



CWJ?madness

Christianity without JESUS?

At CWR magazine, we recognize that for many of our readers, “religion” is a toxic word loaded with ugly *-isms*. *Religion* in this sense freely doles out judgement and condemnation. Yes, others use the term *religion* to describe faith movements (Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, etc.) or valid faith practices (prayer, Scripture reading, worship, etc.). But at CWRm, when we write about *religion*, we’re addressing the yoke of slavery and whip of striving that religiosity uses to forever condemn its victims to “measure up or else!” In other words, we resist *Christless religion*.

We are committed in our pursuit of Christianity centered in Jesus. Yet sadly, in recent years, the world is recognizing a growing chasm between the “Christian” label and the Jesus-following life. Indeed, the overlap between the two is dramatically shrinking!

It has become popular to say, “I’m a Christian—but I’m not religious,” but today it feels increasingly common to hear people clarify, “I’m NOT a Christian—but I still love Jesus.” The reasons are quite obvious. Among them:

1. First and foremost, **Jesus continues to be utterly compelling**. For me, this is more pronounced when Jesus is set in contrast to *religion* and, now especially, to what *Christless*

Christianity has become. While MANY self-confessed Christians have surrendered their first allegiance to Jesus for other *-isms*, MANY *outside* Christianity—whether irreligious or from other religions—now follow Jesus without any intention of converting to Christianity. And MANY who were raised Christian are more devoted to Jesus than ever but can no longer identify in good conscience with the Christian brand.

But Jesus? YES! Let’s follow him!

2. Further, just as *Christless religion* was seduced by legalism, moralism, and retribution, now *Christianity itself has often been co-opted and permeated by another layer of -isms*. More and more, *Christianity* is seen as

Christianity by any label that displaces Jesus is either not actually Christian... or if it is, I guess I’m not a Christian.

synonymous with ideologies that are authoritarian, nationalistic, politicized, and militaristic (to name a few). It has been hijacked by culture wars ideology and drawn to power, to domination, and to exclusion.

A truly tragic element here is that Christian hatred gets equated with faithfulness—deadly vices are now seen as virtues that come to define Christianity rather than mark a departure from it. We end up having to say, “If that’s Christianity, I’m not that.” I find myself making that embarrassing caveat all the time, in almost every significant faith conversation.

All I know is, I’d like to be a Jesus-follower.

3. What is a *Jesus-follower*? How about our CWRm motto: “*All Jesus, all the time.*”

If Christianity has confused or abused you, we suggest taking a deep dive into Jesus and hearing his simple invitation, “*Follow me.*”

We can saturate ourselves in the words of Jesus, asking what “*follow me*” entails. *Jesus-followers* can start by reading his “*Sermon on the Mount*” (in Matthew 5-7). I’ve personally adopted its opening lines (“the Beatitudes”) as my daily prayer practice—I think of it as a shield of faith, protection from invasive ideologies. I ask Jesus for the grace to shape me according to those aspirations. I recommend Greg Albrecht’s *Beautiful Sayings: Beatitudes of Grace* as a wonderful introduction.

I’m still a product and participant in the Christian tradition. It’s better to have a home base for faith than inventing my own religion. I’m grateful that Christianity directed me to Jesus. But that feels more like an accident of birth and geography than ever before. What matters to me is Jesus, even if Christianity (conservative, liberal, or progressive) leaves him behind. If I had to choose (do I?), I’m with Jesus and all who seek to follow him. □

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