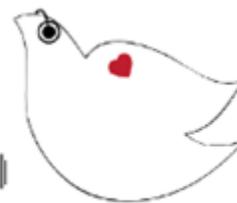


Dunker Punks Podcast



Transcription details:

Episode Number: 83

Episode Name: Identity

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Episode Description: “The Church of the Brethren is unique, they have certain values that are incredibly distinct [to the] church itself.” Does the Church really have room for everyone? In this episode, Emmy, Evan, and Hannah explore the ideas of accepting people of differing faiths and beliefs while identifying to a similar culture.

Speakers in audio file:

S1: Emmett Witkovsky-Eldred

S2: Hannah Corbus

S3: Emmy Goering

S4: Evan Hiebert

Transcription:

Emmett: Hey Dunker Punks, we appreciate you tuning in week after week to hear from us. Now we want to hear from you. The Dunker Punks Podcast is conducting a listener survey, to learn more about you, our listeners, and what you want to hear on the show. Let us know what you like, what you don't, and your suggestions for the podcast. Just visit bit.ly/DPPSURVEY in all capital letters to participate. That's case sensitive, so be sure to enter DPPSURVEY in all caps. Once more that's bit.ly/DPPSURVEY in all caps. Thanks, and enjoy the show.

[Intro Music, then short drum riff]

Emmett: Thanks for tuning into another episode of the Dunker Punks podcast. My name is Emmett Witkovsky-Eldred and I'm one of the hosts of this show. Today's episode is short, but it's packed with a lot of substance, and it deals with one of the biggest questions facing the life of the church right now. Who belongs?

The capital C Universal Church in the United States, as well as the Church of the Brethren in particular, is facing a looming membership crisis. As younger people leave the ranks of Sunday morning worshipers, practically the only religious affiliation in the United States that is growing today are the nones. Not Catholic, habit wearing N-U-N nuns, but people who say they have no religious affiliation at all. They have none.

Many within this category say that they are spiritual but not religious. Meaning they have some sense of the divine, but they feel repelled by organized religion. Still, many others affirmatively express doubt that God exists, or even certainty that God does not. They identify as agnostic or atheist. The nones are a growing classification of religious identity for several reasons, but their growth is mainly comprised of former Christians. They're people who grew up attending church, or at least had a family that identified as Christian, even if they didn't go to church that often. Many nones left organized religion because of a negative experience within the comm, Christian community: Too many rules, too much judgement and hypocrisy, exclusion of people because of their sexuality or their gender identity, lack of action in the church on defining social issues like racism and sexism, poverty and environmental destruction. Sometimes even corruption and wrongdoing.

But others simply have searched themselves and decided that the church isn't for them, or that they don't believe in God. Regardless of the reason, it's rarely a clean break. The church, as an institution if nothing else, occupies a major role in the lives of many young people who grew up in Christian households. Their parents, grandparents, and other significant friends and loved ones still attend. And religious symbolism and rhetoric is ubiquitous in the home, especially around the holidays. And church is a community, even if it's an imperfect one, that many nones still feel drawn to. And enveloped within. Some by habit, but many still by choice.

Growing up, I knew plenty of cultural Catholics. Friends and neighbors who grew up in the Catholic Church, but have left for any number of reasons. Yet they still feel that their Catholic upbringing is part of their identity and their community. Even if they don't follow any Catholic precepts, attend Mass, or even believe in God. When I got to college, I found many friends who considered themselves culturally Jewish. Being Jewish was an important identity to them, one of which they are proud and protective. They just didn't feel like they happened to believe in God.

In today's episode, Emmy Goering discusses what it means to be culturally Brethren. That is, to have been raised in the Brethren community, and to still identify with the values and ways of living that define the Brethren experience, yet to be outside of Brethren worship or spiritual belief. Emmy, who describes herself as an atheist, wrestles with what it means to belong in Christian community, if you don't necessarily identify as Christian any more. What is your place in the church, if you don't believe in God? Can you be culturally Brethren even if you're spiritually something else? To think through these tough questions, Emmy sits down with two friends, Hannah Corbus and Evan Hiebert, who have different perspectives on faith, but who each want to see Emmy thrive in her spiritual identity and find community while being true to herself. We'll hear first from Hannah, and then add Emmy, and finally Evan.

[music]

Hannah: Basically, I was, I was raised in, you know what would be considered a Christian home, right, but as, kind of the faith dynamic of my family was backed up in Judaism. So that is kind of the root of my family heritage, but Christianity and Judaism both would have just been a culture. Um, so, I would say, and, maybe slightly more on the non-religious side of that scale. So, with that in mind, my idea of God and faith and beliefs, um, was something that you just identified as and that was kind of it. Um, until I was about 16 years old, um, and then through the help of friends and different mentors, um, I was really going through a lot of things.

And they really helped me to find hope and peace in faith. Um, so that is actually when I became a follower of Jesus.

Through that, I got connected with the Covenant Church, due to friendship connections there. Uh, so I really got connected with like, the youth group and worship ministry, things like that. So in high school, ya, you're spot on. Um, I (giggle) was like that sold-out Christian girl going to Winter Jam, and doing all these awesome Christian things, and had a big life change. Really into worship music. Um, very outspoken Christian.

Then, beyond high school, I really think that that is when my faith actually formed, and I started to understand what it meant to be a follower of Jesus versus a Christian. Um, so I'm actually currently a student at Manhattan Christian College, um, and I'm getting a degree in basically Bible and theology. It has a much specific title, but, because of that, um, I've had to do a ton of study on what Christianity was, what it is today, and what the scriptures say that it will be. And, through that lens, my faith has completely shifted. Um, I would much rather proclaim myself as a follower of Jesus than as a Christian. Uh, because I'm a big believer that Christianity is not what it should be. Um, nor what it was. Um, from sixteen until now, I'm twenty-one, I've had a pretty much 180, within Christianity. Um, I'm still a faithful, spiritual person, um, but that has shifted from a cultural identity to a personal conviction. But I came home and I realized that I had been viewing things through the lens of religion. And, well Jesus didn't come to start a religion; he came to point people to God. And if I was going to claim, to be someone who is faithful, a follower of Jesus and a follower of God, I couldn't be religious. Because that meant following certain rules and believing certain things because my community did, and identifying with a certain political group. But that was going to have to change, if I was going to be able to come home from a refugee camp, and tell the story about how a little kid died from an asthma attack, and somehow still fit that into the perspective of, I follow a God who can control this.

Emmy: I think there were a lot of people who were probably super, similar to me. I think it's, right now, I don't know if like, the cool thing is the right way of like, addressing it, but I think right now a lot of people say that they're like, spiritual but not religious, and all that kind of stuff, but I'm like, opposite of that. Like, like, I'm not spiritual at all, um

Evan: But you're religious?

Emmy: I wouldn't say religious, though (mutual laughter), but I, like,

Evan: Ya. I see, I know what you mean. Like you're, you're...

Emmy: I value the church...

Evan: You're value... ya, you put value in the, the work that they're doing...

Emmy: Ya

Evan: but you don't follow the spiritual tenants...

Emmy: Oh ya...

Evan: necessarily.

Emmy: And so, (sigh) I, I think that that's not as, popular of an opinion, and I...

Evan: Mmhmm

Emmy: But I know that there are people who feel that way, they just don't know how to share that.

Evan: Well, I feel like, I like, it seems like what you're attracted to in the Brethren Church are like things that I would be attracted to in the Brethren Church.

Emmy: So, what's your view of Heaven and Hell? I think that's something that differs so widely.

Hannah: Ya.

Emmy: Depending on who you talk to.

Hannah: I even have a totally different view than my own family in this. Um, I guess I do in most things, but (giggle) Ya, I take the very typical view that Heaven is real, Hell is real. And, the separation is real. Um, I believe that the consequence of sin is, is Hell, um, but this is being shaped by my idea of who God is. Who is perfect. That nothing unholy is ever in His presence. And so when sin entered into humanity, there was a physical separation. Yes spiritual, but physical. Sin cannot dwell in the same place as God. God is perfect. And so in order for those to, you know, proceed through life and to reach God, in essence Heaven, there has to be some sort of purification process, for something impure to reach something perfect. So, I believe that is through Jesus, but that being said, without going to the spiritual purification, you can't reach God. And so physically yes, there's a separation of Heaven and Hell. Um, I, I don't feel qualified to tell you what I expect Heaven and Hell to be like, because I don't think anyone is. I can tell you what I've read, but, I've never experienced it, obviously. But the one thing that I know, completely to be true, is that if being in Heaven is complete unity with God, in a perfect restored relationship, then Hell must be the opposite of that.

I don't know if it's fiery. I don't know if it's, you know, smoky, smells like sulfur. Um, that was spoken to someone in a dream, so maybe. But if Heaven is complete unity with God, Hell must be complete separation. And complete sorrow. Anything that is the opposite of life receiving, received in God.

No one would ever want to throw away their creation. You know, think about an artist who has worked so hard on his sculpture. Has put effort into every last detail and finally created it, and it functions the way he imagined. But it makes one mistake, it falls off the shelf. Does he want to throw it away, or is he going to cry over it? If God truly created us, there is no way he would want to banish us to Hell. And um, this is the hard part, I think, it's our choice. And so, sin is not an action, sin is not something that we've done. It's a condition, it's who we are, it's what we were born into, as a side effect of the fall. Um, I'm not a sinner, because I lie. I lie because I'm a sinner. It's who I am. Um.

Emmy: So, do you think that I am actively choosing to not follow God? And, I won't be offended.

Hannah: No! Ya.

Emmy: Because I've heard it all. But...

Hannah: To be honest with you, I struggle with this question, because my very best friend, um, actually she calls me her daughter, so I guess I could say my mother (laugh), not my literal mother. Um, she's a Muslim. She, she doesn't agree with nearly anything I believe in. And I'm really struggling with that. Because this is the balance of what qualifies you to get into Heaven, is it if you're a good person, if you follow the morals that Jesus taught, um, if you live a good life? I really wish I could answer that with a yes. My whole heart wants to say that, because if I say no, that's not enough to get you to Heaven, than that's me saying that, even some of my own family members are in Hell right now. That my best friend will be in Hell. Um, I think that's an awful thing to say. But, in full honesty and in sorrow, I have to tell you that ya, I do, I do believe that, the only way, um, to get to Heaven, is, by acceptance of Jesus. And if I didn't believe that, then, then I wouldn't even be spiritual, of any sense.

Emmy: I get told I'm going to Hell often, if it comes up, um, which is fine, um, it's just kind of is what it is. I'm sure you get that...

Evan: It's annoying...

Emmy: Ya

Evan: Oh ya (Emmy: laughter) And it's, it's somewhat, I don't know if insulting is the right word, it's off-putting, like...

Emmy: Ya.

Evan: Especially, after a while, it doesn't affect you because you don't believe that...

Emmy: Mmhmm.

Evan: Initially, it affects you a lot, if you've ever, like, pondered if that's true or not, it's really scary if someone tells you that.

Emmy: Do you think, people like myself, who have, really little spirituality have a place within those churches, solely, um for community?

Hannah: Yes, I do. If I didn't, I wouldn't have any friends that I do. Um, I wouldn't love Muslims. (laugh) If I didn't believe that you had a place in the church, I, my life would look completely different. Um, I view you and all others who are like you to be completely loved and worthy and also quite purposeful. I really think that you have something to bring to the church that people like me don't. And I think we need to learn and grow from experiences that you can

share with us. I think you understand a huge part of the Gospel that most Christians don't, that being the need for social action, and the need to look past the cultural Christian lens that we've been taught. Even though you're not spiritual per-se, I think you understand creation in a way that I don't.

Emmy: I almost think it's really important for, like, agnostic people or atheists to be in the church, because I think it's really easy for a lot of Christians just to kind of, assume, like, atheists have no morals and all those kind of stuff,

Evan: Mmhmm.

Emmy: ...and that's said a lot.

Hannah: You have a place, and, I need to be more intentional about learning from people like you, but I think that goes vice-versa also, think there's something we have to offer you, and that mainly being worth and identity. Um, but it's never up to me to tell you that you're not complete. I never have the right to say that to you. Um, I think that's your decision, but because of that, we need to be religious in partnership with each other. And the church needs to learn to accept that and welcome that.

Emmy: Um, ya, I can't say it's not, like, tiring for sure. I think if anything, I would just want more people, like me to have (Evan: Mmhmm), um, community, like a little sub culture.

Evan: Right.

Emmy: Um, I feel like that would be pretty neat. Like I was saying, I just think it's important that there are, like, people who are non-believers within (Evan: Mmhmm) the churches. Because...

Evan: I, don't see that happening, though.

Emmy: You, you don't see a lot

Evan: No mm

Emmy: Like

Evan: Like

Emmy: Like agnostic atheists

Evan: Maybe more-so agnostic, or people who grew up, in a certain, similar to you, like who grew up in a certain Brethren or other sort of Christian culture that, that's their social group, that's their community that they would have been built into, especially if they, lose their faith at a later point in life, for them to leave the church would just be, wiping away their entire, um, history and connections with people. If that was the type of community, but, I just, I think

especially people who didn't grow up in church, I think it would be hard. Ya, like, I, again, I just, I guess I can only speak for people that think like me, would be that ya, I think, uh, doing things that the Brethren Church is standing could be good, and that might be something I would help with, like, going overseas and providing aid or, or locally whatever that is. But then, to then go and say that I am Brethren, would be a really big step, I think for a lot of people that, don't believe, the overall of the Brethren Church. Um, I think it would be really hard to start a cultural Brethren group. Without it being completely separate from the title "Brethren".

Emmy: It's probably easier for me to think this because I don't really know a lot of other denominations or anything like that super well, (Evan: Mmhmm) but, um, when my family started going to the Church of the Brethren I was in fifth grade, and so that's kind of all I've known. But I also see the Church of the Brethren as being kind of unique. In that, they have certain values that I think are incredibly distinct and really unique, to, that church itself. I mean, the tagline is like "Peacefully, Simply, Together".

Evan: Mmhmm.

Emmy: Which, could be done, aside from any sort of belief aside from any sort of belief in God or whatever else.

Evan: Right.

Emmy: And so, I think in a lot of cases, it's easy for me to be able to separate myself from the prayers and the language and all that. And still, feel some sort of place (Evan: Mmhmm) and feel at home.

Evan: I played with my mother and friend for a Christian concert, and I played the drums. And I was not believing at the time, and I remember feeling like really conflicted about whether I should even play drums for this. This is like, a, a worship service. And, eventually just like, ya, it's fine, I can do it, it's not... But, there is like a part in me that's like, afraid of like, pretending to be something you're not, I'm not, or not being fully transparent (Emily: Mmhmm) in that way. And so I think I'm just sensitive to that, but. And to me, I, like, I would feel instantly exhausted, trying to be a cultural Mennonite or cultural Brethren or cultural any sort of Christianity, without actually believing, I think that would be really exhausting to me. But, ya, I don't know. So, more power to you. (mutual laugh)

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Emily: I want to give the Church of the Brethren like, all the credit it deserves.

[ominous background music]

Evan: Mmhmm.

Emily: I, I'm not trying to start a bunch of people who want to stand up and walk out of the church, (Evan: Mmhmm) either.

Evan: Ya.

Emily: I think if, if they're happy where they are, I want them to stay, and I'm happy where I am, so I want to stay.'

Hannah: The church that talks a lot about giving donations, or about being in fellowship with their neighbors, that's the church I'm gonna pursue, because they're not focused on what they can get, but what they can give.

[ominous music swells before Emmy starts talking, then fades to background]

Emmy: So I've been thinking about a new phrase: Just called Cultural Brethren. I think that there's a group, within the Church of the Brethren who might not believe in a God. And might not feel a spirit moving within them through music or through prayer or through scripture. And I think that's ok, because I think that the Church of the Brethren has so much more to offer. And I think within a time when a lot of people are rejecting the church, and embracing

spirituality, I think that says a lot about the Church of the Brethren for me and probably for other people, about its ability to welcome people, wherever they're at.

[ominous music]

Emmett: You know, the moment I found most powerful in that conversation was the moment when Emmy asked Hannah if Hannah believes if people like Emmy, people who don't necessarily believe in God, but want to find community, have a place in the church. While Hannah herself wrestles with the hard line she draws about faith, belief in Jesus, and Heaven and Hell, she was nonetheless quick to affirm that Emmy belongs. She even added that the rest of church, believers like Hannah, have much to learn from people like Emmy. Hannah also added that people like her have something to offer and teach as well. That that exchange of perspectives, that sacred dialogue, that community, cannot happen in a vacuum, and it can't happen when we are too quick to quarantine who belongs, and who doesn't.

Rachel Held Evans, an influential Christian writer who tragically died very young, at the beginning of May, once said that the offensive part of the Gospel isn't who it excludes. The offensive part, meaning the part that can be hardest for Christians to wrap their minds around, is just how many people the Gospel includes. In God, we find a limitless supply of extravagant, and all-encompassing, unconditional love. It doesn't matter who we are or where we come from. It doesn't even really matter what we believe. What matters, is that we belong.

[background music begins]

The other piece of this conversation that I found powerful was the earnestness of Emmy's questioning and reflection. It was meaningful to listen to my friend wrestle with such deeply personal questions about faith, doubt, community, and belonging. And it was meaningful to me, too, to hear her trust these friends from different perspectives enough, to seek their insight and guidance, to engage in an honest and difficult conversation about matters like faith and religion. Sometimes, we paint a picture of God as this ancient and powerful being that revels in our acts of devotion, worship and praise. Even saying that God created us for that purpose. And surely God does delight when we choose to lift our voices in joyful song or heartfelt prayer. But I believe that God also delights when we choose to be so serious about God, that we wrestle with our doubts and fears, and even when we make the difficult, unpopular choices that are authentic to what we believe, regardless of what conclusions that might bring us to.

I specially believe to even that, in fellowship, with our brothers and sisters. Why else would God have given us the power and the intellect to ponder, even God's own existence. I am grateful for Emmy and other cultural Brethren out there who have chosen to identify as Brethren, regardless of the station of their spiritual faith. To take seriously those values that we learned about peace, simplicity, and in this case especially, togetherness and community. We belong.

Thank you, Emmy, for contributing today's episode and thanks to you, the listener, for tuning in.

[theme music, louder then going to background]

The Dunker Punks podcast is produced by a team of contributors from around the United States who are building a community for difficult conversations. This show was edited by Jacob

Crouse, who also wrote our music, and is hosted by me, Emmett Witkovsky-Eldred. Zechariah Houser is our production intern, and Kerrick van Asselt produces graphics for us on social media. The show wouldn't be possible without the leadership of Suzanne Lay, and the generous hospitality and support of the Arlington Church of the Brethren. You can learn more about the show by visiting arlingtoncob.org/dpp or by going to dunkerpunk.com. You can also find us on social media at Dunker Punks pod. You can contact us by emailing dpp@arlingtoncob.org. Let us know if you'd like to support us as a content contributor, technical editor, host, or even as a donor.

One last announcement before we go: we are counting down to a special summer series as we make some transitions in the format of this show. This is our third to last episode before we switch to a season and series format. We will be kicking that off by rebroadcasting one of our favorite existing four-part series of episodes during the summer. That'll start on June 29th with a new episode posting every three weeks until August 31st. But fear not, we will back with all-new content and new episodes every other week, in a great new format starting in September. And of course, please be sure to complete that listener survey I mentioned at the top of the show. You can do so by visiting bit.ly/DPPSURVEY in all caps. That's bit.ly capital DPPSURVEY in all caps. Thank you so much for listening, and be sure to tune back in, in another two weeks.

[music continues for a few moments]