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Falling from faith? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I came to college in a big city from a small town in Nevada. I came on the suggestion of one of the elders in the church, partly as a means of becoming a stronger voice of the church and partly to become more familiar with my own faith. Over the past couple of months, I have begun to question many things the church says and does, and many of the things I believe. I find myself doing things that I never would have dreamt of doing only six months ago. I'm not sure that this process is reversible or where it is headed. I am really confused and not sure what I want. I am afraid that relations with my family will become difficult if they find out how much I have been questioning my faith. I am really confused and don't know what I want. Are there any organizations on campus that I can talk to about this? Do you have any advice?

Signed,
Falling from faith

Answer

Dear Falling from faith,

As you have moved away from home and entered college, it sounds like you've gained independence and are beginning to discover how you want to live your life. Now that you've changed your context, you have the opportunity to take a step back and look at your faith from a unique point of view. With this new lens, you may see aspects of yourself you never saw before. It's okay to examine, explore, and question your faith and the teachings of your church. You may want to take some time for reflection and seek out support from resources on campus that are available. You may find that the teachings and messages of your faith may not fit as neatly into your new, more complex world — and that's all right!

Exploring your religion could be extremely new territory, so it could be useful to take some time to think through the process and identify the "what" before moving forward. A good starting place may be to choose specific concerns you have that are causing you to question your faith. You could try to ask yourself questions such as: What impressions come up as you focus on this instance? What does it make you feel or think? After identifying the "what," you might move on to the "why." This may need some deeper reflection, so you may want to take some time. You could

consider why is it that thinking about your faith causes you to feel this way? You may think about the pros and cons of your religion. What works for you and what doesn't? Do you think it will have relevance in your life in the future? Are you able to come to terms with the aspects of your church with which you don't agree? As you ask yourself some of these reflective questions, being gentle with yourself can ease the process of working through how you feel about your faith. Sometimes, it works for people to recognize and reconcile what they don't believe in, agree with, or support, rather than to discard religion completely. For example, some people may disagree with stances that their own religion has taken, but they haven't completely left it.

Most likely, the confusion you feel will be with you for a while. The answers you want may not come easily or quickly. You may accept that you're going through a period of questioning and that it doesn't have to mean that you've "fallen" from your faith. You may choose to speak with your religious leader or parents about some of the questions you've thought about. You don't have to tell them what you've been doing at school if you're worried about their reactions. If you felt comfortable, you could tell them, about the questions and doubts you have — they may have gone through a similar experience when they were younger. Or if you're sure this won't go over well, you could speak with a religious leader on your campus. You may also find support from a mental health professional to be useful in order to sort out your feelings and thoughts. Believe it or not, many people are going through a similar process of questioning their religious beliefs as they enter college, and the resources available on campus may be well prepared to help you discuss your faith.

Faith is an extremely personal matter. It could add to and complement your life, while also guiding you through difficult times. You may decide to keep your faith, but not your religion. You may also find that what you grew up with is no longer the appropriate fit for you. With time, patience, and talking through your questions you may be able to decide what is best for you.

Alice!

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