

Telling my Story – Esther

At just six weeks old I was baptised in a city centre Methodist church close to the flat where we lived. Mum has been a member of the Methodist Church since she was young, as were my grandparents (who met at church as teens), and their parents before them. I attended church with Mum and my (reluctant) younger sister; my ‘non-religious’ Dad didn’t come with us, but never objected despite his upbringing. Dad was brought up Shia Muslim in Iran where he went to the mosque on Fridays with his parents and siblings. My paternal grandparents, both *Hajji*, attended my sister’s baptism while they were visiting the UK in late 1990 - they did not seem to see any conflict here with their own worldviews.

Against this backdrop of plurality, I grew up a church goer. I do wonder whether subconscious seeds were sown back then for my now pluralist perspectives on faith.

In the late 90s I attended various Christian youth events that were more charismatic than our traditional congregation, but I also continued going to church with Mum and became a member (confirmation) when I was 17. I then went off to study Religious Studies in Edinburgh where I joined the Methodist church near the campus as well as the university’s Christian Union. CU was the first time I came up against more conservative views on a regular basis, and began to question, ‘do I fit here?’ This was in part due to my studies - the more you ‘learn’ theology, the more questions arise!

I transferred to Newcastle University for my second year and stepped away from church. I was focussed on finding my fit socially and was starting to think church wasn’t the best way to do that. The following year I joined a large evangelical church with thriving student work. I quickly got back into having ‘church stuff’ happening a couple of evenings a week. During a student workshop there I had one of my ‘pivotal’ faith moments. The pastor explained Ephesians 5 in terms of a hierarchical relationship where men should always get the final say and have ultimate authority over their wives. I genuinely remember sitting waiting for a punchline: ‘But, this ancient text was written in a different social context...etc.’ It never came. I was astounded – in a room of intelligent young adults I didn’t understand why nobody seemed shocked by what was being taught. I soon discovered that this church is part of a movement which doesn’t accept women as church elders, and decided to leave.

I’ve never lost my faith, although I wasn’t ‘practising’ for most of my 20s. But, spending summers on volunteering trips to African community projects had a lasting impact on my worldview. Aside from the poverty I witnessed, what impacted me a lot was the faith of the people I met and the *living faith* of the projects themselves. Here were people, with little materially, who were living out the Gospel in a practical way. As a result, I believe faith praxis is vital (e.g James 2:14-18) – I have listened to too many ‘self-help’ sermons and seen presentations of empty piety; neither of which are the revolutionary movement I believe Jesus was trying to start.

The next time I ‘went back to church’ was to an evangelical church with a colleague; I’d felt something was missing and was ready to find a new church. There I made some life-long friends and got involved in weekly activities. It felt good to be back in community and to be reconnecting with my faith. As part of this reconnection, I was full-immersion baptised in 2016. That may be controversial given my infant baptism and teenage confirmation, but I felt it was the right choice at the time. It was an amazing experience, but would I do it again today? Possibly not.... I have since left that church (mainly due to their preaching of a prosperity gospel and being non-affirming of LGBT+ people) and have recently come full circle back to the small Methodist where I spent my childhood!

In summary, its fair to say that my worldview is in a constant state of flux. My *worldviews* are fluid and changing; influenced by life's circumstances and whichever faith community I have been within or without at any given time. My academic interest in biblical studies and RS, being a feminist and a proud LGBT+ ally results in continuous questioning and exploration. However, the core remains – I believe in a creator God(dess), who is visible through nature and humanity. The experiences I have summarised above have led me to an inclusive, plural and universal vision of God and his/her church.