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**THEOLOGY**

## Starbucks Spirituality

**Brett Lawrence** | posted October 1, 2002

Daniel Hill holds a steady part-time job working one or two shifts a week at Starbucks. It's hardly a career-track position, and it's not that he needs the extra cash or battles a secret caffeine addiction.

It's the people.

Purple hair, belly-button rings, tattoos, black-painted fingernails—those people.

For Hill, whose day job is ministering on staff with Willow Creek Community Church's Axis outreach, Starbucks provides a context to build meaningful relationships with postmodern, Gen-Next twentysomethings who are far from God.

"Nothing has been more transforming for me than working at Starbucks," says Hill, "These people matter to me."

But the moonlighting gig isn't a free pass to easy evangelism. His coffee colleagues are like a good cup of triple espresso—plenty of steam, a little bitter, and enough kick to knock you on your backside if you aren't careful.

Exhibit A: "The first day Debbie worked at Starbucks, one of the shift supervisors points at me and asks her, 'Did you hear what his real job is?' After she hears I work at a church, Debbie freaks out. She says, 'Three years ago my 16-year-old daughter was raped and murdered. Tell me, what kind of God would let that happen? I believe in God. I just have a real problem with him.'"

Hill isn't alone in facing these kinds of questions. Suspicion and distrust of Christians, and wariness of God are readily observed.

Consider the bumper sticker: "Dear God, please save me from your followers." Or the ubiquitous Christian "fish" that has mysteriously grown feet courtesy of the Darwinian crowd—a symbol of faith sarcastically twisted by the culture.

Even Christian bookstores carry such titles as: "Following Jesus Without Embarrassing God," "Toxic Faith," and "The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse."

With fingers pointed at Christians, we're obliged to identify the underlying accusations and offer a response. Three questions are at the core.

## Why should I trust you?

Daniel Hill suggests that 90 percent of the accusations Christians face are rooted in mistrust. "I don't find that people have a problem with Jesus," he says. "They have a problem with Christians."

Anyone who claims authority today—politicians, parents, or pastors—will face the question of trust.

Rick Richardson, author of *Evangelism Outside the Box* and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's national field director for evangelism, observes: "When people ask questions about homosexuality, for instance, we're tempted to think they're asking questions about right and wrong. But they're not. They're asking about dominance and oppression.

"Homosexual strugglers look at what the church has done to women, they look at slavery, at this history of collaboration between Christian faith and Western dominance—and they say, 'In light of that, how can I trust you?'"

If that's the question, how can we respond?

The answer requires more than words. Christians, with PowerPoint presentations and four-point evangelistic outlines, have mastered the art of proclamation. But words alone aren't going to answer the trust question.

Trust is built by actions, not words.

"We're supposed to *proclaim* the kingdom of God and *demonstrate* the kingdom of God," says Soong-Chan Rah, pastor of the Cambridge Community Fellowship Church near Boston. "Evangelism for our generation means learning to do both.

"Part of proclamation means that we speak the whole gospel of Christ, not just the Westernized version of it. We also need to be good at demonstration—bringing healing to our sick society and at-risk neighborhoods, bringing wholeness not just to the spiritually lost but also to those who are under economic oppression."

One of the most fundamental ways to represent God's kingdom is by being kind to the disaffected, even when we have genuine disagreements with the way they choose to live.

For Valerie Zander, who works with a team to develop neighborhood churches in the San Francisco area, this means working with people who are homosexual.

"The question is, 'Do I offer genuine friendship and companionship to people who are gay?'" Zander says. "If you're a believer, the answer to that question is yes.

"I have a lesbian friend who told me, 'I'm expecting.' She was watching closely to see how I responded. Would I tell her she shouldn't be raising a child, or would I be excited for her?"

"I had to ask myself, *Does my friend want my approval? Does giving it to her salve her conscience? Will she say, 'Oh see, look, she's a pastor's wife and she thinks it's okay?'*"

Zander came down on the side of kindness.

"I decided in my life, in profound ways, I believe children are a gift from God. I truly believe that I would not be the kind of person I am becoming if I had not had children. So I said, 'I'm happy for you because children are a gift from God.'"

In whatever way we respond, the one thing we can't do is ignore the trust issue.

"It's often the question behind the question," says Richardson. "Because a lot of these are accusations against the church. Whenever you try to address them without addressing the trust issue they can't hear you," he says. "So I always start by listening and validating the questions and identifying why people would have trust issues."

"I'm not going to defend Christianity's marriage to Western European domination. I don't care where you come down on specific issues, such as sexism, for instance. You have to take seriously the trust issues people have with the church."

"Let people know you've heard them and that you have compassion for the hurts people experience."

## **Isn't that just your reality?**

In *Evangelism Outside the Box*, Richardson tells about an encounter with Bob, a philosophy of science student at the University of Illinois. Bob was dating a girl from Richardson's InterVarsity group, and she asked Richardson to talk with him.

After Richardson began discussing evidence for the resurrection and Jesus' desire to have a relationship with us, Bob responded with an extended monologue of his own.

He touched on Einstein's theories and introduced the findings of scientists Niels Bohr, Max Planck and Werner Heisenberg. Then Bob got downright evangelistic.

"Quantum theory has immense consequences for our view of reality," Bob explained. "First, logic can no longer be seen as either/or. You can't say either Christianity is true or it's false. Reality is also/and. Light is a wave, and it's also a particle."

"So when you give me your arguments, you're operating with that old-time dichotomizing logic that went out with the downfall of Isaac Newton's world of simple, certain scientific truth.

"Second, all reality is participant reality. There is no such thing as an independent, objective world that you can observe without changing it. You can't measure light particles without changing them, without creating the reality you observe. You probably want to make me think the early Christians just reported the historical facts.

"They helped create the facts they observed, and then reported them out of their interpretation of reality. Scientists do that. Writers do that. Religious people like you do that."

The good news, Richardson says, is that accusations related to the radical changes in science during the twentieth century and objections to Christians' claims of truth don't necessarily require a doctoral-level understanding of quantum physics.

"What you're really arguing for," says Richardson, "is an acknowledgement that reality isn't just inside you. It's also outside you.

"The reality of God is out there. I work hard with people here—to get them out of their total experience orientation. If all you seek is experience, if you're just looking for what's true for you, it's a self-defeating search. Reality is something you find while you're seeking something else."

The Starbucks-serving Daniel Hill says that the "whatever works for you" mentality is a foundational part of the postmodern mindset. Still, he says, it can be fruitless to engage that argument directly.

Hill calls the postmodern mindset "kind of the air they breathe" rather than a deep-seated philosophical barrier to faith.

"I've never been able to persuade someone intellectually to abandon the relativistic mindset," he says. "That's never the doorway I get someone to walk through. What's more likely to happen is that they'll see the power of a transformed life in another Christ follower and be transformed."

Hill says we also do well to remember that relativism has its plus side.

"People are open to Jesus," he says. "They just don't consider him the only way. I try to engage them in who Jesus is and not that the others aren't correct."

## **What good is Christianity?**

Richardson calls this the question of utility and relevance. Does your belief change lives? Does your religion work? Does it help me, whether I'm in your group or not? Or are you just another self-serving group?

"The question of the uniqueness of Christ is not primarily philosophical," he writes.

"People are not looking for theological comparisons but for attractiveness, relevance, and usefulness."

Katy, a business consultant in Washington, D.C., had been hearing the rat-a-tat-tat of a recurring message for five years.

"Our role on earth is to take on suffering and allow ourselves to become agents of God's redemption," her young adult pastor would say. "Seek out the pain of the world so you can engage it and see the Lord redeem it."

Today, two young girls in Washington's inner-city are grateful that Katy was listening.

"Our young adults group started a mentoring program in Anacostia, the murder capital of the murder capital of the country," explains Bill Haley, the source of Katy's five-year echo.

"It became very clear that at one point, the mother of the little girl she was mentoring was going to need alcohol rehab, and the little girl and her sister were going to need someone to take care of them."

Katy volunteered, thinking it was a six-week commitment, and then watched that short-term assignment stretch into more than two years.

"She eventually needed to quit her job as a business consultant to take care of these two children," says Haley, director of urban ministry at the D.C.-area Falls Church. "We lay down our own interests for the sake of coming to the aid of those who would have no other help. That's an incarnation of the life of Jesus."

It's also an effective response to the third question of the postmodern culture.

"I believe the greatest apologetic for this day is the apologetic of Jesus and the early church," says Haley, who lives with his wife in inner-city D.C.

"Simply put: Being a Christian means following Jesus. If our discipleship is not leading us to continue to give away our lives to other people, at great personal cost, then we are not following Jesus.

"There is a fundamental call to Christians to be involved in generous compassion to the poor and the broken and the underprivileged. There's more in the Bible about justice and compassion than evangelism."

## **What they can't argue with**

In today's culture there will always be questions and accusations—some fair, others unfair; some informed, others ignorant.

As ministers of the gospel, what is our response?

Hill suggests the best way may also be the simplest.

"Be intentional and authentic in your friendship," he says. "Their

response to my overtures can't determine whether we stay in friendship. If it does, then it's not a friendship but a manipulative ploy to get them to become a Christian. It's a difficult paradox to reconcile."

Especially when abstract discussions about cultural accusations turn personal, and real people and eternity hang in the balance.

Remember Debbie, the woman whose daughter was raped and murdered? More than a year and a half after they met, Hill is still working on that friendship, reaching out, extending a hand of grace. He asked her to tell her story at church.

"During one of our Axis messages recently, we were asking, 'How do you find God in the midst of pain?'

"I asked Debbie to come and share her story, and she did. She tells this gripping story of loss and hurt and pain, and everyone was waiting for the end of the story," he explains. "But she finished by saying, 'I have a real problem with God.'"

"It's not the end of the story," Hill says. "It's the middle."

Daniel Hill will be leading a workshop on "Starbucks Spirituality: Reaching Emerging Generations for Christ" at the upcoming National Pastors Convention February 26-March 1. For info, visit [www.nationalpastorsconvention.com](http://www.nationalpastorsconvention.com)

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