

SundayReview | OP-ED COLUMNIST

Cardinal Tobin, Am I a Christian?

Nicholas Kristof DEC. 22, 2017

What is Christmas about, anyway? Can I be a Christian if I doubt the virgin birth? Can a woman become a cardinal? What would upset Jesus today? I put these blunt questions and more to Cardinal Joseph Tobin of Newark, who was appointed by Pope Francis and is in his mold. Here's our conversation, edited for space and clarity.

KRISTOF *Merry Christmas! Let me start with respectful skepticism. I revere Jesus' teachings, but I have trouble with the miracles — including, since this is Christmas, the virgin birth. In Jesus' time people believed that Athena was born from Zeus' head, so it seemed natural to accept a great man walking on water or multiplying loaves and fishes; in 2017, not so much. Can't we take the Sermon on the Mount but leave the supernatural?*

CARDINAL TOBIN People are, I guess, free to take whatever they want. Just like there's wisdom in non-Christian religions that Christians appropriate.

The most mind-boggling miracle is the incarnation. We believe that the Creator of the Universe, the one who existed before time and before anything else, became one of us. If you accept that, then there are a lot of other things that don't seem to be quite as unbelievable.

It's not a magic show. All of the miracles were not isolated or simply altruistic events. They were actually pointing toward who God is, and who this carpenter from Nazareth really was.

One area where the Catholic Church seems to me antiquated is gender. If Jesus trusted women like Mary Magdalene, if Phoebe could be a leader of the early church, then why can't women be priests or cardinals today?

Those are two different questions. Regarding priests, it really is a stumbling block for people, and especially in this country and in this culture, as all areas of life are opening up to women that this particular ministry in the Catholic Church is not. So I understand the consternation. I have eight sisters. I know for some women this sort of stumbling block takes them away from the church.

As for cardinals, most are bishops but not all of them. As recently as the 19th century there were lay people who were cardinals.

So will we see women cardinals soon?

Maybe my theology isn't sophisticated enough, but I don't believe that there's a compelling theological reason why the pope couldn't name a woman cardinal.

Pope Francis has promised to find a more incisive role for women in the church. There are isolated incidents of women being appointed to fairly influential posts in the Roman Curia. I think it's got to be more than that.

I have huge admiration for Catholic nuns, priests and laity working on the front lines all over the world to fight poverty, disease, injustice. Those people are doing exactly what Jesus talked about. But, so often, religious leaders, including those in the Vatican, seem less focused on the needy and more on issues that Jesus never breathed a word about, like gays, or abortion, or family planning.

It's fair to say Jesus did not make pronouncements on those three hot-button issues. I think, though, that he gave us an ethos and a moral direction, so we don't have to sit down and say, "Jesus, what do we do?" Catholic tradition didn't fall out of the air and decide something capricious. It's based on all sorts of lived experience of people trying to follow Jesus closely.

Can I ask about prayer? I accept that prayer has spiritual, healing value, but why is it that God answers prayers only in ambiguous situations, such as curing cancer, but never to, say, regrow a leg?

It's interesting you mention that, Nicholas. My dad grew up strong and big, played football for Boston College, went into the service and lost his leg in World War II.

One night he was looking at his prosthesis. He said: "I was thinking I've had that thing half my life now. But if I didn't have that, I wouldn't have your mother, and I wouldn't have you." So he discovered something in that tragedy. Faith got him through it.

Sometimes I think when I don't receive an answer to what I'm praying for, maybe what I'm asking for actually is something that could be harmful for me. I do believe God hears all prayers, and I believe God answers in some way.

In previous Q. & A.'s, I asked Rev. Tim Keller and President Jimmy Carter whether a skeptic like myself, who admires Jesus' moral teachings but doubts the virgin birth and any physical resurrection, counts as a Christian. Basically, Keller said "no," and Carter "yes," so you're the tiebreaker. Am I a Christian?

I would think that if you haven't completely closed the door on the possibility that God has more to say to you, then I think you're in the tent.

Let's turn the tables. Anything you want to ask me?

Can I ask a favor? I'm really worried about this country for a lot of reasons, but I'm particularly concerned about refugees and immigrants. I really think this present administration is moving clearly toward a mass deportation. My people are already terrorized. I am so afraid that unless we can find a way of changing hearts, they're going to go ahead with it.

So is that God's work here on earth? Is that what Jesus would be criticizing today?

I never hear Jesus going out of his way to point an accusing finger at people who are oppressing the poor. What he does criticize in very stark terms is the ones who don't see them, who don't see them as they are. I think that's what happens. We're developing a national cataract.

Thanks! And for all my skepticism, this I believe: Merry Christmas!

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