

“I believe, help my unbelief”

Seeking the historical Jesus at Carleton

“Do you **believe** everything your professors tell you?” I asked him. “What about that **core** Carleton value, to ‘Question Everything’?”

James (not his real name) pulled a flask of vodka out of his back jeans pocket and offered me a swig. He was a Carleton senior I randomly ended up sitting next to at Ebony, the triannual dance revue. I’d gone that night to see a group of students dance to a Christian worship song, an irony at Ebony. As we settled into Arena Theater’s upholstered red seats, hints of yeasty beer breath mingled with the body odors of a spirited audience that was primed for the event’s traditional after-party on Saturday night. James and I introduced ourselves above the cacophony.

James was incredulous that my friend Marcia and I, two of a scattered handful of older adults in the audience, would even attend the bawdy event. In this unlikely setting we somehow started talking about faith. “I grew up Presbyterian,” he said. “But I don’t ever plan to go back to church.”

“Why is that?” I asked him.

“I had a professor who told me that Christianity was just one of the many religions that emerged from the Ro-

man Empire,” he said.

It was my turn to be incredulous. “Do you believe everything your professors tell you?” I asked him. “What about that core Carleton value, to ‘Question Everything’?”

He told me that he trusted his professor, who was very smart.

I recently heard echoes of his comment about the Roman Empire in one of Philip Yancey’s award-winning books, *The Bible Jesus Read*. “[W]hat seemed very ordinary, one more dreary feat of colonial ‘justice’ in a Roman outpost,” Yancey said, “made possible the salvation of the entire world.”

From a human perspective, Jesus’s crucifixion was just one of many—agonizing for the accused but unremarkable in the greater scheme of things. But Jesus’s so-called crime was different. It wasn’t for something He had done that Jesus was punished, but for who He claimed to be. When Jesus equated himself with “I AM,” the pre-existent one (Mark 14:62), the religious leaders condemned Him to death.

“Yes, there will be doubts. There will be struggles with disbelief (‘I do believe; **help my unbelief,**’ the seeker said to Jesus in Mark 9:24.) As a committed atheist student once told me, ‘Atheists have their intellectual problems too.’”

But putting Jesus to death just compounded the problem for these same leaders: Three days later news started to circulate that His followers had seen Him alive. And those who put Jesus to death couldn’t produce a body to refute the reports. In time, the message of the risen Christ spread to every part of the Roman Empire.

It is not politically correct to say that salvation comes through Jesus (John 14:6, Acts 4:12), and not through the prophets of other religions. It’s about as offensive as stating that the Scriptures, taken in the context of history and culture and genre, are the bedrock authority for our faith and practice.

There are several options for deciding what to do with the claims of historic Christianity. First, of course, would be the response of my friend James: Reject them outright; write Jesus off as a legend or a passing fad. Second, we may reinterpret the claims to mean something different, something culturally constructed to fit our more evolved ideas. In other words, we can redefine the terms to suit our

presuppositions. For example, we can intellectually inquire whether when you mention Jesus you are referring to the Jesus of history or the Christ of faith, supposedly two very different persons.

Or we can grapple with the claims of Jesus Himself—claims so compelling that they have dragged scholars like C. S. Lewis into the faith, “kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance to escape” (his own words).

We who believe that Jesus is God in the flesh also believe that the good news of His death and resurrection transcends time and culture. God is intimately concerned with how we respond to this good news, and our response determines our eternal destiny.

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As a committed atheist student once told me, “Atheists have their intellectual problems too.” There will always be questions on the table.

That’s the table to which we invite students. We don’t have all the answers, but we’re pretty familiar with the questions, and we believe the truth will hold up under doubt and scrutiny.

Although we have lots of stories to tell from the last 10 years, we’ve tried to give a sense of the roots put down in the good soil for decades before us. We of course cannot know all of the stories that set the stage for what is happening today, but we stand in awe of all God has done on campus. *Keeping the Faith at Carleton* is but a glimpse. ♦

In addition to serving as a campus minister, Deb Hvass, like any manager of a nonprofit, wears a lot of other hats. Before serving



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