

On "True" Christians, etc.

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Many Christians in particular and theists in general harbor the notion that those that are true practitioners of their faith are incapable of performing particular actions. For example, many Christians maintain that true Christians do not engage in premarital or extramarital sex, smoke cigarettes, do drugs, drink alcoholic beverages, etc.

Most Muslims claim that true Muslims do not and cannot engage in terrorist threats or actions. This idea often takes a bigoted twist. For example, after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, many Muslims claimed that the attackers were not true Muslims. Some went further and proclaimed that they must have been atheists, because no one that truly believes in God could be capable of such actions.

However, this mindset is not limited to theists. Many humanists claim that true humanists cannot be sexist, racist, homophobic, etc. However, this notion that someone that truly embraces a worldview is somehow incapable of performing immoral actions is terribly flawed.

The fact that no person can live up to her highest ideals in no way disqualifies her from laying claim to her professed worldview or belief system. All of us human beings are imperfect, but that does not mean we have to reject any group of ideas that form the bedrock of our identity.

However, where religions are concerned, it is important to realize that some religious ideas are clearly immoral and, if put into practice, can only have negative influences upon the world. Examples of this simple fact are found in abundance.

For example, what biblically literate and intellectually honest person can maintain that no true Christian could ever condone slavery? On the contrary, the Bible truly condones slavery on a regular basis (Luke 12:47-48, Ephesians 6:5-6, 1 Timothy 6:14, etc.)

Moreover, the Bible condones genocide (Numbers 31:17-18), sexism and patriarchy (Genesis 3:16, Ephesians 5:22), anti-Jewish bigotry (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16) and many other crimes against humanity. Just because there are progressive Christians that try to rationalize these ideas away does not mean that those that accept these ideas are not true Christians. (Conversely, religious fundamentalists cannot accuse religious progressives of not being true Christians simply because the two sides have moral disagreements.) Both sides are sincere in their beliefs and strongly believe that they are right.

This all raises the subject of varying biblical "interpretations." Religious progressives especially claim that they have different interpretations of certain biblical ideas than do their conservative and reactionary counterparts. Of course, the religious progressives imply that their supposed interpretations must necessarily be the correct ones. However, as Canadian writer Shadia B. Drury has noted, these religious progressives are not actually reinterpreting their religious texts. Rather, they are *re-inventing* them and making them more humane and more applicable to modern times. (As Robert Green Ingersoll would say, "We have been saved by disobedience" to those negative biblical teachings.)

There are certain Christian virtues that hardly any true Christians practice. For example, how many Christians turn the other cheek when they are attacked? Certainly conservative Christians are the last to turn the other cheek, especially where foreign policy is concerned. There were no conservative Christians talking about forgiveness after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. However, they are still true Christians.

In Africa, some true Christians persecute and kill alleged witches and wizards, just as true Christians had done in Europe centuries ago. Some true Christians in Africa also persecute and kill LGBT people, as do some true Muslims in the Arab world. The sincerity of their convictions cannot be doubted, and certainly where Christians are concerned, they have true biblical support for their beliefs and actions.

In the U.S., true Christians want to merge church and state. They promote creationism or Intelligent Design as though they are legitimate scientific theories. True Christians deny the reality of climate change and promote many other kinds of pseudoscientific nonsense.

What is truly ironic is that true Christians from all walks of life accept teachings that are demonstrably *false*. For example, they believe that the universe was created in a matter of days. Moreover, they embrace beliefs that are highly unlikely to be true, such as the idea that a man literally walked on water, that a serpent spoke fluent Hebrew, that Adam and Eve existed in reality, that Moses conversed with a burning bush, that Noah's ark was real, etc. In other words, many true Christians accept ideas that are simply not true.

The only time it seems appropriate to speak of false theists is when discussing those theists that profess to have beliefs they do not truly have. For example, they might profess to believe that Jonah lived in the belly of the big fish. They might even teach the story during church service or Sunday school as though it were literally true. However, they do not truly believe it themselves. Yet this kind of fake theist could still be a *good* theist, helping the poor, working for social justice, etc. Conversely, a theist that truly believes all of the dogma could be a *bad* theist.

This brings us to the following point. Rather than talking about true and false Christians, Muslims, humanists, etc. it would be better to speak of *good* and *bad* adherents. Indeed, the notion that someone that truly embraces our deeply cherished religion or worldview is incapable of certain immoral actions is false. We might know a tree by the fruit it bears, but we will not necessarily know one's religion or worldview based on their actions, good or bad.