



Jonah Raskin

James Joyce and Father John Converted Me: How I Became an Atheist Catholic

St. Ignatius sits atop a place that's called Lone Mountain, though it's really a hill that overlooks the city of San Francisco. The steeples rise to the sky above, or to the heavens as a priest or a nun might say. I am neither one nor the other and don't aspire to join the priesthood or become a nun and perform the "liturgy"; I think that's the correct word. Still, I feel humbled and inspired when I sit, watch and listen to the rituals that unfold at St. Ignatius during the 9 am mass that lasts for 30 intense minutes.

For a couple of years I attended Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. I recited the 23rd psalm, most of which I remembered from school days, and which I spoke along with the parishioners and four nuns who always sat together. I did not take communion, except once. One of the nuns reprimanded me and asked for the wafer I had accepted and that I surrendered. I was a bad boy.

I am not now nor have I ever been a Catholic, though some of my friends who are Catholic tell me that I'm a closet Catholic. That seems like a fair and accurate description. I tend to be guilt ridden and believe in the power of confession and I like the stories I've heard about redemption and resurrection. The crucifixion strikes me as rather grotesque and frightening. As a boy I was told that if I sinned I too would be nailed to a cross.

St. Ignatius does not amplify my feelings of guilt. Rather, it is awe inspiring and makes me think of the churches I visited as a tourist in Europe, where Catholicism was born and where it led to persecution, the Inquisition, wars and conquest. In the New World the Catholic Church aided and abetted colonizers. I'm not blind to the horrors performed in the name of God and Godliness. But that history hasn't not stopped me from slouching toward the Catholic church, or rather to one particular Catholic church.

The architecture and design of St. Ignatius has the effect of lifting my eyes above me, and my spirit, too. I'm out of myself and into a community. The stained glass windows and the statues tell stories about the stations of the cross. For the past year the outside of "St. Ig," as some of my San Francisco Catholic friends call the church, has been under construction. The scaffolding obscures the beauty and the grace of the architecture. The inside has also been in repair and the floor has been refurbished. None of these activities interfere with mass or prevent parishioners from attending, though sometimes the sounds of construction impinge on the spoken word.

I discovered St. Ig by accident, though accident is probably not the right word. Most likely, I was destined to find St. Ig. You can't come upon a church as majestic as St. Ig by accident. But one fine morning on the way to the Koret Health and Recreation Center for a water aerobics class, a kind of baptism, I noticed that a side door to the church was open. So I slipped inside and took a seat just in time for the start of the 9 am mass. From that day on I found that Father John's sermons were always works of art. He never failed to mention Ukraine or Ethiopia and to remind us of our ties to people and places where famine and civil wars raged. My kind of priest.

After that first time, I began to attend regularly. I felt comfortable and at home, more at home than in the orthodox synagogue on Noriega Street where the service is in Hebrew, a language I can't read, write or speak. The rabbi doesn't even face the congregation for much of the service. I went once and never went back.

The St. Ig priests speak in English and read from the Bible in English. In the synagogue, I felt like I was in alien territory, though I was born into a secular Jewish family. I was not bar mitzvahed and never did attend synagogue when I was growing up, though my grandfather, Benjamin, helped to found the synagogue in Huntington, Long Island, my home town. I drove him to the synagogue on Saturday mornings; not directly, but a few blocks away. He walked the last leg of the journey.

Why would a secular Jew feel more at home in a Catholic Church than in an orthodox synagogue?, I have wondered. Perhaps because many of the writers I have admired and even loved, including James Joyce, were raised Catholic and wrote about Catholic traditions. Joyce converted me, though he distanced himself from the church and from Ireland and went into exile. Still, he never really got Catholicism out of his system as any reader knows if he, she or they reads *Ulysses*, or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Catholicism has sustained many writers including Graham Greene who wrote *Brighton Rock*, *The Quiet American* and *The Third Man*, and Anthony Burgess, the author of *A Clockwork Orange* and many other novels.

After attending mass for a few months I sat down in an office with Father John and told him that I didn't believe in God and that I was probably an atheist. He didn't flinch or blink. He surprised me when he said that whether I believed in God or not I was always welcome in St. Ignatius. Also, if I wanted to become a Catholic he would offer me a speeded-up version of the confirmation process. I might take him up on that offer. Meanwhile, I feel like St. Ig is in me. When I am at home and close my eyes I can see it and feel it. I know I'm in a sanctuary that knows no walls.

Jonah Raskin is the author of eight poetry chapbooks and a book about Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," titled *American Scream*; he is also editor of non-fiction at Caveat Lector. He has been writing and performing poetry for more than forty years. He often performs his poetry at Black Bird Books in San Francisco and is available to perform at other events. He can be reached at mjonah.raskin@sonoma.edu.