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He had faith in his job;

A reporter's work covering church sex scandals, religious tycoons and healers tests his beliefs -- and triggers a revelation.

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BODY:

WHEN Times editors assigned me to the religion beat, I believed God had answered my prayers.

As a serious Christian, I had cringed at some of the coverage in the mainstream media. Faith frequently was treated like a circus, even a freak show.

I wanted to report objectively and respectfully about how belief shapes people's lives. Along the way, I believed, my own faith would grow deeper and sturdier.

But during the eight years I covered religion, something very different happened.

In 1989, a friend took me to Mariners Church, then in Newport Beach, after saying: "You need God. That's what's missing in your life." At the time, I was 28 and my first son was less than a year old. I had managed to nearly ruin my marriage (the second one) and didn't think I'd do much better as a father. I was profoundly lost.

The mega-church's pastor, Kenton Beshore, had a knack for making Scripture accessible and relevant. For someone who hadn't studied the Bible much, these talks fed a hunger in my soul. The secrets to living well had been there all along -- in "Life's Instruction Manual," as some Christians nicknamed the Bible.

Some friends in a Bible study class encouraged me to attend a men's religious weekend in the San Bernardino Mountains. The three-day retreats are designed to grind down your defenses and leave you emotionally raw -- an easier state in which to connect with God. After 36 hours of prayer, singing, Bible study, intimate sharing and little sleep, I felt filled with the Holy Spirit.

At the climactic service Sunday, Mike Barris, a pastor-to-be, delivered an old-fashioned altar call. He said we needed to let Jesus into our hearts.

With my eyes closed in prayer, I saw my heart slowly opening in two and then being infused with a warm, glowing light. A tingle spread across my chest. This, I thought, was what it was to be born again.

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The pastor asked those who wanted to accept Jesus to raise their hands. My hand pretty much levitated on its own. My new friends in Christ, many of whom I had first met Friday, gave me hugs and slaps on the back.

I began praying each morning and night. During those quiet times, I mostly listened for God's voice. And I thought I sensed a plan he had for me: To write about religion for The Times and bring light into the newsroom, if only by my stories and example.

My desire to be a religion reporter grew as I read stories about faith in the mainstream media. Spiritual people often appeared as nuts or simpletons.

In one of the most famous examples, the Washington Post ran a news story in 1993 that referred to evangelical Christians as "largely poor, uneducated and easy to command."

Another maddening trend was that homosexuality and abortion debates dominated media coverage, as if those were the only topics that mattered to Christians.

I didn't just pray for a religion writing job; I lobbied hard. In one meeting with editors, my pitch went something like this:

"What if I told you that you have an institution in Orange County that draws more than 15,000 people a weekend and that you haven't written much about?"

They said they couldn't imagine such a thing.

"Saddleback Church in Lake Forest draws that type of crowd."

It took several years and numerous memos and e-mails, but editors finally agreed in 1998 to let me write "Getting Religion," a weekly column about faith in Orange County.

I felt like all the tumblers of my life had clicked. I had a strong marriage, great kids and a new column. I attributed it all to God's grace.

First as a columnist and then as a reporter, I never had a shortage of topics. I wrote about an elderly church organist who became a spiritual mentor to the man who tried to rape, rob and kill her. About the Orthodox Jewish mother who developed a line of modest clothing for Barbie dolls. About the hardy group of Mormons who rode covered wagons 800 miles from Salt Lake City to San Bernardino, replicating their ancestors' journey to Southern California.

Meanwhile, Roman Catholicism, with its low-key evangelism and deep ritual, increasingly appealed to me. I loved its long history and loving embrace of liberals and conservatives, immigrants and the established, the rich and poor.

My wife was raised in the Catholic Church and had wanted me to join for years. I signed up for yearlong conversion classes at a Newport Beach parish that would end with an Easter eve ceremony ushering newcomers into the church.

By then I had been on the religion beat for three years. I couldn't wait to get to work each day or, on Sunday, to church.

IN 2001, about six months before the Catholic clergy sex scandal broke nationwide, the dioceses of Orange and Los Angeles paid a record \$5.2 million to a law student who said he had been molested, as a student at Santa Margarita High School in Rancho Santa Margarita, by his principal, Msgr. Michael Harris.

Without admitting guilt, Harris agreed to leave the priesthood. As part of the settlement, the dioceses also were forced to radically change how they handled sexual abuse allegations, including a promise to kick out any priest with a

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credible molestation allegation in his past. It emerged that both dioceses had many known molesters on duty. Los Angeles had two convicted pedophiles still working as priests.

While reporting the Harris story, I learned -- from court records and interviews -- the lengths to which the church went to protect the priest. When Harris took an abrupt leave of absence as principal at Santa Margarita in January 1994, he issued a statement saying it was because of "stress." He resigned a month later.

His superiors didn't tell parents or students the real reason for his absence: Harris had been accused of molesting a student while he was principal at Mater Dei High School in Santa Ana from 1977 to 1979; church officials possessed a note from Harris that appeared to be a confession; and they were sending him to a treatment center.

In September 1994, a second former student stepped forward, this time publicly, and filed a lawsuit. In response, parents and students held a rally for Harris at the school, singing, "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." An airplane towed a banner overhead that read "We Love Father Harris."

By this time, church leaders possessed a psychological report in which Catholic psychiatrists diagnosed Harris as having an attraction to adolescents and concluded that he likely had molested multiple boys. (Harris, who has denied the allegations, now stands accused of molesting 12 boys, according to church records.) But they didn't step forward to set the record straight. Instead, a diocesan spokesman called Harris an "icon of the priesthood."

Harris' top defense attorney, John Barnett, lashed out at the priest's accusers in the media, calling them "sick individuals." Again, church leaders remained silent as the alleged victims were savaged. Some of the diocese's top priests -- including the cleric in charge of investigating the accusations -- threw a going-away party for Harris.

At the time, I never imagined Catholic leaders would engage in a widespread practice that protected alleged child molesters and belittled the victims. I latched onto the explanation that was least damaging to my belief in the Catholic Church -- that this was an isolated case of a morally corrupt administration.

And I was comforted by the advice of a Catholic friend: "Keep your eyes on the person nailed to the cross, not the priests behind the altar."

IN late 2001, I traveled to Salt Lake City to attend a conference of former Mormons. These people lived mostly in the Mormon Jell-O belt -- Utah, Idaho, Arizona -- so-named because of the plates of Jell-O that inevitably appear at Mormon gatherings.

They found themselves ostracized in their neighborhoods, schools and careers. Often, they were dead to their own families.

"If Mormons associate with you, they think they will somehow become contaminated and lose their faith too," Suzy Colver told me. "It's almost as if people who leave the church don't exist."

The people at the conference were an eclectic bunch: novelists and stay-at-home moms, entrepreneurs and cartoonists, sex addicts and alcoholics. Some were depressed, others angry, and a few had successfully moved on. But they shared a common thread: They wanted to be honest about their lack of faith and still be loved.

In most pockets of Mormon culture, that wasn't going to happen.

Part of what drew me to Christianity were the radical teachings of Jesus -- to love your enemy, to protect the vulnerable and to lovingly bring lost sheep back into the fold.

As I reported the story, I wondered how faithful Mormons -- many of whom rigorously follow other biblical commands such as giving 10% of their income to the church -- could miss so badly on one of Jesus' primary lessons?

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As part of the Christian family, I felt shame for my religion. But I still compartmentalized it as an aberration -- the result of sinful behavior that infects even the church.

IN early 2002, I was assigned to work on the Catholic sex scandal story as it erupted across the nation. I also continued to attend Sunday Mass and conversion classes on Sunday mornings and Tuesday nights.

Father Vincent Gilmore -- the young, intellectually sharp priest teaching the class -- spoke about the sex scandal and warned us Catholics-to-be not to be poisoned by a relatively few bad clerics. Otherwise, we'd be committing "spiritual suicide."

As I began my reporting, I kept that in mind. I also thought that the victims -- people usually in their 30s, 40s and up -- should have just gotten over what had happened to them decades before. To me, many of them were needlessly stuck in the past.

But then I began going over the documents. And interviewing the victims, scores of them. I discovered that the term "sexual abuse" is a euphemism. Most of these children were raped and sodomized by someone they and their family believed was Christ's representative on Earth. That's not something an 8-year-old's mind can process; it forever warps a person's sexuality and spirituality.

Many of these victims were molested by priests with a history of abusing children. But the bishops routinely sent these clerics to another parish, and bullied or conned the victims and their families into silence. The police were almost never called. In at least a few instances, bishops encouraged molesting priests to flee the country to escape prosecution.

I couldn't get the victims' stories or the bishops' lies -- many of them right there on their own stationery -- out of my head. I had been in journalism more than two decades and had dealt with murders, rapes, other violent crimes and tragedies. But this was different -- the children were so innocent, their parents so faithful, the priests so sick and bishops so corrupt.

The lifeline Father Vincent had tried to give me began to slip from my hands.

I sought solace in another belief: that a church's heart is in the pews, not the pulpits. Certainly the people who were reading my stories would recoil and, in the end, recapture God's house. Instead, I saw parishioners reflexively support priests who had molested children by writing glowing letters to bishops and judges, offering them jobs or even raising their bail while cursing the victims, often to their faces.

On a Sunday morning at a parish in Rancho Santa Margarita, I watched congregants lobby to name their new parish hall after their longtime pastor, who had admitted to molesting a boy and who had been barred that day from the ministry. I felt sick to my stomach that the people of God wanted to honor an admitted child molester. Only one person in the crowd, an Orange County sheriff's deputy, spoke out for the victim.

On Good Friday 2002, I decided I couldn't belong to the Catholic Church. Though I had spent a year preparing for it, I didn't go through with the rite of conversion.

I understood that I was witnessing the failure of humans, not God. But in a way, that was the point. I didn't see these institutions drenched in God's spirit. Shouldn't religious organizations, if they were God-inspired and -driven, reflect higher standards than government, corporations and other groups in society?

I found an excuse to skip services that Easter. For the next few months, I attended church only sporadically. Then I stopped going altogether.

SOME of the nation's most powerful pastors -- including Billy Graham, Robert H. Schuller and Greg Laurie -- appear on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, benefiting from TBN's worldwide reach while looking past the network's

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reliance on the "prosperity gospel" to fuel its growth.

TBN's creed is that if viewers send money to the network, God will repay them with great riches and good health. Even people deeply in debt are encouraged to put donations on credit cards.

"If you have been healed or saved or blessed through TBN and have not contributed ... you are robbing God and will lose your reward in heaven," Paul Crouch, co-founder of the Orange County-based network, once told viewers. Meanwhile, Crouch and his wife, Jan, live like tycoons.

I began looking into TBN after receiving some e-mails from former devotees of the network. Those people had given money to the network in hopes of getting a financial windfall from God. That didn't work.

By then, I started to believe that God was calling me, as he did St. Francis of Assisi, to "rebuild his church" -- not in some grand way that would lead to sainthood but by simply reporting on corruption within the church body.

I spent several years investigating TBN and pored through stacks of documents -- some made available by appalled employees -- showing the Crouches eating \$180-per-person meals; flying in a \$21-million corporate jet; having access to 30 TBN-owned homes across the country, among them a pair of Newport Beach mansions and a ranch in Texas. All paid for with tax-free donor money.

One of the stars of TBN and a major fundraiser is the self-proclaimed faith healer Benny Hinn. I attended one of his two-day "Miracle Crusades" at what was then the Pond of Anaheim. The arena was packed with sick people looking for a cure.

My heart broke for the hundreds of people around me in wheelchairs or in the final stages of terminal diseases, believing that if God deemed their faith strong enough, they would be healed that night.

Hinn tells his audiences that a generous cash gift to his ministry will be seen by God as a sign of true faith. This has worked well for the televangelist, who lives in an oceanfront mansion in Dana Point, drives luxury cars, flies in private jets and stays in the best hotels.

At the crusade, I met Jordie Gibson, 21, who had flown from Calgary, Canada, to Anaheim because he believed that God, through Hinn, could get his kidneys to work again.

He was thrilled to tell me that he had stopped getting dialysis because Hinn had said people are cured only when they "step out in faith." The decision enraged his doctors, but made perfect sense to Gibson. Despite risking his life as a show of faith, he wasn't cured in Anaheim. He returned to Canada and went back on dialysis. The crowd was filled with desperate believers like Gibson.

I tried unsuccessfully to get several prominent mainstream pastors who appeared on TBN to comment on the prosperity gospel, Hinn's "faith healing" or the Crouches' lifestyle.

Like the Catholic bishops, I assumed, they didn't want to risk what they had.

AS the stories piled up, I began to pray with renewed vigor, but it felt like I wasn't connecting to God. I started to feel silly even trying.

I read accounts of St. John of the Cross and his "dark night of the soul," a time he believed God was testing him by seemingly withdrawing from his life. Maybe this was my test.

I met with my former Presbyterian pastor, John Huffman, and told him what I was feeling. I asked him if I could e-mail him some tough questions about Christianity and faith and get his answers. He agreed without hesitation.

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The questions that I thought I had come to peace with started to bubble up again. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why does God get credit for answered prayers but no blame for unanswered ones? Why do we believe in the miraculous healing power of God when he's never been able to regenerate a limb or heal a severed spinal chord?

In one e-mail, I asked John, who had lost a daughter to cancer, why an atheist businessman prospers and the child of devout Christian parents dies. Why would a loving God make this impossible for us to understand?

He sent back a long reply that concluded:

"My ultimate affirmation is let God be God and acknowledge that He is in charge. He knows what I don't know. And frankly, if I'm totally honest with you, a life of gratitude is one that bows before the Sovereign God arguing with Him on those things that trouble me, lamenting the losses of life, but ultimately saying, 'You, God, are infinite; I'm human and finite.' "

John is an excellent pastor, but he couldn't reach me. For some time, I had tried to push away doubts and reconcile an all-powerful and infinitely loving God with what I saw, but I was losing ground. I wondered if my born-again experience at the mountain retreat was more about fatigue, spiritual longing and emotional vulnerability than being touched by Jesus.

And I considered another possibility: Maybe God didn't exist.

TOWARD the end of my tenure as a religion reporter, I traveled to Nome, Alaska. Sitting in a tiny visitor's room, I studied the sad, round face of the Eskimo in front of me and tried to imagine how much he hated being confined to jail.

Peter "Packy" Kobuk was from a remote village on St. Michael Island in western Alaska. There natives lived, in many ways, just as their ancestors did 10,000 years ago. Smells of the outdoor life hung heavy in his village: the salt air, the strips of salmon drying on racks, the seaweed washed up on the beach.

But for now, Packy could smell only the disinfectants used to scrub the concrete floors at the Anvil Mountain Correction Center. Unfortunately, alcohol and a violent temper had put Packy there many times in his 46 years. For his latest assault, he was serving three months.

The short, powerfully built man folded his calloused hands on the table. I was surprised to see a homemade rosary hanging from his neck, the blue beads held together by string from a fishing net.

I had come from Southern California to report on a generation of Eskimo boys who had been molested by a Catholic missionary. All of the now-grown Eskimos I had interviewed over the past week had lost their faith. In fact, several of them confessed that they fantasized daily about burning down the village church, where the unspeakable acts took place.

But there was Packy with his rosary.

"Why do you still believe?" I asked.

"It's not God's work what happened to me," he said softly, running his fingers along the beads. "They were breaking God's commandments -- even the people who didn't help. They weren't loving their neighbors as themselves."

He said he regularly got down on his knees in his jail cell to pray.

"A lot of people make fun of me, asking if the Virgin Mary is going to rescue me," Packy said. "Well, I've gotten helped more times from the Virgin Mary through intercession than from anyone else. I won't stop. My children need my prayers."

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Tears spilled from his eyes. Packy's faith, though severely tested, had survived.

I looked at him with envy. Where he found comfort, I was finding emptiness.

IN the summer of 2005, I reported from a Multnomah County, Ore., courtroom on the story of an unemployed mother -- impregnated by a seminary student 13 years earlier -- who was trying to get increased child support for her sickly 12-year-old son.

The boy's father, Father Arturo Uribe, took the witness stand. The priest had never seen or talked with his son. He even had trouble properly pronouncing the kid's name. Uribe confidently offered the court a simple reason as to why he couldn't pay more than \$323 a month in child support.

"The only thing I own are my clothes," he told the judge.

His defense -- orchestrated by a razor-sharp attorney paid for by his religious order -- boiled down to this: I'm a Roman Catholic priest, I've taken a vow of poverty, and child-support laws can't touch me.

The boy's mother, Stephanie Collopy, couldn't afford a lawyer. She stumbled badly acting as her own attorney. It went on for three hours.

"It didn't look that great," Stephanie said afterward, wiping tears from her eyes. "It didn't sound that great ... but at least I stood up for myself."

The judge ruled in the favor of Uribe, then pastor of a large parish in Whittier. After the hearing, when the priest's attorney discovered I had been there, she ran back into the courtroom and unsuccessfully tried to get the judge to seal the case. I could see why the priest's lawyer would try to cover it up. People would be shocked at how callously the church dealt with a priest's illegitimate son who needed money for food and medicine.

My problem was that none of that surprised me anymore.

As I walked into the long twilight of a Portland summer evening, I felt used up and numb.

My soul, for lack of a better term, had lost faith long ago -- probably around the time I stopped going to church. My brain, which had been in denial, had finally caught up.

Clearly, I saw now that belief in God, no matter how grounded, requires at some point a leap of faith. Either you have the gift of faith or you don't. It's not a choice. It can't be willed into existence. And there's no faking it if you're honest about the state of your soul.

Sitting in a park across the street from the courthouse, I called my wife on a cellphone. I told her I was putting in for a new beat at the paper.

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO: HAUNTING IMAGE: Lenora Colice, the mother of a sex abuse victim, cries during a news conference announcing a payout by the church. **PHOTOGRAPHER:** Karen Tapia Los Angeles Times **PHOTO: NOT CURED:** William Vandenkolk attended a 2001 "Miracle Crusade" in the hope that self-proclaimed faith healer Benny Hinn could mend his eyes. **PHOTOGRAPHER:** Irfan Khan Los Angeles Times **PHOTO: THE WRITER:** William Lobdell lobbied his editors for the religion beat because he wanted to show people of faith in a positive light. He did find the affirming stories in Orange County that he knew were out there, but the darker stories soon overwhelmed him, bringing his own faith into question. **PHOTOGRAPHER:** Mark Boster Los Angeles Times **PHOTO: MAN OF FAITH:** "It's not God's work what happened to me," says Peter "Packy" Kobuk, who as a boy was molested by a Catholic missionary. **PHOTOGRAPHER:** Damon Winter Los Angeles Times

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