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What is Christianity without Truth? Stanley Fish Asks the Question

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Sometimes it just takes the right person to ask the right question. Oddly enough, Stanley Fish is that man when it comes to the question of the Bible as mere literature.

Stanley Fish is one of the nation's most notorious postmodern intellectuals. He headed the English department at Duke University for many years, leading that unit to become internationally notorious for its left-wing postmodernism. After that, he served as Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is now Davidson-Kahn Distinguished University Professor of Humanities and Law at Florida International University.

In "Religion Without Truth," published in the March 31, 2007 edition of *The New York Times* [now available on-line [here](#)], Professor Fish makes an important argument. He is responding to those who are pushing for classes in the Bible as literature in the public schools. In his view, bracketing the question of truth is a strange way to know the Bible.

In other words, the Bible is making claims to belief. It is reductionistic and unnatural to study the Bible as mere literature. Nevertheless, in the public schools the Bible can be studied as literature, but not as the Word of God.

Fish's thoughts:

The truth claims of a religion — at least of religions like Christianity, Judaism and Islam — are not incidental to its identity; they are its identity.

The metaphor that theologians use to make the point is the shell and the kernel: ceremonies, parables, traditions, holidays, pilgrimages — these are merely the outward signs of something that is believed to be informing them and giving them significance. That something is the religion's truth claims. Take them away and all you have is an empty shell, an ancient video game starring a robed superhero who parts the waters of the Red Sea, followed by another who brings people back from the dead. I can see the promo now: more exciting than "Pirates of the Caribbean" or "The Matrix." That will teach, but you won't be teaching religion.

More:

The difference between the truth claims of religion and the truth claims of other academic topics lies in the penalty for getting it wrong. A student or a teacher who comes up with the wrong answer to a crucial question in sociology or chemistry might get a bad grade or, at the worst, fail to be promoted. Those are real risks, but they are nothing to the risk of being mistaken about the identity of the one true God and the appropriate ways to worship him (or her). Get that wrong, and you don't lose your grade or your job, you lose your salvation and get condemned to an eternity in hell.

Of course, the "one true God" stuff is what the secular project runs away from, or "brackets." It counsels respect for all religions and calls upon us to celebrate their diversity. But religion's truth claims don't want your respect. They want your belief and, finally, your soul. They are jealous claims. Thou shalt have no other God before me.

Stanley Fish is right. The Bible is making claims to truth and demands belief. It was not given to us for its literary merits, but for our salvation. Professor Fish may not be a believer, but he understands this aspect of the Bible better than many who are. Studying the Bible merely as an artifact of literary merit may be an attractive idea to sell to school boards, but it is hard to see why Christians should get very excited about the idea.

As Professor Fish asks, “if you’re going to cut the heart out of something, why teach it at all?” As he correctly notes, the truth claims of Christianity are not incidental to its identity. As he explains, “they *are* its identity.” Is Stanley Fish the only one to see that?

Professor Fish was my guest on Tuesday’s edition of *The Albert Mohler Program*. Listen [here](#). He was a fascinating guest, and I do hope we can continue that conversation soon.

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