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Op-Ed: On Sunday, faith and freedom

By Judy Belk

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According to a survey conducted by the Bertelsmann Religion Foundation Monitor, the United States is the most religious nation in the industrialized world. The Pew Forum's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey found that 88% of the Americans it surveyed are fairly or absolutely certain that God exists, and that more than half of them say religion is "very important" in their lives.

Personally, I've always had a tenuous relationship with organized religion, especially Christianity. As it was for most African Americans of my generation, the church was a powerful force in my childhood. I grew up in Alexandria, Va., in the late 1950s and '60s before it became a hip tourist destination. And although I lived only 10 miles from the White House, my early life was governed by policies created by the crazies 100 miles south in Richmond, who had peculiar ideas about people who looked like me. It was hard not to think God was playing favorites.

Access to many of the pleasures other children took for granted — swimming pools, schools, parks, ice cream parlors, movie theaters — were off limits to me because of the color of my skin. That helped ensure that the church was our "community center," the connective tissue linking the community. It was a one-stop provider of news, social events, activism and faith. It was also one of the few places in my world where disenfranchised people were in charge. Each Sunday, folks who were forced to move through their lives heads down, eyes averted six days a week, were given the opportunity to stand up, clear-eyed, leading and controlling an institution on their own terms. Seeing that transformation each week gave me hope and faith, not so much in a God I couldn't see, but in the power of men and women inhaling a taste of freedom.

Still, Christianity and I never recovered from our first significant encounter: my baptism on a cold Christmas morning when I was 8, way too young to know for certain that I wanted or needed to be saved from my sins. But my mother was determined to provide her two black girls, my 10-year-old sister, Vickie, and me, every opportunity she could to help us thrive in an unfriendly world. Washing away our sins was part of that plan.

Southern Baptists go overboard with their rituals. Just a sprinkling of water would never do. We were to be totally submerged in an above-ground baptismal pool in the church basement. Later, after a change of clothes, we would be invited to the upstairs sanctuary to have our first communion of stale crackers and warm grape juice. Santa's presents would have to wait.

I was terrified. Vickie and I were dressed in all white gowns, and each of us also wore two large puffy shower caps. Saved or not, my mother had her priorities; she was not going to have her girls walking around on Christmas Day with nappy hair.

The basement was packed. The church had been promoting the Belk girls' baptism for weeks, and it seemed as though the entire neighborhood had turned out for the event. As Vickie and I walked in with our mother, the crowd parted, making a path directly to the pool. The Rev. Mills was waiting for us there in a black robe and hip-high black waders, looking more like a fly fisherman than a man preparing to save two souls.

As we made our way down the aisle, my mother smiled with pride as she greeted well-wishers. There was a chorus of amens, and Miss Elizabeth, our Sunday school teacher, started humming as folks joined in singing:

At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light,

And the burden of my heart rolled away,

It was there by faith I received

my sight,

And now I am happy all the day

I was not happy. I was petrified. After the Rev. Mills led the congregation in prayer, he slowly stepped into the pool and nodded to my mother, who pushed Vickie forward. She was dunked, my mother wrapped her in a large Donald Duck beach towel, and then it was my turn. My sister whispered reassurance: “It’s not that bad.”

I stepped into the pool, holding on to the edge. The Rev. Mills gently pulled me toward him. “Don’t be afraid. The Lord is with you.”

If he was, I didn’t see him. The water was much colder and deeper than I thought.

I started hyperventilating and having what I now realize was the beginning of panic attack. It caused the Rev. Mills enough concern that he skipped the prayer and went straight to “In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.”

As he leaned me back toward the water, I grabbed his robe and wouldn’t let go, dragging him down with me. He lost his balance and we both fell under and started thrashing around in the pool. Several deacons leaned over in their Sunday best to retrieve us.

Finally, the Rev. Mills, soaked and slightly disoriented, was able to stand and make it to the side of the pool. Shivering and dripping wet, I ran to my mother, who was less concerned that I had almost drowned than that I had lost my two shower caps, leaving my wet hair exposed and napping up by the minute.

The Rev. Mills quickly composed himself and quipped, “The Holy Ghost was certainly with Little Sister Judy this morning. Can I get an amen?”

While these days I’m more apt to be chanting “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo” than humming “At the Cross,” a recent trip home reminded me of the central role that Oakland Baptist has played in my life. There was the time in 1963 when I helped the church serve meals to weary travelers answering Dr. King’s call to march on Washington; there was my wedding day in 1979, with Vickie standing beside me as my maid of honor; there was my return a month later for her untimely funeral and the announcement of a scholarship in her name, which is still in place.

Even the City of Alexandria seems to have finally understood the important role of our church. In an acknowledgment of past wrongs, the city recently unveiled a plaque in a local park highlighting the role that my mother, the church and others in the African American community played in the fight against injustice. Now that's something to make even a fledgling Buddhist cry, "Hallelujah!"

Judy Belk lives in Los Angeles and has written about race and family issues for many outlets, including the New York Times, the Washington Post and National Public Radio.