
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Assumptions

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

You ask an interesting question: Should you take a class in religion from a professor who doesn't believe in God?

There has been an ongoing debate since the twelfth century about whether commitment to the Christian faith is a prerequisite for anyone who wants to teach theology.

I take your professor's point that scholars benefit from the objectivity that comes from looking at something from the outside. Insiders are less likely to be critical of commitments that they have already made.

The other side of the argument, though, is that outsiders are often less neutral and objective than they realize. We all have a way of looking at things that determines what we are able to see. Our assumptions often determine the conclusions that we reach.

When it comes to belief in God, scholars who assume that we have to be able to touch and see something for it to be real struggle to evaluate critically an immaterial and invisible spirit. They can only see it as something that we think or feel, but not as something that really is.

This limitation has consequences.

If you read the story of Daniel in the Lion's Den, for example, and you treat it as a fairy tale, or you get caught up in whether it accurately portrays Babylonian history, then you will miss the deeper truth that it speaks about what God is saying to people who have been taken from their home and live with the fear and anxiety of persecution.

C. S. Lewis' "argument by desire" shows how another assumption is possible.

The fact that we get thirsty, Lewis says, suggests that we are creatures for whom drinking water is natural. So, the fact that we desire God, something that our natural world cannot supply, suggests that another, supernatural world exists. We are not guaranteed to live in this other world any more than we are guaranteed to get the water that we need to quench our thirst. But, we are capable of understanding it and we are made to experience it.

So, I think you might enjoy taking the course. Your professor sounds curious and thoughtful, and perhaps most importantly, she has shown a willingness to question the assumptions that you are both making in the way that you are looking at things.

God has a habit of appearing in conversations like this!

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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