

Holy Envy

Chapter 8: Failing Christianity

Taylor tells the story of students failing the quiz on Christianity: “I think I just did the worst on my own religion.” The only student who makes an A+ is an orthodox Jew, “perhaps because he is the only one who knew he had to study for it.”

“The first time this happened, I did not see it coming. I knew the unit on Christianity would be *different* for students, since it was the religion they knew the most about. I just did not think it would be so *difficult* for them to approach their faith the same way they had approached the others: from the outside, not the inside.”

“Over the years I have met students who could recite the sixty-six names of the books of the [Protestant] Bible in order, but had no idea how or when those books were assembled into a sacred library.”

“What happened in the centuries between Jesus’s resurrection and their own profession of faith is of little relevance in the churches where most of them grew up. They were raised to take their places in line directly behind the disciples, picking up the proclamation of the gospel where those simple fishermen left off.”

The importance of history and its consequences: “Christians are as divided from one another as we are from people of different faiths.”

“Unless I want to separate myself from everyone who does not see things the way I do—which my faith urges me *not* to do—then I have to admit that there are mutually exclusive views of what it means to be a Christian and that God alone is smart enough to decide which is best. This frees me to be with Christians who are not like me as well as those who are.”

The only sensible answer to the many questions concerning what Christians believe about various questions begins with another question: Which Christians? “There are a lot of waves in the Christian ocean. When you have met one Christian, you have met exactly one.”

Gandhi on evangelism to a missionary to India: “Do they spread the perfume of their lives? That is to me the sole criterion. All I want them to do is to live Christian lives, not to annotate them.”

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.” What does this mean? “He was sitting around the Last Supper table when he said it, and I am pretty sure the subject was not interfaith relations.” The subject was his imminent arrest and almost certain death and the real possibility that his disciples would be next since they had chosen to follow him. “To my ear at least, he is reassuring them that they have made the right choice.”

“Even if this interpretation does not move you, perhaps we can agree that Jesus’s saying puts him in charge of deciding who is on his way and who is not. If there is no other way to God, there is no other gatekeeper. Jesus alone is the arbiter of salvation in his name.”

“I understand the anxiety of mainline Christians who are watching congregations age and sometimes close, especially since I am one of them. It is hard to watch the wells from which you drew living water dry up.” In the face of this, it is natural to look for something to blame: the “world,” secular culture, false gospels, etc.

“At the same time they obscure the last truth any of us wants to confront, which is that our mainline Christian lives are not particularly compelling these days. There is nothing about us that makes people want to know where we are getting our water. Our rose has lost its fragrance.”

“The students in my class may be failing Christianity, but Christianity is failing them too. If the Spirit is doing a new thing, I wish it would hurry up.”

Questions for Discussion

Have you ever looked at your faith from the outside, as Taylor did, through the eyes of historians and religion scholars? What has that lens revealed to you?

What do you think of Taylor’s idea that Jesus alone is the arbiter of salvation in his name” and that his saying about being the way, the truth, and the life “puts him in charge of deciding who is on his way or not” (p. 153)? Is that comforting or discomfoting, and why?

At the end of the chapter, Taylor tells the story of how she refrained from taking Communion one time because it was painful to her Jewish companion (pp. 157–59). She asks, “Am I really meant to choose between [Jesus] and my neighbors of other faiths?” What do you think of her decision in that instance? What does it mean to you to love your neighbors of other faiths?