

To Be, or Not to Be . . . a Christian

I've long been aware that many well-educated, thoughtful, intelligent people are averse to identifying themselves as Christians. There are various reasons for this. One is that some Christian claims are intellectually problematic. It is quite impossible to reconcile a literal interpretation of portions of the Bible with modern science. Did flood waters cover the earth at the time of Noah? Did Moses part the Red Sea? Did Joshua make the sun stand still? In my view, the stories of these happenings are to be understood mythologically, not literally.

Then what about the presumably miraculous events of New Testament times? Was Jesus born of a virgin? Did he turn water into wine? Was his body raised from the dead? Again, a literal interpretation of these accounts is unnecessary, in fact impossible if one trusts the knowledge and understanding of our world that come to us through the sciences.

There will be both Christians and non-Christians who will insist, "Then, you can't be a Christian." Nonsense. One does not have to be a literalist to be a Christian, although it seems that at least some literalist understandings still prevail and are expected in most Christian communities.

Every religion has its myths and stories that, to an outsider, are clearly that – myths and stories – not literal accounts of actual events. To the insider, however, these myths and stories often take on the character of historical fact. Consequently, certain claims of religion present themselves to many critically thinking people as obstacles to faith, barriers to membership, embarrassing remnants of a naive understanding of the world.

Many people today claim to be spiritual but not religious. They may dislike institutional organized religion in general. They may hold beliefs or be drawn to practices that are not part of any established religion. But often they find the teachings and doctrines of established religion too problematic to accept in honesty and good faith.

I think that it matters what one believes. It is crucial to be in touch with reality, to have a reasonably adequate grasp of the way things are and how they work. I also believe God is the ultimate reality, and that an accurate understanding of the world by no means undermines this belief. In the end, however, the acid test of Christianity or any other religion is whether its adherents are people who do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly on the earth.

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