

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Reflections

Three different churchgoing friends have recently commented to me about their churches' worship services. All three are active, lifelong churchgoers. They're the kind of Christians who keep going to worship services every Sunday no matter what they happen to like or dislike, or approve or disapprove of. These three are in different congregations of different mainline denominations, but some of their comments were remarkably similar. Their similarity led me to reflect on what they meant.



One friend was telling me about the sermon that had been given at her church that morning. Its text was a Psalm that urges worshipers to be joyful. The preacher had emphasized that all Christians should be joyful because they know that Jesus Christ has taken away their sin and that, because they believe in him, they will go to heaven when they die.

This friend accepts that observation as a fact, but as I listened to her account of the sermon I kept thinking, "Do we really know that? And if so, how?"

Is one theory enough?

My friend and many other Christians would undoubtedly answer, "Because the Bible says so." But that answer always makes me think, "Well, maybe the Bible says that, but maybe it doesn't." That explanation of what Jesus does for those who believe in him is one interpretation—one theory—of what the Bible says, but it's nowhere near the only interpretation. It's not even the only *Christian* interpretation. Throughout Christian history, Christians have come to several different conclusions about the role of Jesus, based on the various things they see in the Bible. For this reason, among others, I don't feel I can consider any one of those different Christian views as fact.



Merely different strokes?

It surprised me that two of the friends who recently spoke to me about their churches' worship services said how bothered they were by their preachers' walking around while preaching. "It is so distracting!" said each friend, in separate conversations. These two faithful churchgoers both felt very strongly that preachers should stay behind the pulpit when they preached.



I remember hearing that before, when years ago my congregation had a pastor who walked back and forth in the front of the sanctuary while he preached. I actually thought it was a smart thing to do, because the sanctuary is semicircular and people on the edges see only the preacher's profile when he or she is in the pulpit. It seemed to me that walking around enabled the pastor to make eye contact with everyone, in a way that standing in the pulpit didn't do.

But what was especially surprising to me about my two friends' reports was that the content of the sermons didn't seem to matter near as much to either of these intelligent and faithful churchgoers as whether the preacher stayed in the pulpit or not.

The atmosphere or the words?

Like these two, the other of the three friends that I recently heard from didn't seem concerned about what the sermon or the service's other words said. She was concerned only about whether the service had what she called "a loving atmosphere." I wasn't sure exactly what she meant by that, but I was sure that her main criterion for evaluating a worship service was different from mine.



For me, a loving atmosphere, by which she apparently meant greetings, maybe hugs, and lots of pleasant, friendly conversation, is nice but not essential. What matters much more for me is whether the statements I hear in the sermon, the songs, and other parts of the service seem believable. When I hear unconvincing claims instead, such as the claim that believing in Jesus guarantees the believer a place in heaven, I find it hard to take the church seriously.

Different strokes for different folks? Or is something more important being revealed here?

Is the Bible all we need?



In order to evaluate what the Bible may say about what will happen to Christians and others after death, I feel I must consider not only a variety of Bible interpretations but also other possible sources of information in addition to the Bible. In deciding what I believe about a possible afterlife, I consider not only what other religions claim but also what science, medicine, and history seem to contribute to our knowledge about the subject of death.

From these or other sources, do we actually know what has happened to anyone, Christian or not, after they died? I don't think so. We've all heard about "near-death experiences" that some people see as giving a clue. Some people have had dreams or visions of their deceased loved ones, too, which they interpret as meaning that the loved one is in heaven.

But to me, such interpretations seem to be mainly speculation. They seem likely to say more about the dreamer or the envisionser and his or her wishes, than about the deceased person or Jesus or God. As far as I know, our only real knowledge of what happens to people when they die is about what happens to their physical bodies.



What's the harm?

Why should it bother me or anyone else for churches to claim so constantly that Christians will go to a wonderful place when they die and that non-Christians won't? Why deny people the comfort that those claims apparently furnish, whether or not they're true? If no one really knows happens after death, what's the harm in saying that for Christians it is something wonderful?

What seems harmful to me about churches' emphasis on going to heaven is that their giving so much attention to what may happen after death keeps them from giving that time and attention instead to what Christians need to be doing while they're still alive. Isn't that the main subject that churches need to be addressing, in sermons, songs, and everything else they say?



If no one knows for sure what will happen to us after death, why spend time in church hearing and singing about it? Why not spend that time instead hearing and thinking about ways in which we need to be compassionate, combat injustice, and promote nonviolence, and discussing how to do that with regard to the specific situations that exist in



today's world? According to the gospels, those topics were what Jesus gave the most attention to. Besides, we're evidently much more likely to be able to do something about those, than about what will happen to us after we die.

Of course, if failing to believe in Jesus results in being sent to a fiery place to stay for eternity, as some Christians believe it does, that would be horrible enough to work very hard at avoiding. But it seems to me that what is now known about the universe comes close enough to ruling out the existence of such a place and the possibility of such a fate, that we don't need to worry about its happening.



Seeing how religions have changed

When I heard my three friends' comments about what was happening in their churches, I was reading *The Case for God* (Knopf, 2009), by Karen Armstrong. Some of her observations therefore added to the thoughts that my friends' comments triggered.



Armstrong describes how each of the major world religions and their predecessors arose out of ancient cultures that had much in common. She reminds readers of how many important similarities the religions include. She also observes how in very recent centuries western culture has distorted some of the three major monotheistic religions' most important features. She explains how in the West the Christian fundamentalism that arose only in the nineteenth century has attributed to Christian doctrines and beliefs about God and Jesus some meanings that earlier Christians would evidently have found preposterous. Those meanings include the one about sin and heaven that was so prominent in the sermon my friend told me about.

Failing to take God seriously?

Karen Armstrong feels that although we talk about God a lot today, much of what we say fails to take God seriously. “Surely everybody knows what God is: the Supreme Being, a divine Personality, who created the world and everything in it,” she sees too many people assuming. “They look perplexed if you point out that it is inaccurate to call God the Supreme Being, because God is not *a* being at all.”

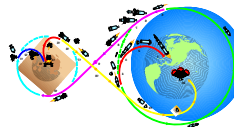


“People of faith admit in theory that God is utterly transcendent,” Armstrong finds, “but they seem sometimes to assume that they know exactly who ‘he’ is and what he thinks, loves, and expects. ... We regularly ask God to bless our nation, save our queen, cure our sickness, or give us a fine day for the picnic. We remind God that he has created the world and that we are miserable sinners, as though



this may have slipped his mind. Politicians quote God to justify their policies, teachers use him to keep order in the classroom, and terrorists commit atrocities in his name. We beg God to support ‘our’ side in an election or a war, even though our opponents are, presumably, also God’s children and the object of his love and care.”

Karen Armstrong finds many people mistakenly assuming that “even though we now live in a totally transformed world and have an entirely different worldview, people have always thought about God in exactly the same way as we do now.” In her opinion, “despite our scientific and technological brilliance, our religious thinking is sometimes remarkably undeveloped, even primitive.”

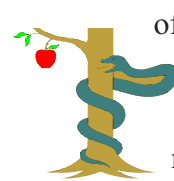


Speaking about God is hard

Perhaps surprisingly, Armstrong observes, in some ways ancient peoples’ understanding of God was ahead of ours. “Many people in the premodern world went out of their way to show that it was very difficult indeed to speak about God.”



She points out that some of the greatest Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians made clear that while it was important to put our ideas about the divine into words, these doctrines were man-made and thus were bound to be inadequate. These theologians knew that the words people used to describe mundane things were simply not suitable for God. “‘He’ was not good, divine, powerful, or intelligent in any way that we could understand. We could not even say that God ‘existed,’ because our concept of existence was too limited. ... You certainly could not read your scriptures literally, as if they referred to divine facts. To these theologians, some



of our modern ideas about God would have seemed idolatrous.”

Karen Armstrong reminds us that myth, the language ancient people used for speaking about God, is now mistakenly taken to mean something that is not true. Its original purpose, however, was to help people negotiate the obscure regions of the psyche. It was never meant as an accurate account of a historical event. “Myth has been called a primitive form of psychology,” she explains. “It was something that had in some sense happened once but that also happens all the time.”

A program of action

Myth was essentially a program of action, Karen Armstrong finds. “Put into practice, a myth could

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.

tell us something profoundly true about our humanity. It showed us how to live more richly and intensely, how to cope with our mortality, and how creatively to endure the suffering that flesh is heir to." That's also true of ritual, says Armstrong. However, myth has now largely been discredited and forced into a style of thinking that is alien to it. Christian fundamentalists now interpret scripture with a literalism that Armstrong finds to be unparalleled in the history of religion. This fundamentalism interprets "belief" as what Armstrong calls "a credulous acceptance of creedal



doctrines as the prerequisite of faith," as though accepting orthodox dogma were Christians' most important activity. "Instead of using scripture to help people to move forward and embrace new attitudes," Karen Armstrong observes, "people quote ancient scriptural texts to prevent any such progress."

That's contrary to what the world faiths have previously done. At their real core, Armstrong finds, "All the world faiths insist that true spirituality must be expressed consistently in practical compassion." I wish churches were saying that more often now, instead of giving so much attention to what may happen to us after we die.

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***Misfits: The Church's Hidden Strength*, by Barbara Wendland coming later this year from St. Johann Press**

Misfits features personal stories that show why many people who want to follow the teaching and example of Jesus feel like misfits in relation to the institutional church, and why churches urgently need to pay attention to the misfits' reasons for feeling as they do. The book includes my story of changing at midlife from a quiet conformist to a vocal nonconformist, in addition to quotes from the stories of many authors and *Connections* readers. The book suggests ways in which churches can welcome the misfits and therefore benefit from their strengths, as well as how the misfits can help themselves. Watch for it!

More spiritual journey stories coming in *Connections*

Some future issues of *Connections* will feature the stories of other Christians' spiritual journeys that, like mine and those of many readers I hear from, have included revising beliefs and undertaking new ministries as new insight arrived. The April *Connections* will tell the personal story of Joerg Rieger, a lifelong Methodist who grew up in Germany and is now an internationally known theologian.

