

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 204 - NOVEMBER 2009



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I believe . . .

that maturing involves continually revising one's beliefs to take new information and insight into account. I didn't dare to start doing that with my religious beliefs until midlife, but doing it has felt like being relieved of heavy weights that I'd carried needlessly for years.



I became a churchgoer as a baby because my parents were active churchgoers. During my early life, everyone I knew participated in a church and considered himself or herself a Christian, so I saw that as the only right way to live. I understood being Christian to mean mainly being "nice"—following all conventional rules and customs, being "sweet" and pleasant and polite, and being a law-abiding citizen. It also meant believing everything the Bible said and taking part in church activities regularly. I found

some things I heard at church hard to believe, but I mostly kept quiet about that. I assumed that I simply hadn't yet caught on to why those things were true.

At midlife, however, I started seriously con-

sidering what I believed, what the Bible said, and what I saw the church doing. I started becoming more aware of others' beliefs and observations and of scholars' findings. As a result, I started revising my understanding of God, the Bible, what being a Christian means, and Christianity's importance compared to other religions. I'm still doing that.

The aim of religions

I now see the basic aim of all religions as discovering how the divine (the sacred, the holy) operates, mainly in the hope of in-



Reconsidering the church and our connections

Along with my beliefs about God and Jesus, my beliefs about the church and about people's connections to God and to each other have changed over the years.



I now believe that following Jesus often requires refusing to act "nice" and "sweet." It often requires being a nonconformist. It can require breaking some rules, or even some laws, and opposing some social customs. It requires critically evaluating what one's nation does. It can require refusing to support some government policies. Jesus apparently did that often.

Do not conform to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind . . .
—Romans 12:2

Being Christian also requires critically evaluating the actions and policies of the institutional church. It can require refusing to participate in some of what the church does. Jesus did the equivalent of that, with regard to the established religion of his time and place.

A spiritual connection to God and others

I suspect that some kind of non-physical connection exists between people, between people and the divine, and maybe also with animals and even inanimate things. I believe that what Christians call "the Holy Spirit" refers to this connection. I believe that "spiritual practices" such as prayer can tap into it somehow. I believe that interaction with others often reveals the divine through this unseen connection.

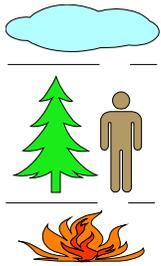
I believe that being part of a community is valuable. But that community doesn't have to be the institutional church. I no longer feel that participating in the institutional church is essential for Christians. Participation is misleading, in fact, when the church presents narrow portrayals of the divine and outdated, uninformed, literalist, unquestioned interpretations of the Bible and ancient creeds and doctrines. And when a church follows and promotes unjust and uncompassionate practices, as some do, participation in that church can even be harmful. It's a connection that needs careful examination.

fluencing it. Religions' adherents try to obtain divine favor and avoid divine wrath by doing what they see as the will of the divine and by praying. Their aim is to keep themselves and their loved ones alive and supplied with life's necessities and to increase their comfort and happiness.



Unbelievable portrayals of God

Christians call the divine "God" and refer to how God operates as God's will or nature. Most Christians see the Bible as the main source of information about God. Many see it as the only valid source. However, the Bible presents only the experiences and beliefs of one particular cultural and historical group, as reported through a complex centuries-long process of oral storytelling and then writing, selecting, compiling, copying, translating, and editing. In my view, therefore, the Bible cannot legitimately be considered a complete, literal, or uniquely accurate account of what God is like, what God has done, or what God has communicated to human beings.



I find many of the Bible's portrayals of God unbelievable, but they're understandable because of how long ago the Bible's contents originated. What is not understandable to me is that the institutional church and so many individual Christians still portray God only as the Bible does, as being in the sky above us in a flat, three-level world.

Contradictory portrayals of God

The church also portrays God in many ways that contradict what it claims to believe God is like. It says God is spirit, yet it constantly portrays God as a person-like being. It says God is timeless, but it often speaks to and about God in 17th-century English. It says God has no gender, but it portrays God almost exclusively as male. The church often portrays God specifically as a Santa-Claus-like man who capriciously, unpredictably, and unexplainably gives some people what they ask for but denies the requests of others. Many Christians portray God as an all-powerful being who allows or even causes disasters such as tornados, wrecks, and illnesses to kill some people while saving others from the same disasters. These portrayals deny much of what we



now know, and we rarely require evidence for them like we require for our beliefs about other subjects.

I don't see the doctrine of the Trinity as an essential description of God. It is merely how some leaders who lived several centuries after Jesus expressed their beliefs.



A being? An order? Impossible to know

I understand the divine not as a being but rather as something like the order, pattern, or system of principles underlying all aspects of the cosmos (that is, of total reality, whatever that may include). Knowing exactly what this infinite pattern or system is like or how it functions is surely impossible for finite human beings. However, I can't believe that it deals individually or personally with people. It may be loving in the sense of operating beneficially for the overall system or for whoever and whatever acts in accord with its principles rather than against them. But I believe the divine is neutral in that it does not deliberately do good or bad for particular individuals or groups in response to their personal needs, behavior, beliefs, or requests.



Christianity's model is Jesus

I believe compassion (love), nonviolence, and justice are the true goals of Christianity, because it arose from the life of Jesus and is based on following his example, and he apparently practiced and taught these behaviors. I believe that sin consists of being uncompassionate, violent, or unjust—harming people or other parts of the natural world—and that practices that do not harm others (mutually chosen sexual practices, for example) are not sinful.



Justice in this sense isn't merely punishing criminals. It is helping all people to have enough of life's necessities. It is treating no human beings as inferior because of their race, sex, class, or other such characteristics. Christians' source of authority for this meaning of justice is partly the prophetic tradition described in what we call the Old Testament, but it is mainly the Bible's descriptions of Jesus.

In my view, however, practicing compassion, nonviolence, and justice is important not merely because Jesus advocated it but rather because it seems

likely to make life better for the most people. If those practices result from being an adherent of Islam, Hinduism, any other religion, or of no formal religion, then following that religion is as worthwhile as being a Christian. And if an individual or group fails to practice and promote compassion, nonviolence, and justice, then that individual or group's religion is worth little. In fact, it can be harmful, even if it bears the name "church" or "Christian."



Because of how the Bible originated and developed, however, I don't believe that everything it says about Jesus can legitimately be considered historical or that all the sayings it attributes to him can be considered verbatim quotes. I don't believe we know exactly what Jesus said or did. Still, we can probably get a relatively accurate picture of him by analyzing the Bible's contents along with other documents and artifacts from the setting in which he lived, plus the views of scholars. Being aware of such findings and opinions is therefore important.

Promoting awareness is important



I feel that to further the kind of compassion, peace, and justice demonstrated by Jesus—what his earliest followers called "The Way"—the church needs to make not only its members

but also the general public aware of what has now become known about the earthly life of Jesus, the Roman Empire setting in which he lived, and the ways in which he actively opposed its oppressive features. I believe the church also needs to promote awareness of similarly oppressive features of today's world and of the need to expose and oppose them.

I believe that in order to present a realistic picture of Christianity, of Jesus, and of what following

him today requires, the church also must actively promote awareness of how the Bible originated and developed, how Christianity has developed and varied over the centuries, and how other religions' beliefs and sacred documents resemble some of Christianity's doctrines and the Bible's contents. Church members need to know that, like Christianity, other ancient religions worshiped dying and rising gods. Members need to know that many ancient people referred not only to their gods but also to prominent human leaders as sons of God, as having been born of virgins impregnated by gods, and as having ascended to heaven when they died. Such claims are not unique to Christianity and can't legitimately be interpreted literally.



No special access to God or heaven

I don't believe Jesus was divine in any unique way, although he may have somehow been more fully in touch with the divine and more able to communicate it than most other human beings are. This characteristic apparently is what has led many followers to feel, during his earthly life and succeeding centuries, that through him they experience the divine. This characteristic has also inspired many followers to create magnificent artistic and intellectual works and to do valuable service to humanity. But I don't believe Jesus is still alive in any supernatural way.



Neither do I believe that imitating Jesus or declaring belief in him gives special access to God or assurance of "going to heaven" at death. I believe that following his teaching and example can help improve earthly life, but I can't believe that it determines what will happen in any afterlife. I see

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 17 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



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 make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

“heaven” and “hell” as merely names for what people would like to have or to avoid after death.

Rethinking familiar practices

I believe Christian practices such as baptism and Communion (Eucharist) may have psychological and spiritual value that comes from performing actions that symbolize cleansing, newness, and commitment to love and justice. I believe that publicly expressing such commitment can strengthen it. But I don't believe that God initiated or commands these practices or that they affect whether or not one “goes to heaven” at death.



Neither do I believe that only clergy can legitimately administer them or that their effect depends on using particular words, materials, or gestures.

A liberating experience

What a relief it has been for me to realize that it was okay not to believe things I'd never been able to believe but had felt I should make myself believe. How welcome it has been to find that many other Christians have also realized this. But for too many years, many of us assumed we were alone and therefore were mistaken, because we didn't hear anyone else speaking up. Isn't it time to change that?

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November 2009



Many Christians would say that having the views I've expressed here means I'm not a Christian. Many would say that being a Christian requires believing the beliefs and doctrines and following the religious practices that have been seen as essential by the most Christians over the centuries, that are seen as essential by most churchgoers today, and that are officially prescribed by the institutional church. But I don't think acceptance by the majority proves a belief correct or means a practice is a requirement for being Christian. I believe what is required of Christians instead is seeing the practice of compassion, justice, and nonviolence as one's goal and actively working toward that goal. It's making Jesus, not the majority, one's guide.

Many Christians feel that people with views like mine shouldn't be allowed a voice in the church. That seems shortsighted to me. It seems to me that if the church wants to show us we're wrong, then the way to pursue that is not to stifle, oust, or shun us. It isn't to bombard us with Bible verses, because we don't attribute unique authority to them or interpret them all literally. Changing us would require addressing our beliefs and questions instead. Persuading us to change our beliefs would require openly discussing the pros and cons of our views and of official church policies and majority views, and showing us convincing evidence that the church's doctrines and practices made more sense and produced better fruit than our beliefs. But that approach would be risky. It could cause some churchgoers to be converted to our views instead of converting us to theirs. I suspect that's why the church so often stifles new information and insight and discourages open discussion.

