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# Faith Matters: Reflections on the Christian Life

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# Faith Matters: Reflections on the Christian Life

**Description**

In a day in which Christians too often reduce faith to mere sentimentality and atheists decry it as superstitious nonsense, Fr. Kerry Walters offers a series of reflections intended to show that, indeed, faith matters. Drawn from his popular weekly newspaper column “Faith Matters,” these short meditations explore Christian faith from the perspectives of doctrine, spirituality, ethics, politics, art and science, the saints, and the holy seasons that mark the Christian year and set the rhythm of Christian living.

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# Faith Matters

# Faith Matters

*Reflections on the Christian Life*

KERRY WALTERS



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FAITH MATTERS  
Reflections on the Christian Life

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For Kim and Jonah

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## Introduction

Does faith really matter? I think so. I hope so.

For several years now I've written a weekly newspaper column called "Faith Matters." The column's name, and the title of this collection of a few that my newspaper readers most liked, is a pretty obvious double entendre that gestures at both the contents of faith and its importance.

The two things I most want to avoid in offering these short reflections are syrupy, feel-good piety and preachy holier-than-thou judgmentalism. These days, there's way too much of that masquerading as Christianity. Instead, my aim is to encourage readers, both those who're already professed Christians and those indifferent or even hostile to Christianity, to go a bit more deeply into the nature and message of faith. As Saint Paul urged (1 Cor 14:20), all of us, believers and nonbelievers alike, should think about faith like adults, not children.

That's because the faith which we Christians profess and its cultured despisers reject is as smart and insightful as it is compassionate and kind. Too frequently, Christians reduce faith to feeling or emotion, and its critics to bigoted, willful ignorance. But both of these are caricatures. At its heart, faith is a kind of "big-picture" knowledge or worldview grounded in a particular relationship with God. This worldview has birthed some of the most stunningly brilliant works of art, philosophy, theology, and science—we too often forget this fourth area of Christian endeavor, by the way—in human history. Although the faith can be expressed in a couple of simple creeds inherited from the apostles and the Council of Nicaea, it's anything but simplistic.

"Faith," of course, is a multivalent word. Nothing is foreign to it. In these short reflections, I've paid due diligence to its richness by meditating on its relationship to the sciences and its need to dialogue with atheism; its ability to shed light upon our world and the Creator who uttered it (and us!)

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FAITH MATTERS

into existence; the beauty that inspires faith and the goodness that flows from it; the social and cultural responsibilities which faith obliges us to take on; the ways in which we express faith in our everyday spiritualities; the saints whose examples of faith strengthen our own; and the seasons within the Christian calendar that invite us to explore different facets of faith.

The reflections gathered here have been grouped into eight categories that express faith's multivalence and also provide readers with a kind of topical roadmap. But there's no correct way to go about diving into them, and I'm not at all convinced that reading a book like this consecutively from start to finish is the best way to go. So feel free to let the titles on the contents page take you where they will.

And regardless of where you begin reading, remember: faith *does* matter.

Kerry Walters

Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi, 2018

## Philosopher Jesus

**A**s *praefectus urbi*, chief administrator of the imperial city of Rome, Junius Bassus was an important man in his day. But he would be entirely forgotten—such is the ephemerality of fame—were it not for his death.

Bassus died in AD 359 at the youngish age, even for fourth-century Rome, of forty-two. Befitting his high office, he was entombed in an elaborately sculpted sarcophagus. We know that he was a Christian because the front of his sarcophagus is decorated with ten relief panels depicting scenes from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

Bassus's tomb is one of the earliest extant pieces of Christian relief sculpture. It's not remarkable as an *objet d'art*; the carved figures' heads are too big for their rather squat, gravity-burdened bodies. The real value of the sarcophagus is what it tells us about how fourth-century Romans looked at Jesus.

By the time of Bassus's death, Christianity was only just being integrated into the Roman Empire. Constantine the Great had ended the persecution of Christians a mere generation earlier, and mid-fourth-century Christian Romans were still trying to wrap their minds around the notion of a Hebraic God-man. It was inevitable that their interpretation of Christianity took on elements from existing paganism, and this hybridization is obvious in the centerpiece relief of Bassus's sarcophagus.

In it, Jesus is seated, with the apostles Peter and Paul standing on either side of him. Jesus's feet rest on a mythological figure of indeterminate identity, but is probably Aeolus, god of the winds. There's nothing out of the ordinary thus far. Peter and Paul are the two chief apostles of the new religion, and Jesus's trampling of Aeolus probably synthesizes his victory over the old gods.

PART I: THIS CHRISTIAN THING

But a couple of other details startle our twenty-first-century Christian sensibilities. The first is that Jesus is depicted as a beardless youth. The second is that he holds a scroll in his left hand. (His right hand is missing.) It's tempting to imagine the scroll as a symbol of the gospel. But that would be a mistake, because Jesus is clothed in the easily recognizable toga of a classical philosopher. And just to make sure the point isn't missed, the sculptor, in another panel, places the traditional staff of an itinerant philosopher in Jesus's hand.

The Jesus depicted on Bassus's sarcophagus is, despite his youth, a sage, a lover of wisdom. He's a philosopher. This is surprising enough. But just as striking is the absence on the sarcophagus of any overt statement of Jesus's divinity. The only indication is a curiously reticent one: the symbolic trampling of Aeolus.

It's as if Bassus's tomb loudly proclaims that Jesus is a great moral teacher, the latest in a distinguished line of Hellenistic philosophers, but then, in a comparatively muted aside, adds the possibility that he might also be God.<sup>1</sup>

In his 2008 encyclical *Spe Salvi*, Benedict XVI suggested that Jesus is depicted as a philosopher because the ancient meaning of the word denoted a person who teaches how to be "authentically human."<sup>2</sup> As the new Adam and new Eve, Jesus demonstrates in word and deed what God means humans to be. It's a fresh revelation, symbolized on the sarcophagus by Jesus's youth, of the ancient wisdom lost through the fall of our primordial parents, Eve and Adam.

Perhaps. But I think another explanation is that the Christ-event mystified fourth-century Romans, and that just as Christian theology at the time used existing Greek and Roman philosophical categories to make sense of God, so popular piety somewhat confusedly melded Jesus and itinerant sages.

The truth is that every generation and every culture is mystified by the Christ—a point conceded in John's Gospel when he writes that there aren't enough books in the world to capture the meaning of Jesus—and so each inevitably tries to make some sense of him by falling back on familiarly conventional categories. You and I may find Bassus's philosopher Jesus

1. Interested readers may view an image of Bassus's tomb here: Riley Winters, "The Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus: How a Coffin Defeated the Gods," <https://www.ancient-origins.net/artifacts-other-artifacts/sarcophagus-junius-bassus-how-coffin-defeated-gods-008823>.

2. Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008), 18.

## PHILOSOPHER JESUS

spiritually anemic. But two millennia from now, our own way of looking at Jesus may seem equally odd to our descendants.

Skeptics might say that this ever-evolving interpretation of Jesus points to the make-it-up-as-you-go nature of Christianity. But I think that the many masks Jesus has worn throughout the centuries simply acknowledges that the ever-present God is also ever-elusive. To we who see only darkly, how could it be otherwise?

## In Defense of Religion

“I’m spiritual, not religious.”

We hear this everywhere these days, particularly from millennials. In fact, 47 percent of the one-fifth of adults in this country who are religiously unaffiliated say it.<sup>1</sup>

Spiritual-not-religiousers typically aren’t very specific when it comes to explaining what they mean by “spiritual.” They most often appeal to a rather vague belief in a transcendent reality of some sort or a diffuse sense of awe at the majesty of the cosmos.

They’re much clearer about what they mean by “religious.” For them, the word refers to “institutionalized” faith traditions which, they contend, demand unwavering acceptance of certain tenets, prescribe narrow codes of conduct, and are larded with ritualistic rigmarole. They believe that religion as practiced in churches, temples, and mosques enchains the mind with formulaic doctrine, burdens life with joylessly puritanical norms, and belabors the spirit with incomprehensible liturgy.

I get and even partly sympathize with the point spiritual-not-religiousers wish to make. No honest religionist can deny that religious institutions are capable of spiritual atrophy, arrogant intolerance, arcane ritualism, and heartbreaking scandal. Institutions, religious or otherwise, are human artifacts, and thus always susceptible to corruption.

Still, despite the fact that religion can go bad, I’m unwilling to throw it over for the sake of an amorphous spirituality. Embedded within religion at its best is a depth and richness that’s folded into the word’s very meaning.

The English word “religion” is derived from the Latin *religio*, which for the ancient Romans denoted ritualistic obligations to God. But etymologists

1. Pew Research Center, “More Americans Now Say They’re Spiritual but Not Religious,” <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>, Table 5.

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## IN DEFENSE OF RELIGION

are split over *religio's* roots, debating whether it derives from *relegere* or *religare*.

The pagan philosopher Cicero favored *relegere*, which means to ponder, examine, or peruse. The Christian theologian Augustine, on the other hand, plunked down for *religare*: to bind, fasten, or tie together.

Although a lot of ink has been spilt since Cicero's and Augustine's day on this etymological debate, it seems to me that religion in its most authentic form is a marriage of both *relegere* and *religare*. Recognizing this might make spiritual-not-religiousers a bit less dismissive of religion, and religionists a bit more appreciative of the inner meaning of their traditions.

The *relegere* dimension of authentic religion invites us to ponder the wonderment that fills us when we contemplate the starry heavens above and the moral law within. Why is there something rather than nothing? Why am I here? What kind of person ought I to be? These are the core musings that fuel religion. They impel us to dare to dive below life's shallows, plumb its depths, and draw ever nearer to the Divine Mystery.

Religious creeds, which spiritual-not-religiousers dismiss as inflexible dogmas, are efforts to express our human ponderings about the universe and the God who created it. They don't pretend to be exhaustive. How could words ever capture the ultimately unknowable essence of God? They are, instead, guideposts.

Creedal ponderings are essential aspects of authentic religion, but they're not sufficient. The human soul isn't just curious about God and God's work. It also yearns for total, unqualified connection with the divine Source that pulsates at reality's core. As Augustine said, our hearts are achingly restless until we rest in the God of love. Otherwise, we're incomplete.

This is where the *religare* dimension of religion comes in. Authentic religion facilitates the loving connection with God that we crave. Although distrusted by spiritual-not-religiousers, religious rituals tie us to God by reminding us in concrete, lived ways of God's abiding presence in our lives. They help us bind ourselves ever more closely to the God who, in turn, gladly offers himself to us.

The *religare* dimension of religion also clues us into the all-important fact that our ultimate fulfillment requires a loving connection, not just to God, but to the entire community of believers as well.

Spirituality-not-religion is often radically individualistic. Religion never is. It keeps us mindful that we're children of a common Parent who loves us all equally. We're bound by the deepest of familial ties to one



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another and to God, a fact acknowledged whenever we worship together. Religious moral codes, which spiritual-not-religiousers see as stultifying, are efforts, subject to continuous pondering, to help us honor our connectedness by loving one another as God loves us.

So, to my spiritual-not-religiouser friends, peace be with you on your journey. I wish you Godspeed, and I'm sure our paths will occasionally cross.

But I'll stick with religion.

## Biblical Illiteracy

Time for a pop quiz. Which of the following phrases are found in the Old Testament, and which in the New?

*God helps those who help themselves.*

*Spare the rod and spoil the child.*

*Cleanliness is next to godliness.*

*God works in mysterious ways.*

*Hate the sin, love the sinner.*

This is a trick question, because even though these expressions often are given a biblical pedigree, not one of them actually appears in Scripture. If you thought otherwise, you're not alone. Despite all the Bible-thumping that goes on in this country, biblical illiteracy is widespread. The Good Book is one of those classics more often invoked than read.

Data from the Barna Group, a Christian polling firm, show that 58 percent of us claim that the Bible is the literal or inspired word of God, and a whopping 87 percent of households own at least one Bible. No surprises there.<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to actually reading all those Good Books, however, the numbers plummet. Although 37 percent of Americans report reading the Bible once a week or more,<sup>2</sup> most glance at Scripture only four times a year, typically during holidays like Easter or Christmas. Americans are so unversed in the book more than half of us claim to revere that we confuse

1. Barna Group, "State of the Bible 2017: Top Findings," <https://www.barna.com/research/state-bible-2017-top-findings/>.

2. Alec Gallup and Wendy W. Simmons, "Six in Ten Americans Read Bible at Least Occasionally," *Gallup News*, October 20, 2000, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/2416/six-ten-americans-read-bible-least-occasionally.aspx>, para. 1.

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the Hebraic King Saul with the apostle Saul/Paul, conclude that Joan of Arc is Noah's wife, believe that Sodom and Gomorrah are a married couple, and think that the Sermon on the Mount was preached by Billy Graham.

These are real examples, by the way. You can't make this stuff up.

Only 45 percent of respondents can name the four Gospels in order, an exercise you'd think would be about as minimally taxing as naming the first four presidents. America, concludes pollster George Barna, is in "a crisis of biblical illiteracy."

It gets worse. Not only do Christians not know their Bible, they're also not particularly up on what their denominations profess. According to a 2010 Pew survey, 45 percent of Catholics are unaware that their tradition holds that communion bread and wine transubstantiate into Christ's body and blood. Protestants shouldn't feel smarter, however, because a full 53 percent of them have no idea who Martin Luther was. Nearly half of all Christians admit to never reading religious books of any kind.

The worst offenders turn out to be white mainline Protestants and Catholics. When quizzed about Christianity and world religions, they scored lower than Mormons, evangelical white Protestants, black Protestants, and Jews. And get this: they were also bested by atheists and agnostics.

What accounts for this astounding illiteracy? A significant factor has got to be the proliferation of nominal Christians, people who inherit a religious affiliation but have no real commitment to it and even less curiosity about it. It's not that they're hostile to Christianity. They're just indifferent. Inertia may keep some of them in the pews, but they're yawningly bored by the white-bread answers rotely trotted out to questions they don't even care enough to ask. What possible incentive could they have for reading the Bible or learning more about the faith?

The truth—disturbing to some, welcomed by others—is that the same indifference to Christianity that's already overtaken Europe is seeping into America. The United States still comes across as an intensely religious nation, largely because Protestant evangelicals, whose numbers are slipping, are so noisy. But let's be honest: much of what passes for Christianity in this country is more cultural artifact than living commitment.

The proper response to biblical illiteracy isn't a panicky handing out of yet more Bibles on street corners, but doing something about the indifference that breeds it. Mainline churches are being called to do some serious soul-searching about how to proclaim and live the gospel authentically in an increasingly post-Christian America. For believers, the word of God is

## BIBLICAL ILLITERACY

eternal. But the perennial challenge for faith communities is to communicate that word in ways that speak to each new generation. That we're becoming a nation of religious illiterates testifies to the unhappy fact that the ball has been dropped. If American Christianity hopes to make it through the wintry season it's entering, it has to reignite fire in the belly, hope in the heart, and curiosity in the mind.

And that just might spell the end of the church as we know it. To paraphrase a passage that really is in Scripture, the kernel must die to produce fruit.

## Stiff-Necked Christians

The Hebrew prophets didn't mince words. Whenever they saw their countrymen falling into religious hypocrisy, moral indifference, and judgmental self-righteousness, they chastised them in no uncertain terms.

The most common epithets the prophets hurled at sinners were "idolaters," "betrayers," "thieves," "faithless," and "cursed." What each of these offenses had in common was a spiritual perversity that the prophets referred to as *qesheh `oreph*. The expression literally means "hard of neck," typically translated in the Bible as "stiff-necked."

*Qesheh `oreph* was originally a husbandry term referring to an ox that stubbornly resisted pulling a harrow or plow in a straight line. When applied to humans, it came to designate dismal qualities like obstinacy, rebelliousness, hypocrisy, and overreaching pride.

To be called a "stiff-necked people" was a terrible indictment, implying as it did that the sacred covenant with Yahweh had been betrayed by a society too intent on pursuing its own interests to bother with God.

It's a funny thing. Whenever we Christians read the prophets and apply their denunciations to our own day, our tendency is nearly always to assume that they're directed at others and never ourselves. *We're* good, decent people. It's *them*, those wicked *others*, who the prophets are calling out. They're the stiff-necked ones.

But what we American Christians need to come to terms with is that the prophets are speaking directly to us. Their accusing fingers point straight at our sins, and we richly deserve their harshest rebukes. For we're in danger of becoming a stiff-necked people, quick to judge and condemn others, and equally quick to preen ourselves on what we consider to be our rectitude.

Why do I say this? Just consider our toxic abuses of the faith in recent years. Not every American Christian is guilty of them, of course. I

## STIFF-NECKED CHRISTIANS

personally know women and men whose personal saintliness humbles and inspires me. But too frequently, the rancor that increasingly infects our culture trickles down to our churches. Frequently, it does so through our religious leaders, especially those who lust after the golden ring of celebrityhood.

We American Christians are a stiff-necked people whenever:

- we use the faith as a bludgeon to hector, bully, and condemn gays, foreigners, Muslims, women, liberals, conservatives, persons of color, the poor, the rich, fellow Christians who belong to denominations other than our own, and anyone else we don't like;
- we focus obsessively on sin and damnation, showing little compassion for human weaknesses (except, of course, our own);
- we justify our vitriol by pretending it's "godly indignation";
- we defend our intractability by calling it "faith";
- we live two separate existences: a pious, platitude-mouthing one on Sunday mornings, and a cutthroat, me-centered one the rest of the week;
- we swat at moral gnats but swallow entire camels, privileging isolated and arcane biblical passages that proscribe certain kinds of private behavior while giving a thumbs-up to legal, social, and economic institutions that benefit *us* but oppress *them*;
- we sideline the spirit of love, compassion, and non-judgmentalism practiced and taught by Jesus in favor of competition, censure, and criticism;
- we look down our noses at others and, like the arrogant Pharisee in Luke's Gospel, arrogantly thank God we are not like *them*;
- we refuse to recognize that an action or kind of behavior isn't necessarily immoral simply because we personally disapprove of it or find it distasteful;
- we conflate our political positions with our religious ones, no matter how contrary to the gospel our political stands might be;
- we sputter at the least provocation that our religious freedom is being violated, all the while remaining silently indifferent to the real life-and-death persecution of Christians in other parts of the world.

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Jesus warned us about the danger of becoming whited sepulchers, respectable and apparently healthy on the outside, but suffering from the spiritual rigor mortis of *qesheh`oreph* on the inside. It's an image the prophets would have wholeheartedly endorsed. It's an image we American Christians need to take to heart so that we can begin the painful spiritual therapy of bending a stiffened neck. The recommended technique for doing so is falling to one's knees and clasping one's hands.