

When it's time for a changing of the God



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Picture the pageantry of guard posts at the palaces of Europe and national borders around the world. I've watched the guard change at Edinburgh castle in Scotland and Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington. While a jail chaplain, I stood aside and patiently observed a shift change when a new group of deputies came in to relieve staff. As with most changing of the guard, there were few smiles, coming or going. No one seems thrilled arriving for duty, to guard a palace, castle, border, tomb or jail. And why should they? Who wants to be responsible for guarding anything, or anyone?

I got to thinking: What are we guarding? What needs to be guarded? And what if it is a belief? What if we feel it's our duty to guard God? Then, an even more serious question: What happens when there is a changing of one's deity—a changing of the God?

Have you ever replaced one god with another? How many of us have listened to someone who has just changed divinities? Do they exhibit a joyful sense of

discovery, an enthusiasm for a new-found relationship, or a quiet assurance that they can settle into a new faith? Could their "version of conversion" be an exchange of one divine name for another, or mentally sculpting a new image of the sacred?

When entering cathedrals in Europe I was overwhelmed by images of saints, the Virgin Mary and countless statues and icons of Christ that were unfamiliar to me. I grew up with one image of God and that was Jesus – a white Jesus with a glowing tan, blow-dried hair, perpetually clean robe, blue eyes and a constant smile (a frown when I sinned, of course). We sometimes saw him nailed on a cross but there was definitely no blood. I wasn't about to give up my Smiling Savior for someone else's imaginary representation.

In the Introduction to his book, "The World's Religions," Huston Smith writes: "Religion alive confronts the individual with the most momentous option life can present." He proceeds to explain the options, to lay out the basic beliefs and practices of living traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity and "The Primal Religions." Some of those primary tribal groups are bound to specific animals who act as guides and guardians. "The totem animal guards the tribe."

As Huston Smith describes these aboriginal beliefs, there are no sharp distinctions or divisions that separate the primal world from the "Other," even a perceived "Other God." That lack of dualism marks a difference between the ancient earth-based religions and the major wisdom traditions.

Appropriately, this circles us back to cycles of birth and death in religions and faiths. One belief transforms into another – Hinduism births Buddhism; Judaism births Christianity and they both give birth to Islam. And on and on forever. Where we get tripped is when this becomes more personal. When my faith births something new. Am I now a heretic or infidel? Or am I representing a new form, a reformed way of thinking and living?

In the perpetual history of religions, dead or alive, we are challenged to wonder who guards religion, tradition, faith? Who holds that responsibility and how do they exercise that? Is the defense of a religion also a defense of a god or a theology?

Speaking personally (which is about all we can do in these matters), that early Jovial Jesus transformed into the "Church Family," then morphed into All Christians, before expanding to All Believers, then especially "disguised" in the poorest and most powerless people. Down the trail a little further. Jesus ex-

ploded, in fact, God exploded into billions of particles that could no longer be contained, certainly not in my brain. God became Nature, then Nature became God and then every bit of any belief I ever held to, or guarded, dissolved into What Is – Nature, Universe.

That's only my story, at least as I can tell it right now. I no longer feel it's my duty to defend my faith or faith at all; I've been relieved of my responsibility to guard the gods. There's been a dramatic though gradual changing of the gods until there was no more God to guard.

Have you had a similar experience? Have you had a "changing of the God" in your life? If you have, does it feel liberating or frightening – maybe a blend of both? If you have never experienced a changing of the God, or the gods, what do you make of religious history, populated by deities and symbols of the divine? Have you ever considered the "next shift"?

Who are the guardians of Truth?

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