

Truthfulness in Religion Presents a Highly Demanding Challenge

Religion scholar Karen Armstrong, a former Roman Catholic nun, tells of going to her Mother Superior one day and saying something like this: “I’m sorry, but so much of what we say we believe is just impossible.” And the Mother Superior responded, “I know, but don’t tell the others.”

The story reminds me of my conversation with an elder in a former congregation about the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. I had divulged that I did not believe in the literal truth of this doctrine. The elder chastised me, saying that if that was the case, I should keep it to myself.

Why not “tell the others”? Why “keep it to myself”? Is that for self-protection? After all, they used to burn heretics at the stake, and even today you can get in a whole lot of trouble for not believing what’s expected. But these days the counsel sounds more like a way to avoid unsettling those who do not want their cherished beliefs to be challenged, more like a way to shield others from disturbing questions that might require rethinking their faith.

Armstrong’s story also reminded me of what someone once said to me about how she previously coped with the recitation of the Apostles’ Creed in a former congregation. At the beginning of the Creed, she would substitute the word “They” for “I” in the opening phrase, “I believe.”

Let’s be honest. Belief still plays a big part in what most Christians understand to be the basics of their religious faith. However, there are a lot of traditional beliefs that are not compatible with contemporary human experience, empirical evidence, reason, and science. Even Jesus had to face this problem. In a culture where most of the faithful believed that God favors the righteous and rewards the just, while punishing those who are evil, Jesus invited his listeners to pay attention to their world’s version of empirical evidence. As he observed, God “makes [the] sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” [Matt. 5:45].

In many of his parables and other teachings, Jesus drew basic lessons from observations about the physical and social world. He didn’t proclaim doctrine, he asked his followers to take note of what’s real. Unfortunately, rather than focusing on his message, many who came after him formulated doctrines about the Messenger.

Most Christians today probably still hold that true Christianity comes down to having the “right” beliefs. It is assumed that these beliefs are true – even when those beliefs cannot be reconciled with human experience, empirical evidence, reason, and science. I must agree with Armstrong, much of what traditional Christianity has claimed is incompatible with the facts that we know. Honesty and intellectual integrity demand that we admit rather than conceal this.

For me, being a Christian requires being truthful, not necessarily having “right” beliefs. It means trying to live before God and others by following the teaching and example of Jesus of Nazareth. The facts that matter most concern what Jesus taught and did. I do have some evidence-based beliefs about Jesus, of course. I believe he was an extraordinary person, spiritually gifted, whose words and deeds revealed crucial truths about God’s disposition toward the creation and God’s

desires for human existence in relation to other persons and the world.

Nothing that we know precludes belief in an Ultimate Source of creativity, purpose, meaning, and value. But religious people should not make truth claims that defy all reasonable evidence. It's a high challenge: to reconcile what we believe in faith with all that we know.

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