Change of faith: What if my religious parents find out? [1]

Dear Alice,

I need some good advice. All my life, I've been raised as a Catholic. Both my parents are fairly religious, but I have completely lost interest in Catholicism as a religion because I feel it does nothing for me but preach and tell me how to live my life. It has now gotten to the point that I have become very interested in alternative religions, so much so that I want to change faiths. However, I'm terrified my parents will find out. What should I do?

— Regardless Faithless?

Answer

Dear Regardless Faithless?,

It’s great that you’re exploring your spirituality and what works for you and your life. Religion is often a sensitive topic, so it’s natural to feel scared to broach this subject with your parents. With that said, it’s also healthy to be able to have conversations about your beliefs, whether or not your parents agree. It may take some planning and multiple discussions, but it’s possible to let your parents know about your faith in a way that’s respectful to them and their beliefs.

Having this conversation can be scary, but if all goes well it can also be very rewarding. Not only will you feel good about being honest with your parents, but you’ll likely feel free and open about your beliefs. It also gives your parents a chance to accept you for who you really are as a person. This could help them get to know you more intimately, which will ultimately strengthen your relationship. However, if your parents aren't open to your belief systems, it could disrupt your relationship and lead to criticism, rejection, or being completely cut off from the family, which could be very painful.

While you can’t control your parents’ feelings and reactions, there are some steps that may help the conversation go more smoothly. If or when you do decide to share your new beliefs with your parents, here are some suggestions:

- Choose a calm time and place to have the conversation. Renouncing Catholicism at Easter dinner probably won’t go over so well. Instead, consider letting them know you’d like to talk...
with them and ask if they’d be willing to set aside some time away from other family members or distractions.

- As with any difficult or emotional conversation, it’s helpful to compose your thoughts in advance. Try writing some notes to yourself or a letter to your parents, and give them time to think about it before you talk.
- If religion is, or has been, central to your upbringing, your parents may feel rejected or think of themselves as failures as parents. You may want to acknowledge the valuable and positive beliefs they have taught you, and emphasize that this decision is centered around you.

Even with the most thoughtful planning it’s possible that your parents might push back or be upset by this information. If that’s the case, you might try having them reflect on why they’re feeling or reacting in that way. It could be that they don’t agree with your beliefs, or it could be that they’re hurt by your decision. Understanding why they’re feeling or reacting in that way may help you dive a little deeper with them to find a common ground for moving forward. If that strategy doesn’t seem to be working, it might be best to agree to disagree. Sometimes it’s not possible to come to a mutually agreeable understanding, and that’s okay. While it’s healthier to form and maintain relationships based on honesty and open communication, you could choose to take the positive aspects of the relationship you have with your parents for what they are — without trying to push your parents to accept or embrace your beliefs.

However, if you believe that having this conversation with your parents would put you in harm’s way, you may find it more helpful to keep the information to yourself for the time being. It may also be useful to evaluate the relationship you have with them and the scenarios in which you interact with them. For example, some questions to consider include: Do you still feel comfortable attending religious family holidays for now? What would you feel comfortable with continuing to participate in while still exploring other religious traditions? Setting these boundaries may help you continue to learn more about other religions without letting your parents know.

This isn’t an easy topic to discuss. One possibility is to focus on what’s meaningful to you about your new choice of faiths, rather than criticize their religion. In this way, you can model the respect for differing opinions that you hope to receive from them. If you’re looking to talk this out further or prep some more for this, you may find it useful to talk with a trusted friend, spiritual leader, or mental health professional.

Good luck!

Alice!

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