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Christianity 2020
A clear vision of
Christianity for the 21st
century

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What this book is about

Are you a “lapsed Christian”? Do you “wish you could believe” or maybe just wish you had a deeper understanding of Christianity? Then maybe this book is for you.

If you grew up Christian, you have a certain worldview built into the way you think – and yet, maybe you’re finding it hard to believe “all that stuff.” And yet, you feel a God-shaped hole in your soul that is leaving your days feeling empty.

I think I may have some information for you that will help.

Most people are taught what I refer to as the “folk art” version of Christianity – filled with superficial metaphors and childlike simplicity. I don’t know your background, but what you’ve been told about Jesus and the New Testament is probably wrong.

If you want to explore Christian Spirituality with an explanation for the 21st century, I invite you to read on. This is not actually a *new* version of Christianity, but an understanding that has existed for 2000 years. Nor is it an esoteric, “hidden” knowledge – this has all been available for centuries to anyone who wanted to search for it.

I've avoided writing this book for decades because I believe that almost everything that I have to say has been said, and often better, by others. However, in conversations with people it has become crystal clear to me that many (perhaps most) people have never had the opportunity to be introduced to these ideas. So, I set out to write blog posts about these topics, always trying to refer back to the original sources. I hoped that readers would find an idea that intrigued them and that they would follow up by reading some of the originals. These original works stand the test of time and the sieve of experience for a reason. Those blog posts turned into this book.

In the process of turning the blog into a book, I received feedback that the ideas in it were scattered and therefore hard to follow. Part of this is unavoidable, due to the very lack of power of language that I will be discussing throughout. However, after some soul-searching, I decided to try to make the material more coherent – I hope I've succeeded, at least somewhat.

My purpose in writing this book is to help people to realize that there is a whole history of thoughtful, relevant and God-inspired works that are not taught in most churches.

“Acquiring the Spirit of God is the true aim of our Christian life, while prayer, fasting, almsgiving and other good works done for Christ’s sake are merely means for acquiring the Spirit of God.”

(Saint) Seraphim of Sarov

On the Acquisition of the Holy Spirit

There, in one sentence, is perhaps the explanation of the purpose of this entire book. Now, of course, everyone wants details, so I try to give them as best I can.

I’ve purposely tried to keep the essays in this book short, so they can each be read in a sitting. However, in order to be able to do that, I’ve necessarily had to eliminate a lot of details that people might find important. So, I’ve added an introduction, a reading list, and – *alas!* – footnotes. Sometimes I could not find any other way to explain some important details without interrupting the main flow of the essay.

I also envisioned that people might want to skip around, instead of reading the book cover-to-cover. In order to enable this, there is some duplication in a few of the essays. I urge you to read the introduction before skipping around.

I’m sure that many people will disagree with some of the things that I’ve written; it’s nice to know that true Christianity allows you to do that. To the extent that the conversation remains civil and well-informed, I am happy to post your comments or thoughts on my web site (blog) at Christianity2020.com.

Introduction

Based on the feedback from some people I trust, I've tried to put together an explanation of the sources and background of this book. These subjects overlap and mesh throughout the book, and so a quick introduction to these topics is in order. The following paragraphs are meant to be introductory, not definitive – but they should give you a good idea of the genesis of the ideas in this book.

The history of Christian thought is quite varied, especially the early history. Until the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE¹, Christian thought was not regulated at all – people with widely disparate views called themselves Christians. Even the earliest Christians – most notably Peter, James and Paul – had quite divergent views of the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. At first these dissenters were out in the open; but later, when the church became almost synonymous with the government, these people either had to go underground, tread lightly, or (in some cases) find themselves the guest of honor at a roast.

¹ CE stands for “Common Era” as used in modern scholarship to avoid the Christian-specific AD. The same goes for BCE (Before the Common Era) instead of BC.

Modern scholarship, especially the archeologic finds at Nag Hammadi (circa 1945) and (to a lesser extent) the Dead Sea Scrolls (circa 1946-1959), has enabled us to access much of the early thought that was considered for many years to be lost for eternity. From this we can see that many “heresies” (Greek for “choices”) were not always the small movements that the Church tried to present them as, but were instead sometimes large movements that dominated entire regions. The systematic destruction of the primary works of these movements, along with the attempted destruction of the beliefs themselves, kept this information unavailable to most people for centuries.

The ideas kept breaking through, though. Some taught in secret, some were able to keep themselves just within the bounds of what the Church would accept, and at least one was denied as a heretic and later declared a saint².

To see a quick list of some of these folks, visit the “List of Christian Mystics” page on Wikipedia (I hope that Wikipedia lasts at least as long as this book! Please donate to them.) This is not a complete list of all the “heretics”, but it is a good beginning set, specifically for the purposes of this book.

² Joan of Arc

*Which brings us to*³ the topic of mysticism. A mystic is a person who has direct experiential intercourse with the divine – in Christian terms, with God. There are mystical traditions from pretty much every cultural and religious group throughout human history. Although I am specifically interested in Christian mysticism in this book, I do liberally quote from a non-Christian source (The Tao Te Ching⁴). In my view, there is nothing contradictory in quoting the Tao Te Ching in reference to Christianity – truth can be found in many quarters.

Which brings us to the concept of Truth (capital T). A prevailing view in many groups (especially academic) is what is variously called post-modernism or social constructivism. Although I give more details in the book, a short description of these views would contain the notion that there is no thing as Truth (with a capital T), there are only varied opinions. This differs from the notion that there is such a thing as Truth, but that no one has a guaranteed lock on it. Only a crazy

³ I'll repeatedly use the phrase *Which brings us to* as a device to indicate how I see these variegated topics are related to one another.

⁴ According to the updated pronunciation, this is pronounced "Dao De Ching" and thus often written that way now. However, most of the books I've found use the "T" version, and this is what I "grew up on" (so to speak) and so I use that spelling throughout this book.

person thinks that he knows the one and only Truth. *Except...*

The one and only thing that a person knows is their own experience. Thus, someone might report that “I saw what appeared to be a ghost” as opposed to “I saw a ghost” – the first report is unassailable unless you just think the person is flat out lying. A philosopher named Ludwig Wittgenstein used the idea of a slap to your face – if you felt the pain, you could not deny that it exists.

Which brings us to Ludwig Wittgenstein, who is quoted throughout this book. Wittgenstein is generally considered to be the most influential philosopher of the 20th century – even according to Time magazine! His first book – the only one published during his lifetime – is a philosophic treatise on the nature of language and logic. He ends up developing a complete and thorough proof of the logical necessity of mysticism. After writing this book he retired from philosophy because he believed he had explained everything... but later on he came out of retirement and went on to become the chair of the philosophy department at Cambridge. Most people who quote his book (called *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*) have not actually read the book, because it is a pretty tough slog. In fact, I had one class in graduate school where we covered this book but neither of the two professors had ever actually read it!

Wittgenstein was a logician, and thus I also delve into the nature of logic, which turns out to be one of the best pointers to the nature of God. However, in order to get to that point, one has to wade through predicate calculus, set theory and then the proofs of soundness and completeness of predicate logic, and the (seemingly contradictory) results of the incompleteness of any logic system and the undefinability theorem: “no sufficiently rich interpreted language can represent its own semantics.”⁵ This means, for our purposes here, that there is no such thing as a perfect language. Language is inherently limited.

Which brings us back to mysticism. If you directly experienced God, how could you describe that experience? What human words would work in this case? Clearly, there aren’t any. At this point, the mystic has two options: (1) try to describe it anyway, using the vernacular of the time, (2) shut up about it. Now, those who choose option 2 are by definition not heard from much – and so, we mostly end up only knowing about those that choose option 1. And, human language being limited by time, space, and society, these descriptions are always analogic or metaphoric, and are thus easy to dismiss as nonsense, which is really what it is: non-sense. It

⁵ “Tarski’s undefinability theorem”, Wikipedia.

is not one's senses that experience the divine – how could it be?

To those that have these experiences, they are as real and unassailable as a slap in the face. What you do about it and with it is another question. You may have had a mystical experience and not known what it was. Or you may have chosen to pretend it didn't happen because "all that stuff is bullsh*t" – or, you may not have had a mystical experience at all. But one person who undoubtedly did was Jesus.

As I will describe in detail later, Jesus was a Jewish mystic – imbued with the Spirit of God at his baptism. This is what made him an "anointed one" – a *Christ*. Note that I say he was *an* anointed one, not *the* anointed one. He was not the only one. There have been other mystics throughout the ages, and Jesus would likely have melted into relative obscurity if it had not been for Paul.

Paul (Saint Paul, Saul of Tarsus) picked up a few nuggets of the story of Jesus and packaged it together with some Neo-Platonic beliefs and "sold" the package to the gentiles (non-Jews) throughout the Roman Empire. It was a slick bit of marketing, but it had little to do with Jesus's⁶ original message, as evidenced by Paul's

⁶ There is some small controversy regarding whether this should be written as Jesus' (as I learned it) or as Jesus's (as is more common today). After much soul-searching I decided to go with the one that is more common these days.

vehement disagreements with Jesus's original disciples⁷.

So, you may ask, how can I call this book Christianity 2020 if I don't believe in the "standard model" of Christianity? Because, from all accounts, *neither did Jesus!* What we have received as the orthodox⁸ model of Christianity was defined by humans, mostly from Paul-started churches, in 325 CE.

And yet still, why even bother to repurpose the term Christianity? Why not call this "Jesusism" or something? I believe that one should not abandon two thousand years of honing the message. Yes, there were a lot of false starts and wrong turns, but clearly there is a divine spark in the overall Christian movement, and to throw this away in a childish temper tantrum is a huge mistake.

Which brings us to why I believe that Christianity needs to be saved. Isn't it the terrible religion that oppressed the world for so long? Well, yes and no. Certainly there were a lot of

⁷ As evidenced by a fresh reading of Acts and 1 Corinthians.

⁸ Throughout the book, I differentiate between "orthodox" (small o) and "Orthodox" (big O) Christianity. The first refers to the model of Christianity that was developed through the first seven councils; the second refers to the Orthodox Church, which in the USA is often referred to as "Greek Orthodox."

people who did bad things in the *name* of Christianity, just as there are people who have misused other religions such as Islam and Buddhism.

Christianity needs to be saved because it is the original religion where *the individual matters*. Before Jesus, religions focused on the subjugation of the individual to the collective. The Jews believed that they had to serve God, no matter how nasty and capricious he was (see the Book of Job). One could argue that the Buddhists focus on the individual, but in fact Buddhism focuses on the *annihilation* of the individual. The Roman state religion was used to reinforce the positions of the powerful. Even Plato and Socrates – bastions of democracy – promulgated the notion of sacrificing the individual to the State.

Of the major-league religious figures, only Jesus said “you matter.” This is why Christianity is fastest growing in places in the world which are under repressive regimes.

Let me close this introduction with one important point. Within this book, I don’t waste space or ink saying “In my opinion...” or “I believe...” The reason is that everything I’ve written here is what I believe and saying so would just be needlessly redundant. Why would I write it if I didn’t believe it? Of course I realize that you might have a different opinion, and you

have a legal and moral right to that. And I have the right to disagree!

In any case, the ideas in this book are meant to spark in you the notion that you can adopt or maintain Christian beliefs and a Christian lifestyle without having to subscribe to a bunch of hand-me-down beliefs. This is my path. I hope it helps you find yours.

Deeper Christianity: On not being absurd

"All this, if taken literally, is absurd. If it is taken symbolically, it is a profound expression, the ultimate Christian expression, of the relationship between God and man in the Christian experience. But to distinguish these two kinds of speech, the nonsymbolic and the symbolic, in such a point is so important that if we are not able to make understandable to our contemporaries that we speak symbolically when we use such language, they will rightly turn away from us, as people who still live in absurdities and superstitions."

Paul Tillich

The Nature of Religious Language

There is a real problem with promulgating Christian spirituality: most people take the easy approach to religion. I don't mean this to sound harsh, because it is a natural human tendency to take the easiest approach to anything. If we didn't, there would not be washing machines and chain saws.

There are at least two easy approaches to Christianity: accepting it as you were taught and rejecting it as absurd.

Accepting Christianity as you were taught means that you received your beliefs already

digested, like a young bird receives food from its mother. It's easy because you don't have to think, contemplate, or concern yourself with the details. The problem with this approach is that it is unsustainable for most people. This is why we are losing the battle for "hearts and minds".

Rejecting Christianity out-of-hand is also easy, because this is probably what you have been taught in government schools and via the prevailing attitudes in society. You've probably been taught that Christians are always the big meanies that come into a place and force their beliefs on the nice indigenous folks that were just living peaceful lives gathering berries. Although we all seem to agree in principle that you can't reasonably condemn an entire group for the actions of a few, it doesn't stop people from doing it where Christians are involved.

The uncomfortable truth is that, most probably, the Christianity you've been taught *is* absurd. It's unsustainable, and losing Christianity because of this could be the death knell of individual human rights. While I disagree with some of what (now deceased former bishop) Spong has written, the title of one of his books says it all: *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*.

But the deeper meaning of Christianity is hard to "get" and thus people are reticent to put in the effort to understand it. All of the information is

there, and has been for centuries. If you want to understand it, all you have to do is look.

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

Matthew 7:7-8.

Why God necessarily exists

"I have explained the nature and properties of God. I have shown that he necessarily exists, that he is one: that he is, and acts solely by the necessity of his own nature; that he is the free cause of all things, and how he is so; that all things are in God, and so depend on him, that without him they could neither exist nor be conceived; lastly, that all things are predetermined by God, not through his free will or absolute fiat, but from the very nature of God or infinite power."

Baruch Spinoza

Ethics

Most people have not read anything by Spinoza, or even heard of him, which is a shame. If people have heard at all of arguments for the existence of God, they are probably familiar with the five arguments of Thomas Aquinas. Spinoza lays out a very detailed argument for the necessity of the existence of God, but while he is at it, he redefines the concept of God in western civilization.

God, according to Spinoza, is "substance," which meant something different in the 17th century than it does today. By the fourth sentence of the "Ethics", Spinoza gets right to the definition:

“By substance, I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself; in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception.”

*Baruch Spinoza
Ethics*

Or, as God is quoted as saying in Exodus: *“I am that I am.”* According to this view, God is existence itself. Therefore, *God necessarily exists.*

This may not be the “standard model” (millennia old) notion of God, but many people find it difficult to accept the notion of God as a bearded old man on a cloud. However, radical skepticism leads nowhere but to nihilism and an unhappy life. Just read up a bit on the life of David Hume.

The fact is, you have to start with some basic premises, or you have no values⁹. And without values, you have no direction. Without direction, you are literally aimless. People who are aimless are usually lost.

What’s the worst thing that might happen if you stop doubting and accept the one basic premise that God necessarily exists?

⁹ “Having values” means “having things that you value” which is the basic emotive psychological force.

A false dilemma

According to mythological thinking, God has his domicile in heaven... The meaning is quite clear. In a crude manner it expresses the idea that God is beyond the world, that He is transcendent. The thinking which is not yet capable of forming the abstract idea of transcendence expresses its intention in the category of space; the transcendent God is imagined as being at an immense spacial distance, far above the world.

*Rudolf Bultmann
Jesus Christ and Mythology*

A false dilemma is a type of informal fallacy in which something is falsely claimed to be an “either/or” situation, when in fact there is at least one additional option. A really good example is this statement¹⁰:

“I don’t believe in a bearded old man in the sky, so I guess I am an atheist.”

whomever

It’s imperative for any 21st century adult who wants to believe in God to move away from the notion of the bearded old man in the sky. If you understand that God is transcendent and therefore beyond words, you can begin to

¹⁰ This might also be an example of a “straw man” argument.

understand why there is so much mythological language used when discussing the experience of God. People use language to communicate, and yet language – as a social construct – can only contain signs and symbols that represent collective experience.

So, we end up with such ideas as God being a “bearded old man up in the sky” – a father figure. This makes sense if the source is from a patriarchal society where the oldest male is always the one in charge. (You may note that I avoid as much as possible using any pronouns when I refer to God.)

What other choice is there? Of course, silence is an option. Many of the church fathers and mothers chose silence, embodying Wittgenstein's famous admonition that “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” However, this can also be seen to be a somewhat selfish approach, like finding candy and hiding it in your room so you don't have to share. It is the age-old conundrum of the mystic.

The next time someone laughs at you for believing in “some bearded old man in the sky” I suggest that you “shake the dust from your feet” (Matthew 10:14) and move on.

When Jesus became Christ

And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him.

Mark 1:9-10

The Gospel of Mark was the earliest Gospel written of the 4 canonical Gospels. As such, it's generally accepted that it is the closest to "original" Christianity to which we have access. The reason why this Gospel opens right away on the "scene" where Jesus is baptized by John is because *this is the moment that Jesus becomes Christ.*

I know that this will seem like blasphemy to almost everyone who reads it. We're taught that "the Son" / Christ / Jesus has existed since the beginning, along with "the Father" and "the Spirit." However, *this was not the original belief of most Christians.*

Now, I could go all Dan Brown¹¹ on you with an explanation of church councils and emperors and politically driven religious decision-making, but all of that is available in longer and more

¹¹ Author of *The DaVinci Code*. It's a fun read, but filled with half-correct information.

detailed formats than these essays¹². Instead, I invite you to consider this with an open heart and an open mind.

The description of what happened to Jesus when he was baptized very clearly describes a moment of mystical enlightenment. Literally, when Jesus is baptized, the Spirit of God descends upon and into him. He now becomes an anointed one, a *Christ*.

Just think for a moment upon the convoluted explanations that are necessary to try to make sense of the Trinity:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father ... who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, and was made man ... And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.
Nicene Creed 381 CE. modification

¹² I suggest *How Jesus Became God* by Bart Erhman

Three gods, one God; all equal, but not the same, but of the same essence, sometimes timeless and sometimes in-time. In the original Nicene Creed, the Holy Spirit (Ghost) gets a one-line mention at the end: *And we believe in the Holy Ghost*. That's it.

All of these machinations seemed at the time to be necessary to explain the depictions in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles – but we must keep in mind that this was a time when most people were not trained to think in abstract terms. Thus, there needed to be a concrete explanation for the relationship between God, Jesus and this mysterious “Paraclete” (helper) that shows up every once in a while in the form of a dove or a fireball.

What if all of this happened today? What if, when Jesus says “The kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21), *we actually believed him*? What if we stripped away all the trappings of the “orthodox” view of Jesus's message and instead took a fresh look? What if Jesus found communion with God in the act of being baptized, then withdrew to the desert to deal with his new-found revelations? What if the Holy Spirit is just a name for a deep relationship with God? What if *everyone* can be anointed?

Before you run away in horror, let's look at actual New Testament quotes which support this notion:

*(Jesus said) I am going to send you what
my Father has promised; but stay in the city
until you have been clothed with power from
on high.
Luke 24:49*

*The wind blows wherever it pleases. You
hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it
comes from or where it is going. So it is with
everyone born of the Spirit.
John 3:8*

*That they all may be one; as thou, Father,
art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be
one in us.
John 17:21*

*Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father
which is in heaven is perfect.
Matthew 5:48*

These quotes come from the “orthodox”-
approved scriptures; even more evidence exists
that this was Jesus's original meaning in the
*apocrypha*¹³.

¹³ The apocrypha are a series of Christian written works
which did not make the “cut” when it came to choosing the
official scriptures. There are at least a few dozen of these.

“Your truth”, “my truth” means “no truth”

If someone is making a sensible remark by saying, “That is true for me but not for you,” then the person must mean simply, “I believe it, but you do not.” Truth is not relative in the sense that something can be true for you but not for me.

“Truth”, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

It's scary how many people now use the phrases “your truth” and “my truth” – especially when it comes out of the mouths of politicians. These are the very same people that sneer at so-called “science deniers” and yet, evidently, they don't agree with the very core belief of science (that objective facts exist).

From what I can tell, this movement started with Schopenhauer's 1818/1844 book *The World as Will and Idea* (please don't bother to read this book unless you're tracing the history of dumb ideas). The very first sentence of this book is “The world is my idea.” Contrast this with the first sentence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*: “The world is everything that is the case.”

But this really got rolling in the second half of the 20th century due to the quite reasonable work of Wittgenstein, Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard *which was then adopted by a bunch of people who did*

not fully understand their work. In fact, the place where you encounter this postmodernist radical relativism most is not in philosophy departments, but in teacher's colleges. A very reasonable train of thought has come to mean the equivalent of "anything is true if you say it often enough and loud enough." Now we've had two generations of teachers who swallowed this notion and then regurgitated it back to their own students.

Postmodernism is the enemy of truth. Even if you are an atheist and believe in nothing but "hard science" then you believe that truth is not subjective. So, to be a scientism-ist and a postmodernist is self-contradictory.

The most radical postmodernists do not distinguish acceptance as true from being true; they claim that the social negotiations among influential people "construct" the truth. The truth, they argue, is not something lying outside of human collective decisions; it is not, in particular, a "reflection" of an objective reality. Or, to put it another way, to the extent that there is an objective reality it is nothing more nor less than what we say it is. We human beings are, then, the ultimate arbiters of what is true. Consensus is truth. The "subjective" and the "objective" are rolled into one inseparable compound.
"Truth", Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

“Consensus is truth” – doesn't this sound like an Orwellian nightmare?

The single best counterexample I know for postmodernist radical relativism is the Boxer Rebellion, where the “Boxers” (so called because they were students of a charismatic martial arts master) were “convinced they were invulnerable to foreign weapons.” Putting aside who was right politically in this conflict, it quickly became apparent that – although thousands of people believed that Western weapons could not hurt them, they were very very wrong. The summary execution of all those suspected of being Boxers ensued. You cannot talk your way around a bullet.

By that same token, it's important to remember that having faith in God or Jesus does not instill you with supernatural powers either. The only power you have is power over your own beliefs, attitudes and actions.

We would all like to live in a world where people have magic powers – just look at the popularity of Harry Potter and the Marvel superhero movies. But, *wishing doesn't make it so*. And neither does consensus or political posturing.

Saint Paul was not a Christian

And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all.

I Corinthians 15:28

If you have to believe in the doctrine of the Trinity to be a Christian (as we are told by the Nicene Creed), then Paul (Saul of Tarsus) was not a Christian.

The above quote is just one of many which clearly puts Jesus/Christ in a subordinate position to God, which is not possible if Jesus/Christ is himself God.

I'm writing Jesus/Christ here when referencing Paul because a reading of Paul's letters indicates that Paul was way more interested in the *concept* of Christ than in the *personage* of Jesus of Nazareth. A close reading of Paul, along with Acts, indicates that Paul was a Greek-trained Jew who had either a mystical experience or a psychotic breakdown. In either case, he was almost entirely disinterested in what Jesus actually said and did, and was only using the nascent Jesus movement to promulgate his newfound worldview.

Jesus of Nazareth was a convenient vehicle for Paul to utilize to spread his doctrine, much of which had little to nothing to do with Jesus himself. It's a way easier "sell" to claim that someone else is divine than to claim that you yourself are. So, he inserted into the mouth of Jesus/Christ those ideas that he had decided on anyway.

I mention that Paul was "Greek trained" because at the time any Greek educated person would automatically have been steeped in Greek philosophy – especially Plato and the Stoics. This reading makes way more sense than the tortured and convoluted interpretation one has to bear in order to get the Christianity of the Nicene Creed out of the writings of Paul. This also explains why Paul was more comfortable preaching to the "pagans" than to the Jews.

Paul won the "marketing battle" for early Christianity, which is why his writings dominate the New Testament, but he never met Jesus (at least in Jesus's earthly life) and he clearly was at odds with the actual disciples of Jesus.

Try to consider the life and teachings of Jesus without wearing "Paul colored glasses."

Christian mysticism

A Christianity which is not basically mystical must become either a political ideology or a mindless fundamentalism.

Alan Watts

Behold the Spirit

There was one well-known mystic who wished to help others achieve the union with God that he had reached; and he went from town to town trying to explain those things which had been revealed to him, saying such outrageous things as: "The disciple is not above his master: but every one that is perfect shall be as his master." and "The kingdom of God is within you" and "I and my Father (God) are one." As you are no doubt aware, he was executed for saying these things.

Shortly after Jesus was killed for saying these things, it became okay for Jesus, but **certainly not okay for anyone else** to say. The line of thinking which became mainstream Christianity went essentially this way: (1) no human can be divine; (2) well, okay – Jesus was, but **no one else**. As usually happens, people began to focus on the person and not on the message. People found it easier to believe **in** Jesus than to **believe** Jesus. Was Jesus a Christian? Did he accept himself as his own personal savior? I don't think so. In a

ludicrous historical accident, the religion **of** Jesus became the religion **about** Jesus.

What we today call Christianity was in essence invented by Paul. Paul was to Jesus as Dr. Watson was to Sherlock Holmes – he was the press agent, the salesman. If not for Paul, it is not hard to see that Jesus would be as little-known as Simon Magus is today. Both led small religious groups which hinged on certain magical powers each was supposed to have possessed. Each asked their followers to give up their possessions and families to follow him, and each expressed a direct and special relationship with God. Both Jesus and Simon Magus were what we would today call cult leaders.

But why did Jesus's message survive? Certainly, marketing played a large part; but there was also a core message to Christianity which found ready acceptance during the first few centuries A.D. This message, which was a combination of Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Neo-Platonism, was tied together with a thin thread of actual facts about Jesus, and turned into a religion which the world was ready to accept. The question of whether it was accepted because people were ready for it or if it was created as a belief that people were ready to accept is a toss-up.

To see why the world was ready for Christianity, it is convenient to think of a

civilization as going through stages of life much as a person does. There is infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, old age, and death. Now apply these stages to what we call Western European civilization, which was born during the first centuries CE, experienced childhood during what we call the “Dark Ages,” entered puberty with the Renaissance, and matured over the last several centuries. Western Civilization is now entering its old age, when thoughts turn to mortality and subsequently to spirituality. We can see this in the current resurgence of interest in matters of religion. The number of people who describe themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious” exemplifies how people are now searching for God, perhaps in all the wrong places.

But what does this have to do with the birth of Christianity? Christianity was born during the death of the Greco/Roman Civilization. It hit the right cords with the mood of the people at the time – it was the right answer at the right time.

It’s important to note here that just because I think Christianity survived because of proper timing, doesn’t mean that I discount its spiritual value. I used to, but I don’t anymore.

The problem is that when we say “give me that old time religion” we are talking about the *adolescent* version of Christianity, most of which is of no use to a mature civilization. What we

need is a return to a Christianity of a mature culture – that of the first several centuries CE. It was during this time that the concept of the incarnation – that is, the concept of Christ, was developed. The term Christ, which means “anointed one” is an adjective, like “carpenter”. “Jesus the Christ” means “Jesus the Anointed One”, much like the phrase “Jesus the Carpenter” would mean. Jesus was *a* Christ, not the *only* one, any more than he was the only carpenter. The incarnation of God in man was *exemplified* by Jesus, not *defined* by him. By deifying Jesus, we avoid having to live up to his example.

That Jesus did not believe himself to be the only Christ is beyond question. During the last supper “scene” in the Gospel of John, Jesus is praying to God and says (of his disciples) “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us.” In Mathew he is quoted as saying: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” And we all know that “the Kingdom of God is within you.”

Accepting the incarnation as an historical event is one thing; understanding its symbolic content is another; living it’s meaning is yet another. The Catholic Mass was developed to celebrate the possibility of union with God through the use of symbols and metaphor. Seen from the standpoint of an adolescent, of course the original masses look like hogwash; but seen

with the eyes of a mature adult, the richness of the symbolism is evident. It always surprises me that someone who can carry on a conversation about the aliens, ghosts, or astrology with a straight face can also dismiss the symbolism of a Catholic Mass as ludicrous. Viewed as objective reality, a Catholic Mass *is* ludicrous; but viewed as a symbol of something much deeper, it is not.

“...the (symbolism) is like a nut – a shell containing hidden fruit, a hard, concrete symbol embracing a spiritual truth. To extract the truth the nut must be broken – with reverence and respect, because without the shell’s protection the fruit would never have grown. The task of Protestantism was to break the shell, though because the Protestants did not fully realize this and did not know about the fruit inside, the job has been inexpertly and irreverently done. They have hammered away with gusto; they have cracked the entire surface; they have taken whole chunks of the shell right off, and, having thrown some of them away, have taken the rest into a corner and there tried to piece them together in a different form. But the fruit has not interested them. Protestantism has simply broken up the system of symbolism, reduced it and re-formed it, and, in these later times, has practically discarded the whole thing. The time has come for us to attend to the long-neglected fruit.”

Alan Watts

Behold the Spirit

To serve the spiritual needs of a mature civilization, a religion must be equally mature. Just as we outgrow the use for the religious symbols of our own childhood – Santa Claus and bogeymen – a society as a whole can outgrow its “traditional” religious symbols. The danger is when we outgrow these symbols but find no replacements. For our current culture, religion must necessarily be mystical. As Alan Watts predicted over seventy years ago: “A Christianity which is not basically mystical must become either a political ideology or a mindless fundamentalism.” And this is what has happened.

A religion which does not seek union with the fundamental driving force of the universe is not a religion at all – but simply, and disappointingly, only a philosophy. And a philosophy is woefully inadequate as a basis for living a life. No one ever charged into battle yelling “Give me Kant epistemology or give me death!” because a philosophy lacks emotive power. The word *emotive* has the same root as motor – the power to make something move. Religions *move* people, philosophies *interest* people.

Fundamentalist leaders know intuitively that religion is much more powerful than philosophy, and they make use of this fact every day in their national broadcasts. They fulfill a need, however poorly. Others flock to various concepts under

the banner of “neo-evolution” or “integral beliefs”. All of this is very sad to me, since the answer is and has been under our noses the whole time.

“Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”

Mathew 15:14

By thinking that we have exhausted the substance of Christianity simply because almost no one teaches it the right way is truly a sin. There is a great deal of power in Christianity, specifically Christian mysticism, if we open ourselves to it. If we think even for a moment that we should discard two millennia of spiritual inspiration because we didn’t like our childhood priest or minister, we run the risk of throwing out the baby with the holy water.

The mystic must either go his own way and leave theology alone, or else he must be forever wrestling with the adaptation of experience to theology and theology to experience, forever tempering his language with caution and taking care not to be a heretic.

Alan Watts, Behold The Spirit

Why Wittgenstein?

Some readers of this book may wonder why I quote Ludwig Wittgenstein so often. This essay explains why.

Although no thinker exists totally outside of his environment, Ludwig Wittgenstein came close. Originally schooled in engineering, he entered philosophy by way of formal logic and mathematics. His work is based to a great extent on introspection and rigorous analysis, and his analysis of language set the intellectual climate for much of the twentieth century and resonates today. He is generally considered to be the most influential philosopher of the 20th century – pretty good for a guy few people have heard of!

One of Wittgenstein's most basic concepts is that language is a “game” in which we all participate; it is a social phenomenon which can be described but not explained.

Grammar is not accountable to any reality. It is grammatical rules that determine meaning (constitute it) and so they themselves are not answerable to any meaning and to that extent are arbitrary.

*Ludwig Wittgenstein
Philosophical Grammar*

Because of this aspect of language, we begin to blur the distinction between things-in-themselves and the words which represent those things. We think that the words floating about in our minds have *Meaning* (with a capital M), separate and distinct from us thinking them. However, Wittgenstein points out:

When I think in language, there aren't "meanings" going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions: the language is itself the vehicle of thought.

Ludwig Wittgenstein
Philosophical Investigations

According to Wittgenstein, many, if not most, of our philosophic problems arise from the misleading nature of language. There are at least ten ways that language misleads us:

*Suggesting misleading pictures; surface similarities concealing deeper differences; suggested analogies that can't be carried out; leading us to try to say what cannot be said; entangling us in our own rules; conflicts between different uses of words; creating out-and-out illusions; giving incorrect accounts of uses of words; inventing a myth of meaning; counting some useless thing as a proposition...
Being thus misled, we find ourselves in the grip of pathologies of language, which lay hold on us as powerfully as any mental or physical disorder.*

Finch, H.L.

Wittgenstein (book by this title)

In the *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein states that everything that can be said can be said clearly, but not everything can be said. Specifically, direct experience cannot be coded into language. To see why this is, consider the sentence “I went to the store” – this sentence is fraught with generalizations and lack of detail. Not only the obvious things such as what store and what time, but much more subtle things such as the subtle smell of bakery items or the feel of the receipt on your fingers. Direct experience means all of the sense data you experience, most of which cannot be captured in words¹⁴.

Thus, the very essence of our experience of life cannot be communicated.

What, then, is communicated when we use language? Language is a series of learned abbreviations and approximations which can never fully capture the entire contextual web associated with what we mean when we speak. These abbreviations, approximations, or *codes* are learned during the learning of our first language. For many of us, especially monolinguals, this code turns in on itself and becomes the very medium of thought which is thus constrained by the coding system we have learned. It is upon reaching this point in his thinking that Wittgenstein (1922), thinking that he had

¹⁴ As a quick thought experiment, describe the smell of coffee without using the word “coffee.”

resolved the issue, wrote: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."

In the end, Wittgenstein gives us a solid, logic-based, argument for the necessity of mysticism.

There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest.

They are what is mystical.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

*This is the end of the sample material from the full book. If you're interested in more, please visit **Christianity2020.com** where you can see more material, or just order the full book on Amazon.*

May the Spirit of God be with you!