

Was the Bethlehem baby Jewish, Christian or a Freethinker?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Several believers and a few atheists were engaged with me in a brief online discussion about whether Jesus could be considered a secular person, even an atheist. As you might imagine, it was a lively exchange.

A Canadian blogger joined the dialogue saying he was “no longer Christian, but a Messianic Gentile.” From his standpoint, “Jesus was not religious.”

Jesus has a way of complicating these labels. Maybe because he can't easily be pinned down or boxed up in neat religious categories.

As I have often said and written: Jesus was never a Christian and he could never be a Christian. It makes many “followers of Jesus” very uncomfortable to hear that, but it seems like a very common sense thing to say.

Even those who readily admit that Jesus was Jewish and never called himself the “First Christian,” acknowledging he was never a member of any church or religious congregation, get a bit squeamish when someone suggests that he was nonreligious. Did he find a good fit in the synagogue of his time? How about the church today?

Jesus of Nazareth consistently criticized religious leaders, condemned self-righteous piety and “creatively interpreted” scriptures so much he was

judged a heretic. He was accused of the worst kind of blasphemy and atheism: “Though you are only a human being, [you] are making yourself God” (John 10).

Jesus' own “atheism” became orthodox Christian teaching.

Was Jesus religious because he prayed and read the Torah? Perhaps, but did he pray to himself (“I and the Father are one”)? The only time we hear of him reading or reciting a brief passage from the Torah (the only recorded time he ever participated in a synagogue service) he was, according to the storyline, thrown out! Not a good reference for public speaking.

Just as theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said there is “cheap grace” there is also a “cheap christ.” There is an imagined Christian Christ who was the founder of a new religion called Christianity. But what if the man and his message were lost in tradition (and translation)? With centuries of distraction by theological disputes, the real agenda of the Nazarene seems to have been lost: to lovingly serve the outcast outsiders without judgment-ethical action takes precedence over belief.

Many “followers” say the whole purpose of Jesus touching the untouchable, healing the sick, teaching the crowds was to make the multitudes believe in his divinity and accept that he was born to die for them.

As I responded to my blogger friend, “[When I was a Christian] we were following the “radical rabbi” whose call was to social justice and compassion

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rather than a call to correct beliefs or theologies. In other words, he was a revolutionary reformer who emerged from traditional Judaism. In a sense, he probably was no particular religious faith (unless he believed in himself!).”

The blogger replied, “I like the outside thinking, Chris, it challenges for sure! I love the thought processes you have gone through and have experienced, it is truly a rich perspective.”

This outside thinking pushes back on those who divide the world into believers/nonbelievers, children of the light/children of the dark, my faith/no faith, my God/no god. Is taking sides the best or only choice? Was that at the center of Jesus' message?

The emphasis on correct beliefs can deflect our attention from being good human beings who recognize the goodness in other human beings. Many masters and doctors of divinity, scriptural scholars and countless clergy tell us being good isn't good enough—we must be-

lieve correctly.

But do they accurately represent the Bethlehem baby's life and message? Maybe we need fresh, freethinking storytellers who present a New Jesus who may be more like the Old (original) Jesus. Humanists, agnostics, atheists might be among them. Many seculars know the story of the Palestinian Preacher quite well. We know what it's like to be an Insider and an Outsider. We may even be in a better position to make this outrageous statement:

If Jesus was walking in our world today, he might enjoy being out among the honest, reasonable folks, not to “save” us but to savor us – to savor honest conversation and cooperation among people undistracted by beliefs. No doubt we would have disagreements. But would we absorb his message more deeply? Would he be relieved that we didn't worship him?

Without judgment, everyone would be invited to join humanistic endeavors in our communities and our world. Leaving theology and holy books at home, the whole week could be devoted to service. Gatherings would be inclusive celebrations of common humanity joyfully working together for the good of all.

Any baby might grow healthy and happy in a freethinking world like that.

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