

Considering how Jesus can still speak to the nonbeliever



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I wish all my Christian friends and family a lovely Lent and energetic Easter! In years past, I led some wonderful services with uplifting songs, sermons and symbols of life. At one church where I served as a parish associate, we would wear our white robes and feel a certain thrill when the large wooden cross was brought forward covered in kaleidoscopic colors of spring flowers. Quite beautiful.

As a jail chaplain I remember bringing a flower or two inside to women and men “doing time” in those dark cells. To watch as someone holds and smells the new life of spring, when it may have been a year or more since they even saw some greenery, is a humbling moment. In the jails we would sing folk hymns or spirituals to brighten up the mood for people separated from their husbands, wives and children.

One year, another chaplain, my friend Rabbi Jerry, invited me to lead a lively Passover-Easter celebration with him.

If the story of human suffering at the hands of injustice has deep spiritual meaning for believers, there are ways

that human story can also have a deeper, wider secular meaning.

On my journey away from the cross and the Church, I always wondered what would become of Jesus. Once my Lord, Savior and BF, he became an important teacher and model for me — for chaplaincy, teaching and living a life of compassionate service. But what could the Nazarene be for a nonbeliever? Could the Palestinian rabbi still have something to offer a freethinking secular person?

There are many in the agnostic and atheist community who have no interest whatsoever in the Christ of Christians. A lot of people left the faith for good reasons and simply have no reason to return or even consider that anything they left behind retains any value for them. I understand that. I would never consider going back either.

Yet Jesus presents an interesting dilemma. Billions say he is the Lord of All and must be worshipped as divine — the incarnated God. And millions of others, who don't call themselves his followers, respect and honor him, seeking to learn from his core teachings.

Maybe this gets to the real issue. What are the “core teachings” of this 2,000-year old sage?

It has seemed to me for a very long time that the central issues for Jesus concerned compassion, justice, loving

one's neighbor and working for peace. The so-called Sermon on the Mount pretty much sums it up.

And yes, “loving God” is a part of what he taught, but what does that mean? Does it mean believing correctly (“orthodoxy”) or practicing a loving life? Some would say it's both. Yet those who emphasize faith and belief sometimes forget that the point is to live better and do good — anyone can say they believe anything. “Show me” is the test, and Jesus seemed to focus on that.

And of course we should ask, Which God do you mean to love? A later teaching was fairly basic, “God IS love,” so then what? A person acts in a kind and loving manner ... are they a “true believer” or “just” loving? Who gets to judge?

So many questions! Jesus still stirs them up after 2,000 years!

Was Jesus a Christian? Of course not. He wasn't Catholic or Protestant or Orthodox or Evangelical or any denomination. He certainly never went to church. We know he was Jewish, but not much for synagogues either.

Would he go to church if he was walking around now? Which church? What if he looked like a homeless person, mentally ill, a refugee? Would you let him in?

I don't know, but I suspect the flesh-and-blood Jesus might be drawn to the

common people, the outsiders, those of us who only know one world and have to live in it now, who can't be too bothered by some other world beyond the grave, beyond the sky, and beyond reason.

Was Jesus an American? Silly question, let's move on.

Was Jesus a secular person? Now we venture into dangerous territory. As I define it, “secular” simply means grounded in this present world, as opposed to being otherworldly, “spiritual” or “sacred.” The Christian world would clearly tell us that definitely, “No, HE was NOT secular!” He was, they might say, “grounded in another world.” To a freethinker that sounds rather nonsensical, but it reminds us of the great divide between Jesus the human being and Jesus who became “The Christ” of the Church.

Imagine for a moment that Jesus indeed was a secular person. What if he died as we all do — returned to the dust of the earth, just like us?

I, for one, would still respect this incredibly wise secular teacher.

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