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The Doctrine of the Virgin Birth Under Attack—Again

In a 2003 New York Times op-ed piece, Nicholas Kristof argued that no intellectually credible person could believe that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin. The fact that so many Americans do believe that, he said, is evidence of the great divide between Europe and America—a divide he characterizes as between the “intellectual” and the “religious.”

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Nicholas Kristof must be a very smart man — but a very slow learner. A columnist for The New York Times, Kristof is a Harvard graduate and was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University. But when it comes to something as significant as the nature of Christianity, Kristof and his columns are dumb and dumber.

Back in March [2003], Kristof wrote a very strange column suggesting that his liberal media colleagues ought to give evangelical Christians a closer look. Not that they would like what they saw, mind you, but that the rising public influence of the evangelicals demanded media attention.

His argument came down to this: Evangelicals are strange people with radical religious beliefs that will do great harm to the nation, but they mean well and so let's be nicer in opposing them to the death.

An exaggeration? Kristof acknowledged that he tends to disagree with evangelicals on almost everything. And he intends to oppose evangelical influence at every turn, because, “I see no problem with aggressively pointing out the dismal consequences of this increasing religious influence.”

On the other hand, Kristof called upon his liberal colleagues to drop their “sneering tone about conservative Christianity itself.” If only he had taken his own advice.

This past Friday [August 18, 2003], The New York Times ran another Kristof piece in its editorial section, and it's a wonder to behold: Perhaps the worst opinion piece to run in that paper in years — and that's really saying something.

In his new column, Kristof points to “the most fundamental divide between America and the rest of the industrialized world: faith.” Unlike the rest of the industrialized world (with the exception of South Korea), America is resolutely religious. Europe is overwhelmingly secular, with low church attendance and very little Christian influence in public life or politics. In America, on the other hand, more persons attend church than public sporting events, and both major political parties court the religious vote — just in different sectors.

This is not news, at least to anyone even moderately informed about the national character of the United States. One would have to have been locked in a monastery for the last thirty years to have missed the religious dynamic of America's culture war, and even the most casual visitor to western or northern Europe would note its secularity. But the divide between Europe and America is not Kristof's real concern. It's the divide between "intellectual" and "religious" America.

Got that? Intellectual and religious are now opposing terms? What Kristof really means is a divide between secularist/liberal America and Americans who are conservative Christians. As "Exhibit A" for his case, Kristof chose the doctrine of the Virgin Birth of Jesus.

"The faith in the Virgin Birth reflects the way American Christianity is becoming less intellectual and more mystical over time," he wrote. More mystical? Less intellectual?

According to Kristof's reasoning, no intellectually credible person could believe that Jesus Christ was born of a virgin. As authorities on this he cites the likes of Hans Kung, a German theologian barred by the Vatican from teaching Catholic theology. Kung is a notorious liberal, who has called the Gospel narratives a "collection of largely uncertain, mutually contradictory, strongly legendary," stories. Kristof is obviously unaware of the huge body of scholarship in support of the Virgin Birth. But, in all likelihood, he wouldn't care anyway. Quoting Hans Kung on the Virgin Birth is like identifying Hugh Hefner as a spokesman for chastity.

Kristof cannot believe that so many Christians [he cites 91-percent] take the Virgin Birth to be true, "despite the lack of scientific or historical evidence." Is he demanding an ultrasound?

There are several important divides in American life today, and Kristof inadvertently pointed to one closer than he thinks: the divide between the secular media elites and believing Christians. The media elite is tenaciously committed to a worldview steeped in anti-supernaturalism. Miracles are out, along with the whole idea that modern people should be bound in any way by a 2,000-year-old book.

This is the most important American divide. One the one side are secularists who honestly cannot believe that intelligent people can believe Christianity to be true. One the other side are those who have staked their lives — including their intellectual energies — on the truthfulness and authority of the Bible.

It's too bad Nicholas Kristof didn't take his own advice. Instead, he offered up a caricature so ludicrous that it's hard to take it seriously. Have all the editors at The New York Times gone away on vacation? In the end, this sad column tells us all we need to know about the real worldview of the media elite. It's not like we didn't know already.

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