

## Are you a Christian?

Harry Strachan, Oct 20, 2018

A good friend, who long ago left his childhood Evangelical faith, finds me perplexing. He knows I am not a practicing member of any Christian Church and when asked I claim to be an agnostic. However, he also knows I am fascinated by theology, particularly intrigued by the Process Theology stemming from Alfred North Whitehead's metaphysics. He knows I trust modern scientific theories like Evolution, Einstein's theory of relativity, Quantum Mechanics.

But he knows I have my own morning spiritual practice. Generally I start the day with a short reading from some religious tradition. I attempt to meditate, listen in silence. Often pray for wisdom for others as I think about the coming day.

In our conversations of politics or values or how best to live life, I make liberal use of ideas, phrases and words from our shared Judea-Christian background. "We are all members of one body." "All things work together for good." "The importance of faith, hope, and love, but most importantly, love."

Perplexed the other day, he wrote, "I'm beginning to suspect you are a man of faith. Are you becoming a Christian?"

Good question and worth a serious answer. The answer though has several layers.

First answer. There is no question I was bred and born in a deeply Christian (evangelical) womb. Both my maternal and paternal lineage contain many preachers and Christian educators. I was raised in a missionary family in which all aspects of life and behavior were soaked in biblical language. At an early age I was "born again" and voluntarily attended a hot-house Christian high school and College, to prepare for a career similar to my parents and grandparents.

Even after "leaving the fold", as my career in academia and business evolved, at first unconsciously, and more recently consciously, I tried to live the values I learned in that Christian hot-house and continue the legacy of service I inherited. So ... whatever I say, I am a product of Christianity.

Second answer. Is my theology similar to the historic Catholic Church and its Protestant offspring? No, unless interpreted in a way the traditional Church does not accept. If asked which dogma comes closest to reflecting reality, that of a Christian who believes literally in the Apostolic creed which begins "I believe in one God who created...", or the opposite assertion of atheism, I refuse both options. Instead I claim to be agnostic.

My experience of the world leads me to believe there is a reality we label God “in whom we live and move and have our being.” He/She/It I suspect is both immanent in and transcendent of our four dimensional reality, beyond anything we can imagine, a mystery containing many paradoxes.

That Jesus worshipped this God I don't doubt. That Jesus was both a wise teacher and role model and in that sense a son of God I also accept. That he was/is a member of the Trinity in a unique way not available to anyone else and furthermore the only way to acceptance by God, I doubt. So, if I allow the historic Catholic Church and its Protestant offspring to define what it means to be a Christian, then I am not a Christian.

Third answer. You are right -- I have become a man of faith. I have committed to live, even if I cannot know for sure, AS IF there is a good God who created and sustains reality and is in some way giving it direction and meaning. I have chosen to act AS IF the values and practices taught by my inherited faith (truthfulness, generosity, gratitude, faith, hope and love) make for a better life. Underneath the apparent dualism I experience in the world, is, I believe, a Unity. My evolutionary useful experience of dualism (good and bad, suffering vs health, etc), may be an illusion. I choose to see a unity I call God, full of paradoxes, in everything and giving life direction and meaning. I have no certainty this is the case but that's my choice. Paradoxically living out of that perspective has enriched my life and reinforced my faith.

A recent reading from Father Rohr articulates nicely why I am agnostic in my thinking but a man of faith in practice.

### Knowing that We Don't Know Monday, October 8, 2018

*... In meditation, we move beyond doctrines and dogmas to inner experience. When we move to the level of experience, we see that this self, which is primarily a “radio receiver,” is not to be taken too seriously, for it is always changing stations and is filled with static and interference. When I am faithful to meditation, I quickly overcome the illusion that my correct thinking, or thinking more about something, can ever get me there.*

*You see, information is not the same as transformation. Even good and correct thinking is trapped inside my little mind, my particular culture, my form of education, my parental conditioning—all of which are good and all of which are bad. Great mysteries are naturally experienced and known within our small and limited contexts, so we should be much more humble about our own opinions and thoughts. How could the Infinite ever be fully or rightly received by the mere finite?*

*Alongside all our knowing must be the equal and remaining “knowing that I do not know.” Strangely enough, this unknowing is a new kind of understanding. We do have a word for it: the old word **faith**. Faith is a kind of knowing that doesn’t need to know for certain and yet doesn’t dismiss knowledge either. With faith, we don’t need to obtain or hold all knowledge because we know that we are being held inside a Much Larger Frame and Perspective. As Paul puts it, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, just as I have been fully known myself” (1 Corinthians 13:12). It is a knowing by participation with—instead of an observation of from a position of separation. It is knowing subject to subject instead of subject to object.*

*It took me years to understand this, even though this is straight from the Franciscan school of philosophy. Love must always precede knowledge. The mind alone cannot get us there (which is the great arrogance of most Western religion). Prayer in my later years has become letting myself be nakedly known, exactly as I am, in all my ordinariness and shadow, face to face, without any masks or religious makeup. Such nakedness is a falling into the unified field underneath reality, what Thomas Merton called “a hidden wholeness,” [2] where we know in a different way and from a different source. This is the contemplative’s unique access point: knowing by union with a thing, where we can enjoy an intuitive grasp of wholeness, a truth beyond words, beyond any need or capacity to prove anything right or wrong. This is the contemplative mind which religion should have directly taught, but which it largely lost.*