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April 26, 2019

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Religion occupies more space in the opinion section of The New York Times than could have been imagined only a decade ago — for better or worse. This week's main feature is an awkward exchange about Easter involving two major columnists and a seminary president. It goes to the heart of religious anxieties, a far cry from the days when such columns were typically celebratory.

The first piece was the highly regarded Nick Kristof's twice-yearly plunge into personal faith. At the outset, he portrays himself as a skeptic testing the credibility of his believer guest. He quickly asserts that he doesn't accept supernatural claims like the bodily resurrection of Jesus or the virgin birth. But he doesn't rule out changing his mind.

In this dialogue, he questions the Rev. Serene Jones, the progressive president of Union Theological Seminary across the street from Columbia University, on what Kristof considers the tests of authentic Christianity.

His approach appears to be open-minded toward the wide assortment of theological views among the churches. Yet his point of reference is the cluster of beliefs commonly known as "traditional," the litmus test still applied by many but only some portions of branches. He seems limited to the narrower version of "essential" convictions.

It is a common trait among those who don't or no longer believe but retain unexamined assumptions about the widening definition of "Christian." They may have left the church but kept its particular standards without examining expanding ones. The original meaning of orthodox was "right belief" and that branch remains, even as other branches offer alternative conception of what constitutes Christian identity.

So he asks Jones about the gatekeeping issues he appears to have in mind. Her answers are direct and contrary to orthodox catechisms. She dismisses Jesus' bodily resurrection as contrary to reason. "Those who claim to know whether or not it happened are kidding themselves," she responds. The cross isn't God's plan to save our souls, she says, but an "enactment of our human hatred."

To this non-orthodox Christian, the "empty tomb" is a symbol that "the ultimate love in in our lives cannot be crucified and killed." She isn't about to smooth over how jarring that may sound to traditionalists. "The pervasive idea of an abusive God-father who sends his own kid to the cross so God could forgive people is nuts."

For anyone operating out of a pre-Reformation set of criteria for right Christian belief, this can be shocking. But it is the outgrowth of five centuries of engagement between classic formulations of Christian essence and modern truth-testing by historians, linguists and rational inquiry, all more or less under the canopy of the scientific method. Old beliefs underwent revolutionary examination.

Scholars like Jones strive to reconcile older paths to truth with new ones. Those who rid themselves of religion often resist alternatives. They have thrown away the old as absurd and leave it at that. In that sense, they stick with the assumptions of a religion they don't believe in.

Perhaps Kristof, an exceptionally humane and astute observer, knows about the growing pluralism but it doesn't come across that way.

If this movement of free thought has eluded him, Jones provides a further sampling of it in her view of the virgin birth. "I find the virgin birth a bizarre claim," she says. "It has nothing to do with Jesus' message."

In the brief space she has, she can merely hint at how millions of Christians embraced that position. Apart from the biological anomalies, she stresses the idealistic view of women that glorified those who had never been sexually touched at the expense of the dignity of most women, thereby strengthening an existing misogyny.

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Kristof typically saves one achingly personal question for the end. It shifts focus from reportorial objectivity to rare subjectivity. Does she think he qualifies as a Christian even though he can't accept the bodily resurrection or virgin birth as true — suggesting that an orthodox scorecard still exists that summarily rejects him, whether nor not he cares? He asks as if he's already disqualified, unable to imagine meeting orthodox approval. Or maybe he's heard something from Jones that prompts genuine curiosity.

"Well," she gamely replies, "you sound an awful lot like me, and I'm a Christian minister."

Kristof doesn't venture an opinion in the context of the interview. But he is known as a generous host and a respectful listener, prerequisites for change.

Jones' tart testimony catches the attention of another columnist, Ross Douthat, the Times' leading defender of Catholic orthodoxy. Almost any religious movement would want Douthat on its side. He is erudite, eloquent and persuasive. He has become a fixture on the Catholic right who criticizes Pope Francis as a threat to Catholic teaching and criticizes theological liberalism as a retreat from supernatural authority.

Kristof's column played to the heart of Douthat's anxieties. His colleague, Kristof, affirms an essentially secular viewpoint and Jones represents to him a whittling away of authentic truth in a misguided effort to reshape the church along worldly lines.

Jones' message bespoke a danger powerful enough to stir a measure of self-pity among the guardians of eternal dogma. She allegedly spoke for liberal Christians who were undermining orthodox believers.

"If you aren't a liberal Christian in the mode of Serene Jones," Douthat said in muted scorn, "if you believe in a literal resurrection and a fully-Catholic Notre-Dame de Paris, this combination of [Jones'] attitudes encourages a certain paranoia, a sense that the liberal overclass is constantly gaslighting your religion."

Jones was no fringe preacher or "founder of a Gnostic alternative," he wrote, but an ordained Protestant minister who "regards her project as the further reformation of Christianity."

For those still disgruntled over the original 16th-century Reformation, that is bad news. But that alternative world of diverse theology encourages those who call themselves Christian by different conceptions of belonging.

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