

Chapter 1.05 Following Jesus in Fact

Christianity and the Good Life.

So far, I have not made Christianity superior to other religions or to a moral life without religion. That is about to change. Because of Christianity, around the world, ideals, morality, and institutions have changed, grown, and come to resemble the ideals of Jesus. The message of Jesus has spread both through formal Christianity and apart from it. Nations can develop economically without adopting the message of Jesus. Yet nations that adopt capitalism and develop also tend to adopt many points of the message, including the integrity of individuals and the need for positive action to build a better world. Nations that cannot accept these key points of Jesus' message have a hard time developing even when they are formally Christian, such as in Latin America and the Philippines. When capitalist nations that once were standard Christian lose formal religion, their people still hold to the message of Jesus. People in old Christian nations such as in Europe tend to stress the message of Jesus even more strongly when formal religion declines – do not be fooled by apparent rebellious glitz. People in old Christian nations still want to be good and still want to be good along the lines that Jesus taught. Their problem is not so much with the message of Jesus as with the gap between the message versus formal institutions and leadership, the gap between the message versus politics and the Church. We still need to appreciate the role of Jesus' teachings in the modern world and to appreciate Jesus.

From at least 1900, simple followers of Jesus have been beset both by strident Christians and by strange alternatives spiritualities. Their confidence has been eroded too because it is hard to use government to promote good ideals without going too far and without corrupting government. Followers of Jesus are ashamed to admit they follow Jesus even though other people are proud to follow militant nasty conservative Christianity or some other creed. Followers of Jesus need to remember the great good that has come of Jesus' teachings, admit to themselves they do follow Jesus, and be willing to say it. Followers of Jesus can and should be proud too.

Modern people would like to derive morality from abstract rules, such as “moral action is what leads to the most benefit for the most people”. While we can see the general shape of morality using reason, we cannot derive all of morality through reason alone. Especially we cannot find the force of morality in reason alone. Reason alone is not enough to give us moral perception and moral action. We need more. Recall the donkey standing between two exactly equal piles of hay. The donkey starves because there is no logical basis for choice and action. The need to go beyond reason is a lesson from “Hamlet” and from the philosopher David Hume.

We get the something more from religion, evolved human nature, and practical reality. For now, I want to focus on religion, so I leave out evolution and practicality until later in the book. Religions can give us both good principles and bad principles. I do not here argue about this problem with religion. So I focus on the good points that we get from religion.

Religion supplemented reason to give the moral ideals by which people act, hope, and live. Religion supplemented ideas about practical life to give guidelines by which people act, hope, and live. Without

religion, people would be an evolutionary dead end as armchair philosophers. Without Judaism and the book of Ezekiel, we would not have justice that stresses the importance of the individual and we would not have the integrity of the individual that we find in Jesus.

The key ideas of modern morality, first in the West and now the world, come from Jesus. The power behind modern moral action comes from taking his message to heart. Without Jesus, we would have no widespread Golden Rule; little freedom from ritual, magic, and bad formulas; no science; no democracy; no colleges; no liberal arts; no hospitals; no charities; few civic groups; no Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts; no YMCA or YWCA; no Blue Cross; no similar organizations in other religions such as Red Crescent; no extensive forgiveness; few dedicated professionals; no capitalism; no capitalism that is well-regulated and effective; no acceptance of interesting human differences; and no protection of nature. We would not have political activism, for better and worse. Without Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom, the importance of everybody in it, and the need for everybody to use his-her full abilities to build it, we would not have modern ideas about the proper relation of states to their citizens, and we would not have modern ideas about the active citizen working to build a better nation. Without Christian churches and charities as models we probably would not even have Hillel House. We did not come to these good institutions by reason alone. Widespread acceptance of Jesus' teaching is why ideas in previous chapters seem so familiar to modern people of all nations and creeds. Christianity spread because Jesus' teachings work as an ideal, as a guide to practical life and practical good government. We owe a great debt to Jesus, and we owe a great debt to Christianity for spreading the teachings of Jesus.

Just because Christianity and Jesus' teaching are the historical foundation for much of modern morality does not mean we should force them down people's throats, either by harangue or by using the government. It does not mean that other cultures, religions, and institutions did not play a large role as well. They did. Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi was a product both of Hindu ideals and of Jesus' teachings inherited through British Christian institutions. The success of Jesus' teachings does not mean Jesus is God. Jesus' teachings work best when not forced on people. When they are forced on people, they are no longer Jesus' teachings. That is also a reason why his teachings have done so well.

On the other hand, if we think Jesus' teachings are true, and we think they are the best ideals, then we should not be ashamed to say so. We should not let modern people get away with thinking they can derive morality from reason alone or can avoid acknowledging Jesus now that they have gathered his fruits.

Modern people are trying to adopt the best aspects of Jesus' teaching, such as the Golden Rule and diversity, without calling it religion, and without adopting aspects of standard Christianity that they do not like: the Jewish-Christian-Muslim God, so-called "family values", the idea that Jesus was God, and support for the class structure. Selecting can be good. Yet, in selecting, modern people also avoid seeing the historical contribution of religion, standard Christianity, and Jesus, and they avoid calling what they adopt "Jesus' teachings". For now, modern people might have to select ideals without fully appreciating the history of the ideals that we select. I am sorry we have to make ourselves blind in one eye so we can see from the other. Maybe we can have bigger, more honest eyes later, and use both of them.

Trust, Good Works, Decency, and Hope.

Above a threshold, trust, good works, decency, and hope sustain themselves and feed on each other. A house of good roommates, a good neighborhood, or a good work environment, sustains itself. Below a threshold, trust, good works, decency, and hope disappear. Instead suspicion and bad works sustain themselves and increase. Above their bad threshold, suspicion and bad works sustain themselves while trust, hope, decency, and good works dwindle and die. A bad house and a bad neighborhood are versions of hell – see the classic Twilight Zone episode “Monsters on Maple Street”. Once below the threshold of trust, good works, decency, and hope, it is very hard to build back. If ever people achieve a situation of trust, good works, decency, and hope, they need to work to keep it, and they need to fight suspicion and bad works.

A situation of trust, good works, decency, and hope does not preclude fun, carousing, “kicking up”, social criticism, and rebellion. In fact, it needs them. A situation of trust, good works, hope, and decency is not sterile. Any situation that is sterile is not fully good, and so we have to do better.

A situation of trust, good works, decency, and hope requires some social order. People need social reliability. They need offices, duties, and responsibilities. I am not sure what all is conducive to trust, good works, decency, and hope without also being stifling, so I do not go into details here.

Jesus’ teachings help build trust, good works, decency, and hope, and help build the correct social order with offices, duties, and responsibilities. We should follow Jesus because we think he is right, not because of the social results. But we can appreciate the results. We can see good results that Christians have had, and can try to reproduce them even if we do not follow any Christian church.

Not all Christian ideologies lead to trust, good works, decency, hope, and the right society. Christian fundamentalism erodes them, as do strict dogmas from other religions.

Most religions stress trust, good works, decency, and hope but not the same way as Jesus’ teachings. I believe Jesus’ teachings give us the best basis for building and sustaining the communities we want. I believe Jesus’ teachings give us the best ideals for good government even if they alone are not enough for good government. Jesus’ stress on the Golden Rule, on forgiveness, and on positive activity helps to make a good situation, helps to keep a good situation, and helps to rebuild in case we fall into a bad situation.

The state has to enforce some order. It would be wonderful if the minimum of state-imposed order also led to trust, good works, decency, and hope. But that is not true often enough. Using the state to force us beyond the threshold of hope, decency, trust, and good works usually makes the situation worse. A strong order of the modern fascist kind does not lead to trust, good works, decency, or hope. It erodes them. A strong order based on religious fundamentalism or political correctness has backward effects. We need religion as an independent set of ideals that people believe regardless of what the government says and that people act on regardless of what the government does. When we have that, we can find the threshold of trust, good works, decency, and hope that the government can help sustain.

De Facto Followers of Jesus.

Modern morality would not prevail without Christianity and the teachings of Jesus. I do not think any other religion did lead fully to the ideals of Jesus, or could have. Prevailing modern moral ideals lead people to act like followers of Jesus even when they are not Christians. This is a good thing, and it does not detract from the religion of anybody, from the message of Jesus, or from Jesus himself.

When anybody does unto others as he-she would have others do to him-her, and tries to make a better world, then that person acts as a follower of Jesus. Even militant atheists, strident left wing activists, followers of other religions, standard Christians, and Christian conservatives, all can be followers of Jesus in this way. When people act this way they do not act like Greek philosophers or Enlightenment philosophers, Romantic rebels, conservative saviors of family life and social order, or post-modern ironic pseudo-hipsters; they act more like followers of Jesus.

This assessment will anger people who do not wish to be labeled as religious, or who might be religious but do not wish to be labeled a Christian. I do not say that all de facto followers of Jesus are formal Christians. You can be a de facto follower of Jesus and not be a Christian just as you can be a de facto follower of Gandhi and not be a Hindu, a de facto believer in the objectivity of mathematics without being a Platonist, a de facto believer in cause and effect and not be a formal Buddhist. You can even be an atheistic college professor and a de facto follower of Jesus. In our world, maybe most de facto followers of Jesus are not Christians. But they are still de facto followers of Jesus. I hope de facto followers of Jesus do not react to my assessment by denying similarities to Jesus or by negating the ideals of activism, justice, community, trust, decency, hope, and good works.

I see why some people would be offended at being labeled a follower of Jesus, or accidentally being labeled a Christian, but I do not know what to say. In the modern label world, it is hard to say "follower of Jesus" without also saying "formal Christian" even if they are not necessarily the same. I said people should adopt Jesus' teachings because they are true and work well, and I said people have adopted them whether they realize it or not. I said that Jesus' teachings are best regardless of great ideas in other religions. When non-Christians say this about their religion, most Christians get offended. As a follower of Jesus, when other people say this about their religion, I try not to be offended and I try to see what they are getting at. I have to take seriously the good things in their religion. I have looked at ideas from other religions and I still find Jesus' teachings best. Jesus' teachings permit me to look at other religions to assess their value without feeling guilty and without trying to impose my values. Not all other religions or ideologies allow this kind of graceful objectivity.

In fact, I have picked up quite a few Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Taoist, and Hindu ideals. I like it when people point that out in me. Modern people act like Jews through love of justice and community or act like Hindus through their empathy and love of adventure. Sadly, too many non-Jews and non-Hindus are offended by the idea that they act like Jews or Hindus. Everybody who enjoys personal and social justice acts like a Jew to some extent. Everybody who enjoys "Star Wars" has developed some Hindu sensibilities just as everybody who enjoys the "Matrix" trilogy or Batman movies has developed some Gnostic sensibilities. I am not frightened by what I have picked up from other religions and cultures. I am grateful. I think other people in the world share this attitude of acceptance even if they do not like to think of themselves as acting in accord with Jesus' teachings.

Maybe it helps if people understand they can adopt the best features of Jesus' teachings without adopting aspects they might not like such as the Jewish-Christian-Muslim God, or without adopting

aspects of dogmatic Christianity they might not like such as the idea that Jesus is God or stereotypical American family values. If de facto adoption of Jesus' teachings without the religious "baggage" did happen, I would be happy enough. I do not know how God would react.

We need to be honest about where our values really came from, and be grateful to the people, religions, and cultures that gave us good values – especially the teachings of Jesus but even also institutional Christianity.