

Opinion

The president of Union Theological Seminary also discusses crucifixion, hell and a new reformation.



By Nicholas Kristof
Opinion Columnist

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This is the latest in my occasional series of conversations about Christianity. Here's my interview, edited for space, with Serene Jones, a Protestant minister, president of Union Theological Seminary and author of a new memoir, "Call It Grace."

KRISTOF *Happy Easter, Reverend Jones! To start, do you think of Easter as a literal flesh-and-blood resurrection? I have problems with that.*

JONES When you look in the Gospels, the stories are all over the place. There's no resurrection story in Mark, just an empty tomb. Those who claim to know whether or not it happened are kidding themselves. But that empty tomb symbolizes that the ultimate love in our lives cannot be crucified and killed.

For me it's impossible to tell the story of Easter without also telling the story of the cross. The crucifixion is a first-century lynching. It couldn't be more pertinent to our world today.

What about other miracles of the New Testament? Say, the virgin birth?

I find the virgin birth a bizarre claim. It has nothing to do with Jesus' message. The virgin birth only becomes important if you have a theology in which sexuality is considered sinful. It also promotes this notion that the pure, untouched female body is the best body, and that idea has led to centuries of oppressing women.

Prayer is efficacious in the sense of making us feel better, but do you believe it is efficacious in curing cancer?

I don't believe in a God who, because of prayer, would decide to cure your mother's cancer but not cure the mother of your nonpraying neighbor. We can't manipulate God like that.

What happens when we die?

I don't know! There may be something, there may be nothing. My faith is not tied to some divine promise about the afterlife. People who behave well in this life only to achieve an afterlife, that's a faith driven by a selfish motive: "I'm going to be good so God would reward me with a stick of candy called heaven?" For me, living a life of love is driven by the simple fact that love is true. And I'm absolutely certain that when we die, there is not a group of designated bad people sent to burn in hell. That does not exist. But hell has a symbolic reality: When we reject love, we create hell, and hell is what we see around us in this world today in so many forms.

I've asked this of other interviewees in this religion series: For someone like myself who is drawn to Jesus' teaching but doesn't believe in the virgin birth or the physical resurrection, what am I? Am I a Christian?

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

I often feel like we are in the middle of another reformation in a 500-year cycle. John Calvin and Martin Luther had no idea they were in the middle of a reformation, but they knew that church structures were breaking down, new forms of communication were emerging, new scientific discoveries were being made, new kinds of authorities and states and economic systems arising — all like this moment in time. This creates a spiritual crisis and a spiritual flexibility.

Christianity is at something of a turning point, but I think that this questioning and this reaching is even bigger than Christianity. It reaches into many religious traditions. This wrestling with climate change, and wrestling with the levels of violence in our world, wrestling with authoritarianism and the intractable character of gender oppression — it's forcing communities within all religions to say, "Something is horribly wrong here." It's a spiritual crisis. Many nonreligious people feel it, too. We need a new way entirely to think about what it means to be a human being and what the purpose of our lives is. For me, this moment feels apocalyptic, as if something new is struggling to be born.

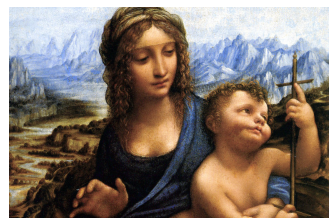
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Nicholas Kristof has been a columnist for The Times since 2001. He has won two Pulitzer Prizes, for his coverage of China and of the genocide in Darfur. You can sign up for his free, twice-weekly email newsletter and follow him on Instagram. [@NickKristof](#) • [Facebook](#)

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