

The Color of Faith

by Scott Southwick

You see it on inspirational posters, and it bugs me. Apparently Emerson said it: "Every wall is a door." But that's like saying, black is white, or up is down. Or: words don't matter. Or: I think I'll just stay in bed today. The thing is, to be human, you've got to discriminate.

section

My best friend Khaled's idea was, he'd set up a pool tournament. Each church would send a player, and whichever church won, he'd join. Any church that wouldn't shoot pool, he wouldn't want to join. We were sitting outside King's Road Coffee in the sun and I thought it was a terrible idea.

"Khaled, this means you're going to become a Scientologist. They'll just call up the celebrity center and get whoever's the billiards champ of the whole world." Khaled was sipping fresh orange juice, his eggs mostly untouched, and I was trying to impress upon him the urgency of not doing this. "Plus, they have all that science and technology on their side."

We'd been around and around about this. Khaled's a funny guy and he thought this would be funny. He didn't care what it did to his friends.

"Khaled, you're talking about auctioning off my best friend's soul. I could end up escorting you to some pagan shrine every Thursday night, for your weekly sacrifice." He was reading the movie listings. "Do you care about *anything*?"

I had realized early on that I was going to have to fix this tournament. I had realized early on I knew nothing about fixing things, and would need to go to a library and do some studying. Perhaps there was a Time-Life series? After breakfast I took the bus down Santa Monica to look for a library. Counting Jenny Craigs to pass the time. Only one other passenger, a young guy with a curlicue goatee and a porkpie hat and a tattoo of Lana Turner on his forearm.

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I asked him: "You get impounded, too?"

He said, "I meant to pay them, I really did."

I asked him: "So if you could join any religion, which would it be?"

He scratched his chin. "Is that supposed to be a hypothetical question? Because, you know, I *already can* join any religion."

He had me there. "OK, if you *had* to join a religion, which would it be?"

"In this hypothetical world, am I a celebrity?"

"No. You're you."

"Shoot, this is tough. Buddhism, I guess."

That's what everybody always says. "Do you believe life is suffering?"

He shrugged. "It's been OK so far."

"Now, what if you had to fix a pool game?"

"You mean, a pool *table*?"

"No. I mean, if you had to assure the outcome of a game of pool."

"Well, broadly speaking, there's seven methods. Two of them I really don't recommend, unless you're desperate."

I was desperate, so we'd use all seven methods. His name was Ronk and he'd seen a documentary about fixing things, on the Discovery channel, so I started taking notes.

But across town, Khaled was busily working against me: he took out a full-page ad in *Variety*. At first this did not strike me as an efficient use of his advertising dollar, *Variety* being not a multi-denominational religious trade publication; but Khaled seemed to be in this only for the publicity, for the madness. The phones, the mail, the doorbell. Soon he was the cover story for the *LA Weekly*. Then there was the front-page feature in the *Times*. I realized this was terrible. It would be much harder to fix the tournament in full view of the public.

"So Khaled, you're going to need some help with this tournament," I said, concerned. "Let me manage it."

We were jogging in Runyon Canyon. Khaled huffed: "Since when do you care?"

"Come on, I've got a better head for these things than you do." It was true; I had a real day job, as a graphics designer, and I could make graphs and charts and PowerPoint presentations. Khaled was just a comedy writer.

So Khaled put me in charge, although I was a little offended at his reticence, as if I were going to steal his limelight or something. I was just trying to *help*.

Having taken control, my next goal was to mess everything up by setting a lot of rules and restrictions.

"For a tournament, we have to set the limit at 64 contestants," I said, the next day at Gold's Gym.

"Why?" I guess poor naïve Khaled had pictured people wandering in off the street and picking up a cue to take a shot at his religion, like the peasant Arthur having a go at the sword.

"Because it's a holy number," I told him. He wasn't buying it, even later after my PowerPoint demonstration. "See, it divides by four, and eight, and sixteen," I told him. "And anyway, you can only afford to rent the pool hall for one evening."

Was it moral, what I was doing? Essentially, I'd be choosing my friend's religion, when I hadn't even chosen my own. I thought about this one afternoon, out on the chaise on my apartment's balcony, overlooking the pool and the palms, my book resting open face-down on my belly, Studs Manley's classic *How to Fix Billiards for Fun and Profit*. I concluded that Khaled had forced my hand. The imperative I felt was either a moral imperative or an immoral imperative, but in either case it was *imperative*.

Unless one considers ignoring the clear demands of one's conscience a true alternative.

Across the water, the girl in the lime bikini, her head cocked and squinting toward me and the sun.

section

~~You~~ You don't know how many religions there are until you start a competition between them. That brings them out of the woodwork. You may think there's only three or five or seven major religions, but once you start subdividing, it never ends. For instance, I grew up

“Presbyterian”, and I thought that was one religion; but instead it turns out you've got your Presbyterians, your United Presbyterians, your Presbyterians of America, your Seventh-Day Presbyterians, your I-don't-know-what, and we Presbyterians aren't even particularly prone to schism.

Khaled and I used to go to Presbyterian summer camp: flag football, lanyarding, making sassafras tea, buying Jolly Ranchers at the canteen, passing notes to girls, meeting them by the boat dock right after mess hall. When you grow up Presbyterian in the suburbs, every sermon is about the Golden Rule, the pastor always begins with a warm and bland anecdote about the local sports franchise. This is happening all over the country; I thought I knew what a Presbyterian was.

Back at the office, all kinds of cults had started applying. I said: shouldn't we limit this to legitimate religions? And Khaled started in with that whole line of garbage: *well, a cult is just a term of denigration for a religion that hasn't--*

And I said: *uh-uh*. Walks like a cult, quacks like a cult, etc.; you can't give up your right to discriminate. So we had to negotiate this point. I wanted to open the bidding high, so I said: we exclude any religion less than fifteen hundred years old.

He said: give me a break. We're gonna sit around and watch druids shoot pool?

Eventually we settled on: whoever started the religion had to be dead. This gave our billiards tournament more or less the same criteria they use for deciding who gets on a US postage stamp. But my first act of subversion had been accomplished. For me to have any chance to rig this thing, it was important there be a manageable number of contestants, a finite number of religions.

Now, here's the part I'm a little ashamed to admit. By process of elimination, I found to my own surprise and chagrin that I was reducing the contest to mainstream WASPy religions, suburban American religions that wouldn't ask anything of my friend, because then he could forget the whole thing. Because my point was to protect him, to protect him from being made to *do* things, to wear

funny overgarments or undergarments or attend services every day or have seven children. I wanted to protect him from anyone who might make demands of him. I wanted him to be able to drink, smoke, curse, and to use and enjoy birth control. I'd always scoffed at these mainstream religions, but suddenly I understood their genius, and I craved their particular kind of grace, the grace of leaving alone and being left alone.

I told Khaled I'd go find him a pool hall. He said he'd like to come; I told him he'd just be getting in the way.

The pool hall down on La Brea, the afternoon light streaming in through the cigarette smoke, me looking like a wide-eyed schmo; mouths of sharks must have been watering when I came in. But I went straight to the bar. I gave the bartender some money and I said: I need a man who cheats, bad, and never loses.

He gave me Snake. Snake was 6 foot 4 and hundreds of pounds and he'd learned to shoot pool in San Quentin, the time they gave the prisoners pool tables to try and stop the race riots. It turned out Snake was a veritable encyclopedia of fraud and deception, a man-sized mountain of mendacity. You know those tedious guys who fix your computer, *this soundcard is antique, that's your problem, plus this old BlahCom processor, you're free to choose but personally I wouldn't be caught dead with one of their products--* Those guys are so tedious precisely because they really *do* know everything, and that's why you need them. Well, Snake was like that, for billiards.

"We'll need a few ringers. This is a McManus 480, the best stick in the business, I won it off Benny Material himself, in Atlantic City. I'll bring a few guys, Mandy and Bruce probably, good men, they'll be able to beat anybody there except me. Everything midtown and up is too straight for cheating, The Breeze and The Green and The Pocket, so we'll stay away from them. Get me the names of the players in advance and we'll see if any of them have histories, anybody we should be scared of. If there is, we'll slip 'em a mickey the day of the show."

A mickey! Duly impressed, I took notes. "You religious?"

He shrugged. "Only if Presbyterian is religious."

So Snake was indeed my man. Snake told me he knew which pool hall we'd use; he said one of the tables was rigged, that it had a difficult pocket, and a favorable pocket, and he said that was all I needed to know.

We didn't need to fix everything, because we'd done our homework, and identified the serious threats in advance. Snake taught me what to watch for; after a while, you just know. So M--- the Sunni came in to apply, and he said he won his regiment's tournament back in Lebanon in the early 80s, and he said he still played some and had even considered getting a table at home. His beard twitched and his head bobbed and I knew nothing about his religion except that it had no chance of winning my friend Khaled's soul in this tournament.

But when S--- the Druze came in and filled out his application, he didn't say a word, so we had to take him out. Maybe he examined the office too closely, looked too mean, or maybe he'd just eaten something that upset him, but I wasn't taking any chances. Druze are not forbidden to drink to excess — or at least this one wasn't — and so the morning of the tournament we made it so he'd wake up on a Greyhound to Reno, presumably none the wiser, and most certainly without custody of Khaled's salvation.

I sat on my balcony and sketched out brackets. It looked like an NCAA tournament. Snake would take the right side, and we loaded his three ringer buddies into the left side. We'd identified 11 of the contestants as potential betters of our ringers; of those 11, we'd drug three, we'd take three out with the rigged table, and five would not be making it to the tournament at all. The only unknown was a Dutch Reform Presbyterian; we hadn't been able to get to him, because he was flying in from Europe at the last moment, but I figured: Presbyterians, you can't have too many. I doodled question marks around his name; the woman in the lime bikini rolled onto her belly and stretched and scratched her back once languidly in the sun. Difficult pockets and favorable pockets.

I sketched out fake odds; I made the Greek Orthodox at 200-1, the Unitarian 10-1. Snake was registered as a plain vanilla Presbyterian.

How ironic, such a coincidence, that Khaled would end up in the religion that had raised us!

Meanwhile, I worried about Khaled. He was spending too much time giving interviews and writing articles about the event; I got stuck with the hard work, the preparation, and he simply wasn't around much anymore. I'd read his comments in the *Weekly* and they'd seem eerily detached from reality; for example, he talked about his love for Catholic ceremony, and his admiration for Father Morris' pool skills, when I knew that Father Morris was going down in the second round with a bad case of the runs.

The rabbi, we stole his car. Rabbi Melnick, he'd been giving interviews, all good-natured bravado, but Snake told me the Rabbi was a mean shot, a real shark, and we couldn't leave it up to chance. So the night before the tournament we had his car relocated to the L.A. viaduct — this is not particularly malicious, the viaduct is a dry and safe place this time of year, but just enough inconvenience where he'd spend the day making calls and filling out forms.

The day of the event arrived. Much ruckus from the get-go; we were searching everybody at the door (my idea) and I “found” a gun on the Rastafarian, who the papers had picked as an early favorite. I pocketed it and shipped him off, his protests causing only eye-rolling in the crowd.

I ended up not having to worry about the Scientologists; smelling publicity, they craftily sent Tom Cruise. Tom waved to the cameras and then lost in the first round to Snake's friend Mandy, the Lutheran.

Now, some guys showed up who simply flat-out could not play pool. A lot of the new-agers were like that; they seemed to think that God would sink their shots for them. But billiards doesn't work like that.

It's even possible that some of them weren't taking the whole thing very seriously, my friend's salvation; but I don't even want to think about that.

The room was filled with excited people and hungry people. Ancient enemies brushed shoulders. I stood off to the side,

remembering an episode of *Get Smart* from when I was a kid; delectable 99 secretly controlling the cue ball from across the room.

The first round, the ringers were doing their job, mowing down any religion that might make any demands on my friend: Snake's girlfriend Hilary taking out a Reorganized Latter-Day Saint, Bruce the Episcopalian running the table against the Church of God.

I looked up on the board, and Snake had lost.

I ran over. Snake was giving an interview to the perky little woman from Channel 5 or 6, the one who does the little two-minute 'eccentric' bits at the end of the nightly news. She'd been interviewing Tom Cruise earlier.

"That was the toughest pool player I have ever faced," Snake said, shaking his head, the tattoos on his biceps twitching for the cameras. The Dutch Reform Presbyterian sat alone, across the room, on a bar stool against the wall, his bodyguard beside, arms akimbo.

"Well, at least he's a Presbyterian," I said to Ronk, my friend from the bus.

"I don't think you understand," he said. "These are the baddest motherfuckers on the planet. These are *Calvinists*."

Then it all came back to me, from church school: Oh. *Calvin*.

"What's he drinking?" I asked the bartender. "The European guy, in the black suit."

"Nothing," Vince said. "Not even water."

"If he goes in the bathroom," I said, handing him a hypodermic needle, "you stick him with this."

But the Calvinist didn't consume liquids and therefore didn't need to go to the bathroom. The Calvinist took out the Buddhist in the second round and the Hindu in the third round. I'd send over waitresses with free drinks and his bodyguard would send them away. The Calvinist wore black and did not drink liquid or laugh and when he shot he did not miss, *ever*.

You've seen movies about Judaism, movies about Catholicism, movies about Islam. From those movies you've learned about what Jews believe, and what Catholics believe, and what Muslims believe. But if you made a movie about Presbyterians in America, the movie

wouldn't tell you what they believed. Try asking a Presbyterian some time what their church believes; it's a real stumper. When Khaled and I went through confirmation at age 15, they spent ten minutes on 'What Presbyterians Believe'. Mr. Corley read the three points out of a pamphlet:

"Democratic church structure, Jesus was the Son of Man as well as the Son of God, and predestination."

And did he ever try to hurry over that last one. Khaled raised his hand:

"Predestination? You mean where your life is already set out?"

Mr. Corley winced. "Well, yes; but that was just something Calvin believed."

You can imagine that predestination does not sit well with Americans. But marvel at what the Presbyterians do with this problem: they foist the blame off on their founder. I can't picture a parallel for any other religion:

"The Five Noble Truths?"

"Ahh, that's just something Buddha believed."

But Calvin still has loyal followers. The strict Calvinists believe that we are all *dead in our sins*, that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, that in fact there is nothing we can do at all; there is no free will. I watched Khaled across the room, shaking hands with strangers, throwing his head back, laughing; with all my heart, I wanted this man, this friend from my whole life, to have free will.

Meanwhile the Calvinist threaded the cue ball between its obstacles, he curved it around the eight, he hit it low to lift it off the table and over the Lakota's stripes and when it landed it landed with backspin, which brought a gasp and a cheer from the crowd but not a smile from the Calvinist, because this was work. This man played pool only to serve his peevish and remonstrative God.

With the Rastafarian gone, and the priest and the rabbi MIA, and Tom Cruise on his way home, and all of the interesting cults excluded, Khaled looked sad.

"These later rounds are somehow not as colorful as I'd hoped," he said.

"These Protestants," I said, shaking my head. "Who knew they played such mean billiards?"

For whatever it was worth, the drugs had been working wonders. The bartender turned out to be quite the pharmacist; he had little potions that make you sneeze or sweat or give you diarrhea. We made the Church of the Nazarene contestant bleary-eyed and itchy, and he ended up conceding to the Unitarian, a good-natured chap whom I'd given an all-patsy lineup.

In the right bracket the Calvinist was just murdering people. Meanwhile over in the left bracket, the Quakers had sent someone who *looked* like the innocuous man who filled out the application in my office, but was clearly not that man. This Quaker shot a mean game of pool. The Quaker took out my Lutheran ringer and my Episcopalian ringer, and in the penultimate round he took out my Unitarian.

"This is it," Khaled said, sidling over.

"Yes, it is," I said, fearing that all my work was going to amount to nothing.

"So who's the guy in the black, again?" Khaled asked.

"He's your doom," I said.

"Huh," he said, cocking his head. "I thought he was a Presbyterian."

Then from across the room the columnist from the L.A. Times caught his eye, Khaled's face lit up, and he left.

They dimmed the lights for the last game. The people gathered round. The Calvinist won the draw, and the Calvinist sunk the one in the side pocket and threaded the cue, banked the two, opposite pocket, and he was lights-out and it was all just about over, so I took out the Rastafarian's gun and I shot him in the leg.

section

~~break~~ Well, Needless to say, I've taken a lot of flak for that -- legal charges, a pending civil suit, that guy who writes those *New Yorker* profiles keeps calling me at all hours. And of course Khaled's pretty mad at me, thinks I was just jealous, just trying to *steal his show*, although he did loan me some money for bail.

But I'm standing by my actions. Some people will rationalize anything so they can avoid making simple choices between right and wrong. But I say, you've gotta discriminate. Otherwise you're lost.

