

Can you be a secular follower of Jesus Christ?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Have you heard someone say: "I don't call myself a Christian; I'm a Follower of Jesus"? For some, the "Christian" label sounds too institutional, too "religious." For those who wish to more closely identify with "walking in the footsteps" of the Nazarene, associating with a World Religion has lost its appeal. This all makes sense to me, at least in a psychological way. A person wishes to claim devotion to the person of Jesus rather than the Church. It's also a way of expressing the feeling you have a more personal relationship with Jesus. I understand this quite well.

I was thinking about a rather odd

question: Can a secular person be a "follower of Jesus"? If so, what would that mean, what would that look like? Is this too much of a stretch? Of course, one central question has to be: Why would someone who doesn't believe in a supernatural god, wish to identify with Jesus at all?

There are many questions here, but the fundamental one has to be: What does it mean to follow? If it refers to "being religious," focused on faith, prayer, Bible reading, attending church services and believing in salvation while needing to tell others the "good news" (classic Evangelical Christianity), then obviously a secular person wouldn't do those things. However, couldn't it be argued that Jesus didn't pray as much as act with compassion toward others? He didn't spend time reading the scriptures or attending services; in a sense, he embodied the "good news." Could we just say he "followed his heart."

While working as a chaplain I became friends with Lee, a Zen Buddhist Priest. Lee was one of the most gentle and wise people I've ever met. After joining our chaplaincy board of directors, Lee taught a course with me on the book, "Living Buddha, Living Christ," by Thich Nhat Hanh. Half of our classes were held in a church, the other half at the Buddhist center where Lee was living. It was a meaningful experience, with both church members and sangha members feeling inspired and affirmed. Many Christians practice Buddhist meditation without becoming Buddhist. Lee taught me the flip side of that. A Buddhist could be actively involved in ministries supported or directed by Christians. Our chaplaincy was interfaith, so this wasn't an issue at all, but it was a good lesson in the creative ways people could be "followers" of Buddha or Jesus – or both – by doing human service side by side.

This is the heart of the matter, as I see it. If "following" is primarily concerned with believing – centered on worship, devotion, ritual, theological agreement – then it's clear a non-believer cannot "follow." Yet, if it means practicing the essential instructions of the Teacher, especially in cooperation with devoted believers, then I see no reason why anyone couldn't "walk with Jesus" to do what he encouraged – living a life of loving service, seeking harmony and healing in the human community. Many "followers" wouldn't accept this possibility. I get that. There are plenty of biblical instructions, including from Jesus himself, that suggest believing is primary (although, these may be balanced by other verses). Jesus said "Give all you have to the poor and come, follow me." and "A new commandment I give, that you love one another." He also said to be

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great in the kingdom, become a servant to all. Compassionate service seems to be an important requirement for followers. Couldn't we say the foundational message was Love? If the Sermon on the Mountainside was taken as the main manual for following Jesus, why

couldn't anyone choose to become a follower?

I wonder if being a follower is actually the best thing. The word implies walking behind the Teacher, picking up whatever wisdom he/or she may drop along the way (the way to where? if this is all about following to heaven, that seems sad for any kind of follower). A good teacher doesn't ask for followers but students, pupils who will use their eyes, ears and brains, not simply to ac-

cept or absorb everything the teacher says, but also to ask questions, challenge, wonder, be skeptical. In my mind, and based on my own experience as both a student and teacher, I think a teacher should walk beside students as a companion on the way to knowledge, a guide to wisdom leading to a healthier, happier life, for their own benefit and the benefit of others.

If a secular person like me met Jesus on the path, or sitting in the shade under

a tree, I imagine he wouldn't demand faith or following. He might just invite me to sit or walk awhile with him. We could calmly discuss many questions. Maybe that's better than following?

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (chighland.com).