

From a column by Nicholas Kristof in the New York Times December 23rd 2016

What does it mean to be a Christian in the 21st century? Can one be a Christian and yet doubt the virgin birth or the Resurrection? I put these questions to the Rev. [Timothy Keller](#), an evangelical Christian pastor and best-selling author who is among the most prominent evangelical thinkers today. Our conversation has been edited for space and clarity.

KRISTOF *Tim, I deeply admire Jesus and his message, but am also skeptical of themes that have been integral to Christianity — the virgin birth, the Resurrection, the miracles and so on. Since this is the Christmas season, let's start with the virgin birth. Is that an essential belief, or can I mix and match?*

KELLER If something is truly integral to a body of thought, you can't remove it without destabilizing the whole thing. A religion can't be whatever we desire it to be. If I'm a member of the board of Greenpeace and I come out and say climate change is a hoax, they will ask me to resign. I could call them narrow-minded, but they would rightly say that there have to be some boundaries for dissent or you couldn't have a cohesive, integrated organization. And they'd be right. It's the same with any religious faith.

But the earliest accounts of Jesus' life, like the Gospel of Mark and Paul's letter to the Galatians, don't even mention the virgin birth. And the reference in Luke to the virgin birth was written in a different kind of Greek and was probably added later. So isn't there room for skepticism?



Nicholas Kristof

Human rights, women's rights, health, global affairs.

If it were simply a legend that could be dismissed, it would damage the fabric of the Christian message. Luc Ferry, looking at the Gospel of John's account of Jesus' birth into the world, said this taught that the power behind the whole universe was not just an impersonal cosmic principle but a real person who could be known and loved. That scandalized Greek and Roman philosophers but was revolutionary in the history of human thought. It led to a new emphasis on the importance of the individual person and on love as the supreme virtue, because Jesus was not just a great human being, but the pre-existing Creator God, miraculously come to earth as a human being.

And the Resurrection? Must it really be taken literally?

Jesus' teaching was not the main point of his mission. He came to save people through his death for sin and his resurrection. So his important ethical teaching only makes sense when you don't separate it from these historic doctrines. If the Resurrection is a genuine reality, it explains why Jesus can say that the poor and the meek will "inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). St. Paul said without a real resurrection, Christianity is useless (1 Corinthians 15:19).

But let me push back. As you know better than I, the Scriptures themselves indicate that the Resurrection wasn't so clear cut. Mary Magdalene didn't initially recognize the risen Jesus, nor did some disciples, and the gospels are fuzzy about Jesus' literal presence — especially Mark, the first gospel to be written. So if you take these passages as meaning that Jesus literally rose from the dead, why the fuzziness?

I wouldn't characterize the New Testament descriptions of the risen Jesus as fuzzy. They are very concrete in their details. Yes, Mary doesn't recognize Jesus at first, but then she does. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24) also don't recognize Jesus at first. Their experience was analogous to meeting someone you

last saw as a child 20 years ago. Many historians have argued that this has the ring of eyewitness authenticity. If you were making up a story about the Resurrection, would you have imagined that Jesus was altered enough to not be identified immediately but not so much that he couldn't be recognized after a few moments? As for Mark's gospel, yes, it ends very abruptly without getting to the Resurrection, but most scholars believe that the last part of the book or scroll was lost to us.

Skeptics should consider another surprising aspect of these accounts. Mary Magdalene is named as the first eyewitness of the risen Christ, and other women are mentioned as the earliest eyewitnesses in the other gospels, too. This was a time in which the testimony of women was not admissible evidence in courts because of their low social status. The early pagan critics of Christianity latched on to this and dismissed the Resurrection as the word of "hysterical females." If the gospel writers were inventing these narratives, they would never have put women in them. So they didn't invent them.

The Christian Church is pretty much inexplicable if we don't believe in a physical resurrection. N.T. Wright has argued in "The Resurrection of the Son of God" that it is difficult to come up with any historically plausible alternate explanation for the birth of the Christian movement. It is hard to account for thousands of Jews virtually overnight worshiping a human being as divine when everything about their religion and culture conditioned them to believe that was not only impossible, but deeply heretical. The best explanation for the change was that many hundreds of them had actually seen Jesus with their own eyes.

So where does that leave people like me? Am I a Christian? A Jesus follower? A secular Christian? Can I be a Christian while doubting the Resurrection?

I wouldn't draw any conclusion about an individual without talking to him or her at length. But, in general, if you don't accept the Resurrection or other foundational beliefs as defined by the Apostles' Creed, I'd say you are on the outside of the boundary.

Tim, people sometimes say that the answer is faith. But, as a journalist, I've found skepticism useful. If I hear something that sounds superstitious, I want eyewitnesses and evidence. That's the attitude we take toward Islam and Hinduism and Taoism, so why suspend skepticism in our own faith tradition?

I agree. We should require evidence and good reasoning, and we should not write off other religions as 'superstitious' and then fail to question our more familiar Jewish or Christian faith tradition.

But I don't want to contrast faith with skepticism so sharply that they are seen to be opposites. They aren't. I think we all base our lives on both reason and faith. For example, my faith is to some degree based on reasoning that the existence of God makes the most sense of what we see in nature, history and experience. Thomas Nagel recently wrote that the thoroughly materialistic view of nature can't account for human consciousness, cognition and moral values. That's part of the reasoning behind my faith. So my faith is based on logic and argument.

In the end, however, no one can demonstrably prove the primary things human beings base their lives on, whether we are talking about the existence of God or the importance of human rights and equality. Nietzsche argued that the humanistic values of most secular people, such as the importance of the individual, human rights and responsibility for the poor, have no place in a completely materialistic universe. He even accused people holding humanistic values as being "covert Christians" because it required a leap of faith to hold to them. We must all live by faith.

I'll grudgingly concede your point: My belief in human rights and morality may be more about faith than logic. But is it really analogous to believe in things that seem consistent with science and modernity, like human rights, and those that seem inconsistent, like a virgin birth or resurrection?

I don't see why faith should be seen as inconsistent with science. There is nothing illogical about miracles if a Creator God exists. If a God exists who is big enough to create the universe in all its complexity and vastness, why should a mere miracle be such a mental stretch? To prove that miracles could not happen, you would have to know beyond a doubt that God does not exist. But that is not something anyone can prove.

Science must always assume that an effect has a repeatable, natural cause. That is its methodology. Imagine, then, for the sake of argument that a miracle actually occurred. Science would have no way to confirm a nonrepeatable, supernatural cause. Alvin Plantinga argued that to say that there *must* be a scientific cause for any apparently miraculous phenomenon is like insisting that your lost keys must be under the streetlight because that's the only place you can see.

Can I ask: Do you ever have doubts? Do most people of faith struggle at times over these kinds of questions?

Yes and yes. In the Bible, the Book of Jude (Chapter 1, verse 22) tells Christians to "be merciful to those who doubt." We should not encourage people to simply stifle all doubts. Doubts force us to think things out and re-examine our reasons, and that can, in the end, lead to stronger faith.

I'd also encourage doubters of religious teachings to doubt the faith assumptions that often drive their skepticism. While Christians should be open to questioning their faith assumptions, I would hope that secular skeptics would also question their own. Neither statement — "There is no supernatural reality beyond this world" and "There is a transcendent reality beyond this material world" — can be proven empirically, nor is either self-evident to most people. So they both entail faith. Secular people should be as open to questions and doubts about their positions as religious people.

What I admire most about Christianity is the amazing good work it inspires people to do around the world. But I'm troubled by the evangelical notion that people go to heaven only if they have a direct relationship with Jesus. Doesn't that imply that billions of people — Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus — are consigned to hell because they grew up in non-Christian families around the world? That Gandhi is in hell?

The Bible makes categorical statements that you can't be saved except through faith in Jesus (John 14:6; Acts 4:11-12). I'm very sympathetic to your concerns, however, because this seems so exclusive and unfair. There are many views of this issue, so my thoughts on this cannot be considered the Christian response. But here they are:

You imply that really good people (e.g., Gandhi) should also be saved, not just Christians. The problem is that Christians do not believe anyone can be saved by being good. If you don't come to God through faith in what Christ has done, you would be approaching on the basis of your own goodness. This would, ironically, actually be *more* exclusive and unfair, since so often those that we tend to think of as "bad" — the abusers, the haters, the feckless and selfish — have themselves often had abusive and brutal backgrounds.

Christians believe that it is those who admit their weakness and need for a savior who get salvation. If access to God is through the grace of Jesus, then anyone can receive eternal life instantly. This is why "born again" Christianity will always give hope and spread among the "wretched of the earth."

I can imagine someone saying, "Well, why can't God just accept everyone — universal salvation?" Then you create a different problem with fairness. It means God wouldn't really care about injustice and evil.

There is still the question of fairness regarding people who have grown up away from any real exposure to Christianity. The Bible is clear about two things — that salvation must be through grace and faith in Christ, and that God is always fair and just in

all his dealings. What it doesn't directly tell us is exactly how both of those things can be true together. I don't think it is insurmountable. Just because I can't see a way doesn't prove there cannot be any such way. If we have a God big enough to deserve being called God, then we have a God big enough to reconcile both justice and love.

Tim, thanks for a great conversation. And, whatever my doubts, this I believe in: Merry Christmas!