

Chapter 1.02 Basic Beliefs

This chapter describes the background to Jesus' message and the message. None of the ideas are new. Many of the ideas are standard now for Americans. They are still compelling. I do not intend to be heretical but it still comes out that way sometimes.

Essence.

We should be able to understand a religion in an hour. If it takes longer, something is wrong. This section is the essence of my religion.

God created the world, including you. Life is basically good. Rocks, trees, plants, animals, water, light, sounds, tastes, smells, sights, talking, thinking, morality, struggling, body, mind, interaction, community, science, and all aspects of the world are basically good.

God wants us to enjoy life and to take care of the world. God loves his creation, and wants it to do well, including you in particular. Despite its basic goodness, sometimes the world can be a hard place. Don't make life any harder. Don't hurt anybody. Repent when you do. Make up for it if you can. We all need help sometimes. We all can afford to give help sometimes. So actively help each other. Be more than passive. Be active. Be kind. Be useful. Do what you can. Use your full ability. Actively do for others what you would like them to do for you. Try really hard. Cooperate with other people. Include everybody.

We can, and should, build a continually better world. You cannot try beyond your ability. You are responsible for trying hard but you cannot carry the world by yourself. God made the world. In the end, God will decide what to do with the world.

Idealism is not enough. We have to mix idealism with practicality and with knowledge based on real world experience. We can do this too. There is no magic formula for any of this. Sometimes we make mistakes. If we trust, and let go of fear, we can get along well enough.

Science is correct. To respect science is to respect a gift from God.

Some people are particularly good at reminding us what life is like and what God had in mind. When we find people like that, pay attention. Jesus was an especially important person like that.

Experience and Dogma.

What follows are ideas. No ideas can compare with direct experience, no matter the source of the ideas, not even from the Church or from an intellectual atheist. Nothing is the same as seeing an Asian slum; seeing poor, sick, or sick-at-heart people; or seeing how hate distorts hearts. Nothing compares to pictures from the Hubble telescope or the first time a child reaches out to give a piece of soggy cookie to a friend. Any ideas about the Trinity become mere cartoons. This book comes out of my experience but I cannot get that across fully. Other people have had similar experiences, some better and deeper than mine. If I thought anybody else had written about this material in the way that modern people need, I

would not have written. When you read, do not think about formulas but remember what you have felt, and judge by that. Trying to do what is good and what God wants is better than reading a thousand libraries but we still need the libraries.

Basic Positive Beliefs.

Here are the details.

Some people can be moral without being religious. A person can act well without believing in God, the Tao, the Dharma, or even that the universe is intrinsically moral. Saying "God wants us to do it" does not necessarily add anything to morality. If you really get the idea, then morality is its own justification. The best morality applies to everybody equally, including me, my possessions, and my kin. Another way to say the same thing is the Golden Rule: the best morality requires us to treat other people as we wish to be treated. The best morality suggests that we "pay it forward" and work hard to build a better world. The best morality feels objective; it feels as if it comes outside any one particular person so that it applies to all people equally.

Although people can be moral without God, for the vast majority of people, morality is thoroughly mixed up with the ideas that there is a higher power and this higher power wants us to act morally. The feeling that we should follow morality implies coherence and intelligence in the universe; that is, it implies God. It does not prove God. If we take morality seriously, then we have to take the implications seriously as well.

God exists. God is the higher power. There is only one God. God wants us to act well. I do not specify the relation between God and good. I assume they coincide for nearly all purposes. When they do not obviously coincide, such as when God allows children to have cancer, I have no explanation.

Because I believe in God, I believe in the supernatural as well as the natural. For nearly all purposes, the natural is vastly more relevant than the supernatural. Still, we need to acknowledge our belief to remain honest with ourselves and to keep our bearings.

God is like a person. God has a personality.

God created the world. People are created. We are items of craftsmanship. Everything else in the world is also God's creation, including all of nature.

Science is correct. To respect science is to respect our senses and our minds, which are gifts from God. To disrespect science is to disrespect God.

The Big Bang and what followed is God's way of creating this universe and the diversity in this universe. Evolution is God's way of creating life, and of creating sentient beings (people) who can appreciate the world and who have morality.

Overall, the world is good.

Enjoy the world if you can. It is worthwhile living. God wants us to enjoy his creation and to take care of his creation.

There is hardship. Some of the hardship comes because of the physical nature of this existence, such as hurricanes and mosquitoes. Much of it comes from other people.

We can relate to God. God relates back.

God intends people to have a relation with him, so whatever we need for a relation with God has to be simple enough for everybody to understand who is not severely mentally handicapped. Any message from God has to be simple enough for nearly everybody to get. You should not have to attend divinity school for ten years to have a relation with God and with other people.

To relate properly to God, we have to submit to God. Submission is not humiliation.

Sometimes we hurt other people and nature, sometimes we offend God. We "miss the mark". We sin. Sinning blocks a good relation with God. To restore a good relation, we have to accept that we have done bad things sometimes, and we need forgiveness. We have to repent and ask for forgiveness. Repentance requires that we stop doing the bad that we were doing. God is generous in forgiving.

You do not need to repent your limitations such as not being able to play Bach or not having the temperament to care for patients dying of leukemia. Limitations are natural. They are only bad when they lead us to act badly, as in over compensating.

Much of the relation with God is reciprocal love. God loves us and we love God. We can rely on God's love. God's love can be exacting. God's love is not simply "mushy" and accepting of anything. As God loves us, we should love other people and nature.

The Tanakh (Jewish Bible or Christian "Old Testament") summarized all of this in two ideas: love God and love our neighbor. By "neighbor", the Tanakh originally meant "fellow believer in our God", that is, fellow Hebrew or Jew. We should extend the idea to everybody. Even before Jesus, many Jews had extended it, and they continue to extend the idea today. Jews often treated foreigners and even animals with kindness.

It is hard to love our neighbor as ourselves, so we need practical guidance. Jewish teachers used the Silver Rule: Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you - or do not do to others what you find hateful. The Silver Rule included positive actions too so that, in practice, it came close to the Golden Rule of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you". It is bad to neglect a person that needs aid and bad not to care well for animals. You would not want them to neglect you. So you have to help people and animals.

In a relation with God, it is natural to pray. Prayer is like conversation with God. Formal prayer is not necessary. You do have to open up.

God can interfere in the natural operation of the world. There can be miracles.

Only rarely does God interfere in the natural order or grant wishes. It is unlikely that God will cure your cancer, get you a job, end war, end bad governments, stop a tsunami, or make people more polite. Many people feel that God guides them in daily living. I do not know. Some of it likely is true but not in the sense that God often grants wishes.

We can, and should, work hard on our own to achieve the things for which we pray to God, such as by working through medical research and diplomacy.

When we die, we face God for a reckoning. We will get a lot of mercy but God will not forgive and forget everything. After the reckoning, God decides what to do with us. I doubt the most important options are heaven and hell.

Some people have good ideas of what God wants and of what is right. Hebrews called them "prophets".

The prophets codified the strong Jewish desire for social justice. The idea of social justice is not something that is "tacked on" to the deeper idea of God; it is an intrinsic part of what it means to understand God and to have a relation with God. If you cannot feel social justice, and do not act on your feeling for social justice, then you do not have a proper relation with God. Jews strived to balance the ideas of personal responsibility and social justice.

Jesus was a prophet. Most points of his message already were in Judaism and many can be found in other religions too. His message is unique not so much in specific points but in his commitment, in the clarity of his vision, and in his stress of acting from the heart rather than from any formula.

- (1) The Golden Rule: actively do for other people as you would have them do for you.
- (2) The Kingdom of God. See below and later in the book.
- (3) God loves us each in particular as individuals. God loves you.
- (4) We should love other people like God loves us, as much as we can.
- (5) Trust God, other people, and ourselves. Usually we can do what we need to do if we let go of fear and if we trust. Usually we get what we need to get if we let go of fear and if we trust.
- (6) Mercy. Show forgiveness with few requirements.
- (7) The importance of intentions. Here is where we see an emphasis on the spirit of the Law.
- (8) Include as many people as possible. Include sinners and other marginalized people.
- (9) Act on the basis of our ability, to the full extent of our ability. Try hard. You cannot do more than that.
- (10) God expects more from people with greater ability, wealth, and power.

(11) There is no magic ritual, formula, set of rules, or set of laws to establish and maintain a relation with God. We must respect laws but we have to trust God more.

(12) Non-violence, with few exceptions.

(13) Allow other people to hurt us rather than that we should hurt them, even to defend ourselves, our family, what is right, or any property. We should trust God to advance the cause of right if we cannot do it ourselves other than through violence.

(14) You should be willing to sacrifice a little bit so that the common good for everybody benefits even more. If you sacrifice a little bit in this way now, you are likely to receive even more in return later as a result of society and life becoming better. But even if you do not, be willing to give up a little for the common good.

(15) God is bigger than any ideology, program, law, or ideology. God is bigger than evil. God is even bigger than Jesus.

(16) God invites you to join the world and to enjoy it if you can. Enjoy it in your own way but do not hurt other people. Understanding that there is a God and that he cares about you can be a great joy. Even when we are in distress such as when sick or in prison, we can sometimes take comfort from knowing that God cares about us and can feel joy in the world. If you cannot join and enjoy because your own distress is too much, God still understands and still cares.

(17) Individual people are precious. Your integrity as an individual person is the most precious part about you, more precious to you than all the world. Following the above points helps maintain your integrity.

Failing in any of the above points can undermine your integrity. You can call your individual integrity your "soul"; but Jesus probably did not think of individual integrity, and even of the soul, in the same ways that the modern Christian term "soul" conveys.

If you understand all the message, sometimes you can cut through the silliness, personal problems, ill will, clinging, setbacks, and handicaps of yourself and the world to a sudden insight.

I learned Jesus' message more indirectly from his parables and actions than directly from his declarative teachings.

Jesus intended some ideas differently than was understood by his immediate followers, the early church, standard Christianity, and as modern people understand him now. For example, most Christians are not pacifists. We have to try to see as Jesus did. We have to go along with him as much as we can. If we disagree with him, we have to accept that divide and make of the situation what we can.

Jesus' message is an extension of Jewish Law and upholds the spirit of Jewish Law. Jesus' message is also special in that it goes beyond any law, including Christian Church law. We do not have to denigrate Jewish Law or any law to see this, and we cannot abandon all law when we do see this.

Jesus' message is an uncommon but logical extension of evolved human nature. The foundation for his message is already in evolved human nature but it is rarely realized through human will alone. Biological evolution can build the foundation and can take us up to the gate but it cannot lead us through the gate. We needed somebody like Jesus to do that. Jesus' message could not usually be expressed through the normal working of society. We needed something more to see the message and we needed an extra push to act. Jesus was the "something more" that showed us the way and encouraged us to work toward the ideals. Jesus woke us up. Jesus' ideals can be partly achieved once people see his message, use the abilities given them by human evolution, and use the institutions given by society, to work toward the ideals.

Jesus' ideals cannot be fully achieved in the real world but they can be achieved well enough to make it worthwhile to work toward them. Even if they cannot always be achieved well enough in particular situations, there is still no better ideal.

Jesus' message was aimed at his people the Jews, his time, and his situation but it is also timeless and universal for all people.

The idea of the Kingdom of God included: Israel has political and military freedom, God leads Israel, all nations recognize God as the one and only God, Israel leads all nations, all nations accept the moral leadership of Israel, the Devil is conquered, evil is defeated, and social justice ends because evil is defeated.

Jesus intended to establish the Kingdom of God. To do that, he set up a movement. The people in the movement lived in accord with the ideals of the Kingdom, as if it were already here. By doing so, they helped to bring in the Kingdom. Jesus included more people in his movement than most Jews would have included, including tax collectors and prostitutes. Originally Jesus did not include non-Jews although he probably did not exclude them.

Understanding Jesus and his message can help us have a relation with God, submit to God, do well, repent, pray, love other people, and love nature. We can have a relation with God even if we only act on Jesus' message a little as long as we act as hard as we can with the ability we have.

After Jesus Died.

After Jesus died, his followers were afraid of authority, especially the Romans. At first, people believe a general resurrection would usher in the Kingdom. When that did not happen, people sought other ways to understand the Kingdom. Eventually non-Jews took over from Jews in the movement, and Jews left the movement almost entirely. To avoid problems with Rome, followers no longer talked of a political Kingdom and they avoided any military allusions. The Kingdom became about behavior and community here. The Church took the place of Israel as the site of the Kingdom and as the formal institution of community. Although not a core of church doctrine, most people began to think of the Kingdom as going to heaven to be with Jesus after death. Eventually the Church declared that Jesus was God and was equal to God the father. The Church stressed that Jesus was both God and a normal human being. The Church extended membership to anybody who would accept the authority of the Church and its ideas

about Jesus and his message.

Along with ideas about Jesus' divinity, the Church preserved Jesus' message. That is how we are able to know his message today. By insisting Jesus was both God and man, the Church kept open the door for thinking about Jesus as human. That is how I can write this book which treats Jesus as mostly human.

By keeping Jesus' message, stressing equal membership, extending membership to everybody, making the Church into a community rather than a political kingdom, and keeping the ideal of service, the Church created the feeling for following Jesus that we think of today. The Church created the "Christmas spirit". The ideas of the Church and of Jesus fused with Western ideas of science, government, citizenship, philosophy, science, and art, to make Western civilization. Jesus' message spread around the world. The world understands ideas such as common humanity, and service to people and nature, largely because of Jesus' message.

I think Jesus would approve most changes begun by the Church except his deification. In particular, he would approve of including everyone, the Golden Rule, and of service to humanity and nature.

The Church developed various ideas to explain Jesus' identity, life, deeds, meaning, how he saves, relation to people, and relation to God. I do not think Jesus would agree with most of the ideas but that matters less to me than that people act in accord with his message, especially his expanded message.