

Jesus for Most People

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Acknowledgments

Mike Polioudakis alone is responsible for any errors or silliness.

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Jesus for Most People Brief Contents

PART 1: Basic Statements

PART 2: General Background

PART 3: Hebrews, Jews, and Christians

PART 4: Jesus, and the Early Church

PART 5: Evolution, Morality, and God PART 6: Essays

Jesus for Most People Detailed Contents

Pages are given for each chapter separately only. Cumulative pages are not given.

	Introduction	
PART		
0.00	Introduction	12
PART 1	Basic Statements	
1.01	Background	11
1.02	Basic Beliefs	8
1.03	Continuation of Basic Beliefs	7
1.04	Religious Ideals and Practical Reality	13
1.05	Following Jesus in Fact	5
1.06	Intent, Mostly-Is, and All-About	10
PART 2	General Background	
2.01	Avoiding Common Mistakes	34
2.02	Natural, Popular, and Local Common Religion	14
2.03	Some Terms and Ideas	11
2.04	Some Alternative Religious Stances	14
PART 3	Hebrews, Jews, and Christians	
3.00	Introduction	2
3.01	Hebrews and Jews 1: Basics	20
3.02	Hebrews and Jews 2: Prophets	9
3.03	Hebrews and Jews 3: The Time of Jesus	20
3.04	Christian Variations 1: Classical to Protestant	16
3.05	Christian Variations 2: Enlightenment to Now	16
PART 4	Jesus, and the Early Church	
4.01	About Jesus	15
4.02	Illustrating Points about Jesus	18
4.03	Illustrating Additional Topics about Jesus	19
4.04	Early Church 1: Overall	22
4.05	Early Church 2: Groups and Directions	19
4.06	Early Church 3: Growth	9

4.07	Selected Illustrations from the New Testament	13
4.08	Paul	13
4.09	Jesus' Intent, Mostly-Was, and All-About	10
4.10	Inside and Outside	5
PART 5	Evolution, Morality, and God	
5.01	Moral Atheism	11
5.02	God and Nature	9
5.03	Evolutionary Precursors to Morality	8
5.04	The Evolution of Religion and Morality	10
5.05	Moral Variations and Moral Logic	13
5.06	Implications, Especially about Jesus	11
PART 6	Essays	
6.01	Do-Gooding, Working, Citizenship, and Crusading	10
6.02	Human Nature and Some Sacraments	13
6.03	Relation to God: Submission and Prayer	14
6.04	Golden Rule, What to Do, and Other Topics	8
6.05	Contradictions	6
6.06	Justifiable Rebellion	7
6.07	Hard Cases	6
6.08	Jesus, Religion, and the State	11
6.09	Abortion	18
6.10	Gay Marriage	8
	Bibliography	20

Introduction

This book is about the message of Jesus. This book is for people who believe in a higher power and think Jesus came from it. You do not have to believe in formal Christianity. This book is for people who think God used the Big Bang to create the universe and used evolution to make people, for people who are religious but not formally so, or who are spiritual but not religious. This book helps people feel better about what they believe and about what they do out of belief, resist the general attitude of looking down on belief, and resist bad ideologies such as militant atheism and religious fundamentalism.

You are reading the revised Internet version from 2012. It contains background material on religion in general, Judaism, the early Church, and formal Christianity. The background material is separated out. You can read as much or as little as you want of it without losing the thread. If you skip all the background material, you will get a short focused book about Jesus.

This book was not written by a religious scholar but by an ordinary person who thought it was time to figure out Jesus. I needed some facts. I had to see who wrote the Bible and how they “spun” the Bible to suit their needs. I wanted to know if we could take Jesus as a prophet or if we had to believe in him as God. I reread the Bible and read books about the Bible, Jesus, the early Church, Christianity, and other religions. Eventually I understood that it is better to do as Jesus taught than to ponder theology. This book gives what I discovered. Jesus’ message comes from his stories and from a few simple principles such as the Golden Rule. The message is easy to understand. It is hard to fully achieve in real life but we can all approach it and we can all do better. We cannot run a nation strictly according to his teachings but we can use them as ideals for governing and can use them to make the state run better.

Most people believe in something higher than themselves but these days are not sure what that higher power is, what relation Jesus might have to the higher power, and what they are supposed to do about it. To deny your belief makes you conflicted inside, false to yourself, to other people, and to the higher power. You can never find a way to figure out Jesus or what to do. You have to find a way to live by your belief or you will hurt yourself and probably hurt other people too. We need reasonable ideas about religion and about what to do. This book might be useful to moderate atheists, non-Christians who believe in a higher power including the Dharma and Tao, all believers who hold an open mind, and “red letter” Christians who stress the words and acts of Jesus. This book might not be useful to strong Christians or strong atheists. They might gain something from it but I do not want to engage them in argument.

Summary.

I believe in a personal God, the God of the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition. That is the “higher power” for me. I also understand and respect the ideas of other religions. You do not have to share my idea of the higher power to benefit from this book.

I do not think Jesus is God but I do not worry about it. Even if he is God, Jesus cares far more that you follow his teachings than that you worship him as God. If Jesus is God, but you do not think he is God, and you follow Jesus’ teachings anyway, you will do fine. If you worship him as God but do not follow his teachings, you will do badly.

When I was a child, we used to tease each other by asking: "If God told you to kill your annoying sibling, would you do it?" In other words, if God told you to do something bad, would you do it? The only acceptable answer is: no. We do what is right and good. We don't always know what is right and good. If we think God said something is good, and his message does not contradict what we already know is good, then we are likely to do it. Jesus' message gives us a clearer idea of what is good. If we get that, we don't have to worry about other things. If we are more likely to follow Jesus' message because we think Jesus is God, then fine, that is how people work; but the best reason to do it is because we can see what Jesus said is good.

Jesus called on us to work hard to build a better world. We have to use what talents we have to build a better world. Be proactive. Include as many people as we can in the better world. We cannot only look after our own interests. Put yourself in the place of other people. Follow the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have the do unto you". We cannot be perfect and God does not expect that.

You do not have to do anything crazy. You should not stand at the water cooler and grab people to force the "good news" down their throat.

You do have to accept what you believe and act honestly. You can carry on with business or a profession but you cannot hurt people without strong reason and you cannot hurt people for gain. You can serve as a lawyer, police officer, or soldier but you have to be honest and you have to carry out moral policies. As a politician, you have to work hard for what is best and right. You cannot use party dogma as a cover to gain power. The best way to preach is through example, as did Saint Francis.

Try to have a relation with God. Try to pray. Don't worry if you can't pray. Do volunteer work. Swing a hammer for Habitat. Volunteer for the Peace Corps when you retire. Be open to other people who also believe. Make a friend. Adopt an animal. Adopt a child who is older than an infant. Support a homeless family. Give to charities like the Red Cross, United Way, or Salvation Army. Help people face to face. Pay somebody's rent for a month or a year. Put somebody through college even if they are not an A student. Give panhandlers a meal. Give them money even if they might spend it on booze. Understand the economic, social, political, and ecological issues of our times. Be a good citizen. Use politics to create a better society when it is the right tool. Stop using politics when it is wrong. Do not use the state as your moral agent. Do not use moral activism as a cover for self-justification and self-gratification. Never forget the poor and downtrodden. Use your life in service to the law, medicine, science, or good governing. Do not be afraid to live graciously but do not get seduced by consumption. Write books like this one if it makes you feel better and you think it might help.

Against and Not Against.

It is easy to say we should follow Jesus without worrying whether he is God; but that plan is too simplistic. Most people who follow Jesus are standard Christians in a standard church. Most churches take as their main mission to worship Jesus as God. The New Testament is still the best source of information about Jesus, church members wrote it, and they worshipped Jesus as God. We can make up our minds about the Christian church only by learning about it. We can only learn about Jesus by learning from people who believe Jesus is God and believe their primary duty is to worship him. You cannot just read books like this one or just fling out ideas about Jesus-as-moral-teacher. At least sometime, you have to read the Bible and read what standard Christians wrote. We have to understand standard Christian ideas so we do not fight uselessly with standard

Christians, we get the best from them, and we give something good in return. We cannot understand Jesus without seeing how he got to be God in their eyes. We have to appreciate the reasonableness of church doctrine for its time and appreciate the good that standard Christians do. We have to see how the teachings of the church helped to preserve Jesus' moral message. To follow Jesus' ideas, you have to be confident in your own mind about what you think of Jesus as a person, moral teacher, prophet, and as God or not God; and to do that, you have to go through the standard church at least a little.

On the other hand, you cannot spend years studying church history and theology just so you can make up your mind or so you can argue with zealots. You need a basic idea of the issues, where to read more when you want it, and when to stop. That is what this book is for.

Standard Christianity.

I do not debunk standard Christianity. That is not what this book is about. Standard Christianity is truly great. Standard Christians do a lot of good, and I will not hinder that. Rather than argue if Jesus really fed a large crowd with a few magic fish, we should give non-magical real tin cans of food to the hungry. If you like to argue, and do no harm, then theology can be fun. But don't let arguing get in the way and don't use it to hurt anybody. If you already go to church, and the dogma is not too bad, then you should probably continue going.

Spiritual Mistakes.

This book does defend reasonable belief against some hurtful errors of modern faith. While guarding against mistakes, I sometimes argue against standard Christianity; but I do not intend to argue it away. Some large mistakes:

- "All you need is to believe in Jesus as God. The main duty of a Christian is to worship Jesus as God". Too often, Christians merely go to church or "believe in Jesus" without doing what he wants. Some Christians substitute "a personal relation with Jesus" for doing what he wants. Belief in Jesus as God can get in the way of doing what he wants. The most important duty for a follower of Jesus is to do what he wants.

- "Religion is not about doing good. Even non-Christians do good. You can never do enough good to satisfy God, justify yourself, and save yourself. You have to force yourself to believe in Jesus as God. If you do not believe in Jesus then you will go to hell no matter how good you are or what you do. If you are not a member of a legitimate apostolic Christian church, then you will go to hell." Hell or heaven is not for people to decide. Anybody, or any church, that says so usurps the role of God. God decides. God treats confused would-be do-gooders such as myself better than he treats staunch believers who cause trouble, do not help other people, and do not make the world a better place. It is not about feeling certain that you are justified, saved, or going to heaven; it is about trusting God enough to leave that to God, and then acting on Jesus' teachings as best you can.

- "I can justify myself, save myself, satisfy God, and go to heaven by crusading in some way such as against abortion or for Gay rights". You do not need to justify yourself and, in fact, you probably cannot justify yourself. You do a lot of harm when you crusade to make yourself feel good. People make themselves feel good by finding a cause without thinking through the merits of the cause and without thinking through their motives. People think this way even when their church doctrine clearly says they cannot, on their own, achieve

justification. Often the damage they do crusading is worse than the hurt they want to heal. People do not think how to best use their energy but primarily about their own satisfaction. Too many people that crusade against abortion want to feel good about themselves more than they really want to help babies and parents. They do not adopt babies or foster unwanted children. They do not promote birth control. Jesus did not want us to justify ourselves. He wanted us to help others and to make the world a better place.

- "Jesus is the god of modern family values". Jesus liked families but he was not the god of modern family values. Family life is not the highest life. Raising a good family does not thereby make you a successful follower of Jesus. Many decent people do not live in stereotyped middle class families. Nearly all religions extol a good family life. If Jesus was special among religious leaders, it was not because he raised family life to the highest ideal. Jesus was about a lot more than families. The family in Jesus' time was not like the idealized nuclear family in our time, and so the decent family that Jesus supported was not what modern people promote. Standard Christians abuse Jesus so as to validate the way of life they want to live and to discredit other ways of life. They use an unrealistic idealized version of the modern nuclear family as their symbol of the only decent way of life. They use this ideal to browbeat people that cannot live up to it such as the poor. Jesus would not like that.

- "We want the upper hand in society. We are the decent people, and the decent people should have the upper hand in society. We deserve recognition and respect more than do other people. Our families are the only real families. To get our power and respect, to protect society, and to protect families, we have to put down people that are not like us. We have the right to put down other people because we are fully decent while they are not." People of all religions and political philosophies, Left and Right, Black and White and Tan, believers and atheists, and PC people, secretly think like this and act accordingly. I do not need to critique this bad error here. Decent people do need to work for a decent society but they have to be careful not to make the mistake of thinking they are the only decent people or they are entitled to the power of the state to use as they will.

- "We will use the state to gain our dominance and recognition. We will use the state to make sure that our decency prevails and that society does not go bad by becoming what we do not want". People argue this way despite the lessons of bad theocracy in the past and despite the ideal separation of church and state.

Militant Atheism and Militant Political Correctness.

I do not defend God against militant atheists and militant politically correct (PC) people. Logically, atheists cannot be defeated. No argument can prove God exists. Believers do not need to prove the God exists to know that we need to act. Believers need to decide what to do as a result of believing.

Many atheists and PC people are true believers in their own ways much like militant Christians. They make the same kinds of mistakes as fervent fundamentalists. They feel that, if we are not on the side of their PC, then we are against them. They need to feel justified and saved in their own way. They find justification in crusading for a cause no matter if they do more harm than good or if they could better use their energy another way. Green trees and baby animals are to PC people what "the not yet born" are to anti-abortion crusaders. In their own eyes, PC people are the only really good decent people. They want recognition and they want the upper hand. They put down people that are not like them or not their allies, despite their ideology of tolerance. They use the state to get what they want.

Thoughtful atheists do make a point that deserves respect, even though on the whole it is wrong: "Religions have caused a lot of damage. Religions are at heart irrational and cannot be rational. Irrationality is more likely to cause harm than good. We need less irrationality. We need more reason. If we got rid of religion, then we would eliminate a big cause of damage. We might lead people to think reasonably and clearly. We do not need religion for morality. Morality stands better on its own without religion. We need more rationality in order to know morality better and to act better. If we got rid of religion, we would be more moral people and better people."

Religion sometimes does cause bad behavior but not nearly as often as atheists think. Far more often, people use religion to excuse bad behavior that they do for other reasons such as poverty and fear of the modern world. Even if we got rid of religion, people would still act badly and still find other excuses, as they did under Communism or as they do with PC.

Whether it is true or not, religion is an evolved deep-seated trait of people like the desires for sweets and sex. Without genetic engineering, we cannot get rid of religion any more than we can get rid of alcohol, art, sex, ice cream, or morality. Both religious and non-religious people need to accept this fact and make the most of it. Rather than worry about proving their religion, religious people need to be clear about what they believe and why they do what they do. Within what they believe, religious people should shape their religion to always serve the good. If non-religious people can serve the good anyway, then fine for them. Most normal people mix religion and morality, and atheists should respect that basic fact of human life. Atheists can help religious people find the true good in religion. If some religious people believe ideas that lead them to do harm, such as religious terrorists, or PC bullies, then all of us have to fight them and we have to show how their ideas are wrong. We need to uproot the underlying causes of acting badly.

Morality can stand alone logically without religion; but they are linked in human nature. So, in real life, we have to think about them together. To get rid of religion we might also have to get rid of morality. Trying to separate religion from morality would cause more damage than shaping religion together with morality.

Avoiding Our Religious Feelings.

Shame about religious belief keeps us from accepting ideas that were reasonable through most of human history such as that God exists. Ordinary normal people feel ashamed to believe. Reading this book will help you to see that ordinary people who believe in God are not alone, our situation is reasonable, and we don't have to feel ashamed. If feeling better makes ordinary people better able to act on their beliefs, that is enough. Here are some reasons why ordinary people feel ashamed to believe in God.

First, we feel anxious because we feel we should do something based on our belief but we do not know what to do. We do not know how committed we have to be and what commitment entails. We might have to do something hard or embarrassing or that could undermine the welfare of our families. Fundamentalists tell us we should act in ways that seem more hurtful than helpful such as not to use birth control or not to wear shorts. Anxiety about what to do is perfectly reasonable, but we have to get over it without doing anything silly. Only very few people have to do anything odd for religion. Very few people are called upon to be Frodo and to throw the Ring of Power into the Lake of Fire. Most people only have to be honest and try hard.

Second, we know that traditional belief does not mesh with the modern world. The miracles of the Bible make

little sense now. We know that the Earth goes around the sun, the world was not made in seven days, Moses did not part the Reed Sea (Red Sea), there are no demons to cast out, there was no Adam and Eve, and people evolved out of a common ancestor with other apes. How do we fit together science and belief?

Third, common moral sense, common practical sense, and official teaching, often do not all coincide, and we do not know what to do about differences. I once saw a martial arts school with the motto, "The Unity of Theory and Practice", but that is hard to achieve. Some social policy, such as welfare, might go along with religious teaching to be kind but the same policy also can undermine religious teaching that stresses personal responsibility. Is the death penalty right or wrong? Should we really forgive child sex molesters and let them back into our community? Is it good to keep a mother who is terminally ill, half-comatose, and suffering on artificial life support when all we have to do is pull the plug? How wrong is abortion?

Fourth, modern academics take jaded atheism for granted. They look down not only at traditional church-goers but also at ordinary people with reasonable belief. Jaded academics make a show of diversity, but, even as they sit through a lecture by a Native American or a Muslim, they ignore the content. It is always chic to snigger at Christians. It is easier to be a "flaming" gay person on campuses than to believe in God. It should not be hard to be either. These "modernistic" attitudes cling to everyone who ever makes it through college whether they know it or not.

Fifth, we are caught between religious zealots and modern jaded non-religious people. The extremes spoil it for all the normal people in the middle. Taking advantage of our confusion, fundamentalists tell us we will go to hell if we do not believe as they do, act as they act, and do as they say. Nonbelievers look at all belief and all talk about religion as crazy fundamentalism. If we only want to bounce our curiosity off a friend, if we only speculate out loud, then non-religious people think we are religious zealots while fundamentalist crazies think either we are one of them or a traitor.

Sixth, people that believe in modern "strange" systems such as New Age make the situation worse. If we do not believe in standard Christianity but do believe in God or in some religion, then many ordinary people think we must be a New Age freak. People think, if I believe in God or in any religion, I have to believe in something silly like "the Force", "the Dark Side", magic crystals, or harmonic virgins.

Seventh, not only academic culture but also modern pop culture, especially rock and roll culture, disdains religion. It is not cool to be religious, any kind of religious, except maybe some wrong notion of a Native American shaman. It is hard to be both religious and a rebel, even though some rockers have tried it, and some famous bands, such as U2, depend on it. The hero in a detective novel goes to church less often than he-she falls in love. Many cool people do feel the need for some kind of religion but cannot accept any common formal religions, and so reject all religion. Once long ago, John Lennon and Ringo Starr left Paul McCartney and George Harrison in India, and then eventually the band split up.

Eighth, modern life does not support religion. More than ever before in history, people now can avoid dealing with hard questions. People can find perpetual distraction in chasing sex, getting wasted, watching another DVD, watching TV, buying another toy, using social media, gaming, crusading for a cause, being cool, being in the vanguard, chasing business, or being a successful professional. It can be hard to search out what we really believe and then act on it instead of just doing what gives us a jolt.

Other Similar Books.

The last hundred years have seen huge advances in scholarship about the Bible, the real life of Jesus, Jews in the time of Jesus, and the early Church. Scholars have written outstanding popular books that make some of their work accessible to a general audience. Their books go some way toward meeting the needs of the intended readers of this book but do not quite get there.

Most of those books were written by former standard Christians who still follow Jesus but who realize that all the teachings of the Church could not be literally true. To find what is meaningful, they sift tirelessly through data and dogmas. They engage in a running argument with Christian orthodoxy and the Church. In response, standard Christians do their own sifting to prove that all orthodoxy is true, and literally true. Scholars use evidence about facts to argue indirectly about ideologies. This book is not like those books because it does not sift through facts or engage in a running argument for or against orthodoxy. Instead it goes directly after the message. It takes up facts only enough so we can clear our heads to focus on the message. It does not argue about facts as a way of indirectly arguing about ideologies.

Below the surface of Christian scholarship lies a long battle: “Standard Christianity is a seamless whole that stands or falls on the least detail. If there is any flaw in any detail of the standard story of Jesus and the Church, then all of standard Christianity goes down, and we do not have to pay attention to the Church, Jesus, or his message. To defend Jesus, his status as God, and the Church, we have to defend all of standard Christianity in every detail. If we can prove lots of little details then we also prove the big assertions.”

Even in popular books, scholars take a lot of space to argue about details such as whether Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. Critics of standard Christianity think they have debunked the whole thing if they find contradictions in the various stories of the empty tomb. Critics think they have debunked it all because they find a non-canonical old gospel, such as of Thomas, a gospel that portrays a non-orthodox vision of Jesus and God. Standard Christians rationalize to wriggle out of contradictions, and their squirming casts doubt on important issues such as whether early Christians called Jesus “Lord” and really meant “God”. Even superb scholars who want only to investigate facts find that they operate in a war zone and are forced to take sides.

So we get a lot of words and details without being sure what they imply for the message of Jesus and for our own actions. Instead of many words and facts, we need a few facts and a sense of the core message apart from arguments about standard Christianity as a whole. We need a sense of what facts are relevant: what facts might support the message of Jesus and what facts might contradict it? If Jesus really was not resurrected, does that negate his message? No, it does not. If Jesus was celibate yet did not like divorce, does his stance confirm or deny his whole message? It is not very important. If Jesus did not ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, does that mean he was not resurrected and we can ignore his message? That fact is irrelevant. Did Jesus say most of the Sermon on the Mount? Likely he did, but not exactly as reported in the Gospel of Matthew. Both Jesus’ sermon and Mathew’s treatment are important. As much as we can, we need to figure out what Jesus really said. We need to see Jesus apart from the Church without forgetting that Jesus founded the precursor to the Church.

Distinctiveness of This Book.

This book differs from other similar books thus:

First, I am like my intended readers. I am not a priest, Biblical scholar, scholar of Christianity or Judaism, fundamental Christian, staunch rationalist, or politically correct person. I believe in God but not in the doctrine of any particular church. I would like to do things on the basis of my belief but I am not always sure what to do.

Second, I am a scientist. I am an anthropologist whose main roots are in modern evolutionary theory, called “Darwinism” or “sociobiology”. My belief in science is about as basic as my belief in God and morality. In this book, I give the background to understand arguments about science, morality, and religion. One part of this book is about the evolution of the capacity for morality.

Third, I look at the facts and the recent scholarship without worrying about standard Christianity as a whole. I summarize material from recent scholarship not with concern about implications for or against standard Christianity but with concern for what Jesus was all about.

Fourth, this book prepares the reader to go on to other writings, both other popular books and some scholarly books. This book prepares you for books that are sympathetic to standard Christianity and critical of it. This book prepares you to read about scientific atheism and to read about the evolution of morality. After you read this book you should be able to work through the controversies with less bias and without fear of being prematurely swayed.

Qualifications and Motives.

I am not a priest. I am not a professor who specializes in religious studies. I have no particular qualification for writing this book other than some useful experience, lifelong interest in the issues generally, and recent intense study of these issues in particular. For the aims of this book, I think not being a specialist is an advantage. I cannot read Hebrew or Aramaic. I can read a little Greek because my parents spoke it but I can barely struggle through small passages of the New Testament. I have read the Old and New Testaments through several times in English translations but I do not read the Bible every day. I like other religions. I have read the basics of all major religions and gained a lot from them. I have lived among academics, artists, various Christians, American West Coast Taoists, Buddhist farmers, Chinese who honor the family, and Muslim fishers. I have studied the anthropology of religion. Hopefully, all that is enough for this book.

I have one unusual motive for writing this book. Soon the world will change as drastically as science fiction predicts. We really will have bottle babies, genetic engineering, nanites, and intelligent machines. Men and women will not need each other to reproduce. The world will have twelve billion people, all wanting to have many material things, and all wanting to reproduce some more. America will have a billion people. The planet cannot give all of us all that we will want. Neither traditional religion nor political correctness can deal with these changes. We will get into a lot of trouble if we do not prepare ourselves. We need a good religious and moral foundation. This book alone cannot provide that foundation but it can help if it gets decent normal people to think about what they really believe.

Book Plan and Reading Advice.

The first part of this book gives a synopsis of the issues and a synopsis of my beliefs.

The second part is background on religion in general and on mistakes to avoid. You can skip much of this part if you have the background.

The third part is background on two topics: first, Judaism and Palestine in the time of Jesus; and, second, how formal Christianity developed after about 350 CE (AD). You can skip much of this part if you have the background.

The fourth part summarizes the life of Jesus, the development of the New Testament, and the development of the early church.

The fifth part reviews modern evolutionary theory as it is relevant to morality and religion. This part is about science and belief.

The sixth part discusses the teachings of Jesus as they might apply to modern life, including relations between religion and the state, and topics such as abortion. Even though this material is largely my opinions, I hope it will interest people.

To get only what I have to say about Jesus, read Parts One and Four. I suggest reading only Parts One, Four, and Six to begin with. Then read Part Five. Then skim through part Two and Part Three for whatever interests you. From Parts Two and Three, go back to Parts One, Four, and Six when you recall a connection.

Suggested readings occur at the end. I do not use citations in the main text because this is not an academic book. Most of the suggestions come from the catalog of recent good popular books rather than from scholarly books.

If this were a math book, I would tell the story straight through without repetition, but it is not a math book. You should not have to go back to a previous chapter to review an idea that you need now. Sometimes I repeat. There is not so much repetition as to annoy you.

I do not cite scripture very much because I cannot recall scripture. Thumbing through a Bible to find a passage to support a point does not appeal to me and I do not trust that tactic. I can recall the gist of what Jesus said on a topic, or the gist of a parable, but not the exact words or book, chapter, and verse. I finally learned John 3:16 by seeing it on signs at football games on TV ("For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son..."). I do not distort the Bible, and I try to cite references when needed.

Personal Story.

This book has a story behind it, and some real events spurred me on to finally write it. The rest of this Introduction is not necessary but some people might find it funny.

I was born in 1949 and grew up in Portland, Oregon, USA. I was raised Greek Orthodox, and I was an altar boy for a while, but then I pretty much stopped going to church when I was about twelve. About then, some people at a county fair swindled me into buying a set of encyclopedias, including a large beautiful Catholic Bible. I paid for them with money from my paper route. Determined to get my money's worth, I read that Bible all the way

straight through. I was bored by the same parts that bore everybody else, the genealogies and dietary rules, but found some parts really interesting, such as war, genocide, and sex. I was really curious about the idea of a bargain with God. The teachings of Jesus amazed me. He seemed like the smartest person I had ever read. Because I read the Bible from the beginning and so picked up Old Testament ideas first, the New Testament claims that Jesus was God, was resurrected, and somehow saved us just by being crucified and being resurrected, seemed odd and slightly blasphemous. That attitude stuck with me despite my deep admiration for Jesus.

In the next decade, I studied a lot of Western philosophy and a lot of Eastern religion, in particular the “California Taoism” that fueled the martial arts craze in the 1970s. One summer I was waiting by the phone for long hours as part of a job with the Bureau of Land Management, so I read the whole Bible straight through again, this time the New English Bible with Apocrypha.

By inclination, I was always a mathematician, logician, and scientist, interested in physics, evolutionary biology, and artificial intelligence. I went into anthropology to use science to understand people and to help people. I saw this choice as religious. On the whole, I am a Libertarian with sympathy for the poor and for nature, like a lot of people of my age who came out of the Pacific Northwest.

During the 1970s and 1980s, I saw the rise of political correctness in academia, and saw it take over the minds of some brilliant people, pushing out common decency and practical policy in favor of self-righteousness and ideology. I saw left wing leaders, and ethnic leaders, fix on self-righteously feeling good by castigating straw-man enemies rather than provide good theories, useful policy, and true leadership for their people or for the needy. Blacks hated Whites, and women hated men, and neither sought the truths of human nature that would make society workable. I saw them ignore science or use it as a whipping boy. For all practical purposes, PC is a nasty religion. Then I saw the Right Wing backlash. It was little different from PC despite any policy distinctions and despite claiming ties to God. In acts, it was often worse. America developed modest fascisms of both the Left and the Right.

One of my interests as an anthropologist was development. From 1995 until 2000, I was in Thailand studying shrimp farming and other aspects of ecology and economics. Shrimp farming can hurt nature but it can also get along with nature, and its revenue is needed for development in Thailand, so we had to find ways to raise shrimp for long periods in harmony with nature. The World Bank and other agencies began a program to certify responsible shrimp farms as environmentally and socially responsible. Then came several disasters: the Asian economy crashed, led by Thailand's massive wallow in bad credit; shrimp farming boomed and degraded the coastal environment; the NGOs were more interested in adopting Western PC rhetoric and in conning money from agencies than in understanding real nature, the economy, and the real needs of local people; development programs sponsored by international agencies such as the World Bank were hijacked to become paper shells suitable for photo ops but not doing any real good; and shrimp farmers were able to collude with the national Thai government to avoid adopting any standards. The shrimp farmers could see the virtue of sustainable farming, and many of them really did raise shrimp in a good sustainable way. But they would rather do what they wanted and take their chances with nature than submit to any public guidelines. The economic crash lingered on.

Thailand has many decent people. They can see what needs to be done but cannot overcome their own institutions to get there: “you can't get there from here”. Mostly the Thai themselves are to blame. Mostly Thai

culture allows Thai people to get away with corruption and with short-term gain at long-term cost. A large part of Thai culture is their religion, Buddhism.

I returned to the United States in 2000, taking a menial job at Auburn University. Here I got more views on the interaction of culture, religion, and development.

I began to reread the literature from the major religions of the world, including especially the Bible and Christianity. I wanted to know what made successful regions of the world distinct, such as the West and Japan. I wanted to know what made culture and religion important in good government and in development. I wanted moral and social guidelines. I tried to talk to religious people in the American South but I got nothing other than the naïve “huh” of normal church-goers and the annoying rhetoric of “bible bumpers”. I had to figure it out on my own.

Part of my job at Auburn was to contact Alabama catfish farmers. I like them. Catfish farmers are good examples of Southern culture. They are independent. They work hard, and know how to run an efficient operation. They love the outdoors. They sound as if they should be good capitalist farmers but they are not complete. They are not good at relations with the market. They cannot cultivate buying-and-selling links outside of a narrow circle and they do not know how to present themselves to the public at large. They cannot organize as producers would in the Midwest. But they can “gang up” when needed to pressure political officials to get protection.

Alabama catfish farming is almost a model of ecological soundness, and, given the history of social problems in the South, Alabama catfish farming is a leader in social responsibility here too. Alabama catfish farming has not hurt the original ecology and likely has helped it. The World Wildlife Fund is trying to get farmers all over the world to practice ecologically and socially sound techniques, and to certify that they do so. WWF wanted to help Alabama Catfish farmers to get certified as good producers. The catfish farmers understood but, like Thai shrimp farmers, instead catfish farmers fought certification or tried to twist it to their own ends. For a while, they even got officials to block competing imports of similar species from Vietnam and China.

Lately, the South has gotten foreign carmakers, such as Benz and Hyundai and their suppliers, to open plants here by offering them big tax breaks. People here like having the jobs but they are wary of foreigners, and it is not clear that the influx of capital will go for long-term gain in education and infrastructure. It is not clear that the South will develop generally. Like the catfish farmers, Southern culture is still not “business minded” in general. Lee County, Alabama, where I live, had perhaps the highest ratio of people in the United States vote for George W. Bush and for John McCain, about 70% in both cases. The vote fell on racial lines. Bush and Cheney both came to Auburn University. Like other “red” Republican states, Alabama is a net receiver of federal aid rather than a giver of taxes and aid to the country. Under the religious conservative policies of the Republicans, the United States has not really promoted a free market and prospered. It has floundered. The crisis of 2008 was only the worst symptom of bad economic policy. After what happened in Thailand, Alabama, and America as a whole, I had to wonder what role religion played in bad policy.

Like other normal people, I could spend only so much time on figuring out religion because I had to get on with my life. Yet I had to take religion seriously and had to be prepared to run the rest of my life according to whatever I found out. When I thought it out as best I could, I wrote it down.