

OpenTheo

Columbo Questions for Someone Who Says He's Spiritual but Not Religious

July 20, 2023



#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how to use Columbo questions with someone who is nonreligious but “spiritual,” what to say to someone who “followed Jesus out of the church” and now doesn’t believe spiritual truth is knowable, and how to respond to health and wealth preaching.

- * How would you use Columbo questions with someone who isn’t religious but believes in divine power and describes his closeness to that power as “spiritual”?
- * What should I say to my sister who “followed Jesus out of the church” and now calls herself a “spiritual agnostic” and doesn’t believe spiritual truth is knowable?
- * How should I proceed with a friend who has gotten into health and wealth preaching?

Transcript

Welcome to Stand to Reason's hashtag SDRask Podcast with Amy Hall and Greg Cockel. Yes, ma'am. Alright.

Okay, here's a question from Greg Labelle. Mr. Cockel, I recently received this reply from a friend. How do I use Columbo on this request? I am not the religious type of person.

I believe in divine power and my closeness to that power is best described as spiritual. Well, I mean, what I was just going to say is I'm not sure what that even means, but of course, that question in my mind suggests the first Columbo question. What do you mean by that? So again, that's a model question and my impulse would be to say, so you believe in God, is that right? You said something about divine.

Do you believe in God? The God that you believe in is these personal or somehow impersonal? I'm not sure. Let him talk. So then therefore, that's not religious.

Your spiritual, right? I mean, I'm not sure what this distinction is. So, and now what? So

you believe there's a God and you have a spiritual nature. I agree with both those things.

Now what, it sounded to me like those things were put offered kind of by contrast to my view, but that is my view as far as it goes. What about the rest? Your God? What is your understanding of God? What does God want from us? Anything? Do we have any obligations to the God? You are spiritual. So you're in touch with your spiritual side.

Great. I once, by the way, told a woman who said to me, I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual. I said, yeah, God made you that way so you could know him.

Okay, so now what? So really, this is this conversation, all the questions that I would ask Columbus style are ones to draw the person out to offer me more clarity on their view. Now what I think this person is done is done nothing. They are aware of their spiritual nature of some sort and they are aware that they're not alone.

That's it. Okay, notice that in their mind, it's laudable because they're acknowledging the spiritual realm but it's not demanding because there's no demands of any sort that are suggested in any way by that. And the spiritual but not religious crowd, this is why this is so appealing.

You can kind of acknowledge an obvious element of humanity that there is an invisible realm that we are in touch with and we have a capacity to connect with that. Yet at the same time, you don't have to do anything about it because there's no sense of obligation and this is where I'd want to start probing. What if it turns out that this God does care about the way we live? And I suspect you think he does.

Is your God good? Does he want us to be good? What does that look like? Are we good? By the way, that's a real important question because when we ask that question to people, they say, well, you know, it's like, yeah, God's good. He wants us to be good. I said, are you good? And you know what they always respond? I try.

I try. Exactly. I try.

I said, wait a minute. That's not the question I asked. I said, are you good? Now, the answer tells me that they know they're not.

They're just trying and they think the trying is adequate. Okay. Well, as long as I'm trying, that's all that's necessary, you know, because they feel that pretty good about themselves.

You know, something like 80, 75% or 80% of the people in this country believe in hell and almost none of them think they're going there. Is that something? Because the qualifying line for good that goes from bad, basically bad to basically good is always somewhere below where that person perceives themselves on the moral scale. Always.

Even people in prison. You know, yeah, they, yeah, they, you've probably heard me talk about that study they did where they all thought they were good. Yeah.

Yeah. Because they're comparing themselves to the people around them. And so what that study found is that we're not very good at.

Determining whether or not we're good. We just used to who we are. I guess.

So that would be the directions my questions would go. It's mostly a request for more information about the specifics of their view. And the goal here is to help them to see that they haven't thought about this at all.

They have no view. And that's why I want to ask more. What if it turns out that your divine whatever cares about how you live and is going to make you account for it? That's what my sense is.

That's what Jesus thought. By the way, I was tempted to say that's the biblical view, but that's not the right way to talk about this with people because you don't want to refer to a book. You want to refer to a person they respect.

That's what Jesus thought. And we read some of that in one of the earlier shows, John chapter three, you know, judgments coming. Yeah, asking.

I mean, what do you mean by spirituals? It seems like the obvious place to start. And you didn't even really get into this, but you can also ask. How did you come to that conclusion? Why do you think that's the true way to look at God? Because they might not have answers for that.

They might have answers, but they might not have answers for that either. So both of those questions, just as they are. And then the conversation as it goes, I think will lead from there, but I think that's asking what they mean by spiritual is a great place to start.

Notice there's nothing clever required of Greg in this situation. It's just the first two Colombo questions, which doesn't require you to know anything but the questions to probe what and why that's it. And constantly, time and time again, I've seen using those questions just to try to gather more information forces the other person to think about their own convictions, which they have not clarified even for themselves.

Okay, let's go to a question from Heather. My sister left the church a few years ago claiming she quote, followed Jesus out of the church. She now says she is quote, fine with Jesus, but calls herself a spiritual agnostic and doesn't believe spiritual truth is knowable.

I'm not sure where to begin with all of that and would greatly value your response. Well, once again, and I know I sound like a broken record, which metaphor, by the way, is lost

in a lot of people because they don't know what it is anymore, however, or a broken one and what the significance there is. But notice that these are a lot of kind of vague statements that don't entirely go together.

Okay, so could you read her comments again one sentence at a time? She followed Jesus out of the church. Oh, she followed him out of the church. I'm not sure what that means.

So there must be something that is true about Jesus, who she wants to follow in that is contrary to what she found in the church. And so for some reason, she's leaving the church because her dedication to Jesus required that. Does that sound like? Yeah, that sounds like what she's saying.

All right. And then the next sentence. She now says she's fine with Jesus, but calls herself a spiritual agnostic.

Okay, let's pause for a minute. Well, if you're fine with Jesus, I'm not sure what fine with Jesus means. If she followed Jesus because she saw symptom in him that she wanted to follow as true contrary to the church.

So she left the church to follow Jesus and she's fine with Jesus. In what sense is she is spiritually agnostic? Like she doesn't know. She has no opinion one way or another.

Okay, keep going. She doesn't believe spiritual truth is noble. Okay.

Well, then again, if spiritual truth is not knowable, then what was the spiritual truth she saw in Jesus that motivated her to leave the spiritual untruth environment of the church and follow the spiritually true one Jesus spiritually true in some sense. Do you see none of those statements fit together with each other? And so that's where I would say I'm confused about what you just said. And then I would ask questions that are meant to address the concerns I just mentioned.

If there's no spiritual truth, why are you okay with Jesus? You must think he said something accurate spiritually, which is why you followed him out of the church. So I'd want to take every step and ask them when you say you followed Jesus, that means what out of the church? Well, the church was hypocritical and Jesus isn't hypocritical. How is he not hypocritical? He lived a life of consistency to moral the moral truths that he claimed.

You think that's good? Okay. So what the moral truths that he can claim? Do you think those are good? Okay. Then how are you spiritually agnostic? If Jesus had a portion, some aspect of truth, how are you a spiritual agnostic? Like you don't know.

It doesn't make any sense to me. You're wrinkling abroad too, because it doesn't make sense to you. Well, it sounds to me like she's moving from one to the other.

So she's probably just finding an easy way out of the church. So first she's saying, I still follow Jesus, but I think the church is not representing him well. But now she's moved away where she's to the point of saying, we can't know spiritual truth.

So I really doubt she was following Jesus originally. I think this has just been her working her way out of the church slowly by what she's saying. So I'm not sure because my instinct, I have two different things I'm thinking here, whether you should talk about if spiritual truth is noble or if you should go back to Jesus.

Because if you want to take her at her word when she said that she followed Jesus out of the church, it might be worth going back to him. Well, let's talk about Jesus. What do you think about Jesus now? Who do you think he was? What do you like about him? Or what was wrong with the church that you left? Now, anything that she is going to say in response to that question is going to be an example of a spiritual truth that she knows, or she thinks she knows.

And the church did not embody that adequately, which is why she left. So part of it, this is maybe is not going to sound charitable, and I'm trying to be descriptive. But you and I know we have had plenty conversations with people and heard plenty of things.

People say things that don't make any sense when you look closely at it. They were all kind of jumbled in contradictory, and it has a certain kind of authentic ring to it, but it's just a jumble of stuff that hasn't been thought through. And all our questions are meant to do is to help get more clarity on each of these statements to see what do they actually mean.

I don't think they have a lot of meaning to this person because they have another. Now, she might say, I used to go to church. But then I started reading Jesus.

And when I started reading Jesus and focusing him, then I realized the church isn't doing what Jesus is doing. So I got out of the church. Then I went into a new phase and then I started thinking, nobody knows any spiritual truth anyway.

And so now I'm a spiritual agnostic. That might be the steps. But I don't know.

That's that would make a little bit more sense out of her comments. But I wouldn't at all be surprised if there was really no cohesion here at Elmo. Yeah, I mean, I can remember when I was hiding from God, my excuse in my head was, well, how do I even know he exists? So I actually suspect that she hasn't thought too much about this, but she doesn't want to be in the church.

So I think what I, as I'm sitting here, I think the question I would ask her is, if we could know spiritual truth, would you want to know it? Mm hmm. And then at least she has to be honest about whether or not she really wants to know it. Now, if she says, yes, I'd want to know it.

And then you can say, well, great. Well, let's talk about it. Let's talk about what we can know about spiritual truth.

And then you could start at the beginning, start with the column cosmological argument. Right. It's a good start.

Now, I suspect that this is not an intellectual problem that her sister is having, but it could be. It absolutely could be. So maybe she is feeling like, how can I know this? How can I know this? And so I don't want to, I don't want to, I don't want to commit myself to anything.

That's possible. So just start with asking her, would you want to know it if you could know it? Is this something you want to know? Or do you have some other reason for backing off? Here's what I think she's going to say, but you can't know it. And so that was my question.

If you could, would you want to? So there's that standard Perry, but I think your questions are really good when it gets right down to the, to the real issue. And what's interesting to me, Amy, and this happened in my own life before I was a Christian, and I've heard it many, many, many times over. That when things began to change in a person's spiritual journey to Christ, when they prayed, there's the, the, the, the skeptics prayer.

There's a name for it. I don't know exactly what it is, but they say, God, if you're real, I want to know. Show me.

I prayed that prayer. And it was the summer of 1973, and by September, I was a Christian. So there, there is a, and a lot of people have had that experience where they prayed it, but it was genuine.

So this gets to your point. If you, if you could know, would you want to? And when people get to the point of they're willing to genuinely pray that prayer, lots of incredible things begin happening. And then the second question after you talk about that would be, if Jesus really was who he said he was, would you follow him? And then if she has objections to Jesus, and again, she might punt to, we can't know anything, but then you can go back to that question.

But then you can find out what her objections are to Jesus, but those are two things. I think just getting people to think about if they really have an objection, or if they really just don't want to follow Jesus, because it's, if you can just start them thinking about that, then at least they know where they are. And you know where they are, and you know where you need to start.

There you go. Okay, let's take a question from Andrew Wickham. One of my friends has gotten into health and wealth preaching.

How should I proceed? Well, I have a, I have a, a simple, quick work around on that issue. And it's not exactly a series of questions, it's a series of statements. But it could be turned into a series of questions, I guess.

So, so Andrew could say to his friend, what was the state, the circumstances that when the writer of Hebrews of the Christians that the writer of Hebrews, who was writing to, oh, I don't know. The writer he was writing to persecuted Christians. What was the circumstance of the Thessalonians? I don't know.

First Thessalonians was written to persecuted Christians, along with second Thessalonians written to persecuted Christians. What was the circumstance the Christians Peter was writing to in first Peter? I don't know. Peter was writing to persecuted Christians.

Paul wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and at least 2nd Timothy while he was in prison. Did you know that? No, you might ask the question. What would Paul's circumstances when he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and 2nd Timothy? I don't know.

He was in prison. So if Hebrews are written to to suffering Christians, if Thessalonians, both Thessalonians have written a suffering question. If First Peter was written a Thessalonians, and I think also Philippians, and Paul was writing all these letters from prison, where do you get the prosperity gospel from that? Were these all bad Christians, including Paul? Now to me, that's just so end around.

So you don't straining at individual verses and all this other stuff. But this look, it's like they're straining at an ant and swallowing the camel. The camel is the condition of all the churches and all the Christians in the first couple centuries.

All the way up until the time of Constantine on and off terrible persecutions, Constantine was beginning of the fourth century and Constantine didn't make Christianity the state religion. That didn't come for another 50 years. That made Christianity a legal religion.

So Christians who are no longer persecuted. So our first four centuries of Christianity, Christians were characteristically suffering lots of persecution, lots of hardship, lots of there was no health, wealth and prosperity going on for them. Why? Were these Christians bad Christians? I mean, I don't know.

To me, this is the end of QED, you know, it's over with. It's so obvious. You don't have to be a theologian and go after all these little verses because all these Christians do these verses.

Paul knew these verses. Jesus said, in this world, you have tribulation. I will overcome the world.

But that statement doesn't obviously lead to health, wealth and prosperity because if that were the case, Jesus wouldn't have warned them about the tribulation that's coming and offer the encourage with that. Essentially, in the midst of your tribulation, I will help you overcome. So I think of 2nd Corinthians, the thorn in the flesh and when Paul's weak, then he's strong.

It's throughout the whole New Testament. It's everywhere. It's hard to believe they're reading the New Testament.

It's so integral to this. I was thinking, I've been reading about, I've been reading in Isaiah and I keep seeing in the part I'm in right now, Isaiah keeps saying, you know, don't be afraid of them because in the end, God wins and they will be destroyed. So he's not saying, I'm going to make everything better.

Right. The second, he's saying, your hope is in God's ultimate victory. Peter gives the same exact advice in 1 Peter.

He's talking, he doesn't say, Oh, well, you're suffering and God's going to fix it all for you when you ask him and you have enough faith. No, he says, in the end, you will have victory with Jesus. So don't fear the fact he quotes Isaiah in that part, but don't fear those, you know, don't fear men.

Fear God because he's the one who wins in the end and he's the one who you want to hit your wagon to. Right. And in fact, in chapter 5 there, he says, and the same experiences of suffering are being had by your brethren, who are being in the world.

Right. You know, you cannot read 1 Peter without seeing that God is working through the suffering and he has specific purposes for it. So similar to the question I asked in the last one, I think what you might want to ask is, which, which do you value more? Do you value God? Do you want to know God or do you want the wealth and prosperity that God can give you? Are you using God as a tool? To get something else, in which case he's going to let you down if he doesn't do it? Or is your goal God and would you be willing to suffer if he asked you to? I think that they need to think about that.

They need to think about, you know, if they are seeking God or they're seeking wealth and using God as a tool. And hopefully that can lead to other conversations about, you know, what Peter says and whether or not the New Testament is right, that God is worth going through suffering for knowing him and being with him and being with him in the end. Paul says in Romans 8, I do not consider the sufferings in this life to bear any comparison to the glories that are to follow.

So notice how he's acknowledging the reality of suffering in this life and the payoff is later. He also says in 2 Corinthians 4, momentary light affliction is producing for us in eternal weight of glory. Now keep in mind the momentary light.

Paul's affliction in human terms were neither momentary nor light. And later in the book he talks about being whipped four times, 39 lashes. He was beaten with rods twice or three times.

He was stoned and luster left for dead. He was shipwrecked twice. You know, all kinds of hard things happen.

Trouble here, trouble there. He goes on with his litany of difficulties he's facing. This is the great apostle Paul.

Did he adhere to this prosperity gospel? No. And one last thing, God does not look kindly on people who use him as a tool to get something else. And you can see this in Isaiah too, because the people were trying to do certain rituals in order to get God to do things for them.

And God was saying, your heart is not with me. I hate things you're doing because you're trying to manipulate me with your rituals. So I would also warn him if that's what you're doing.

That is really dangerous. Yeah, that's the pagan response. In animism, you know, spirit worship, whatever, spiritism, it's all about manipulating circumstances so you can beat the demons at their own game basically.

It's all about manipulation. And the same thing was true about the pagan ancient Near Eastern religions. It was manipulating these gods in different ways through a certain series of sacrifices or a certain kind of sympathetic magic where they were having sex up at the high places so the crops would reproduce better.

That's the astral, all of that is all manipulation. And so when the Jews began doing all of this kind of stuff, that's when God just put his foot down. That's not me.

You're not going to manipulate me, but the health, wealth, prosperity, the word, faith movement is completely about manipulating the circumstances and baptizing with spiritual language. Well, thank you, Andrew, Heather and Greg. If you have a question, we'd love to hear from you on Twitter with the hashtag STRS or you can go through our website on the hashtag SDRAskpodcast page.

You'll find a link there where you can send us your question and we will consider it for the show. Well, thanks for listening. This is Amy Hall and Greg Kockel for Stand to Reason.