

Introduction to Christian Theology class I, Handout

A-Rod Dreher--Brown M&Ms and Religious Illiteracy

NPR issued this embarrassing correction today. I assume will be no questioning within the NPR newsroom about its lack of religious literacy and religious diversity. "An earlier version of this post incorrectly described Easter as 'the day celebrating the idea that Jesus did not die and go to hell or purgatory or anywhere at all but rather arose into heaven.'"

Chuck Todd: 'I'm a bit hokey when it comes to "Good Friday." I don't mean disrespect to the religious aspect of the day, but I love the idea of reminding folks that any day can become "good," all it takes is a little selflessness on our own part. Works EVERY time.'

If I have to explain to you why the NPR correction and Chuck Todd's tweet betray massive ignorance of very basic facts of Christianity, then shouldn't you ask yourself why you don't know these facts? Even if you're not a Christian? Christianity is the religion, or at least the religious background, of the overwhelming majority of Americans. The crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ on the Cross on Good Friday is one of the basic teachings of the religion. The name — which is used in English-speaking countries — is presumably meant to observe the paradox that the day on which God was murdered turned out to be eternal victory over death. This is why it is "Good".

Second, the teaching that Jesus arose from the dead on Easter, and ascended into heaven 40 days later, is basic Christianity. You ought to know this as a matter of elementary cultural literacy. I don't think either Chuck Todd or Vanessa Romo, the NPR writer who initially mischaracterized Easter, meant any harm or hostility. In Romo's case, presumably her mistake made it through at least one level of editing. It's pretty amazing that at a national news organization with high standards, no one thought to look this up before publishing.

Michael Brendan Dougherty explains why this is so important. It's not simply a matter of hurt feelings: 'I'd be thrilled if the problem could be solved with a great drill. Alas, the problem of illiteracy gets more serious when our complaints about a foreign policy that predictably leads to persecution become illegible, or lawmakers are unable to anticipate the effect of their laws on us, or see gain in making their opponents defend our beliefs.'

This is exactly right. For many years now, some of us Christians have been trying to talk about Christian teaching on human sexuality, and how the push for LGBT rights in some cases seriously affects our consciences. That does not mean that we have the right to prevail, but in many conversations with journalists, I have not yet found one who evinces the slightest understanding of what the traditional Christian position is. They dismiss it outright as nothing but bigotry.

If we can't count on leading journalists to understand the most basic facts about Christian practice and belief, how on earth can we trust them to report fairly and accurately about something as complicated as Christian sexual teaching? How can they trust themselves? How can they even begin to understand why we believe what we believe on all kinds of issues?

The rock band Van Halen was famous for putting a rider in their contracts requiring that a bowl of M&Ms be backstage for them, and that there be no brown M&Ms in the bowl. It sounds like typical rock star vanity, but there was actually a good reason for it. The band had this provision buried in their contract as a trick to see if the local crews assisting the band had actually read the contract. In a similar way, minor mistakes like these are the brown M&Ms of journalism about religion. They reveal a fundamental carelessness that might have more serious consequences.

The problem is not just with the media, but is even internal to Christian communities. I've said in this space on many occasions that as I travel to Christian colleges, one of the biggest complaints I hear from faculty is that young people have next to no theological knowledge. They are the products of parishes, congregations, and (especially) youth groups that have reduced the faith to mere relationality. I was once in the presence of a college student who had been raised in the church, been involved since childhood, and had been active in a parachurch youth ministry. She knew that Jesus was her best buddy, but she did not realize that he had been physically raised from the dead.

We're not talking about expecting laymen to explain the hypostatic union here. We're talking about the Resurrection.

A couple of years ago, the Charlotte Observer did an interview with the author of a book about how few Americans really understood the Bible. Look at this:

Q: In all your travels and all the different places you went looking for the Bible, was there any place where you were expecting to see the Bible where it wasn't?

A: In the mega-type churches – the churches that were really heavily loaded with the visual and the audio and the rest of the electronic stuff, the music – I was really stunned by what I saw as that alternative version of Christianity being delivered through those means. I didn't consider it biblical in the fullest sense. I thought it was highly stylized – the versions of Jesus, who Jesus was, being filtered through these videos – and, in some way, I found almost shocking in how they seemed to vary from the much fuller picture that exists in the New Testament. So I was surprised by that.

None of this is to excuse journalists their own lapses in religious literacy. As a matter of professionalism, they should get this stuff right, especially — as Michael Brendan Dougherty points out — the things they say, and don't say, in their reporting on religious believers, and the religious angle to wider stories, may have real-world consequences.

Still, it's worth pointing out that we can't expect non-believers to care about this stuff if we don't care about it ourselves. It's entirely possible that Vanessa Romo, who made the whopper of a mistake about Easter, was raised as a Christian, but so badly catechized that she didn't have the elementary facts straight.

B—CS Lewis on Theology as a Map

I quite understand why some people are put off by Theology. I remember once when I had been giving a talk to the R.A.F., an old, hard-bitten officer got up and said, "I've no use for all that stuff. But, mind you, I'm a religious man too. I know there's a God. I've felt Him: out alone in the desert at night: the tremendous mystery. And that's just why I don't believe all your neat little dogmas and formulas about Him. To anyone who's met the real thing they all seem so petty and pedantic and unreal!"

Now in a sense I quite agreed with that man. I think he had probably had a real experience of God in the desert. And when he turned from that experience to the Christian creeds, I think he really was turning from something real to something less real. In the same way, if a man has once looked at the Atlantic from the beach, and then goes and looks at a map of the Atlantic, he also will be turning from something real to something less real: turning from real waves to a bit of coloured paper. But here comes the point. The map is admittedly only coloured paper, but there are two things you have to remember about it. In the first place, it is based on what hundreds and thousands of people have found out by sailing the real Atlantic. In that way it has behind it masses of experience just as real as the one you could have from the beach; only, while yours would be a single isolated glimpse, the map fits all those different experiences together. In the second place, if you want to go anywhere, the map is absolutely necessary. As long as you are content with walks on the beach, your own glimpses are far more fun than looking at a map. But the map is going to be more use than walks on the beach if you want to get to America.

Now, Theology is like the map. Merely learning and thinking about the Christian doctrines, if you stop there, is less real and less exciting than the sort of thing my friend got in the desert. Doctrines are not God: they are only a kind of map. But that map is based on the experience of hundreds of people who really were in touch with God-experiences compared with which any thrills or pious feelings you and I are likely to get on our own are very elementary and very confused. And secondly, if you want to get any further, you must use the map. You see, what happened to that man in the desert may have been real, and was certainly exciting, but nothing comes of it. It leads nowhere. There is nothing to do about it. In fact, that is just why a vague religion—all about feeling God in nature, and so on—is so attractive. It is all thrills and no work; like watching the waves from the beach. But you will not get to Newfoundland by studying the Atlantic that way, and you will not get eternal life by simply feeling the presence of God in flowers or music. Neither will you get anywhere by looking at maps without going to sea. Nor will you be very safe if you go to sea without a map.

In other words, Theology is practical: especially now. In the old days, when there was less education and discussion, perhaps it was possible to get on with a very few simple ideas about God. But it is not so now. Everyone reads, everyone hears things discussed. Consequently, if you do not listen to Theology, that will not mean that you have no ideas about God. It will mean that you have a lot of wrong ones-bad, muddled, out-of-date ideas.