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Finding Jesus in Calcutta | Mary Poplin

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The Veritas Forum

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Transcript

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When Mary Poplin met Mother Teresa, Poplin was looking to articulate Mother Teresa's work in purely secular terms. But the life of this curious nun refused such categorization. A prophet, a mystic and now a saint.

Mother Teresa was not simply a good humanitarian. As many have attempted to label her, but a devout follower of Jesus whose work flowed out of her love for God. And when Poplin returned from India, she realized that a secular telling of Mother Teresa's story would radically distort the reality of her life.

At a Veritas Forum from the University of Michigan, Poplin recounts her formative time in Calcutta and her dreams for a more inclusive Academy.

[MUSIC] So how did I come to know that ignorance wasn't bliss about religion? I went to Sunday school when I was a child, but I think it never took. And so when I came to college, I probably would have told you I was a Christian, but I wasn't.

And I strayed away pretty fast. I didn't come from a highly educated family, but when I

got to college, I sort of was intellectually awakened. I really enjoyed college like I'm sure most of you are doing, maybe not tonight, but often on I guess.

Even as a teenager too, I worked in social justice movements. I worked largely with handicap, youngsters, even as a high school student. And I became increasingly drawn to more and more radical philosophies about social justice and other things.

So intellectually as a professor, I felt my role was to translate these radical intellectual philosophies to my students. And the ones that I built a master's program around and worked in the PhD program realm were sort of critical social constructivism, which sort of for those of you in other fields is kind of the educational equivalent of structuralism and post-structuralism. From radical feminism, cultural studies, and then finally critical theory, which is basically for those of you in other fields, Marxist view of education.

In my personal life, I was adventurous. When I got to the University of Texas, it was kind of like party time. And I was sort of frequently in nightclubs and doing a lot of alcohol, drugs, and well, I'd say I was personally, serially monogamous, maybe.

Mostly. In my spiritual life, we'll skip over that, right? In my spiritual life, I was experimenting kind of with everything. I was what I'd call surfing the spiritual net.

So within two weeks of going to the University of Texas, the whole foods grew up in Austin, Texas. They were a little wooden grocery store. I'm that old.

And I was into trans-and-owned meditation from things on their bulletin board within two weeks. I did Buddhist Zen meditation and then a lot of different new age movements because actually the Eastern religions in the United States are mostly sort of degenerated into a kind of amorphous spiritual, but not religious. And I was a kind of new age movement.

In November of 1992, though, I had just to become a full-tenured professor, kind of the top of the food chain in the University. And I had become that full professor in May. And in November, I had this really unshakable dream.

I remembered every single detail of this dream. And Jesus figured prominently in the dream. I had had a Native American student who told me that he would like to help me with my spiritual life, which was always irritating because I thought I was doing a lot with my spiritual life.

But nevertheless, when I had this dream, I thought Native Americans' spiritual life dreams. And he began to kind of talk to me and counsel me in a way. And so I began in 1993 to sort of secretly and cautiously investigate Christianity.

About a year later, I saw a video of Mother Tree, so I'm going to show you a little clip in just a second because I know that most of you were like 10 years old when she died. So I

want you to kind of see her and see the kind of work that they did. I was there a year and a half before she passed away.

But in this video, she said something that really struck me. She said, "Our work is not social work. It's religious work." And as somebody who was just sort of toying with Christianity, I needed to know exactly what that meant.

I was strangely moved by this video that I'm going to see a little clip from. In fact, I was jolted by it. I was jolted by it because here was a woman doing justice work, but talking about it in very unusual ways.

First of all, Mother Teresa talked almost incessantly about Jesus. She almost could not make a sentence without talking about him. And so I knew that if I were really going to understand, I would need to go there and work.

And so in the fall of 1995, I wrote a letter asking if I could come. The second jolt to my soul was this. In the letter I had said, "If you let me come and volunteer, what would I need to bring?" Okay, I'm pretty pragmatic.

I was thinking toilet paper. And she wrote back and said, "All you need to bring to Calcutta is a heart to serve Jesus in the distressing disguise of the poor." So here was a woman that I was with for two months in her missionaries of charity who was the head and founder of a worldwide multi-ethnic compassion ministry to the poorest of the poor. I had always professed to support all those things, work with the poor, women in leadership, and multi-ethnic organizations.

But she had never made it into my feminist class syllabus, and she had never made it as a model of social justice. So I began to have to ask myself why this was the case when I came back. Was it because she was Christian? Was it because she was Catholic? Was it because she simply talked too much about Jesus? Now most people interpret Mother Teresa that they think about her more like a good humanist, maybe even an extraordinary humanist.

She's more comfortable to us that way. It gives us a feeling that if we just tried hard enough, we might be able to be like her. But when I came back and I tried to write about some of the experiences that I had had, not unlike this experience, I tried to write about her in a sort of secularized Christianity as a sort of soft secularized Christianity.

I felt that it would make her less offensive to my colleagues to the secular world in the university that I lived in. But she did not think about her life this way. And so as I wrote, I began to fall into an intellectual crisis because I was lying about her.

Todd Lake saw Mother Teresa on his graduation day speak at the Harvard Class Day exercise, and this is what he wrote about it. It's very much what my experience was. I remember Mother Teresa's speech on the steps of Memorial Church at the Class Day

exercise in 1982, where she talked of Jesus incessantly, I mean incessantly, and even quoted that verse in John 3 16, already known to most of us thanks to the end zone bleachers.

But as trying for brilliant editing, Harvard magazine's account managed to report almost the entire Mother Teresa speech without once hinting she might have even mentioned Jesus. We all since he could be trouble, and we wanted to make sure he never became a lab issue again. Well eventually, I just had to stop trying to exorcise her faith and write the book, finding Calcutta as best I could from who she was.

So let me give you a few examples. Mother Teresa and the missionaries of charity actually did not believe that the work we just saw was their first work. I don't know if you noticed how chaotic the center where the children were was and how peaceful it was the next day.

But what happens at Mother Teresa's is they believe that their first work is prayer, and so they're always praying. So even when they're working with a child, like you saw, they're actually praying because they believe that their job is first to belong to Jesus. And then by belonging to Jesus, they will have the stamina, the grace, and the strength to do the work that we see them do.

Mother Teresa called it getting a good push from above. The work in the missionaries is very difficult work. It's difficult, it's monotonous, it's cleaning, cooking, feeding, tending, taking care of really, really sick people.

And something bigger had to hold them there. They believed that was Christ. As I was watching this, I was actually thinking to myself how hard it is to get people to persevere in organizations that they volunteer for.

So there's a lot of times that you have these student service learning programs in colleges and universities. And after the initial excitement sort of pales, then it's very hard to get people to not just sort of wake up one morning and decide not to go. Secondly, Mother Teresa's calling, how did Mother Teresa decide that she was going to do this work? Well, Mother Teresa actually was a middle, she was already a nun by 18 in India, and she worked from 18 to 36 as a sister of Loreto.

She was teaching children, middle school children, social studies. Did she just suddenly decide one day that she wanted to help the poor? Well, that's not what she says. What she said, and she actually only said it to about five or six priests, so we actually didn't know this until she passed away.

She used to tell us, "Well, I was on my way on a train, and I heard a call within a call." So what was that call? She heard Jesus tell her, she had three mystical visions of Jesus on the cross telling her exactly what he wanted her to do. And she said first, "He wanted her

to take Indian nuns to serve Indian people." Second, Mother Teresa used to say to her superiors, "He doesn't want them to have to become mims." What that meant is that most orders in the Catholic Church have been developed out of European origins, and so when an Indian girl would join an order in the Catholic Church, she would basically have to become sort of European. And this was kind of a slightly derogatory word for that.

Second, Jesus told her to go into the deepest, darkest holes of the poor and take him because he had no one to take him there. He asked that she not be built any institutions, so they didn't build hospitals or schools. They moved their work right inside those communities where they worked.

So related to that, Jesus told them to take on poverty. He said to me, "God doesn't call everybody to work with the poor, like He called us to work with." And He doesn't call everybody to live poor, like He called us to work to live. She said that Jesus called them to be what she called living sacrifices.

And for Jesus asked them to serve only the poorest of the poor. So you can see why she would have chosen the group of children that she chose when there was a ceasefire, right? Because Jesus wanted people to work with children or to work with people who didn't get even the services for the poor. And in India, we used to, as volunteers, buy water from a man right down the street from us, and He used to always tell us that she should just let those people die.

India had too many people, she should just let them die. So the third and fourth example I'll give you together, and that is the Mother Teresa's belief in divine providence, another Judeo-Christian principle, and radical forgiveness. So Mother Teresa and the missionaries of charity never ask for money.

If you ever get a request for money from the missionaries of charity, you'll know it's not real. They have a rule inside their constitution that they're absolutely forbidden from ever asking anybody for money. Mother Teresa believed that if they were faithful to the call that God made on their lives, then He would be faithful to make all the provision they needed.

So He was responsible for paying for it. While I was there, Christopher Hitchens' new book about Mother Teresa had come out. It was called "Christophretians is one of the Arc Atheists of America." And his book was called "The Missionary Position." And he had actually, before that book, had a BBC film called "Hell's Angel." And so it's very critical of Mother Teresa, and I knew she knew about the book because the sisters actually told me about the book, and I knew she knew about the film because she's actually quoted in the book when the BBC called her.

Well, one of Hitchens' many complaints about Mother Teresa is that she took money from the politically incorrect or the politically corrupt. Okay, let's just think about this. Mother

Teresa and the Missionaries of Charity do not have a branch that reads world newspapers.

They don't study the world politics. They don't believe that's their call at all. So when she gets a check, they don't really analyze it.

They just figure it's a check that God got there and they cash it and use it. So I had read this book while I was there, and not long after I read it, I had the opportunity. One of my jobs was to be a runner from the center for children, handicapped children.

I mostly worked with babies and a runner back to the mother house. And so I was there one day, and she was telling myself and an Indian priest, who were both waiting on things, that she had just seen some Hindu students, and these Hindu students had come and brought her some money, and she was going to use it for her new work, which was to get prostitutes out of jail, and then put them near the sisters and teach them new work. And so she was telling me about this, and I just read the book so I really wanted to push her, because I knew she knew about the book.

So I said, "Mother, there are people who write books about you that say you don't need any more money. You have lots of money." And she looked at me at first kind of quizzically, and then she said to me, "Oh, the book. Yes, I haven't read it.

It matters not he's forgiven." Well, okay. Okay, well, maybe you had the same response Chris for Hitchens said, "Well, I couldn't let it go, because he knew she said that about the BBC film, and he was irate about it. He's still irate about it.

But I saw him in December. He was still irate about it. But anyway, so I said to her, I said, "You know, Mother, he knows that you said he was forgiven, and he's kind of irate about it, because he says he didn't need to be forgiven, and he didn't ask you to forgive him." And she looked at me like I didn't understand, and she said to me, "It's not I that forgives.

It's God. God has forgiven him. Ask the sisters." So when I get back to my place, I ask one of the permanent sisters that I knew pretty well, and she said, "Yes, we read the book.

We have one copy of the book, and all the permanent sisters, those are the ones with the blue stripes. It takes nine years to get those blue stripes." And she said, "We passed it around, and we all read it." And then when the last sister read it, we fasted for a week to ask the Lord what was the message of the book for us? Can you imagine? You've read this book. Now you're fasting for a week.

And so I asked them, "Well, what did they find out?" And they looked at me and said, "Oh, it's a call for us to become more holy." Now I have to admit to you, Christopher Hitchens has never made me feel that way. [laughter] But as it turned out, that was the

message for them. Mother Teresa believed in radical forgiveness demonstrated by Christ, right? On the cross he's hanging there.

Everybody who's just hung him, no one there knows they need to be forgiven, and certainly no one has asked for forgiveness, and that's yet one of his last seven words. So they had forgiven him just *carte blanche*, and so they had no hooks left in them. My pastor once said, "Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies." And I think we all know people who really have been hung up on unforgiveness in their lives.

An equally radical, maybe even more radical, intellectual principle of Christianity, is that when you know something is a miss in your life, you confess it, and his promise is to, number one, forgive you, and number two, to begin to cleanse you from that part of you in your soul that causes that sin to happen. So I'm going to give you a very personal example from my life, because I did these things when I was about your age. When I became a Christian, I began to grieve about two abortions I had, and I began to confess them repeatedly to God.

When I got to Mother Teresa's, I got assigned to the Center for Handicapped Children, but once inside that center, I was assigned almost exclusively to work with infants. Interesting. When I came back from Calcutta, I was at a monastery on my way home, and Father Sam was doing a retreat, and I had sat in on his talk, and he said, "We were going to make these forgiveness cards that we were going to burn at night on this altar outside, like an evening oblation to God." If you remember those of you who read the Old Testament.

So I took my card, and on one side, the card was supposed to write the names of the people you want to forgive, people that you feel you haven't completely forgiven, and on the back side, anything you want to be forgiven for. And so I had my abortion on the back side, I had a list of names, and I'm starting to walk along the river in the afternoon. And in my spirit, this has only happened to me this one time.

In my spirit, I hear a man's voice, and I say in my spirit, because I think if you were walking next to me, you wouldn't have heard it. But it's clearly a man's voice, not happy with me. And the voice says to me, "Who are you not to forgive someone I forgave?" And I think, "Wow, who's not on my list?" So I take out my card, and I look on my list, and I walk along the river some more.

And I hear it a second time, same exact same words, the same emotion with it. And then I'm kind of pretty frantic about that, I guess, and I'm still walking along the river. And the third time I heard it, same thing, who are you not to forgive someone I forgave? I just knelt in the grass, and I looked up the sky, and I said, "Lord, I don't know what you're talking about." And the next voice said, "I forgave you the first time you ask, and I don't want you to ask me again."

[music] Okay, at first I thought the Lord was saying, "Forgive yourself." But I had been trying to do that for years.

So then I started thinking, "Okay, so biblically, what could this really mean?" The truth is that self-forgiveness is a secular principle. It's not a Christian principle. There's nothing in the Bible, and there's no character in the Bible who ever forgives themselves, or is ever told to forgive themselves.

That is secularism. While the scriptures had assured me that I had been forgiven, what the Lord told me that day, that I had been forgiven, and I knew the scriptures, because I had confessed, I was continuing, because I thought the sin was so terrible, to continue to try to work it off. I was trying to work it off until I felt I deserved it.

So one day I might be really free, and the next day I might again feel like I needed to confess again. So let's look at the way that secular psychology, for example, deals with forgiveness, because secular psychology knows that has actually taken this up in the last few years. They believe this is an important principle.

You find that people who believe they're forgiven, and people who forgive other people are much healthier than other people. So I'm going to quote from actually a quite good study. I mean, scientifically the study's pretty flawless.

They had hundreds of older people that they interviewed. This is Kraus and Ellison in 2003. They interviewed people to see if people generally believe they should forgive other people, and then why? That was true.

So here's the conclusion to the numbers in their study. It says older, and I want you to watch the word feel, because this is not, these people think this, it's about these people feel this. So it says older people who feel they are forgiven by God are approximately two and a half times more likely to feel that a transgressor should be forgiven unconditionally than older people who do not feel they're forgiven by God.

Okay, that's fairly accurate with the exception of the people who are really not telling them they feel this, they're telling them they know this, right? Very different words. But let's look even further at how the authors ultimately conclude the study. Now, okay, so it's social science jargon that just sort of play along with me.

I feel like you're really interested. So here's what they say. Finally, as noted earlier, official church doctrine advocates for giving others and seeking forgiveness from God.

Yet we know relatively little how these theological issues are brought into practice in daily life. Two intriguing leads are provided in the literature. First, a recent study by Wirthno suggests that small formal groups in the church, such as prayer groups and Bible study groups, may promote the forgiveness of others.

Second, research indicates that the general psychosocial climate of the congregation may have an important influence on the thought and behavior of church members. Because the general psychosocial climate of the church is likely to affect the way prayer groups and Bible studies are run, comparing and contrasting these two institutional influences may provide valuable insight into the factors that encourage people to be more forgiving of others. You will note that God has completely disappeared from the study.

He's completely absent. To the authors who are secular, there has been no spiritual transaction that has gone on between their subjects and a living God. It's all now about feelings, sociology, psychosocial groups and institutional influences.

This is a perfect example of what philosopher Dallas Willard says, the calamity of displacing the central points of Christian knowledge into the domain of mere faith, sentiment, tradition, ritual or power. This is why I believe that the central question for the 21st century, especially in the West, is reality secular. If forgiveness, as it's described in Christianity, is true, that God forgives and then begins to cleanse us, secular psychology will be at best limited and possibly harmful.

Our resistance in the university and the secular university and the secular sort of western world to engaging the reality of spiritual transactions leaves higher education, psychology in this case, bound in a secular imperative that not only limits our minds but diminishes our search for truth and progress. It reduces all our philosophies and theories to the lowest common denominator. So after I had tried to write about Mother Teresa in a secular way, then I began to realize that I had to understand what were the worldviews that governed the university and the secular West.

From the perspective, because I knew that from any of the worldviews I was currently teaching, Mother Teresa was completely incomprehensible. So I looked at, for example, in scientific naturalism or scientism, some people call it, Mother Teresa is nothing but a unique bundle of brain chemistry. With particular psychonural processes going on, that made her do her work.

So secular humanism, Mother Teresa decided on her own human, with her own human reason and power to do what she did, and she was just simply more highly socially responsive individual who took on that responsibility and had the fortitude and the will to do the good work that she did. Both of those worldviews would add the following caveat, that it was unfortunate that she had this myth of believing in God, which from naturalism or scientism was nothing more than a sort of leftover genetic psychonural fluke that hadn't been completely evolved out of the human race. Or from secular humanism, her Christianity was either a wish fulfillment, no one's ever explained to me why you would, if you were going to wish a God, why you would have one with rules, but nevertheless, wish fulfillment, or the tragic result of having just a sort of poor Albanian third world

education, that would be sort of multicultural explanation, or an opiate from Mark's standpoint, she created this God to make, as an opiate for the poor, so they would be happy with their condition.

From pantheism, like I said in the United States, it's mostly kind of a new age movement, things I was very deeply involved in. Mother Teresa would be a more highly evolved soul. She would have had a very strong connection to the divine, and perhaps even been more highly reincarnated.

But let me go back to secularism, because that's kind of the place that I want to take us tonight, or conclude tonight. This radical secularism in the West, and specifically in the university, has led to, I believe, four major problems that are bankrupting the university education. First, as you can see, even from the video, and as you know from just your own self, and certainly from my life, we are woefully ignorant of the things that most people in the world believe.

At most, when you really look at all those religious surveys, you could say maybe 7% of the world doesn't believe that there's a God or spirit or something like that. So we are woefully ignorant of what all these other people believe, not just Christians, but everyone. Second, secularism has radically diminished the university's commitment to a whole-hearted search for truth by categorically excluding some worldviews from the conversation.

So secularism denies the central purpose of the university, which was to be the free and open marketplace of ideas. Third, it contradicts the university's own self-professed commitment to pluralism. You can't have pluralism when certain things are off limits.

And fourth, radical secularism has left the university with what law professor Stephen Smith calls a thin, desiccated public discourse. He suggests we need to decriminalize the smuggling of beliefs. So here's what how Dallas Willard summarizes some of the work in his latest book.

He says, "Is reality secular? Is adequate knowledge secular? And is that something that has been established as a fact by thorough and unbiased inquiry? Is this something that today's secular university is actually thoroughly and freely discussing the disciplined way?" He says, "Certainly not. Nowhere does that happen?" It is now simply assumed in the university that every field of knowledge or practice is perfectly complete without any reference to God. He says as a philosopher, it may be logically possible that this assumption is true, but is it true? Okay, for me, the bottom line is this, and then I'm going to stop and we'll open up for questions and comments and things.

The bottom line is this, I teach PhD students. They're getting the top degree they can. They're not going to come back to the university again unless they're really... [laughter] Oh no.

Masochist, I think, might be the right word. Except for those of us who never want to leave the university, so we become professors. Anyway, I really want these people to be really, really well educated.

I want them to be actually better educated than I was. I want them to know the whole range of philosophic and theoretical options that they have to consider any problem they're beginning to work on, whatever it is. I want them to understand it historically.

I want them to understand that they can look at all these problems, for example, in my field in education, through different economic, political, spiritual, sociological, scientific, religious, and psychological frameworks. And I would want the same thing for you. I think as educated people, we should become as fully conscious of all the options and choices that we have to make and to study from as anybody.

We should have more. And then we should choose the option that we believe most closely fits reality. Because what Mother Teresa taught me is what you believe and what you disbelieve makes an enormous difference.

So thank you. [applause]

[music] Find more content like this on veritas.org. And be sure to follow the Veritas Forum on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

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