

Connections

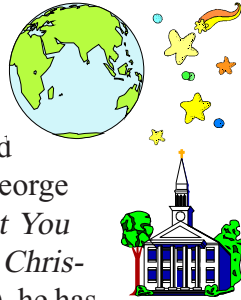
A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Connecting religion with reality



In his many years as a United Methodist pastor and teacher, George M. Ricker reports in his *What You Don't Have to Believe to Be a Christian* (Sunbelt Eakin Press, 2002), he has repeatedly seen the exhilaration that comes from finding that it is all right to think, to question, and even to doubt some of what other Christians believe. He thus aims at promoting dialogue on issues about which many Christians have doubts. He finds "that many 'babes in Christ' remain babes because the Church and its clergy have been silent on many of these issues." And despite what he calls his "disbeliefs," he is a committed Christian, Ricker assures us.



Questioning leads to maturity

Ricker sees that raising questions about our beliefs leads to a more mature faith. That's my observation, too. That's why in this issue of *Connections* I'm presenting more from the two books I wrote about last month. Each of them examines aspects of traditional beliefs that I feel we all need to consider seriously, no matter what our position on them turns out to be. And unlike many other books about similar issues, both of these are short and easy to read.

Ricker urges readers who are disturbed or angered by what he says, to ask themselves what benefit comes from believing what their minds tell them is unbelievable. He apparently doesn't see any real benefit coming from it. Neither does Richard F. Elliott, Jr., who in his book *Falling in Love with Mystery* writes about the separation that he sees in our culture, between religion and reality. Please look with me at what these two Christians recommend doing instead.



Living with integrity in the real world

Richard Elliott advocates abandoning outdated religious imagery. Here's what he suggests doing instead of using it. "Experience in the real world the awesome Mystery that is at the center of life no matter where you show up. Decide in fear and trembling to relate your life to that Mystery. Fall in love with it. See the wonders and the catastrophes that flow mysteriously from the Center of life. Sometimes in delight, sometimes in fear and trembling, decide to trust that great Mystery. Not because it is your first choice, but because as far as you can see it is your only choice if you are to live in the real world with your integrity intact."



Disagreement doesn't rule out respect

George Ricker doesn't insist as strongly as Elliott that we update traditional ways of understanding and speaking about God, Jesus, and the incidents and concepts the Bible describes. At the end of almost every chapter in his book, Ricker reminds us that we can be Christians without adopting all the imagery that arose in earlier centuries, but he follows that reminder with another one. "At least," he says repeatedly, "this is what many Christians believe about what they do not have to believe."



"I respect the views of others," Ricker assures us, "even though I may not always find them congenial to my thinking processes." Similarly, in what I say in *Connections* I try to show respect for others' views. I present several sides of issues I have mixed opinions about, but I feel that integrity, faithfulness, and concern for the church require expressing disagreement with views I consider mistaken. I believe faithfulness also requires taking a stand for positions that I feel need more attention than the church is giving them.

Considering many views helps us grow

"I ask for, but will not always get, the same respect for my opinions," Ricker says. I sometimes find that happening, too, when I oppose or even question other Christians' beliefs. I find, however, as he also does, that we grow in faith and understanding as Christians only if we give other people's views the same serious consideration we want for our own.

Trying to describe our experience



Both Elliott and Ricker urge us to recognize that descriptions of God and many descriptions of Jesus are metaphors. As Ricker explains, when we say that Jesus lived in the area we now call Israel, in what we now call the first century, and that he was crucified by the Roman authorities, we're giving a literal description of Jesus. But if we say that Jesus was the Son of God or that Jesus saves us, we are using metaphors. They are efforts to describe what people experienced through their relationship with Jesus, and to say what they understood to be the significance of Jesus.

The Bible includes a wide variety of metaphors to describe God, Jesus, and concepts like salvation. All of these metaphors use language and thought forms taken from the culture in which they arose, but those don't fit our culture. Ricker therefore urges us to ask, "What does that really mean?"



when we hear a traditional, metaphorical description of God or Jesus.

How might we describe God, salvation, the role and significance of Jesus, and other features of Christian faith if we used the language and understanding of today? Ricker and Elliott suggest some ways.

God is not a person

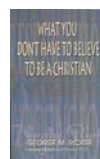
In Richard Elliott's view, we'd have to change some of our ways of talking about God, because God is not a person. In fact, God isn't a being of any kind. Elliott therefore is bothered by our use of personal words for God.



"This super-concern for the word 'personal' in our religious conversation has always puzzled me," Elliott writes. "When I have experienced the Mysterious Center most vividly there has been no sense of my encounter being with a 'person' of some kind. Yet at the same time, those experiences were always very personal for me. They were life-changing for me as a person."

Elliott finds, as I do, that many church words for God hinder his awareness of God. "I usually find," says Elliott, "that the word 'God' gets in my way. It reduces the Mystery down to a creature that can be called by a name. It carries all the old baggage of a world view that is not my own."

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



If you can't find George Ricker's *What You Don't Have to Believe to Be a Christian* at bookstores, or if you want a discount for multiple copies, order the book from Ricker. A single copy is \$19.95, but he'll discount this price by 10% for 2-4 copies, 20% for 5-9, and 30% for 10 or more. Send your check to Dr. George M. Ricker, 1906 Vista Lane, Austin TX 78703. For a descriptive flyer or faster ordering, e-mail him at gmricker@onr.com.

"I also find," Elliott continues, "that personal pronouns are not helpful. Calling the Final Mystery of the universe 'He' or 'She' seems almost ludicrous to me. I use the language in my church, but I use it with discomfort." So do I.

Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?, what shall I say to them?'" God said to Moses, "I am who I am."
—Exodus 3:13-14

A transcendent dimension of life

As George Ricker reminds us, rather than being a person or any kind of creature, "God is the object of faith, a transcendent dimension of life not amenable to our physical senses." And since God is not a person, emphasizes Ricker, "a Christian does not have to believe that God at one time spoke audible



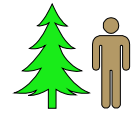
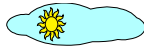
words to any biblical characters." The fact that such manifestations of God often appear as historical and that later people treated them as such, Ricker points out, does not make them so. The East, where biblical documents arose, does not tend to separate



the subjective and objective worlds as neatly as we do. “The accounts of these experiences were written many years—in some cases, hundred of years—after the supposed incidents. The stories reflected the theological understanding of a later age.” We read them with the understandings of a still later age and assume meanings that their authors probably never intended.

A three-story universe

We also mislead ourselves by acting as if the first-century understanding of the universe were correct. As Elliott describes that outdated view, “There was (according to the science of the day) an upper level in the universe. There was the earth down here and there was up above us another realm. That upper realm was in fact the more real one. Down here was just a temporary home.” In addition, that world view treated the upper level as the first-rate place, the middle level as second-rate, and an even lower level as unbearable, so life’s objective was to get to the upper level.



We now know that the universe has no such levels, but in our religion (and only in our religion, strangely) we keep pretending that it does. In fact, we base some of our beliefs about Jesus on that pretense. We talk about Jesus rising up to the top level after death, and about his role in guaranteeing that we will go there too.



People found their lives filled full

If in our religion we admitted that the universe isn’t a three-story place, that since God is not a person God wouldn’t have a son, and that God and the

resurrected Jesus don’t live in an upper-story place called Heaven, what would be important about Jesus? As Elliott asks, “What is the deep truth that we might preserve from this story that might be helpful to every human being on earth were we able to transfer it into our own world view?” His answer? “We could say that in him the Mystery of life was laid bare. ... He was ‘at one’ with the Mystery itself. He trusted it, and enabled others to have that trust. Those who placed their trust there found their lives filled full.”



“I believe the bare bones reason for the Jesus story,” says Richard Elliott, “is that it gives us confidence in the Mystery. Life is very confusing, frightening, and absolutely uncertain. Jesus is a picture of a man living victoriously in the midst of that vast uncertainty. ... Jesus’s divinity is to be found in the completeness of his humanity.”

Jesus lived fully in a mixed world



Here’s how another author describes the role of Jesus, in today’s language. In *Hope Against Darkness* (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2001), Richard Rohr writes, “The cross was the price that Jesus paid for agreeing to live in a ‘mixed’ world that was both human and divine, both bad and good, simultaneously broken and utterly whole.”

“He agreed to carry the mystery,” says Rohr, “and not to demand perfection of God’s creation or of God’s creatures. He lived fully on the horns of the human dilemma and made it work for us. In fact, he said it is the ‘only’ way. It is in that sense only that Christianity is the ‘only’ way to be saved.”

To me that kind of explanation makes a lot more sense than the ancient language that says Jesus some-

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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 make voluntary financial 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 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

how saves us from going to a fiery place when we die, and to claim that Jesus is the only route to God.



“What earlier Christians did in their day,” George Ricker believes, “borrowing language of various cultures to express what they experienced in the life and death of Jesus, we must do for our time.” Instead of just talking and singing about the blood of Jesus, for example, as if Jesus’s literal, physical blood had magic power, we must see the meaning behind the words used in the Bible. Then we see the blood of Jesus as a powerful symbol for Jesus’s life. It tells us “that Christians have

been made new by this life ... a life poured out for humanity, a life of involvement in humanity, which means entering the sufferings of our day.”

Heresy, or God-given insight?

To some Christians such statements are sinful heresy, but to others they are God-given insight that makes believable what isn’t believable otherwise. Can we amicably consider both views and let them keep existing together for now in our churches? Surely we can. I hope we will. Our churches’ faithfulness—even their survival—may depend on it.

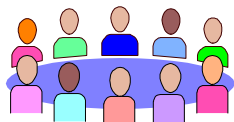
Barbara

Connecting religion with reality

March 2003

A potent study for your church

What You Don't Have to Believe to Be a Christian, the book I've written about in this month's and last month's *Connections*, would be an excellent guide for an interesting and worthwhile study in your church. The book's author, retired United Methodist pastor George M. Ricker, has arranged his book in a format especially well suited for such a purpose. It's short and easy to read. Each of its fifteen chapters discusses a well-known Bible story or key feature of traditional Christian doctrine. These include Adam and Eve, the miracles of Moses and of Jesus, angels, Jesus's birth, his resurrection and ascension, life after death, the Trinity, and Satan.



Ricker's last chapter describes what he has come to see as his essential convictions, plus his view of the traditional creeds. The book ends with a guide for group study sessions, and a list of books Ricker recommends for further reading about how the Bible and Christian beliefs relate to today's world. This study could well be the most intriguing one your Sunday School class or study group has ever done.