

FEATURES



SPIRITED SISTERS

HOW NUNS TOOK OVER POP CULTURE

Deena Yellin NorthJersey.com | USA TODAY NETWORK – NEW JERSEY

It was the beatbox heard round the world. ● In May, a pair of Brazilian nuns were on a local Catholic TV show discussing a vocational retreat when it happened. Suddenly, the duo – in matching powder-blue skirts and white habits – broke into a joyous beatbox and dance routine. ● Sister Marizele Cassiano provided the drumbeat soundtrack on her microphone as Sister Marisa Paula de Neves strutted for the camera. The viral video racked up hundreds of thousands of views. ● They’re not the only nuns turning heads and raising eyebrows lately. A swath of TikTok sisters, known collectively as #NunTok, have earned celebrity for entertaining and enlightening videos about convent life. The “nunfluencers” include Sister Monica Clare, an Episcopal sister superior in Mendham, New Jersey whose videos on everything from celibacy to skincare have earned her more than 222,000 followers and 2.3 million likes. See **SISTERS, Page 7B**

Salesian Sister Guerline Joseph in the chapel at Mary Help of Christians Academy in North Haledon. She helps create content for her order’s social media page, posting photos and videos of her fellow sisters on Instagram. PHOTO BY CHRIS PEDOTA/NORTHJERSEY.COM; ILLUSTRATION BY HIEN TRUONG/USA TODAY NETWORK, AND GETTY IMAGES

As for religious faith, it matters what we call ourselves



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

In the culture I was raised in, we didn’t know any atheists and didn’t want to. To be a nonbeliever in God was unthinkable. Besides, if you didn’t go to church (which meant you must not believe in God) you were a bad person with no morals. I say we didn’t know any, but chances are we were around atheists all the time; you just couldn’t point one out in a crowd (unless they had horns). A few of my friends and family who didn’t attend church may have been atheists or agnostics (or didn’t give much thought to religion), but this didn’t bother me – until I was told you had to “choose or lose (your soul).”

Listening to a podcast interview with biblical scholar, Bart Ehrman, Ph.D., I was impressed with his story of faith. Growing up in the Episcopal Church, he became a “born again Christian” as a teenager through Youth for Christ. His fervent faith led him to Moody Bible Institute, Wheaton College and then to Princeton Theological Seminary. He has

taught Bible courses at Rutgers and now at UNC Chapel Hill (you can listen to his whole story on his “Misquoting Jesus” podcast). Serious personal and academic biblical studies, along with confronting suffering in the world, eventually caused him to leave his church and his faith. Like many of us, this can be a long and painful process which often means losing one’s community, maybe losing friends or even family. It isn’t a decision lightly taken.

In matters of religious faith, it matters what we call ourselves. Ehrman calls himself an “agnostic atheist.” I find that intriguing, and feel some resonance with that way of self-identification in matters of thought and faith. As he explains, the word “agnostic” literally means “no knowledge.” Admitting “I don’t know” seems an honest statement of humility and common sense. An agnostic is someone who simply doesn’t have enough evidence to be convinced something is, or is not, true. It’s a knowledge issue, whereas the term “atheist” means “no god.” This is a decision in response to religious claims that a divine being exists. So, it makes sense that a person can identify as both an agnostic and an atheist. They might say: “I don’t know if there’s a God, or gods, but I

see no good reason to believe in any God.” And, of course, since there are many views of gods, the question always circles back to “which god” are we talking about? (Why believe in “the biblical God” and not Zeus or Krishna, Allah or Jupiter?)

Some elements of Bart’s story parallel my own “born again” journey and seminary experience leading to an emergence from faith. Another interesting commonality: his wife and my wife are both teachers and they are still Christians. Similar to Bart’s experience, some question why a nonbeliever would read, teach and write about religion. I agree with Bart’s view, that historically, Christianity has had a massive influence on culture, and Jesus continues to hold an eminent position in world history. I would add that when your life has been shaped so deeply and for so long by a belief, a worldview, it gets embedded in your brain. You don’t have to “believe” in Socrates or Shakespeare, or any great figure in history, to be fascinated by their life or their words. An agnostic, atheist, or agnostic-atheist can respect the position of the Bible in world history, since it holds an honored position among the literature of the world; a person doesn’t have to be a believer to respect the basic

message of Jesus of Nazareth and his life story. Choosing a faith is literally a choice influenced by many factors, just as choosing not to have a faith.

I find Ehrman’s podcast consistently interesting for his scholarly approach to the Bible as well as his observations on religious beliefs and traditions. Like many of us, he no longer accepts it as “the Word of God.” He doesn’t have the same background I have with inter-religious chaplaincy, or teaching comparative scriptures and world wisdom as I once did, but it all comes down to the same philosophy: It’s a worthy pursuit to seek knowledge and wisdom, including from those in the past who shared a similar commitment to building the mind and the human community. From my perspective, whatever we believe, or choose not to believe, needs to relate to our relationships with our world, our neighbors, anyone who may be theists or atheists. Believe it or not, we are all agnostics to various degrees. If we can admit that, perhaps we can search for knowledge side by side, with the intent to make our common world better for all.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. . His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (chighland.com).