

# I Am Not a Sinner

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"I have a problem with sin," I explained to my minister about why I had requested the meeting. "I do not believe myself to be a sinner. I never have." Then I added, "Maybe it is a sin to believe that I'm not a sinner, but deep down inside I just do not feel like a sinner. I have even done some wrong things in my life. But something inside says I am not a sinner. The Church keeps telling me I am. I cannot continue to come to Church if I have to believe I am a sinner. Am I a sinner?"

I had been in one or another flavor of Christianity all of my adult life. My parents (one Jewish, one Protestant) had told me to choose my own religion. My girlfriend took me with her to her church as a teenager. I had taken two years of Catechism classes and was baptized and confirmed. I had my children baptized when they were born, then volunteered in the Church nursery and taught in the Sunday School. I even tried the Ladies Auxiliary, but just could not fit in with all the blue-haired ladies talking about their quilts and playing bridge. Every Sunday, when I stood to "confess my sins before God-the-Almighty-Father," it was a lie. I was going through the motions of a ritual that was totally meaningless to me. I figured that either I was so bad off that I did not even know I was a sinner, or that the Church was wrong.

Dr. Smith was a new minister, actually an interim minister. Our regular guy was in Europe for the summer. Dr. Smith was the summer fill-in. He still had one more year to go in the seminary. He was willing to start his answer with, "I do not know."

I went on and described the yoga books I had been reading. "Yoga tells me I am Divine Consciousness. This feels true to me. These books say that I am a perfect manifestation of Divine Consciousness, but that I do not know it. All I have to do is realize the Truth that already dwells inside. Christianity tells me I'm a sinner and that I need someone else to redeem me before God. I cannot stay in the Church if that's what I am supposed to believe."

He said, "Let us look up the word 'sin.'" He began to pull books off the shelves. In each one he checked the index for sin. Every book had many entries, but none of them offered a definition. After six or seven books, he drew down a thick encyclopedia and found the entry. The definition ran several pages long and began with, "sin: separation from God."

In triumph I shouted, "Yes! That I have got!" I knew I felt separate from God. I had wanted all my life to end that agonizing separation. The yoga philosophy I had been studying had helped me to clarify my understanding of this unnamed feeling I suffered from for so long. If the Church wanted to call that feeling of separation by the name "sin," it was okay with me. I said, "I have sin, but I am not a sinner."

We talked for another hour or so. He ended with asking me to give the sermon on the next Sunday. My parents came. I quoted the Bible, the Upanishads and the Gurus with whom I had been studying. I described how I was inspired by the teachings of yoga, instead of being downtrodden by the doctrine that I am a sinner. I invited everyone to think differently of himself or herself. I stood with the minister at the door as the congregation hugged and thanked me as they left. I felt validated and confirmed. It was a new type of confirmation: a confirmation in the faith, but a different faith than I had before.

I never went back. The support of that open-hearted, open-minded minister along with the love and enthusiasm of the others in the church gave me the freedom to fly. It is as though I had always had wings but I would never have known it. Yoga told me I had wings, and these wonderful people gave me their blessing to learn to fly.

I went to Dr. Smith's ordination ceremony a year later. I had been certified as a yoga teacher and taken my first trip to India to meet my Guru. He had graduated from the seminary and found a Church to serve. The seminary could not ordain him. Only the congregation could. I sang at his ceremony and thanked him for giving me the freedom to use my wings. And I realized I had been ordained by my

own congregation the year before. I felt (though I did not dare say out loud), “I am done with Christianity.”

I studiously avoided all Christian holidays for the next fifteen years, even making sure I was out of the country almost every Christmas. I studied yoga philosophy. I chanted to Shiva, to Krishna and to the Guru three times a day for 3,000 days. I found the basic principles were expressed in a way that resonated so deep inside me that I can only call it “Truth.” Then I became interested in the new books being published on Christianity. I discovered they were talking about the same thing that had driven me to my minister ten years earlier. I found the connections between the two philosophies: What Christianity calls “original sin” is termed in yoga as “delusion.” “Holy Spirit” is “grace.” “Redemption” is “rediscovery.” The two came together for me in my heart. My own roots from growing up with both Judaism and Christianity became a treasured part of my path in yoga.

Still, I was really shocked when Jesus showed up one day. While I was giving a private yoga session, my client began to cry some quiet sweet tears. She said that Jesus had come. He gave her a blessing and a kiss on her forehead. I was fine with that, because I respected her beliefs. But when she had gone and I was straightening up the room, suddenly I felt His presence. I did not see Him, but He was there. I was amazed to discover that I was angry! I began yelling at Him on the inside, “What are you doing here! I want nothing to do with you and your cross. You can keep it! I want nothing to do with it!” He stayed.

Narada says in the Bhakti Sutras that there are many different ways you can be in relationship with God. You can love Him as a father, brother, sister, lover or friend. You can love Him as a child, which is why so many people love to celebrate Christmas. Narada goes on to say that you should direct every emotion to God. In the Mahabharata, Duryodhana causes the destruction of his own race. Yet he ends up going to heaven because when he was sad, he cried out to God. When he was angry, he shook his fist at God and cursed Him. I took Narada literally.

The second day Jesus continued to hang around with me. I continued to rant and rave, all on the inside. The third day I realized I had been carrying His cross, even though I thought I had left Christianity. One of my shoulders was even mounded up higher than the other, like I had been dragging that heavy stick of wood around with me as I traveled the world in my studies and my work. I quietly gave Him back His cross. My shoulder relaxed down and quit hurting. In His quiet presence I came to understand that He had never wanted me to carry that cross. That is why He had given His life, so I would not have to. Somewhere through the centuries, the message had gotten garbled, so I had labored in pain.

Then I became angry with Him for what was taught in His name. After all, it was His church, so was He not in charge? He stayed quietly with me, until I saw that He could not make it go any differently. If He changed what we would do, it would deny us our free will. I saw the tremendous love that motivated His actions, both in His life and in the centuries since then. He stayed with me for another day or so. I told Him that I could not be part of His church again. Now though, I accepted His support and His love. Only then did He leave. But He’s not really gone. If my mind wanders even the slightest bit in that direction, I feel His presence as a comfort and support. I see His eyes watching me. I ask for His help when I am working with those who have a meaningful relationship with Him. I think of Him as a buddy, a friend. But I don’t think of Him as my Savior, because I don’t need saving. I am not a sinner.

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