songs for children to teach them about Islam.

In Cat Stevens' conversion and decision to retire from performing, we see yet another stage of the evolution of God. Stevens' embedded theology was revealed when he was drowning. That moment of desperation and life and death struggle brought out what he really and truly believed. But note that nearly drowning isn't itself enough. The other key component was reading the Koran. I am no analyst, but I suspect that the moment he almost drowned was a kind of opening. The old beliefs had fallen away and now he was open to something new. The Koran was that something new; it was a vision for how to live out that promise that he made to God. His embedded theology had made a dramatic turn.

Often we see and talk about the "zeal of the converted." This is true of religion of course, when someone new joins a church or a new

faith they are especially energized about it. This is heartening for those of us who have been around a while. But you see this sometimes with books, particularly self-help books that become all of the rage thanks to Oprah or someone like that. As the saying goes, “When all you have is a hammer, the whole world looks like a nail!”

There may have been something to that in Yusuf’s decision to stop performing. As it turned out, Muhammad had not told people to avoid picking up guitars. That was the embedded theology of that particular teacher. And while the other situations were certainly a factor in his decision, Yusuf admitted later in his life that at the time he had simply no more songs in him. He was done with that chapter in his life. And he shut the door very hard on it. For many years, not only would he not perform songs from his days as a rock star, but he wouldn’t even let his songs be used in TV or movies until sometime in the 1990s. There was a distinct break, a rigid barrier, between his life before conversion, and his life after.

However, as they are for most of us, one of his children changed his mind. One day his son brought home a guitar. Yusuf began to play it, and as it had when he was young, he fell in love with music again. He gave permission to other singers to perform his songs. These included Sheryl Crow, Rod Stewart, and Dolly Parton. He allowed some of those songs to make appearances in movies and even commercials.

Then in the early 2000s, Yusuf Islam found himself in a recording studio. He recorded and released a new album in 2006; almost forty years after the last one! Then he went on tour. He would perform songs from the new album, but like most artists, would also play the old stuff that people came to hear. He was very active performing concerts for charity. These were often in response to humanitarian disasters like the tsunami in the Indian Ocean a few years back. He would write songs about these events and dedicate the proceeds to the victims.

One of Cat Stevens' most famous songs was Peace Train. This became something of a theme for the comeback stage of his career. Much of the music he made, and the message he had for people was that Islam and the West can be in dialogue together. They have things in common and can learn valuable things from each other. His life is a testimony to that coming together.

This is yet another development in Yusuf Islam's embedded theology. God is not rigid. His Muslim faith was not as rigid as it had first been presented to him. Eventually it dawned on Cat Stevens that this strong barrier between his life before conversion and his life after conversion was arbitrary. There was no division because he was living the same life. He was who he was, and that life before was part of his history; his being.

I think this is not surprising. Later in life, as we look back and reflect on our experiences, on how they have shaped us, we tend to look for patterns of meaning rather than divisions with sharp edges. We look to a God that brings together disparate and different aspects of who we are and who we have been. This is not a young person's God—confident and self-assured in the black and white nature of good and evil. This is a God of grays and gradations. A quilt filled with patches of experience that when you take a step back produce a greater beauty when experienced as a whole.

I think that our Unitarian Universalist faith lends itself quite nicely to such a God, if you even choose to call this image God. Let us reflect on our images of God throughout our lives. What experiences shaped each image? What image do you hold on to now? Whatever it is, may it bless you, your whole life long. Amen Blessed Be.