

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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A great separation

In our culture there's a great separation between religion and reality, observes retired United Methodist clergyman Richard F. Elliott, Jr., in his 1998 book *Falling in Love with Mystery: We Don't Have to Pretend Any-more*. Very early in his life, writes Elliott, this separation presented a quandary for him. "What is this?" he wondered. "A religion that takes for granted the truth of some utterly impossible stories and yet these beliefs seem to be disconnected from the rest of life."



Literalism can hide the truth

Another retired UMC clergyman, George M. Ricker, deals with that apparent disconnection in his new book *What You Don't Have to Believe to Be a Christian* (Sunbelt Eakin Press, 2002). Believing that everything in the Bible and Christian doctrine is literal and historical truth, says Ricker, is not only unnecessary. It also can hide the deeper truths of Christianity.

Many Christians, Ricker notices, assume they should believe all that other Christians claim to believe, yet they find some of it unbelievable so they feel guilty. Others are turned off by Christianity and the church because of beliefs they find absurd. They miss the depth of the Christian faith.

What does "Christian" mean?

Ricker doesn't define "Christian" in terms of required beliefs. In his view, "A Christian is one for whom Jesus Christ plays the definitive role in life." For Ricker, that means Jesus somehow determines the person's identity, helps define what being human means, and assures the person of a source of eternal love that is available to everyone.

What do you think? Is Ricker's definition adequate?



Three reactions

When I see Christians encountering the views expressed by the authors I quote in this *Connections*, I usually see one of these reactions.

n Automatic rejection by Christians unwilling to consider any understanding of Christianity or the Bible that differs from what they hear at church and currently believe. These Christians apparently assume that any other views are automatically wrong. They dismiss them as sinful, heretical, and unchristian. Such rejection may come from fear of finding that some of their present beliefs are wrong, and of not being able to find anything reliable to replace them. Rejection also can come from unwillingness to risk the temporary uncertainty that examining one's beliefs usually brings.



n Surprise and temporary uneasiness for Christians who haven't encountered such views before but are willing to consider them. Being confronted by beliefs that we think might be true but that differ from those we've always assumed were totally correct can be scary. It puts us temporarily into a limbo in which we're no longer sure that our present beliefs are completely true, but we're not yet sure what changes our new awareness may require.

n Liberation for Christians who already have similar views or who arrive at them after considering what the authors are saying. These Christians may have been keeping quiet because they felt alone. "There must be something wrong with me," they've felt, "because I don't believe what all Christians are supposed to believe, and what real Christians evidently do believe." A feeling of liberation may also come from having felt unable to accept all Christian doctrine but not having seen why. When these alone-feeling Christians discover a Christian explicitly saying what they've only vaguely suspected, it's a big relief.



Opening ourselves to new possibilities is nearly always uncomfortable and scary. Refusing, however, can keep us from encountering God and from following God's call. That's what really should scare us.

Two liberating books

“This is one of the most liberating books I have ever read,” a *Connections* reader wrote me about Richard Elliott’s *Falling in Love with Mystery*, and my own reaction was very similar. The writer of a blurb on the cover of Ricker’s book calls it a liberating book, too. Elliott’s style was more gripping for me than Ricker’s, because Elliott’s was more personal, but I liked both of these books a lot.



Ricker mentions many personal experiences he’s had as a pastor, but he presents them in a chapter-by-chapter treatment of fourteen topics that come from the Bible and Christian doctrine—Adam and Eve, miracles, the Virgin Birth, the blood of Jesus, the Second Coming, and others. By contrast, Elliott’s book addresses such topics within a memoir-like framework, telling how he encountered the “great separation” and how it affected him. His book was especially compelling for me because in his account I found so much similarity to my own feelings and to the ways in which I’ve come to my present understanding of Christianity and the Bible.

Seeing the separation

Three main experiences made Richard Elliott aware of our culture’s separation between religion and reality.



- **Encounters with God**

The first of what Elliott calls his real-life encounters with God came in seeing the birth of a calf on his family’s farm when he was eleven. He experienced the mystery of life as real and powerful, and he was overwhelmed by awe. But in what he calls his “ordinary religious training” he saw no relation to what he had experienced through the calf’s birth.

Growing up in a churchgoing family, from his mother Richard regularly heard amazing stories about the ministry of his grandfather, a Pentecostal preacher. He supposedly had spoken understandably



in languages he had never learned, and had once brought a dead man back to life. Elliott found these claims puzzling because his mother was intelligent and well educated, yet



Falling in Love with Mystery, by Richard Elliott, is out of print but you can get it from Elliott’s web site, www.fallinginlovewithmystery.com

she told these incredible stories as if they were true. He was also puzzled because they seemed totally disconnected from the rest of his mother’s life.

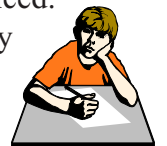
Elliott was puzzled, too, because all the Christians he knew, who all were solid, trustworthy citizens, claimed to believe Bible stories that to him seemed impossible. And despite apparently believing these impossible stories, he noticed, “they went on and lived quite normal lives. They had the area of the stories and the impossibilities thereof thoroughly separated from their real living.”



- **Great injustice where religion was strong**

Attending college in his native South Carolina during the early years of the civil rights struggle, Elliott began to think about issues of justice. That made him reevaluate his entire life. He soon became aware of a fact he found very confusing. The church was strongest in the part of the U.S. where racial segregation had been most blatantly practiced.

“What is this?” he wondered. “A very strong religion is abroad in the land and a very great injustice is abroad in the same land.” It made no sense to him.



- **Religion mired in an ancient world view**

A few years later, after having felt called into the ordained ministry and attended seminary, reading Bishop J. A. T. Robinson’s book *Honest to God*

brought Elliott to another new and powerful awareness. “We live in a different world view,” he realized, “from the world view in which our faith has been articulated for all these years.” He soon came to see, however, that this difference didn’t mean Christianity was false or meaningless. “It is possible,” he recognized, “to articulate the ancient truths of the faith in language and thought-forms that make sense in our real world.” But to Elliott’s dismay, he



saw the church unwilling to act on this insight. “The movement passed by like one more fad,” he found. “The church settled down to its old ways.”

Revealing the Mystery or hiding it?

“I encountered the Holy Mystery in the pasture,” Richard Elliott tells us. “It was direct and personal. No reading was required and no rituals had to be performed. The Mystery had appeared to me, not in the supernatural but in the very natural. And it was wonderful. It was life-transforming.” But instead of leading us into life-transforming experiences by speaking in the language and thought-forms of today, Elliott keeps finding, much of our religion in effect creates “an artificial universe to stand between us and the real universe which is so mysterious.” Too often, our religion hides the Mystery instead of revealing it.



Nudges to reexamine our faith

What Richard Elliott finds so ironic about our refusal to notice the separation between our religion and reality is that we’re continually given so many opportunities to become aware of it. For him, the Mystery—his name for what we’ve traditionally called God—mainly becomes apparent through his

encounters with nature, especially in solitary encounters with nature in its pristine state. He acknowledges, however, that others may encounter the Mystery more often in other ways.



Elliott finds that in two especially obvious ways all of us are continually nudged to become aware of the Mystery, yet we keep ignoring the nudges.



- **Our multi-ethnic society**

If we were members of an isolated cult, Elliott points out, accepting hand-me-down religious stories and explanations would be easy. Other possible explanations might not occur to us. But in our culture “the stories from all over are right here on Main Street,” yet we ignore them. “We go merrily on our way,” Elliott observes, “with the certainty that although there are other stories, the ones of our tradition are in fact the true ones. This requires a high degree of arrogance and/or intellectual inertia . . .”

- **Our constantly expanding view of the universe**

“For a long time,” Elliott finds, “the universe itself has been calling us to a profound reexamination of our faith-story.” However, we have ignored the call and are still ignoring it. Some of Elliott’s descriptions of what science has discovered are a bit fuzzy and include small inaccuracies—he’s obviously not a scientist—but his point is valid. “An enormous change in our picture of the universe has made little discernible difference in the world view of our religion. We stand on tiptoe to receive the latest technological inventions of our day, but when it comes to our religion, we hold on tenaciously to the solutions of antiquity.” We pretend that the world is as it was seen to be in the first century, Richard



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I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers voluntarily make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

Elliott finds, and “this pretension has created a chasm between our religious world and the real world.”

Why do we keep pretending?

In Elliott’s opinion we pretend because the kind of unreal being that we pretend God is can make only a minimal difference in our living and can be easily manipulated. Also, a religion that is separate from reality can stay focused on sins of which many of us are innocent, so we can go home from church feeling good. And when our religion is mainly about going to heaven when we die, it lets us ignore the big issues of earthly life. It helps us hide from God.



In Elliott’s view, the big question for us is whether our religion can still make sense if we change our story to fit what we now know about the world. He’s sure that it can. So is George Ricker. In next month’s *Connections* I’ll write about how these two authors and others believe our understanding of God, Jesus Christ, salvation, and some other features of Christian tradition might change if we applied twenty-first-century knowledge about the universe instead of clinging to the first-century views that most of our present religious language and many of our beliefs are based on.

Barbara

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Over-believers or under-believers?

When I finished reading Richard Elliott’s book that I quote in this issue of *Connections*, I phoned the *Connections* reader who had let me know about it. A few members of her congregation had read and discussed it together and loved it, she had told me, so after finding that I loved it too, I wanted to know more about their reaction. “We all thought it was wonderful,” she said, “but we can’t talk about it out loud in our congregation.” I find that all too familiar, and sad. We need to be talking about such subjects out loud in our congregations.



In a blurb on the cover of the Ricker book that I quote here, theology professor Leroy Howe describes the attitude that both of these books address, which Howe finds prevalent in many churches. He calls it “the morass of over-belief that threatens the church’s vitality everywhere.” Are we really “over-believers”? Do we really believe things that don’t match reality, and that we don’t need to believe in order to be Christian? Many church members are saying instead that some of us—especially our top leaders—are “under-believers” and thus should be ignored or even ousted. Which of these views does the church need to promote? Or some other view about our beliefs?

