

PART 1: Basic Statements

Chapter 1.01 Background

This chapter explains some ideas about Christianity. Some ideas we will meet again and some are discussed here mostly to get past them. If you do not know the bare facts of Jesus' life, see Chapter 4.01. "Standard" Christians are "orthodox" Christians, meaning "correct believing" Christians. Standard orthodoxy is summed up in the Nicene Creed. Most major churches are standard orthodox. Standard Christians believe Jesus is God, was resurrected, and will come again. They believe Jesus' life on Earth had magical efficacy. Because Jesus came to this world, was crucified, and resurrected, people automatically can be saved if they want. Their primary attitude toward God and Jesus is worship, which can take many forms including following his message.

Special Jesus.

Unless Jesus was special somehow, there is no reason to pay attention to him or his teachings. Great religions claim something unique about their founder and message: Jews have privileged access to the one and only God; Mohammad was the last and greatest of the prophets, so Muslims know the true will of God; Hindus see the unity of all with the deepest reality, and know how to behave as a result; Taoists see how the world really works and how to get along with it; and the Buddha saw clearly how to avoid suffering.

Jesus might not have a unique message in the same way. At first sight, Jesus did not teach any moral lessons that other religions do not also teach. Because his teaching is not radically new, it seems there is no reason to accept that he is a special messenger of God and that we should follow his ideas or to accept that he is God and that we are saved by his having come to this world.

Although Jesus does not seem radically new, I believe he was special enough so that we do have to pay attention to his message and we can accept him as a prophet of God. He taught an image of a better world that is not quite the same as in other religions, and he urged followers to act vigorously to achieve the better world in ways unlike other religions. His message extends normal tendencies in human nature, such as kindness, in ways that could not be done through biological evolution and that are not done in other religions. I explain throughout the book. The specialness resides in the message rather than in the messenger.

Standard Christians do not have to worry about whether or not Jesus' teachings were unique because they do not base their religion on his message but on his status as both God and man (human). The specialness of Jesus comes in the person of Jesus. Our salvation is guaranteed merely because he was God and human, was crucified, and resurrected. I do not know how to engage this idea of how Jesus is unique. I do not think this idea is important. I think his teaching is more important than his status, and that his teaching is enough.

The ideal for standard Christians is that the message and the status of Jesus require each other. If you

understand what Jesus was, that he was God, then you have to appreciate his message and follow it; if you understand Jesus' message and feel its appeal, then you have to appreciate that he was God. Despite many theologians trying to show how the two aspects of Jesus require each other, it is still not clear. Most people focus on his status rather than his message because focusing on his status does not require a commitment to difficult acts. It is enough to worship him and then carry on with life. Many standard Christians selectively follow Jesus' teachings, largely in ways that benefit themselves.

Special Daily Life.

If specialness could be found in normal daily life then people would not need religion. When people seek something special in a religion, at first they look outside of normal daily life. Christians have Jesus the God-Man, Jews have direct ties with God through a line of prophets, and Hindus have direct experiences of a world more real than this world of ordinary life.

Although religions refer to something outside of normal life to ratify their truth and power, the average follower does not base his-her daily life on an experience outside of normal daily life even if he-she had such an experience. Most people fear what they find outside of normal life. They accept that the founder of the religion had such an experience, and they can refer to the experience of the founder. Once people can refer to an experience outside of daily life in the lore of their religion, instead of living in that experience, the average person uses religion primarily to validate everyday life, to make daily life seem holy rather than tedious. Average people do something token in daily life to refer to the truth and power of their religion, such as go to church or hang a cross; and that token reference allows them to feel that their daily life is special. It allows them to believe their daily life is the proper daily life. It allows them to do what they need to do to get along, and to consider that holy. Some Christians use Jesus to validate family values. Somehow belief that Jesus was God makes living in a middle class nuclear family holy. Some Buddhists think chanting sutras makes riding the bus to work every day holy. Some Jews and Muslims think the same of prayer.

When people use the special experiences of their religion primarily to ratify what they need in daily life, they create a distinction between what is special in their religion versus their daily life; but they do not often feel the distinction. Jesus said that his followers needed to disdain their normal family but "family values" Christians do not pay attention to that teaching. It does no good to make fun of what normal people need and what they might do with the teachings of their religion. We have to accept that what makes a religion special in official doctrine might not be what matters in the daily life of followers. We have to look at what really happened with Jesus, official doctrine about him, and what ordinary people make of him. We have to consider what we make of Jesus, and we have to be careful not to make something of him only to use as an excuse to ratify our daily lives. When we find something special about Jesus, we have to think how to modify our lives in accord with that, if we can.

Universal or Particular.

Any religion that claims to be important also claims to apply to all people in all places. It claims universality. An important religion is not just a religion for Jews, Hindus, or Christians but for all people. The god of the Jews or Hindus is not just their god but is the God of all people everywhere. Respect for life is not just true for Muslims or for Jews but for all people everywhere. Jesus did not

just save a few people; Jesus had the ability to save everybody.

If Christianity claims to be important and to be about Jesus' teaching as well as his status, then the teaching has to be universal. It has to apply to everybody. Jesus had to be a teacher of universal moral truths.

Only a Teacher.

Some Christians object to seeing Jesus as a moral teacher because they object to seeing him as only a moral teacher. They say seeing him that way reduces his status. It treats him as only a philosopher rather than as God. They do not mind seeing him as a teacher of universal moral ideas as long as we do not forget that he was primarily God, and it is as God that he saves us.

I understand their concern but I find it odd because I believe his importance lies in his teaching of universal moral ideas and that concern with his status can blind us to his teaching. Concern with his status can lead us to go against his teaching. I would rather wrongly take him for a philosopher and follow what he taught than rightly take him for God and overlook what he taught.

Conquering Evil.

We can understand religions, and appreciate their differences, by seeing how particular religions explain evil: where does evil come from, why does God allow evil, and what do we do about it? People tend to think of death as evil, and so religions need to explain why we die, and, if death is not the last step, how we might overcome death. If a religion cannot deal with the problem of evil, then it is incomplete. I do not believe any religion deals with this question well enough so I think all religions are incomplete, including both the teachings of Jesus and standard Christianity. Even so, we can hold to a religion while admitting it is not complete and while getting the best from it that we can.

Traditional Christianity bears a special burden with the problem of evil because it has always claimed that Jesus conquered evil. Standard Christianity could admit that the problem of evil is too much for humans to understand. Standard Christianity had to develop an elaborate explanation of the origin of evil and of how Jesus defeated evil even though evil still flourishes in this world. Standard Christianity sees evil as the direct result of demons contaminating an otherwise good creation of God. Just by being born, dying, and being resurrected, Jesus conquered all the demons and Jesus put an end to evil and death. Evil is tolerated for a while but will finally end when Jesus returns. By all normal standards, this claim is false. I do not believe in demons, and I do not think the coming, dying, and resurrection of Jesus put an end to evil.

I have no explanation for evil. I can explain how humans evolved the capacity to do evil acts. But I cannot explain why God would have allowed the capacity to evolve in the first place, and so I have no ultimate explanation for evil. In the end, I have to accept the presence of evil and just get on as best I can.

Salvation.

Standard Christianity claims something that other religions do not claim in the same way: to save people. This is why Jesus has a special status. People are lost. Without Jesus, they cannot be saved. With

Jesus they can be. The mere existence of Jesus, apart from any message, saves people. The most important message of Jesus is his mere existence. I disagree with the need for salvation in this sense, and therefore I disagree that Jesus' mere presence saved people, so I have to be clear about salvation.

Most everyday Christians that I have talked to are not clear what it means to be saved. Early Christians just after the time of Jesus thought three things. First, Jesus was returning very soon, within months, to establish the Kingdom of God. Second, if they died before Jesus returned, their bodies would be saved from normal decay, and they would be resurrected for the coming of the Kingdom in a special body but a real physical body. Third, the Kingdom of God was a real physical Kingdom on this Earth rather than in heaven. The Earth would be transformed, as were their bodies, but it would still be a real physical Earth. They would be members of a physical Kingdom of God either while still alive or when resurrected after death. Current ideas of salvation probably developed out of the early ideas but current ideas are not like early ideas. I do not think early Christians would fully understand current ideas, and current Christians do not think in the same terms as early Christians. Few people now believe in a physical resurrection as did the early Christians. Christians think the Kingdom of God is not physical, and not on this Earth but in heaven.

Most Christians now think the Kingdom of God is not physical, and is not on this Earth but in heaven. Salvation means to be with Jesus in Heaven after death. Some Christians think salvation means to be given special powers or to have a special non-corruptible body even in this life, and then to go to Heaven to be with Jesus after they die. Some Christians think it means to have a special relation with Jesus in this life so that Jesus listens to them and helps them more than other people, and then to go to Heaven to be with Jesus after death. Starting no later than Saint Augustine around 400 AD, and getting much strength from later Protestantism, Christianity developed the ideas that people had to be Justified to be saved, a person could not be Justified by any acts of him-herself, and God intervenes to Justify and Save certain people of his choosing only. I think these ideas would not have made sense to Jesus or to early Christians.

Contrary to popular belief, most standard Christians still are not clear on what they are saved from, why they need to be saved, and what they are saved to. Early Christians probably did not worry about being damned in hell so much as about being left out of the real physical Kingdom of God. Standard Christians now are saved from damnation in hell, but few people other than standard Christians and Muslims believe in hell or believe that all people will be divided into the two camps of heaven and hell. Most people do not think an ordinary life of mixed modest goodness and badness is enough to warrant eternal damnation, so they do not know what they are saved from. Beginning sometime after Saint Augustine, Christianity developed the idea of Original Sin to go along with the idea of Justification and to explain evil: all people are damned because of Adam and Eve's choice to disobey God. As a result of Original Sin, all people now live irretrievably depraved lives. Few modern people believe this, perhaps because most people do not live irretrievably depraved lives. I doubt Jesus would have thought most normal are people automatically damned to Hell and I doubt he would have understood Original Sin.

Non-Christians often do not understand what they need to be saved from or what they need to be saved to. In Thailand, I heard amusing conversations where standard Christians try to talk non-Christian Buddhists or animists into believing they are first lost so Christians can then save them. Non-Christians do not understand that they already are lost and do not understand Original Sin. They know frustration,

failure, tragedy, bad, evil, disease, obnoxious people, indecency, corruption, bad luck, and even their own role in negativity. They understand the need for consolation, help, and hope. They do not understand Christian ideas of depravity, the need for salvation, and Original Sin. They do not feel inherently depraved. They do not see how simply believing that Jesus is God can save them from inherent depravity. Standard Christians have to talk people into feeling inherently depraved so they can then undeprave them.

Standard Christianity has to explain why people need to be saved and what it means to be saved. It seems that merely understanding the status of Jesus, his birth, death, and resurrection, leads to overcoming evil and leads to eternal life. This answer does not make sense to everybody.

Working directly for salvation, and worrying about justification, original sin, grace, hell, and heaven, does not often help people live according to Jesus' teaching. In fact, these ideas can have the opposite effect by frightening people or because people use them to control the hearts and deeds of others. Rather than oppose these ideas directly, it is better to just ignore them and instead to focus on Jesus' message.

Special Universal Teacher or Only a Jewish Teacher.

Recently, scholars have done very well at seeing Jesus in terms of his time and place, in terms of his context as a Jew in the early Roman Empire. This way of seeing Jesus sheds light on his ideas about the Kingdom of God, community, sharing, healing, non-violence, and other teachings. This way of seeing Jesus helps to overcome two thousand years of prejudice against Jews, and helps to clear our heads of prejudice in general. We have to see Jesus in this way to really appreciate him. It is a good way to see him. We will look at this material in the second part of the book.

This way of looking at Jesus can seem to undermine his uniqueness and the universality of his teachings. To many standard Christians, this way of looking at Jesus undermines his status as God. If Jesus did not do something other than the Judaism of his time, and greater than the Judaism of his time, then Christianity would not have arisen. It would not have been necessary. Jesus' teaching or life must be distinct from Judaism in some way and must be better in some way. The more we want to see him as Jewish, the less we seem him as special and universal. The more we want to see him as special and universal, the less we tend to see him as Jewish. For example, if, by "Kingdom of God", Jesus meant something primarily for Israel, then the Kingdom of God cannot be the basis for Jesus being special, for universal moral ideas, for seeing him as divine universal savior, and for heaven. If Jesus brought something new for all people, then he was not fully Jewish by the standards of his time, and what Jews then believed was not enough.

Since the early Church, Christians have understood that Jesus must stand apart from, and above, the popular Judaism of Jesus' time. Unfortunately, standard Christians made Jesus special by putting down Jews, often by denigrating and demonizing them. They contrasted Jesus not just with the popular Judaism of Jesus' time but also with a made-up unreal universal bad Judaism that few real Jews ever followed, but which later Christians understood to include all real Jews everywhere at all times. Demonizing Jews flatly goes against the message of Jesus. Christians cannot make Jesus more special by making Jews vile. Jesus has to be special because of good qualities that are intrinsic to him and his message. For Jesus to stand as tall as possible, he has to stand above other people that are tall. For

Jesus to be most special, he needs to be special among people that were special before him. To lower Jews so as to make Jesus stand out by contrast really lowers the level from which Jesus stands out and lowers Jesus. That kind of Jesus does not stand out among people in general.

Jesus was fundamentally Jewish. His moral message extended Jewish ideas and improved Jewish ideas. Jews would have appreciated his message, and perhaps would have accepted his message, if historical events had not led to a split between Jews and Christians. I hope to convey how Jews were special, see Jesus as Jewish, understand his message, see how his message extended Jewish ideas for the better, see how he was special, see how his message does not undermine Jews, and see how his ideas came to be universal. I believe we can do this. Moses extended Jewish ideas and improved on them without denigrating Abraham or denigrating what had gone before. In his time, Jews accepted Moses. Even many non-Jews eventually accepted Moses.

For a modern enlightened standard Christian who believes in Jesus as God, the ideal is both to see Jesus in his original situation, including his life as a Jew, and to use that knowledge to appreciate his unique identity as God and his unique mission as God. I am not sure this can be done but many adept standard Christian scholars have made a good case. Many modern scholars do it without denigrating Jews but it is not clear how far their ideas have gotten into the general population of standard Christians. I review some of their arguments later in the book.

No Theory of Prophets.

Nearly all religions recognize some special people that set up the religions. It need not be only one person but might be several, such as the prophets of Judaism, the sages of Taoism, or the writers of the Upanishads. In some cases, the particular identities of the founders were lost but it is still clear there were particular special people, such as with the earliest religious writing in India. In some cases, the religions stem directly from folk tradition or courtly tradition without particular authors, such as Shinto in Japan.

In Judaism, the key human figures were prophets, including the early prophets such as Abraham and Moses. Judaism is clear that these people were human and were not in any way divine. They were not manifestations of God. Judaism is also clear that God somehow did inspire them. If I do not wish to see Jesus as God, then I have to see him as a prophet. I see great figures of other religions along the same lines, although Judaism might disagree. I see the Buddha, Chuang Tse, Mohammad, and Francis of Assisi as great prophets. I have no interest in trying to decide which is greater although I am biased toward Jesus. We should look at the lives and messages of each, and then decide for ourselves how to act.

The problem is that I have no theory of why God needs to inspire some people rather than just clean up the whole human mess directly, how God can inspire people, why God inspires some people but not others, why God does not inspire everybody, and why God gives various messages to different prophets. I have no theory of prophets or of special people in religion. I have no good theory of why we have to pay attention to some prophets and some messages more than others. Nobody has a good theory, not for Judaism and not for other religions.

Skeptics deny there are special people in the sense that I make of Jesus, other Jewish prophets, and other major figures in other religions. Skeptics are glad that there are people of unusual intelligence and insight, but we should not see the hand of God behind them or the breath of God inside them. Natural selection just allowed for the chance that some people might turn out with unusual religious gifts. I understand their point, and for the most part it is true, but I still cling to the idea of prophets. Perhaps God set up natural selection so that it would produce prophets. Skeptics might gain insight into my view by looking in the ideological mirror. Skeptics look on great scientists, such as Archimedes, Newton, Darwin, and Einstein as if they were prophets inspired by God. They tend to look at great philosophers and great politicians in the same way, such as Plato, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln. No matter how skeptics would like to look at such people as if they were only human, skeptics cannot hold back the pang of awe that normal people reserve for prophets. I have seen this gleam in the eye of many Darwinists at conferences.

Until we have a good theory of prophets, we cannot decide about Jesus as God, as divinely inspired prophet, or as merely human. We cannot decide about the relation of Jesus to other prophets. This book cannot wait. In the meantime, I accept that God sends us prophets even though I cannot answer the questions this view raises. I accept that Jesus was only human but also more than human because he was a great prophet, like other great prophets, without thus raising him to God and without implying anything about the rank of various other prophets and of their messages.

Selecting from the Bible.

The Bible is not a scientific text. It has many points of view and many moral teachings. It sometimes even contradicts itself.

Nobody follows all the Bible, not even the most pious Jew, Christian, or Muslim, no matter what they say. It is not possible.

People select from the Bible what to follow and what to discard, and interpret what they do follow. For example, some people follow the Sabbath, and some do not. People that follow the Sabbath interpret following the Sabbath in different ways, so that some people allow themselves to do work at home that they enjoy while some people refrain from doing anything that could be interpreted as work. Some people will cook on the Sabbath while others will not even reheat leftovers.

People do not select and interpret at random; they have a plan; they have “an agenda” or “ulterior motives”. The plan can be more important than the actual material from the Bible. The plan reflects the real reason, spirit, and vision for their particular way of life. The passages from the Bible that they select and interpret only provide the material that fills in the plan and justifies the plan. For instance, people that want to lead a strict sexual life can easily find passages to support that path. Men that wish to have many wives and to use prostitutes can find support too. One of my favorite examples is the “Song of Songs”, a great poem about love and sex. For two thousand years, the Christian Church interpreted the poem not as about love and sex but as about the close relation between Jesus and the Church, thus denying what was blatantly in front of their eyes in favor of the agenda of supporting the Church. Liberals and conservatives both select and interpret so as to support their plans. A plan for selecting from the Bible can be conscious or unconscious. Usually it is unconscious, because that is how our minds work and

because people do not like to think they select on the basis of ulterior motives. When we try to understand any particular point of view, even one that seems to rely a lot on scripture, we need to look behind the scriptures to a way of life that we want for other reasons.

Even Jesus was complex and inconsistent enough so that people can select from him to support their own preferred ways of life. One reason to see Jesus as a Jew in his context is to get over the tendency to select from Jesus only what supports us.

Christianity carries a special burden of selecting and rejecting. According to standard Christianity, Jesus superseded the Old Testament, so Christians need not follow the Old Testament. Yet standard Christians love to use the Old Testament to support their way of life. They clearly do not think Jesus eliminated the Old Testament entirely, and they quote Jesus that we do still have to follow Old Testament law. But in using the Old Testament, standard Christians never use the entire Old Testament; they select and interpret to suit themselves. They rarely offer coherent explanations for selection, rejection, and interpretation.

Christianity has to come up with a clear explanation of what ideas it accepts or rejects, how it interprets the ideas that it accepts, and why. Except for some of the major longstanding churches such as the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, I have rarely read consistent explanations and I have rarely encountered Christians that could give them.

As with using religion to validate daily life, the underlying plan for selection and interpretation is often about a way of life that supports the kind of family and community that is typical of the people selecting and interpreting, and the underlying plan is often about denying rivals the kind of family and community that they need. Urban middle class Christians select from and interpret the Bible to support urban middle class nuclear families and to undermine the alternative expanded families of the poor. Liberals select from and interpret the Bible to support personal choice and their political alliance with the poor, ethnic groups, and people of various sexual-gender lifestyles. Pro-market people select and interpret to support naïve unrealistic capitalism. Nearly all Westerners, both liberals and conservatives, select from and interpret the Bible to make themselves feel justified, righteous, and saved, as if they had a special reason to be alive and a special importance to God.

I also select according to a plan. I have a generally liberal orientation with some streaks of Libertarianism, and I like modern capitalism and modern life. I do not know how much my basic life orientation has affected my understanding of Jesus. When I can see my bias, I point it out.

In fairness to standard Christianity and to other religions based on the Bible, all religions, all philosophies, and all political programs also select from their basic texts and interpret according to ulterior motives. None of them take all their basic texts as wholes. Even Darwinists select from science. Some are worse than Christianity even when they make a public virtue of consistency. I do not explore other religions in this book.

Selecting and Interpreting Can Be Good.

Americans seek purity, and so we see any selecting and interpreting from a sacred text as bad. Some

selecting and interpreting is really bad, as ten minutes with a TV evangelist or one negative campaign ad can prove. At the same time, selecting and interpreting are inevitable, so we have to see that it can also be good, and we have to try to make it good rather than bad.

Selecting and interpreting the Bible allowed Christians to mix standard Christian doctrine with great moral ideas from the West such as from Greek philosophy and from Celtic and Teutonic mythologies (for example: good citizenship, nature worship, and heroism in the face of certain disaster). If we had not selected and interpreted, we would not be able to use ideas such as “greatest good” or “true moral rules apply to everybody equally”. Selecting and interpreting allows us to mix ideas gradually so that we are not swamped by sudden insights that seem good in the short run but have some long-range odd effects, such as from existentialism, so-called family values, or worship of the free market.

The Historical Jesus.

I include the New Testament when I say the Bible is inconsistent, self-contradictory, and not a historical record. Some sayings attributed to Jesus he did not actually say, and some actions attributed to Jesus he did not actually do. The New Testament is as much about the writer's ideas of Jesus as about the real Jesus. The New Testament selected, rejected, and interpreted to support agendas. On top of that, standard Christians then select, reject, and interpret from the New Testament to support their own additional agendas. They make Jesus in their own image, to serve their own needs. So, despite the fact that the New Testament is quite short and fairly clear, various Christian groups still cannot agree on basic ideas. They argue vigorously over points of theology that leave ordinary people baffled and that have no relevance to the program of Jesus.

Christianity needs an accurate picture of what Jesus really said and did. Having an accurate historical picture of Jesus would also help place him in his Jewish context. In the last two hundred years, there have been at least three major waves of research on the historical Jesus. Despite problems, scholars have made a lot of progress. Some of the results back up standard Christianity and some support alternate views. We can use these results as long as we do not also make up some self-serving idealized Jesus, or at least as long as we are honest about what we do make up. I hope what I say in this book is consistent with the best results.

Discard Scriptures but Keep the Plan?

If the plan behind selection, rejection, and interpretation is often more important than the Bible, then why not discard the scriptures entirely and keep only the plan? Why bother with the hypocrisy of referring to an ancient outmoded sacred text only to mangle it and defile its sanctity? In effect, this honesty is what many modern people have decided to do. That is why the vast majority of people, even standard Christians, do not read the Bible. Some skeptics additionally argue that getting rid of a sacred text helps get rid of the kind of religion that only justifies prejudice, greed, oppression, killing, and war. Getting rid of the Bible and the Koran would save a lot of grief. I admire the honesty both of ordinary people who do not read the Bible and of skeptics who wish to ban it, but I do not agree with them.

(1) People need to ground their actions in some kind of absolutes, some kind of values, which have no further rational basis. Even atheists and agnostics have a set of rock-bottom values. We need

something beyond logic, although we can use logic to support the set of values on which we rest. Dr. Gregory House, from TV, is ultra-logical and claims to view cases only as intellectual puzzles, yet even he shows values deeper than mere puzzle solving. He does the right thing because it is right, sometimes even when it hurts him.

(2) There is a lot that is very good in the sacred texts, especially the Bible. To discard the Bible entirely is to miss what has brought out the best in people for several thousand years and continues to bring out the best. Having the Bible as a constant background helps us to gradually assimilate ideas and to test ideas thoroughly as we assimilate. We just need to be clear about what we select and discard and interpret, and why, and about the relations between old ideas and new ideas.

(3) I doubt that getting rid of the sacred texts will get rid of official religion, and I doubt that getting rid of official religion will get rid of prejudice, oppression, greed, killing, and war. Religion, the capacity for goodness, and the capacity for bad, are all rooted in evolved human nature. Religion can be a powerful rationalization to do bad but it is not the only rationalization, and people can do horrible things with no rationalization at all. Unless we change human nature, getting rid of sacred texts will not get rid of religion, and getting rid of religion will not end evil. Despite its occasional service for evil, on the whole religion is a net force for good, if only because it powers morality. Getting rid of religion would subvert a force for good in human nature. Because religion is a deep part of evolved human nature, trying to get rid of religion to stop the bad caused by religion is like trying to stop people from having sex. The damage of repression outweighs the benefits. Trying to get rid of religion will cause even more bad. The right thing to do is to shape religion to promote good and to combat bad. To do that, we have to face up to what we really believe.

Managing Confrontation.

Few of us like to have Bible verses quoted at us. When in that situation, ask the Bible “bumper” to list every moral teaching from the entire Bible that he-she both accepts and rejects, and to list all passages that describe each moral teaching both accepted and rejected. Ask why each text is accepted or rejected. Ask for a clear interpretation of each selected or rejected idea-and-text, and the reasons for the interpretation. Open the Bible to the books of Deuteronomy, Leviticus, or Joshua, and then go through them passage-by-passage to ask which passages are selected, which rejected, how interpreted, and why. Make the person explain why each teaching is accepted or rejected, and why each passage is interpreted as it is. Make the person explain why he-she overlooks any passage. Ask whether each passage is in accord with the New Testament or not, and for detailed explanation. You do not even have to know much about the Bible to do this. The entire event usually lasts only a few minutes until the “bumper” gets frustrated. When you are done, think about what you would have done in the place of the Bible bumper. What would you preserve, what would you make of it, and why?

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.

Chapter 1.03 Continuation of Basic Beliefs

Historical Development.

The original teaching of Jesus is the basis for traditional Christianity and for modern understanding of Jesus but it is not the same as official Christianity, what the average church-going Christian understands, or what non-church followers of Jesus understand. Ideas about Jesus changed between Jesus and now. Even his first followers did not do exactly as he wished and did not understand him as he understood himself. Some developments deteriorated from what he taught, such as by turning him into a magical god-hero. Some developments improved on what he taught, primarily by increasing the scope of his program to include all people. Some changes were part of building an institution, the Church, and were not necessarily related to what he taught. No church is based only on the original teachings of Jesus or on his original view of himself.

Modern ideas of Jesus as prophet and moral teacher are as much in the direct line of what Jesus taught as standard Church dogma, and they preserve the spirit of what he taught even if sometimes they are not the letter. For example, the modern idea of “the Christmas spirit” is not what Jesus taught but it is a true, wonderful, and good development, and it preserves the spirit of his teaching. Modern followers of Jesus could not live by what Jesus originally taught because our world is different than his world and because many of us are not Jews; but we can live by the spirit and by its modern development. The world could not live by the letter of what Jesus taught but it can live by the spirit. I like modern non-church ideas of Jesus.

In later parts, this book explains both what Jesus taught and developments from what he taught. You can decide whether modern understandings preserve the spirit of what he taught, if you can rely on some church version of Jesus, or you have to develop your own version.

Some More Specific Comments.

Because it is hard to love anybody as we love ourselves, another way to think about it is to love our neighbor as if he/she were your close brother or sister.

Jesus' message is universal to all people but Jesus was a Jewish prophet. Judaism generated Jesus. When we can afford the effort, we need to understand Jesus in the context of his place, time, and religion.

People can act on Jesus' message if they come to understand it by themselves or come to understand it through the teachings of religions other than Christianity. A person need not be a Christian in a traditional church to follow God and Jesus. Gandhi is an example of following Jesus while not being a standard Christian. Some people follow Jesus who never heard of him, or never learned his words. Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists, and Hindus can be followers of Jesus because of what they do. It is necessary to understand the full message. I do not know how much you have to understand. It doesn't hurt to keep reading, doing, and trying.

It is not enough just to be a nice person, a good citizen, confess God, submit to Allah, confess Jesus, follow Mosaic Law, go to church, know correct dogma, perform proper rituals, follow the Silver Rule, give alms, be decent, be righteous, be strict in sexual morality, support "family values", be a rebel, flirt with moral ambiguity, be true to your existential stance, vote the right way, pay taxes for social programs, pay taxes for defense, feel general sympathy toward people, be cool, be hip, be aware of the most current artistic movements, succeed, or buy the right stuff. You have to actively help people and you have to actively try to make a better world.

I do not know what all is required. That is a matter between each person and God. It is not useful to try to spell it out.

It might be possible to act according to Jesus' teaching but still believe in dogma that is not in accord with his teachings. If so, any point of wrong belief should not interfere much with right action. A Hindu might believe in a god other than the Jewish-Christian-Muslim God but still act according to Jesus' teaching as long as the Hindu does not, for example, persecute Muslims. I do not know where a person in that situation would stand in his-her relation with God but I think he-she would do well. Nobody is perfect in dogma and so God does not judge us according to dogma. I do not know much about God, so I probably have some wrong ideas; but my ignorance does not stop me from acting well, having good intentions, and thinking along basically correct lines. The core message is simple enough so that dogma cannot screw it up, and simple enough to be consistent across religions.

Mohammad was also a prophet. He said many good things. I can think of nothing that Mohammad said that necessarily negates Jesus' message. I can think of ways that people have used Mohammad, Jesus, the Jewish prophets, and the Buddha that are not compatible with Jesus' original message. No specifics given here.

Once upon a time God chose the Hebrews as the way to bring his teaching to the world. I do not know if the Hebrews (later Jews) were the only "Chosen People of God" but they were at least one Chosen People and probably the most important Chosen People in their time. The special exclusive mandate for the Jews ended with Jesus. No nation, people, or religious group took the place of the Jews. Now there is no particular nation or ethnic group that has the special relation with God that the Jews once had. "Chosen people" now are any people that act on the teachings of Jesus (the teachings of the Hebrew prophetic line), for as long as they act, and only as long as they act, without regard to church, ethnicity, country, gender, life style, or religious dogma. Not even political beliefs matter as long as the political beliefs do not contradict the teachings of Jesus. Christians are not the chosen people of God simply by being Christians. Not even self-declared followers of Jesus are chosen people except inasmuch as they really do follow Jesus. The United States is not the modern chosen nation. Fundamentalist Christians are not the modern chosen people. Muslims are not the modern chosen people. Politically Correct people are not the chosen people. No particular Christian Church, such as the Roman Catholic Church or the Greek Orthodox Church, is the only body of chosen people on Earth. You do not have to believe Jesus was God in order to feel that the exclusive relation of Jews with God ended and that the possibility for the relation is now open to all peoples.

I hope Jews continue to remember the traditional Covenant in their ethnic identity; but what they do, and

how they do it, is up to them. I hope Jews continue as examples of a good relation with God, examples of what a modern chosen people should be, and of the highest morality; but what they do, and how they do it, is up to them. Christians cannot tell them. I mean all this in a good way.

The Jews thought that God interferes in history to guide people, guide groups, and turn the direction of human affairs in ways that he wants. We all wish this were true, but I do not know if God really does this. Perhaps God did it for a while with them. If God really does this, he does it only very rarely, and so subtly that I can find little evidence of it that a scientist would accept. So, even if God does intervene in history, we need to work on our own to build a better world.

There is good, bad, and evil. Evil is qualitatively worse than bad. Bad is an adult getting the flu while evil is a child being sold into prostitution. Evil cannot be undone.

There is no devil. Religion is not about fighting the devil.

Religion sometimes is about fighting evil.

Evil did not come into the world only from rebellion of the devil. Evil is part of the world. People are able to do good, bad, and evil as an intrinsic part of being people. This does not mean that good needs evil or that good and evil are intrinsically woven together.

God must have foreseen and allowed evil. I do not know why.

There is more good than evil in the world in general.

In the life of any one particular person, there might be more evil than good, or more bad than good. I do not know why, and I cannot advise. It does not help those people to try to explain away the evil or to point out that good outweighs evil in general.

Jesus Was Wrong About Some Things.

Jesus was wrong about divorce and Satan. Jesus was wrong about limiting the Kingdom of God to the Jews and wrong about the Kingdom of God coming right away. Just because he was wrong about some things does not mean we can discard his message as a whole. It also does not mean we can cherry pick what we want and not take all of it seriously. We have to seriously look at each point, the way he meant it, to see the value of each point. We should take the Kingdom of God seriously as long as we do not think it is right around the corner. In that way, we can understand modern citizenship.

Because of my religiosity as a child, I had a very hard time with the idea that Jesus might be wrong about anything. I have grown to tolerate the idea. Other leaders in other religions were wrong about some things too. The idea that Jesus was wrong about some things is anathema to standard Christians who think that Jesus was God. It makes Jesus merely human, and it means we have to think about particular points of his message and about his relation to God. I do not think the fact that Jesus was wrong about some things is very important. If it helps you to see Jesus' message without any theological claptrap, then use the idea that Jesus was not perfect. If his mistakes lead you to question

his whole message, or lead you to get satisfaction from disrespecting standard Christians, then stop gloating, get over the idea that he was only human, and get on with better things.

It is not only me and Liberals who do not go along with the letter of the New Testament. Everybody who lives in the real world, especially Conservatives, selects from the New Testament and interprets what they select to support their way of life and to control other people. You very likely disagree with Jesus if: you believe in using force to defend yourself, your family, or your possession; you believe we need armed forces and the police; you support the death penalty; you have ever filed a lawsuit; you do not support government policies to help the poor, widows, orphans, and the handicapped; you believe capitalism is inherently Christian; or you insist on harsh penalties against people who do not follow strict "family values" such as people who commit adultery, have abortions, or have babies out of wedlock. You might be right in the sense that the real practical world requires some of these measures. But you still contradict Jesus, and you should be honest about it and what it implies.

God Used Jesus and Deceived Us.

Jesus was a good person, and his death did not automatically save everyone, yet God still let Jesus die horribly. Jesus was not God and Jesus was not resurrected, but God let people think he was. If Jesus was not God and was not resurrected, then God should not have allowed people to believe that. If Jesus was God, was resurrected, and did somehow automatically save everybody, then Jesus and God should have made those points crystal clear rather than leave us in dogmatic muddle and leave us open to conflict based on silly theologies. If someone other than God had set up this situation, we would say he-she lied. That God allowed Jesus to be horribly murdered is bad enough, but that God then allowed us to believe lies about it is worse. Of course, because people believed Jesus was God and was resurrected, they also kept alive his message. Knowing human nature, there is probably no other way in which humans would have kept alive such an exalted message. God allowed people to be deceived about something really important, the identity of Jesus and resurrection of Jesus, so God could get across Jesus' message. God used Jesus and deceived us. He did it in a good cause and he did what he had to do; but, in the end, God still used Jesus and still deceived us. Make up your own mind about God in this light. This situation does not mean we can ignore Jesus' message. We still have to think about the whole thing and have to make up our own minds. I return to these themes several times in the book.

God, Modern Government, and the Planet.

Most of the core ideas given above and in the previous chapter find direct support in the Bible. The ideas in this section do not, but I think they are important and I think they are in line with the Bible.

God wants us to succeed in modern good government. God wants us to succeed in self-government and democracy. We have to be more than just good citizens but we also have to be good citizens. Self-government is God's institution for people now. If we fail at democracy, we will have failed God.

God wants us to succeed with social justice. We cannot have an unjust democracy. We cannot allow some people to live well and other people to continually hurt despite their honest best efforts. Finding the balance between individual responsibility, social justice, taking care of people, and allowing people to

take advantage of society, is not easy but it is something we must do.

God wants us to be good stewards of Earth. We can use the planet without destroying God's creation. If we do destroy biological diversity, harm the environment, and harm the climate, then we will have failed God.

Over population, unemployment, poverty, bad education, and unequal development make it hard to be good citizens of our nation and of the world.

God does not want a theocracy as was the goal of ancient Israel and is the goal of many fundamentalists now. He wants good self-government along lines that are acceptable to people in general of all religions. Within those general guidelines, we can be stricter and more observant depending on our particular beliefs. We do not have the right to impose our beliefs on others. Government usually runs better, and more according to the ideals of God, if we do not impose our beliefs on others – paradoxical but true. If generic self-government goes against an important belief of ours, then we need to think and we need to negotiate with other citizens. For example, if the state permits the rich to exploit the poor or if the state permits abortion, we need to think about the best thing to do short of theocratic revolution.

I do not know if God wanted institutions other than self-government and stewardship in past times, or if God will want other institutions in the future. I do not know if God wanted kings to rule in the past and will want robots to rule in the future. I do not know if the history of the Jews, the West, and the planet pointed us toward self-government and stewardship. I do not know if striving for self-government and stewardship will eventually lead into other things and eventually serve an even greater plan of God. I do not care. I know that God wants this now, and that is enough for now.

The problem of self-government is hard for me because I doubt the ability of people in general for self-government; that is I doubt democracy can work. It seems odd that God would want us to succeed at self-government but would not give us the talent we need to do the job. I comment more on this problem later.

Jewish ideas about social justice and the Kingdom of God, along with Jesus' idea of working hard as a member of the Kingdom of God, prepared us for our roles as citizens in modern democracies. Even so, we should not view the modern democratic state as the only possible embodiment of the Kingdom of God, and view the modern good citizen as the only possible member of the Kingdom of God. Jesus was setting up the Kingdom of God in the middle of the Roman Empire where there was no democracy and when only a few people had Imperial citizenship. The Kingdom of God, and membership in the Kingdom, are wider than any form of government or relation to government. God wants us to be good modern citizens in self-government as part of being members of the Kingdom of God, not as a substitute. Besides working through government to achieve an approximation to the Kingdom of God, there are many other actions a person can take to be a good member of the Kingdom of God, such as directly helping people in need. Even people that are not smart enough, too sick, too despondent, or too ignorant to be good citizens in a modern democracy still can be good members of the Kingdom of God.

People need to see their everyday lives as holy, and people interpret their religions so as to make their everyday lives holy. They interpret their religions so as to make crusades out of duties they should do

anyway, such as be a good citizen or help the neighbor with a problem. Being a good citizen does not automatically make you holy. Having a well run democracy does not make a nation holy. Working hard to make government work does not make you a saint. Those tasks need to be done, and God very much wants us to do them; but doing them does not necessarily make us special, holy, justified in the eyes of God, or send us to heaven. Seeing the situation this way takes some glamour out of political crusading, and might make average citizens less vigorous; but it is better to be clear about what God wants and how the world works.

Creeds, Feelings, Experiences, and Acts.

The ideas of the previous chapter and this chapter are a creed, a list of points. Creeds are not as important as experiences and acts. Experiences include rituals such as baptism and feelings such as of the presence of the Lord. Acts can include giving to charity, paying it forward, witnessing, speaking in tongues, casting out demons, going to church, following the sacred calendar, working with prison inmates, writing a book, or a ritual such as eating a Lord's Supper. I might have been more honest to standard Christianity if I had first described its common experiences and acts before listing my own creed.

Here we need to focus on ideas and morality rather than on experiences or acts alone, for three reasons. First, except for some positive acts in accord with the Golden Rule, the experiences and acts of nearly all Christians are not much different than the experiences and acts of most people in other religions. Other religions have baptisms (washings), suppers, and powerful experiences of being with the Lord. The experiences and acts of standard Christians would not be odd to many Hindus, Buddhists, and Taoists. Readers of this book want to know what is special about Jesus. That means understanding ideas of positive actions, the Golden Rule, the Kingdom, mercy, forgiveness, and inclusion.

Second, acts include more than the usual stereotypical religious behaviors. Acts include more than rituals, more than behaviors intended to make a person feel better such as the usual going to church, and more than isolated bouts such as speaking in tongues or casting out demons. Those acts might not be bad but they are not enough. The readers of this book want to act so as to build a better world, and they want to feel that their actions are the most appropriate. We need to be able to think about acts. We need ideas about acts to guide us toward good acts.

Third, many non-standard followers of Jesus have some of the same powerful feelings that standard Christians have, such as the presence of Jesus or the feeling that God does help us; but non-standard followers of Jesus do not rest on those feelings alone as the basis for religion. They want to put their feelings in the context of morality, best actions, and reasoned ideas. They need confidence that their understanding is correct and focuses on what is important. Readers of this book might lack confidence in their ability to resist doctrinaire Christians who stress feelings, experiences, rituals, church membership, or isolated acts. Readers might lack confidence in their ability to resist atheists and jaded modern people. They do not know how to square their ideas of Jesus' teaching with the practical needs of real life, personal freedom, and running a democracy.

To connect actions and experiences to building a better world, we need to have good ideas and to be

sure of our ideas. That is why the statements of belief.

Ideals for Tough Situations.

I know sometimes we just can't act to build a better world, and that simply feeling God loves us can be the highest act possible. People feel "stuck" this way when they are sick or when a loved one is sick and they cannot help. People feel this way in a horrible place such as a prison or an internment camp (although even in a camp the prisoners do amazing things to build a better world). People feel this way when they have done something bad and cannot easily make amends. People feel this way when their lives have "gone to shit" and they do not know how to turn it around. People feel this way when they think they have to make something of themselves but can't. Most people know that sometimes they cannot act as they would wish and instead have to just hope. But most of the time this world is not a prison camp, we are not dying badly, and we do not have to save the world single handed. So we do need to think about how to act there. Just because normal religion has failed many modern people does not mean we should treat the real world as a prison camp. Frank Zappa described modern life as, "concentration moon over the camp in the valley" but he was wrong. "The Burbs" are not the apocalyptic world of "Mad Max". "The Office" is not a prison camp or a Kafka story. If ever we are in a hellhole, then having learned first about being a good person in a better world is not bad preparation for making it through and doing what we can.

I understand that many people cannot go much beyond just hoping for God's love, especially in the modern confused world. They do not know what to do. Or they are afraid. I am not much of a pastor, and so I cannot advise these people very well. If all you can do is feel, pray, and hope, then do that. I cannot fault people because they are not Saint Francis or Mother Teresa. But even the hard-up people can appreciate the good acts of other people. Even the hard-up people can encourage others. Even they can trust God and can have a relation with God. Those too are actions. Very likely, for them those are acts enough. The heavy-of-heart sometimes do what little they can better than people that are more capable but do less.

Chapter 1.04 Religious Ideals and Practical Reality

Jesus' message is a superb ideal but it cannot serve as the basis for a practical real society or practical real government. We have to think about what fails, how Jesus' teaching points us in the right direction, what we need other than Jesus' message, and how to bring the ideal and real closer together. All major religions have long traditions of practical advice. This chapter does not describe them. This chapter describes the problems that we have to face in trying to hold ideals while making a real society in the real world.

Practical Failure; No New Ideals; Standard of Standards.

I do not know any set of ideals that is both really ideal and something we can live up to everyday. No people fully live up to any morality, religious teachings, or philosophy. No good government was ever based only on moral or religious ideals, not even theocracies such as in old Israel or modern Iran. No Christian nation ever ran primarily according to the teachings of Jesus. We need ideals and we need real guidelines in addition to our ideals.

When people realize the world cannot live according to ideals, they tend to get discouraged and sometimes they even do foolish things such as crusade. It is better to admit the gap between ideal and real, and deal with it. Only then can we get the best of the human situation and come closest to ideals. Because human nature plays a large role in the gap, it is better to admit the realities of human nature and strive to manage human nature to achieve the best we can.

It seems we should pick the best set of ideals, even if we cannot live up to them. This way is tricky. Ideals are what we use to measure the best. We do not have ideals outside the ideal to compare ideals to see the best. If we had a best standard, that best standard would be part of our ideals. That standard would not be apart from our ideals by which we measured our ideals. The problem of a "standard of standards" recurs in various ways later in the book so please remember it.

Despite the logical puzzle, it still makes intuitive sense to say we want the best set of ideals, and makes sense to use a general standard to judge particular ideals. In fact, we do use several general standards already, such as the greatest good, right, applies to everybody equally, allows people to best get along, and is merciful. We use general standards when we figure how other ethical systems can work with the teachings of Jesus, for example whether we can follow Political Correctness and Jesus too or can follow Conservative Republicans and Jesus too. We use a general standard when we pick among items in sets of ethics, as for example choosing the best of both the Taoist advice to "let go" sometimes and Jesus' advice to "hold on" sometimes. We still do not have a single highest general standard that allows us to combine all various ideals into one set.

The teachings of Jesus offer the best set of ideals. They best approach the general standards that we use to measure any set of ideals. The teachings of Jesus give us ideals that we can realistically approach even if we cannot fully meet them.

Best Practical Ideal.

If we accept both the impossible ideal and our realistic practical limitations, then it seems reasonable to combine them into a best practical ideal. Instead of shooting for an impossible ideal, we set up an ideal that we might actually achieve. In fact, this is what a lot of people do, and this is what I suggest. This is what the practical traditions of most major religions struggle to achieve. This strategy brings us back to the problem of the standard of standards but we just have to live with that problem.

Unfortunately, people differ even on the best practical ideal. Without going into a lot of argument, I think the best practical ideal now is the teachings of Jesus combined with pluralistic democracy, capitalism, the correct oversight of capitalism, social justice, and care of nature. Making this all work is hard but might be doable.

Good Self-Government and the Real World Again.

Self-government fails for many of the same reasons that ideal morality fails. Even when we take into account that practical good government is part of what we need to supplement morality, democracy can still fail because of human nature. We are just not good enough and smart enough to govern ourselves. Again we face the problem that God gave us a task which he also ill-equipped us to carry out.

Jesus Points the Way; Jesus Completes Human Nature.

People are a mix of good and bad. We can see what is good but we can never fully live up to it. When we try to be perfect, we only make life worse. We compound bad behavior with guilt and fear. Our inability to find the best balance leads us into bad situations from which we cannot escape. Sometimes the events of the world lead us into bad situations from which we cannot escape.

Jesus' teachings point the way toward the good without requiring us to be too good. Jesus inspires us to be good without using goodness as another source of guilt, tyranny, and failure. Jesus' teachings complete human nature without requiring it to be more than human nature too much of the time. Jesus' teachings can often lead us out of bad situations even if they cannot lead us out of every bad situation. Jesus' teachings can serve as the ideal toward which we lead real life and real government as long as we understand that we cannot get there right now.

Jesus' Morality Piggybacks Christianity.

Jesus' teachings are not the same as standard Christianity. Christians do not always carry out Jesus' moral teachings, and Christianity has many ideas that are not found in Jesus' teachings. Jesus' teachings ride along with official Christianity as a kind of "sub-message". Jesus' moral message rides piggyback on the doctrine that Jesus is God. Even from this subordinate position, Jesus' message still gets through, teaches people, changes hearts and minds, and changes behavior. Christianity is like the "carrier wave" for the core of Jesus' teachings. Jesus' teachings are like a bottle of honey immersed in a bucket of scented water. The core message operates within the official doctrine to make people better. People want to believe in magic and miracles such as the virgin birth of Jesus or that the Buddha could walk and talk at birth. When people believe in magic, they are more likely to go along with the morality that the magic packages. When people believe in the virgin birth or the resurrection, they are more likely to go along with the moral teachings. The moral teachings of Jesus are not easy. Most people would not

have gone along with the teachings if they did not also believe the magic, especially the magic that Jesus' crucifixion absolved them of their sins and saved them, and the magic of Jesus' resurrection and its promise of eternal life. If people had not believed that Jesus' death and resurrection were magically effective, we would not have hospitals, schools, capitalism, science, ethical business, workable democracy, and the Golden Rule. If people were not self-interested so as to want forgiveness, salvation, resurrection, and immortality for themselves then we would not have the selflessness of the Golden Rule and we would not be working toward the Kingdom of God.

Repeat Warning: The Kingdom of God and the State.

In saying that the best practical realization of our ideals now is pluralistic democracy, I imply that pluralistic democracy is today's version of the Kingdom of God. In a way, that is true; but we should not get misled. No kind of government is the same as the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is in relations of God, people, and nature. Some particular kind of government might help those relations along but it cannot substitute for them. The Kingdom of God is bigger than any real government of any type. Real governments only approximate the Kingdom of God. Not the United States, a Libertarian minimalist state, a Christian fundamentalist state, any church, Israel, any Muslim theocracy, or any Hindu theocracy, is the Kingdom of God. The state is not the same as God. Conservatives of all faiths, and politically correct people, need to keep this in mind when they want the state to be the instrument of their morality and religion.

Practicality.

People are not perfect, and cannot be perfect, but people are remarkably good and have done pretty well despite all the possibilities for failure. The point of the list below is not to show that people are fallen, depraved, too selfish, or there is no hope. The items below are facts that we have to face to get over discouragement. Then we can see there still is much possibility for ideals and we can get to work. You don't need to read the whole list straight through. Scan it, and then come back. If you try to read it straight through, you will get needlessly depressed.

No amount of religious or PC harangue can make us perfect. We cannot base real institutions on unrealistic views of human nature, too good or bad. We have to construct institutions to take advantage of our good abilities and to minimize bad. All the points in the list have roots in our naturally evolved human nature. Our evolved human nature both makes us pretty good and insures that we cannot be perfectly good. Keep this in mind for Part Five and Part Six. Do not blame yourself if you did not make people perfect and change the world. We have all struggled and failed. Do not blame Jesus if he did not succeed either. Do not blame Jesus if his followers are not perfect. It is easy to see the faults below in other people; they apply to us too. All the points were bitter hard lessons for me from real life. By accepting that people really do behave this way, we can see how the message of Jesus can make us better.

(1) Some people are just stupid. Plain talk is better here. Nearly everybody, including people that are not bright, can understand basic morality and the teachings of Jesus, so this point is not cynicism or an excuse. Yet some people do have trouble understanding some ideas, and we have to be realistic about this human limitation.

(2) Some people are morally stupid even if they are otherwise intelligent. They do not see right and wrong clearly. They are morally shortsighted. They do not see that there is a greater welfare and that we should contribute toward it. They do not see that a small sacrifice on their part provides a much greater benefit to the whole. They think their little bit of benefit outside the rules does not make a difference. They know they should not steal because they might get caught and punished but not because stealing is wrong. They understand a hostile business takeover but they do not understand business ethics. These people usually do not have bad intentions; they are just morally stupid. None of us is perfect but some people are so morally “dense” that they make things break down.

(3) Some people are bad. Some people understand morality well enough to fake it and to use other people but they do not really get it in their hearts. On the mild end, these are the people who will screw anybody to get ahead and cannot see the damage they cause. They are the “users”. They are the bureaucrats that delight in causing trouble just to show they have power over us. In the middle, are sociopaths who do not worry about spreading venereal disease or do not mind socking somebody. On the far end are the killers with the cold eyes or the killers with the fake warm eyes.

(4) Some people learn to be bad and have great trouble unlearning. Some people cannot unlearn badness by any normal human means.

(5) Nature (evolution) gave to people many abilities that ordinarily would help them in their quest for food, mates, housing, children, and success. These abilities include the ability to flirt, take risks, fight, tell stories, influence people, use force, share, tell the truth, lie, improve nature, and gain possessions. These abilities include the capacities for morality and for belief in gods and God. These abilities can be used for good or bad. Some lend themselves easily to good uses, such as sharing, while others easily support bad uses, such as force. All our abilities can be turned to bad ends, often by taking them too far. Flirting in its place is fine but when it leads to habitual casual sex it hurts us and hurts other people too. Moral rectitude is notorious for going too far. Once we get on a bad track (item 4), we often find it hard to backtrack to better uses. We easily get hurt by bad people and experiences; we learn to respond with bitterness and spite; and without realizing it, the bitterness and spite become a way of life. Nearly all the rest of the items in this section are variations on the theme of this item but I do not usually draw out the explanation.

(6) People are nearly always self-interested and sometimes selfish too. Selfishness does undermine morality. Self-interest can undermine morality but it does not always undermine morality. Often self-interest supports morality. We will see later that the capacity for morality evolved out of self-interest. It is too easy to say that people are too selfish to be moral, cannot learn to love other people as they love themselves, or cannot learn to see that other people are people like themselves. That kind of glibness allows us to avoid hard thinking about what really does undermine morality. We need to be clearer about what kind of self-interest or selfishness is at play and what it leads to. We have to be specific about what is going on without getting lost in rationalizations for self-interest or selfishness such as “greed is good”.

(7) For the very large majority of people, success is comparative and competition is comparative. This problem includes “keeping up with the Joneses” but the full scope of the problem is much more pervasive and has worse long-term results. Most of us do not have an idea of success apart from what other

people achieve. We have to measure our success in comparison to the success of others. We do not want only a comfortable house - we want a house that is a bit bigger than the average house. We do not want only a car that can get us around reliably - we want a car that other people admire and that pushes us back in our seat while we accelerate past traffic. Most importantly, we measure the success of our children and other family members in comparison to other families. Our children must have a better chance of getting a good job than other children. If we can afford it, our nieces, nephews, and grandchildren must have a better chance of getting a better job than others people's kin. To make sure we are doing at least as well as others, we easily learn to be selfish, to overlook rules, to bend rules, break rules, and forget about the greater welfare in the long run in favor of our own welfare right now.

(8) Family overrides morality, especially family security. This is the greatest arena of comparative success. In many ways, this is the hardest category in which the ideal diverges from the real because it puts us in genuine contradictions that cannot be fully resolved. We can grumble about people that are personally selfish but it is hard to fault a poor mother for stealing to feed her children. We recognize that somehow morality arose from social life, and recognize that family life and social life are deeply mixed. We do not know when family life should come before morality or the other way around. On the one hand, we see people putting their families above general welfare or even using their families as an excuse to take advantage. Business people often use their family as an excuse to work long hours and thus not see their family; or as an excuse to ravage other families. We want to help poor mothers but some people abuse welfare. As I wrote this item, the country was enraged over the woman who already had six children and then had eight more. On the other hand, we have to defend our families, sometimes with guns, and sometimes with legislation. So we both see morality in acting for the family and see the breach of morality in acting for the family. Clearly there are forces apart from morality that we have to take seriously.

(9) The same issues as in item 8 arise also in community welfare or in national welfare. Morality arises as part of group life but sometimes people put their particular group or even the whole general group above common decency. Sometimes the motives are obviously self-centered but too often people can act this way out of misplaced purity of motive. "My country, right or wrong" is not right and it is not good for my country either. Sometimes people appeal to the common good as an excuse for abuse. Sometimes people get confused about when to live by high morals and when to put aside high morals to defend the common good. Americans are still trying to figure out how much personal liberty we need to give up for security against terrorists. It is one thing to say Jesus preferred us to die rather than hurt another person, and we should trust God to protect what is right and to protect our families. It is another thing to stare blankly while bad people destroy our way of life. Somebody has to fight conservative reactionaries, terrorists, theocracy, or PC. To help the poor, we have to mobilize against economic oppression, and mobilizing against oppression often requires stepping on some toes. These kinds of situations remind us that morality and group life have much in common but they might not reduce one to the other.

(10) People use morality as a tool. As an ex-teacher, I cringe when I hear "but that's not fair" because I know what follows has almost nothing to do with fairness but I have to pretend anyway. Parents and politicians feel the same way. A particular group usually appeals to the common good when it really cares about its own good regardless of the true common good. In the economic crash of 2008, bankers appealed to the common good to save their own skins while over-committed home buyers appealed to the common good to save their fantasies. It is easy to understand people who go after what they want

without appealing to morality. It is confusing when people use morality to get what they want because we are not sure what that implies for morality.

(11) Crime pays. Immorality pays. Lying, cheating, stealing, nepotism, sexual display, selfishness, back biting, conniving, cronyism, in-group politics, betrayal, etc. pay. If they did not pay, evolution would have cleaned any basis for them out of our nature. If they did not continue to pay, people would quickly learn to stop. People really do gain from amorality, immorality, or using morality as a tool. Immoral people do not often enough get caught and punished. Too often, they get away with it and flourish. People use morality to get away with immorality. Moral people pay the price for immoral people. Too often we are not sure whether morality or immorality is more likely to succeed. It is often easier to be immoral, so we try immorality, succeed, and repeat.

(12) People will hurt other people to get what they want. People will use morality to hurt other people to get what they want. People hurt other people, and use morality to hurt other people, so as to compete with other people by putting them down. Many drug laws in the United States are not about morality but instead use morality to control the poor to make sure the middle class stays on top. Estate taxes have been used to hurt the rich rather than as a realistic way to gain needed revenue. We demonize other people so that we can do what we want to them.

(13) People delude themselves to get what they want. People think they are entitled. People believe they work harder than they do. People believe the level of their personal exertion deserves much more reward than it really does. People pretend they are the ones who have been hurt when really other people have been hurt worse. I am good; other people are bad. People think they work hard for the welfare of their family when really they work hard to avoid their family – even stay-at-home parents take this attitude. People firmly believe in their own innocence always, and loudly say so. People have to delude themselves when they use morality as a tool. When people delude themselves, they get strange inside, erect walls around their delusions, and tend to hurt others even more. It can be very hard to break the fortress of self-delusion, especially when the self-delusion is needed for security of self or family.

(14) People are amazingly adept at offering rationalizations for what they do in whatever terms will work, including moral terms when those are what the audience wants or practical terms if those are what the audience wants. I send my dog to shit on the neighbor's lawn because she is rich and hires illegal Hispanic workers at below fair wages. We often say that what appears to be for our good is really for the greater good. We want a bail-out for home buyers not because it saves our own over-extended ass but because it is good for the country. Sometimes our audience is ourselves: we delude ourselves with a rationalization that we buy on one level even if we know it is crap on another level. The line between rationalization and self-delusion is hard to draw and they often overlap.

(15) We do not give up a little now for more later. Instead, they get more now and leave later for everybody else. We do not give up a little ourselves for the greater good of everybody. Often by giving up a little now we get more later. Often by giving up a little to the community we get more back later for ourselves even if it is not directly obvious how we personally benefit, as in paying for public education. Often a little loss on our part can lead to a much greater gain for the community as a whole regardless of whether we also gain, as when we refrain from partying until four in the morning so that people who need to get up to go to work can sleep. Sometimes a little effort-with-loss on our part has the same effect, as

when we pick up litter or care for nature. Sometimes we have to sacrifice for the community and we cannot always stop to go through refined prolonged exact calculations about it. Usually the obvious rules are for our good and the common good. Just do it. Learn the habit of consideration for neighbors and nature. Actually apply common decency. Unfortunately, too many people will not just do it. They have to be forced into doing it. Everybody believes he-she is the exception to the rules. Everybody wants to get away with something and is willing to make his-her neighbors pay the price of his-her indulgence, so we have howling dogs, dirty air, and sell out politicians. Sometimes people do not see the connections, sometimes they do not care even if they do see. Too often, mere words are not enough, and people have to be punished for not being commonly decent. So we have laws about pollution, being a good neighbor, noise, littering, and sending your children to public school.

(16) This case is a variation of 15. If a small sacrifice on our part now always led to a greater reward for us later, then we would probably not have case 15 or this case. A great aggravation of human life is that sometimes people really do gain by doing what they want now even when their benefit hurts the greater group, even when it hurts the greater group more than it helps them, and sometimes even when it might help them more later not to be selfish now. Sometimes it really does pay to be selfish regardless of what happens to everybody else. People put their welfare ahead of the total welfare even when they can see that the loss to the total welfare from their action far exceeds their gain. People put their welfare ahead of the total welfare even when they can see that the gain to the total welfare would far exceed their small loss. People seek gain now even when they can see they will lose even more later, and even when they can see that the group loses much more than they gain. We are ruining nature for our benefit now; our children will pay and so we really will pay too; but we do it anyway. A developer gets the town council to rezone a nice residential neighborhood into mixed business and residence, and then starts putting in professional office buildings and not-so-professional strip malls because a nice neighborhood appeals to those businesses; but in so doing, eventually the neighborhood goes to crap.

(17) It is easier to be moral when we and our families are fairly secure, when we feel that a moral act will not undermine our future. It is hard to save an orphan in Africa by taking food out of our own child's mouth. It is easy to give a tenth of our income to charity when we make ten million dollars a year. Unfortunately most of us never feel secure enough even when we are secure enough by any objective standards. Partly people are just like this. Partly we do not feel secure because we always judge our success and our security by others and we feel that if we give, even out of our abundance, we put ourselves at a comparative disadvantage. A big part of the task of modern states is to make people feel secure enough to be moral.

(18) Morality needs common trust. It is easier to be moral when we can trust other people not to use morality to make claims that can undermine our security and when we can trust other people not to cheat or take advantage. When people make superficially just but really unjust claims, such as when people sue us for a million dollars for tripping over our child's bike, then we deny the claims to protect ourselves and our families even though we might know they are true. Doing that makes us sick at heart. I don't care what you say, it could not have happened that way. We need to feel that, if we give a little, then other people will give a little too, if not now, at least in the future. What they give need not exactly equal what we give but they need to give something unless they are destitute or sick. Especially we need to feel this way about giving for the good of the community.

(19) It is easier to be moral when we feel that our partners in morality are members of the same group, community, or nation. It is easier to trust other people when they are one of us. People in our group are less likely to make damaging claims and are more likely to seek a balance of practical and moral reason. It is easy to be moral with one of us. It is hard to be moral to somebody outside our group and easy to be nasty to them.

(20) It might sound grand to say that morality is only really morality when it is not easy: we need to tell the neighbor that we superficially scratched his car even though he will make us repaint the whole thing and we won't be able to pay the rent for three months; we have to let out our one-and-only rental house investment to an immigrant who can barely speak English; and we have to give a job to a woman. It is easy to say we should extend "us" to include everybody. But that is not what human life is like most of the time, and it is not realistic. We should not expect people to be heroically moral on a regular basis in the face of adversity and insecurity.

(21) We need to create situations that lead people to be moral, and we need to avoid situations that lead people to be selfish. We need to create communities of economic security and trust out of people who are primarily interested in their selves and families. Even while protecting individualism and striving, we need to avoid selfish scrambles where nobody feels secure enough to trust. To the extent that the state can help us to create those situations without ruining our lives, that is one good use of government.

(22) In creating situations that turn bad into good, one of the most difficult cases is comparative success (comparative competition). We need to create a situation in which people strive to beat their neighbors; the striving does not get out of control; the striving leads nearly everybody to do better; the striving leads nearly everybody to feel as if he she has enough; and, in the end, paradoxically, the striving leads people to be satisfied with tying their neighbors rather than beating their neighbors. We need to trick people in a good way. Tricking people in this good way helps sustain good situations. In modern successful capitalism, the middle class including the secure working class with good jobs get this trick played on them. The results of the trick perpetuate the middle class and healthy working class. Modern successful capitalism might not be the only way to create this situation but it is probably the only way the modern world will have for the next few decades. We need to make regulated capitalism work. When it does not work, we have a terrible mess with much bad and evil.

(23) Sometimes people hurt others, or more often hurt the children of others, so they can retain security and so they can get the feeling of greater security that comes from being ahead. Spite, revenge, and vindictiveness are real.

(24) People crave unrealistic fantasies, often driven by comparative success. People over-reach. They watch television and then wish they could live in a McMansion. They want a trophy spouse and want kids that can read Dickens fluently at age two. They have too many children that they cannot support, and then rely on public programs such as public school and welfare. We cling to ridiculous self-serving political ideologies and religions. We continue to believe in the end of the world where God floats down to solve all problems. Many silly dreams are fueled by unrealistic ideas of what it means to keep up with neighbors and to give our children success. We owe ourselves indulgence. When we want too much, we cover it up with various rationalizations. The public owes our children an education. Saving our particular house is saving America. We sue the neighbors for two million dollars when a good bandage on our knee

would have been enough. We lie about the scratch on the neighbor's car because we really want to go out to that new gourmet restaurant.

(25) Once we act badly, we feel guilty. To cover up feeling guilty, we delude ourselves and act even worse. When we feel guilty, we do not back off, repent, and make good. Instead, we act even more so. We become stronger in our denials and accusations. We cover up one bad emotion with a barrage of other bad emotions and actions. Once we get into this situation, to repent even of one little part would require unraveling a big web, and so we are stuck. The bad feeling spoils other parts of our lives that initially had nothing to do with the situation.

(26) When we know that: other people feel as if they are on the edge even when they are not, over-reach, will hurt us to protect themselves or to keep their fantasies alive, feel guilt, and act irrationally to cover up their guilt; then we cannot trust them even when we have enough wealth-and-security, and they have enough wealth-and-security, so that we should trust each other. We fear other people. Out of fear, we become the kind of people that we fear. It is really hard to overcome this fear. It is really hard to trust somebody who might take away your house, your savings, and everything you have worked for and dreamed about. When people fear, we act to make other people fear us. The mutual fear increases the irrationality and digs deeper the hole.

(27) So far, I have been talking about personal situations but the same dynamics apply to relations between groups or to relations among a lot of people in a group. This is how we get into international "situations" that last for decades, of which the most obvious to Americans for years have been race relations in our country and the Jews and Muslims in the Middle East. I have lived my entire life in the shadow of race, welfare, badly managed capitalism, the Cold War, and the Middle East.

(28) Switching gears: some people are too good. These are the opposite of people that do not seem to have enough moral sense. They have too much moral sense. It sounds odd, but being too good can actually interfere with being good enough. The perfect is the enemy of the good. If we have to worry about not taking home a paperclip, then we do not see the co-worker with a problem. We have to think about how the right amount of goodness can emerge out of too little good or too much good.

(29) Ideals are closely akin to emotions and to commitment. Americans like emotions. They like Captain Kirk and "Bones" McCoy as well as Mr. Spock. We need to act sometimes when we cannot act on the basis of reason alone. Emotions, commitment, and ideals get us to act when logic is not enough. Yet emotions and commitment are not fine instruments. It is hard to fine-tune emotions to serve morality best. We cannot always be mean to the dog and kind to the cat. It is hard to love family, spouse, and country sometimes but not other times.

(30) Religion and morality require commitment. Commitment and "sticking to your guns" is often admirable. But people can over-commit. People can blindly adhere to something so much that their commitment interferes with their ability to do good even when the code to which they adhere seems otherwise good. (A) People over-commit to a group such as religious sects, nations, and military groups. (B) People over-commit to a cause or a code, such as Political Correctness or Family Values. Soldiers can feel the idea of a "band of brothers" too much, as when they cover up a bad deed; see "A Few Good Men". (C) People over-commit to a particular item in a code, as when soldiers "leave nobody behind" so

that they sacrifice four men to get one man off a battlefield, or when an atheist destroys the spirit of Christmas to get one tree removed from a public place. (D) Stubbornness is a kind of over-commitment. When we refuse to evaluate ourselves, refuse to admit we might be wrong, refuse to admit the other person might be right a little bit, and we stick to our guns no matter what, we are not always admirable and we sometimes cause considerable harm.

(31) People are susceptible to compulsion and addiction. Even when they know that something is bad, or hurtful, they cannot stop doing it. Lighting up another cigarette or clicking on a porn site is just too easy and too fulfilling in the short run. Bullying, whimpering, or facilitating hurts in the long run but it gets the job done in the short run and so we cannot stop.

(32) Zealotry is a lot of fun, and too often it works. Zealotry is a combination of addiction and using morality as a tool. It is not limited to religious zealots. Political correctness is as big a force as religious zealotry. People need commitment and vigor. It is hard to keep commitment and vigor from turning into zealotry.

(33) Too often actions have unintended consequences. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions". The road to mediocrity is paved with the same bricks. Sometimes people intend well and play fair yet still interact to make a bad situation. Conservatives use welfare as an example. Sometimes a situation goes bad even when people do not cheat. A group of friends end up going to a mediocre restaurant that nobody prefers because they cannot agree on a better restaurant. Sometimes people do not get the best they could out of a situation because they are afraid of cheating or afraid other people will take advantage of them. That is what happens when nobody will rake the leaves off his-her own lawn because they are afraid nobody else will either, and so everybody else's leaves will blow back onto our lawn. Mexican standoff is another example.

(34) Regardless of how we feel about specific programs such as welfare, we have to see that people do tend to get dependent and they do rationalize to continue dependency. People want other people to take care of them. People want other people to protect them from the uncertainty of the world. Dependency is a strong addictive drug. When people can force the state to be the co-dependent partner, dependency is especially likely. People do abuse welfare. Business firms abuse corporate welfare, and abuse programs that were originally intended to provide jobs or to stabilize the economy for everybody. Both people and business firms make up elaborate scenarios in which they are victims and therefore justified in staying dependent.

(35) Once situations go bad, they tend to stay bad. Once people or business firms get dependent, they stay dependent. Once in a bad situation, it is hard to escape without help. Usually we need some intervening greater authority. In modern democracies, and many world political hotbeds, there is no greater intervening authority. Unfortunately, it is far easier for good situations to go bad than for bad situations to go good.

(36) As a result of people using morality as a tool, we do not know what is moral and what is not. People want to keep the poor in line so people say stealing is bad when a mother takes garbage out of a dumpster to feed her children; but the same people excuse the "golden parachutes" of business executives who let a business firm go bust and let thousands of people lose their pensions. So is stealing

bad or not? People often get the most moralistic just when they are using morality as a cover.

(37) We need secular government. Government has to use ideas that are not based in our morality. The ideas in government not only come from outside our morality but also might contradict it. The police compel a child molester to confess so as to get him off the streets or to save a child at risk now. For the same idea from fiction, see "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance".

(38) We need and admire secular heroes. We need to admire public officers who use force, such as the police, soldiers, and even fire fighters. We need to admire the person who protects his-her family by killing intruders. We need to admire the small business owner who stands up to thieves, gangsters, and politicians. We need to admire John Wayne and Jimmy Stewart in "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance".

We have to be careful because we over-romanticize these people in the modern world of moral ambiguity; every would-be artist, writer, musician, critic, tough-guy, PC person, business person, and crusader for the Right or Left thinks he-she falls into this category but really very few do. Despite the danger of romanticizing, the people of this category are real, we need them, and we do not always see how their actions fit Jesus' teachings. Often what makes these people useful to society makes them unable to fit into society. We need them to sustain society but they cannot live in the society that they make for others to live in. Winston Churchill could be tough as nails, and, in his time, that was what we needed; but he could not win a peacetime election. Some of the best examples come from fiction: the John Wayne role in many movies, especially Uncle Nathan in "The Searchers". Could Batman just lead a normal life in Gotham City? The swordsman mouse from the Narnia books is a cute version of this problem.

(39) We have to blend system and intuition. Neither a system of rules alone nor intuition alone is enough. This is a problem in all deep religions, and I have no solution. This problem is strong for Christianity because Christianity developed its idea of intuitive faith by contrasting itself with supposed Jewish legalism and strict adherence to rules.

(40) Real life is complicated and mixed up. The movie "Amadeus" portrays Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart as an "idiot-savant". He can create beautiful music but he is really a crude bumpkin, a spoiled brat who never grew up and who still has "daddy issues". So where does real art come from? If real art has to have some basis in truth, then how can somebody like Mozart create real art?

In our own smaller ways, we are all like that. We are a mixture of good and bad, and often we do not know where the good really comes from. Ordinary people, or even otherwise bad people, can do good things. Gangsters can go out of their way to protect abused children. Even pious people have a streak of evil, as we know from suffering through the high school module on "The Scarlet Letter" or suffering through a slasher movie festival. A man can visit a prostitute from time to time but still be a good husband and father; Ben Franklin did. A wife can have children by a man other than her husband but still be a good mother and still otherwise be a good wife to her husband. A drunkard can lead a nation; Winston Churchill did. It is hard to base a systematic religion on people who are so mixed.

(41) When Christianity works well, it seems too boring to be the proper religion for the mysterious God that made this amazing world. Maybe the closest approximation to successful Christianity in the modern

world is an affluent American middle class suburb whether the suburb is White, Black, Yellow, or Brown. Affluent suburbs in other nations under other religions also come close to meeting the ideals of religion and family values in those lands. Yet people in affluent upper middle class American suburbs have to drink and take drugs to make it through the day. Children run away from there. To find something to dream about, people there have to romanticize fashion, Asian martial arts, somebody else's ethnicity, the ghetto, Zen, somebody else's religion, rock and roll, sex, saving the world, ecology, protecting unborn babies, the capitalist market, terrorism, the American Satan, or anything else that gets you through the night. Bored aimless people cause trouble. Terrorist zealots often come from the aimless middle class. People in boring neighborhoods go from reasonable religions to religious craziness.

It seems Christianity is designed for a world of constant real problems, especially moral challenges, but where usually the problems are not so big that cooperation and a good heart cannot make them better. Christianity needs to respond to more than the pain of a high school crush but less than nuclear holocaust. This world seems capable of endlessly inventing enough problems of the right scope so that most normal people do not have to worry about falling into boredom. Even so, as we realize the dreams of success inherent in religion, we have to wonder if that is really what Jesus and God are all about.

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.

Chapter 1.06 Intent, Mostly-Is, and All-About

People see what they want to see in Jesus, often to serve their own ends, noble or selfish. Some people see the dogma of the Church. Some people see ideal versions of themselves: clergy see a great pastor; soldiers see a spiritual warrior; liberals used to see a working class hero. Many people see an excuse for what they want to do. If they want to be a successful business person or successful crusader for the rights of workers, that is what they see in Jesus. Some people see a powerful man whose example allows them to control others: if they want to control the poor then they see in Jesus a person who urged us all to find jobs and to live only in middle class families; if they hate the rich, they see Che Guevara. We can never free ourselves completely from seeing in Jesus what serves our own ends.

People expect God, Jesus, prophets, religious leaders, politicians, and other great leaders to be completely consistent and to be infallible. But Jesus was not. Jesus was wrong about some things, such as the immediate coming of the Kingdom of God and about never getting divorced. Early Christians expected Jesus to return in a matter of weeks but he did not. People make leaders completely consistent to augment the power of the leader and so to better use the leader to serve themselves.

Seeing great people only as it serves us betrays the great people. If we look honestly at the inconsistencies of great people, we can avoid seeing them only as we want to see them. By seeing them honestly, warts and all, we can better appreciate why they were really great. Understanding why Jesus said people should not get divorced helps us to appreciate how he saw the Kingdom of God, how we might see it likewise, and how we might see it differently.

Intent, Mostly-is, and All-about.

“Intentions” are what a person aims for, his-her goals, and understandings. Intentions include self-understanding if a person has much self-understanding. “Mostly-is” is what other people say a person mostly-is in the situations that matter for him-her. Mostly-is is the character of the person in a certain situation. For instance, readers of this book might say that I am mostly a thwarted mathematician trying to impose logic on childhood beliefs. “All-about” is the important outcome of a situation in the long run and it is a person’s role in that outcome. Hopefully someone will say this book is all-about getting people to trust God and to do something good on that basis. A motorcycle ad might say that motorcycles are really all-about freedom.

What a person intends, what a person mostly is, and what a person is all-about are not necessarily the same. In real life, with real people, those aspects of a person often differ. People are not completely consistent. People often are not aware of what they mostly-are and have not much idea what they are all-about. Even great people often are not aware of who they are (mostly-is) or what they are all-about even if they have some strong intuitive feeling of “I am a great person”. A drunk might truly have good intentions at heart but he-she is still mostly a drunk. Many musicians intend to be artists and think they mostly-are artists but really they mostly-are listeners. They want their life to be all-about creativity when really sometimes it is all-about washing dishes and sometimes it is all-about making people happy at

weddings. When Leonidas and the Spartans defeated the Persians at the battle of Thermopylae in 432 BCE, they saved Western civilization and probably saved democracy. They were all-about saving a great way of life. Yet the Spartans were not interested in Western civilization and were not at all democratic. They mostly were aristocratic warriors who intended to do their duty and to achieve immortal glory. Their identity was in line with what they intended but it was not what we see them as all-about. Charles Martel and the Franks defeated the Muslims at Tours (Poitiers) in southern France, in 732 CE (AD), saved Europe from severe distress, and maybe saved Christianity and Western life. The Franks also were-mostly warriors who intended to defend their territory from foreign conquerors. They had no idea what they were all-about. "Martel" means "hammer", and Charles Martel was the grandfather of Charles the Great (Charlemagne). Achilles was the greatest warrior of Greece but, in the end, that was not what he was all-about; he was all-about being a good citizen and a good man even if that meant overcoming his identity as a warrior. Southern American Black blues artists did not intend to change Western arts and they were not the folk heroes (mostly-is) they have become in legend. Winston Churchill was a smart-mouthed drunk and also the great leader of a great nation. He did intend to save a nation (all-about) despite who he mostly-was. James Bond is a sociopath but he is also an agent of good and the exemplar of doing your duty. He does not intend to save Western civilization but that also is what he is all-about. From "The Lord of the Rings", Merry, Pippin, Sam, and Frodo did not intend at first to save the world from Sauron, and they were not mostly warriors.

The gap between aspects can be both logical and factual, each aspect has its own kind of evidence, and the relations between the aspects can get complicated and uncertain. Not all warriors save Western civilization. Not all drunks are great leaders. Not all great leaders are drunks. Not all artists have personality problems. Not all losers with an imagination are great artists. Not all great generals are Patton and not every Patton is a great general. Not all peasant leaders save humanity. Not all saviors are peasant leaders.

Although it sounds like a contradiction in terms, sometimes a person can have more than one "mostly-is", sometimes because people are just multiple, often because they change according to circumstances. For convenience, we like to think there is a close relation between mostly-is and all-about, there should be only one all-about, and so there should be only one mostly-is. Reality is more complicated. Winston Churchill was a drunk, good soldier, literary stylist, good storyteller, and excellent statesman – depending on the situation. John Lennon was a graphic artist, poet, rocker, songwriter, rebel, political activist, maudlin family guy, and writer of maudlin songs. We have to consider how each mostly-is relates to the others, and how each mostly-is relates to intentions and to all-about. Even if we can settle on a definitive single mostly-is, that information does not necessarily determine all-about.

Sometimes all three aspects do coincide. In "Lord of the Rings" again, Gandalf and Aragorn (Strider) did intend to save the world, they adopted the mostly-is identities necessary to carry out their roles in saving the world (wizard, king-in-exile), and saving the world is what they were all-about. Each had a slightly different public persona but there was little doubt as to what they mostly-were.

The unity of intent, mostly-is, and all-about usually happens only to characters from literature or mythology. Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin all became what they were all-about. In "The Matrix" movies, Mr. Anderson is not at first unified. He only becomes "Neo" after a process of unification in which he evolves a new mostly-is identity as the flying martial artist, he only slowly comes to realize his new all-

about as “the one” savior, and his intent (“he is beginning to believe”) only slowly lines up with his new identity and new all-about. His real all-about is peace between the machines and humans, largely through the defeat of Agent Smith. When a character in real life or in fiction is merging his-her aspects we say that he-she is coming to accept his-her destiny. We tend to think that highly unified characters are somewhat divine or somewhat demonic.

A lot of modern literature and cinema is about how people originate intentions, mostly-is, and all-about, and about relations between the aspects. It is about both unity and diversity. It uses moral ambiguity to find diversity. Some examples are the famous plays “The Iceman Cometh” and “Death of a Salesman”, the song “Pablo Picasso Was an Asshole” by Jonathon Richman and the Modern Lovers, and the movies “Amadeus”, “Spiderman” series, and “Batman” series. The idea of a “secret identity” for superheroes is not only a device to let people fantasize as in “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” but also a way to explore the diversity of intentions, mostly-is, and all-about.

Discrepancies can be confusing, so we try to ignore them or try to subsume all aspects under one aspect. We try to focus on one mostly-is. We see a person entirely in terms of all-about. People like to see Winston Churchill entirely as the great leader and not in any other way. Until the last days of his Presidency, many people wanted to see George Bush as the hard-headed crusader against terrorism and for American freedom. We want to see doctors as saints. It is really annoying to think that a silly adolescent might have created Mozart’s beautiful music. Can a talented but whining wide receiver ever really be a good team player? Instead we focus on the talented non-whiners such as Jerry Rice. Movie stars are supposed to be always glamorous. We do not want to know that movie stars eat raisin bran for breakfast and watch the same cartoons with their kids over and over.

Explaining Away Through Mostly-is.

When people wish to diminish a famous person, they explain away that person by focusing on some unflattering mostly-was and ignoring all-about. They reduce the person to a flawed being while overlooking that flawed humans can still achieve worthwhile things. People try to explain away John Kennedy or Martin Luther King as womanizers or plagiarists. People try to explain away famous scientists as only Jewish or only Black. People try to explain away great artists such as Beethoven as only neurotic. People might have any of these identities but that does not explain what they were all-about.

Part of the push to merge and glorify the intent, mostly-is, and all-about of great people is a defense against reducing them to some diminished mostly-is and thus overlooking all-about. By making a person one whole hero, we force ourselves to appreciate his all-about despite any differences with intent or mostly-is. Unfortunately, this tactic can backfire because, when people find that some real mostly-is does not live up to the idealized mostly-is, they incorrectly assume that gap also undermines all-about. We do not like idols with feet of clay. When we find out Churchill drank, it spoils him. The truth is the best guarantee of a correct all-around assessment.

Most people do not know the standard orthodox dogmatic all-about of Jesus and most people do not fully accept it when they do know it. When we cannot accept the all-about of a person, we change the situation by instead creating a mostly-is that we can accept and that serves our needs. Most of us cannot

understand what Einstein was all-about, so we focus on his charming character, finding in it what suits our needs. Most conservatives cannot accept any harm that Ronald Reagan did so instead they focus on his character as a “great communicator”, healer of America, and supposed winner of the Cold War. We do the same with Jesus. We find a character in Jesus that makes sense to us, allows us to carry on the lives we want, allows us to control others, and inspires us in some way. We use that as the basis for his all-about. I mentioned some identities at the beginning of this chapter, such as Jesus as capitalist or as revolutionary. People do not understand how Jesus saves so they simply focus on his glorious awe-inspiring identity as Son of God and leave it at that. When people need comfort, they do not think about Jesus as the fulcrum of history but think of him as the Good Shepherd. When I am bogged by the task of building a better world, I think of Jesus as prophet and moral teacher. This way of engaging Jesus through his mostly-is is common among clergy, theologians, philosophers, everyday people, and even atheists.

When people adopt a mostly-is to explain Jesus, they tend to overlook his all-about. The best defense is to accept as much of his character as we can and to accept that his all-about might not be entirely implied in his mostly-is. The best defense is to realistically accept that Jesus might not be supernaturally integrated.

Jesus' Intent, Mostly-is, and All-about.

We do not know for sure what Jesus intended. Jesus might have intended to die or he might not. He might have intended to extend God's rule to non-Jews or he might not. He might or might not have intended to be the messiah or the prophesied “Son of Man”. He might have understood (intended) the idea of messiah or Son of Man differently than most other Jews or the same as some other Jews.

Jesus might have been mostly a prophet, Son of God, God, instrument of God, yogi, healer, magician, wandering cynic, holy man, moral teacher, representative of Wisdom, peasant freedom fighter, god of the hearth, god of so-called family values, god of good soldiers, or god of decisions and social responsibility. He might have been any of those regardless of his intent.

If saving the world is what he was all-about, that achievement might not be in line with his intent or what he mostly-was, or it might be. Jesus might have known (intended) exactly what he was really all-about and might have adopted the identity (mostly-is) he needed to achieve what he was all-about, or might not have. He might have intended one thing, adopted another identity (mostly-was something else), and achieved results he never intended and that could not have been predicted from what he mostly-was. Recent scholarship on the historical Jesus has shown us more about his likely intent and mostly-is. Some of this new material is in line with traditional ideas about what Jesus was all-about but some of it is not. One reason for the many recent books about Jesus is to feel a way through implications that the new material has for discord and harmony in the three aspects of Jesus' life.

Orthodoxy.

Orthodox (standard traditional) conservative Christians insist that Jesus' intent, mostly-is, and all-about are all completely in line. Jesus knew what he had to do, and who he was. He adopted the identity necessary to achieve his intent. On earth, he really was that person, and only that person. He really did

achieve his goal. He was like Neo from “The Matrix” movies after Neo came to understand that he was “The One” and began to act accordingly.

Jesus’ intent was to save the world by doing the will of God. The will of God was that he should suffer, die, and be resurrected. In the Christian account after about 350 CE (AD), whether Jesus intended to set up the Kingdom of God on Earth is not clear but does not seem central to his intent. No items of his message as I described it seem central to his intent. Christians follow the message because it seemed important to Jesus and because it seems to have something to do with the Kingdom of God; but particular points of the message, such as the condemnation of the rich, do not seem integral to his intent and so often are ignored. The traditional Christian account of intent, mostly-is, and all-about make it easier to be selective about adopting and interpreting the New Testament.

Standard Christians use the cover phrase “Son of God, both fully man and fully God” to say what Jesus mostly-is. Yet many regular people are not really sure what the phrase means. The idea of the Trinity is not much help. Average people are not sure how the fact that Jesus is the Son of God relates to the facts that he was also a carpenter, an itinerant preacher, got in trouble with the authorities, did not seem to like commerce very much, and liked to get tipsy at social events. Are those aspects of his identity integral to his intent and what he accomplished?

Standard Christianity says that Jesus was all-about saving the world, and that his intent and mostly-is fall in line with his mission to save the world. Unfortunately, it is not clear what “saving the world” means, and the confusion over that all-about bleeds over into his intentions and mostly-is. If we are not sure what he was all-about, we cannot be sure of what he was or what he intended. Average people have trouble understanding what the mission exactly is and how his various characters conform to it. How does it help to save the world to get tipsy at weddings? Most average standard Christians think that saving the world means going to heaven to be with Jesus when they die but that is not what the Church teaches. What does that have to do with scolding the rich or being crucified? Most standard Christians think saving the world means saving individual souls but some standard Christians think it means setting up a Kingdom of Christians to dominate this earth. Will citizens of the new Kingdom have to be celibate as Jesus was? No group of standard Christians can explain how their idea of all-about relates to getting in trouble with authorities.

Some of the harmony in orthodox dogma is the result of creative interpretation by the writers of the New Testament and the writers in the early Church. Some of it is really true of Jesus but we are not sure how much comes intrinsically from him because it is hard to see through the creative writing. Conservative Christians want to interpret recent scholarship about Jesus in terms of the traditional concord of his intent, mostly-is, and all-about.

Conservative Christians sometimes recognize the discrepancies between mostly-is versus all-about by saying Christianity is not about the real Jesus of history (intentions and mostly-is), about whom we can know little anyway. Christianity is about the Christ of faith (all-about), about whom we know all we need from the New Testament and the doctrines of the Church. Critics of the Church say the Church is interested more in the death of Jesus (all-about) than his life (his intentions and mostly-is).

Suppose Jesus mostly-is the god of decisions and responsibility. Was that his main intent in his mission? What was he all-about then? Was his main all-about to lead people to existential crisis or to a feeling of

responsibility? Was his main all-about to lead people to repentance and restoration? It seems that his all-about is much greater than this. A focus on this mostly-is as the god of decisions and responsibility obscures more important questions.

The point is not to use discrepancies simply to discredit standard Christianity but use them to improve our own understanding and make up our own minds.

Liberal Christians.

Liberal Christians also would like consistency in Jesus' intentions, mostly-is, and all-about but they do not achieve it well. Briefly, liberals are not sure what Jesus was all-about so they fix on a particular mostly-is and use that identity as the key to his all-about and intentions. Like standard theologians, they think his intentions conformed to his mostly-is and that he succeeded in the all-about that is implied in his mostly-is. In fairness to liberals, they accept the inconsistencies more than do standard Christians. They try to use the inconsistencies to deepen appreciation for what Jesus mostly-is, but they are not often convincing. Because liberals do not offer a convincing mostly-is, to standard everyday Christians and to conservatives, liberals do not sound as if they are trying to be realistic but as if they are trying to explain away Jesus by reducing him to some unflattering mostly-is like a magician.

If liberals think of Jesus as the Prince of Inclusiveness, then they also think that is what Jesus intended, and think he will fully succeed in the future. Suppose Jesus was mostly a peasant rebel. Then what were his intentions and what was he all-about? Even if he was the Che Guevara of his time, what did he accomplish along those lines? He did not start a revolution. He did not inspire revolutionaries over most of the history of Christianity. Even the American Revolution was not inspired directly by him. If he intended the revolution, but did not succeed, then how do we understand his mostly-is and all-about? Suppose Jesus mostly-is the god, avatar, symbol, example, or instrument of unconditional love. What were his intentions and what is he all-about? Did he still intend to save the whole world? Then he did not succeed. Did he intend to make everybody love everybody else? Again, he did not succeed. Did Jesus intend to make people who were receptive to the message of love feel good about loving? That is possible but there is not much evidence for it. Even if that was his intent, what was his all-about? Was he all-about establishing a community of people that knew the value of love? That did not turn out. Was he all-about establishing a Church such as we see now? That outcome seems hardly consistent with the motives and identity of the god of love. The various Christian churches are not the realization of a community of love, and many non-church groups seem to do better.

Some liberal Christians acknowledge that aspects of Jesus' life diverge. Jesus' life could have been like the movie "Life of Brian". Jesus could have intended just to be a useful person but was forced into the role of wandering teacher of wisdom, and then became magical savior of the world when he was crucified. Jesus could have intended to become a freedom fighter but accidentally became savior of the world. Jesus could have intended to be a Jewish teacher, mostly became a wandering Cynic philosopher, and accidentally was all-about saving the world because his actions led to that result.

Sometimes the divergence seems like a contradiction. Jesus declared that he was bringing not peace but a sword and was bringing anger between family members, despite his current reputation as being all-about the "Prince of Peace". Jesus advised people to disrespect their families by not burying dead family

members, by leaving their families to follow him, and by using kin terms such as “mother” not for family members but for fellow followers of him, despite his current identity as being all-about so-called family values.

Sometimes the gaps are just puzzling. Jesus seems to be a particular mostly-is, and we do not know how to relate that particular mostly-is to being all-about the savior of the world. Jesus was healer and exorcist. Jesus liked to eat, drink, and be merry. Jesus had a bad temper sometimes. Jesus tolerated the rich but he clearly favored the poor over the rich. The idea of a messiah as developed in Judaism of his time might or might not be relevant to what Jesus intended and to what he was all-about. What does any of that have to do with savior of the world?

We have to accept any inconsistencies and make up our own mind. I hope that realism about all aspects of Jesus is the best defense of his all-about.

Methodological Note.

Confusion about Jesus arises because some people explain one aspect such as intent while other people explain another aspect such as all-about without realizing they are talking about different aspects. Sometimes a writer uses evidence that is appropriate to one aspect (such as mostly-is a wisdom teacher) and applies it to another aspect (such as intent to save Israel). People apply the same evidence to different aspects of his life. People look for the same kind of evidence for different aspects of his life when different aspects might call for different kinds of evidence.

Polytheism.

Before the historical rise of strict monotheism, Jesus' various identities, abilities, concerns, motives, and achievements would have been filled by a variety of lesser gods. There would have been a separate god for the rebel, the patriot, the yogi, the magician, the bon vivant, etc. One god would have brought unconditional love while another god saved the world. When people focus on one mostly-is that they like, really they re-introduce polytheism. When some people see Jesus as god of the family while others see him as god of love or god of acceptance, all really are mild polytheists who worship slightly different gods. This kind of mild polytheism is accepted in Hinduism and in some Buddhism. Christianity tends to introduce tacit polytheism partly through the many roles of Jesus and partly through worship of saints and religious heroes. I do not mind Christian polytheism much because it is a mild form, probably less dangerous than the deification of movie stars and politicians. Serious thinkers get beyond polytheism. We should know what we are doing when we adopt a mostly-is for Jesus or speculate about Jesus.

Anticipation: My View.

This section states a brief version of what I think so you know what to expect later in the book.

Mostly-is.

Jesus mostly-is a prophet.

Intent.

His main intent was to establish a Kingdom of God as described in previous chapters, both a real Kingdom focused on Israel and a spiritual Kingdom achieved through a changing of hearts and minds all over the world. His message intended to make people better and to show them how to live better as well. He intended to allow people to build a closer relation to God, and he gave them new ways to do it. He did not intend to do that by dying and being resurrected.

All-about.

Jesus did change hearts and minds. He did give people the basis for living better when they follow his teachings. He showed us the direction toward a better world. By merging with Western culture, his teachings laid the basis for institutions such as science, self-government, and free enterprise. His teachings provide the basis for most of the moral attitude of modern people all over the world even if they are not Christians. His teachings force us to consider ideals that developed in human biological evolution but that we cannot achieve through evolution. If the world ever does achieve lasting peace and prosperity, if we ever do learn how to be good stewards of nature, if we do learn how to self-govern, then we can say Jesus was all-about that success too.

I have no trouble accepting as a prophet a man who was wrong about some things, even important things. I have no trouble accepting as a prophet a man whom God might have used to get the message across indirectly by having him crucified and transformed into a god. I do have a little anger toward God for using Jesus that way and for using us.

Some Preliminary Results To Get Over.

It helps clarify Jesus' identity to review ideas such as "Son of God" in light of modern science and the modern world view. I do not ridicule here. In the past, we could use formulas such as "Son of God" without worrying about biology or physics. In modern times, we cannot. We have to take the scientific implications into account. I do not recommend that theologians spend time trying to find solutions.

Jesus as Son of God.

The idea "Son of God" might not mean the same now as it did when the New Testament was written, and the discrepancy might matter in how we understand Jesus. In the Classical World, the title "son of a god" was a label-and-explanation applied to an unusual great hero, like Heracles or Achilles. Heroes had great powers attributed to them, and then the great powers were explained by saying the hero was a son of a god. When Classical people wished to raise a person to unusual status, they gave him half-divine parentage and called him a son of a god. The first examples were mythological such as Heracles but later real people were raised to the status of son of a god and given exceptional powers, such as August Caesar. After the person was labeled the son of a god, then he usually acquired even greater powers in the re-telling so as to validate the label. The early Christians borrowed from this model when they called Jesus the Son of God. Most Christians did mean that he was the son of a god in the Classical sense but probably did not mean The One-and-Only-Begotten-Son of the One-and-Only-God as in later theology. Jesus changed into the one-and-only son of the one-and-only-God only over time and out of theological

battles.

These days, if we want to know if somebody is the true “blood” son of a particular man, we get a DNA test. If Jesus had only one human parent, then likely he had only one-half the usual DNA, the maternal half. If so, it is unlikely that he could have lived. If he could have lived with only the maternal half of human DNA, Jesus should have been a girl. If Jesus did live with one-half the normal DNA, then maybe we could manufacture other people like Jesus by cloning humans using only maternal DNA. I hope that is not possible. If Jesus had the entire usual amount of DNA, then Jesus likely had a human father and likely God was not his father in the orthodox conservative Christian sense. If Jesus had all the usual DNA, and half of his DNA did not match any human father at all, then we might say that God was his father and that God made some DNA to meld with Mary’s DNA to make Jesus. Then we could, in theory, duplicate that unusual paternal DNA from Jesus and use it to make other babies like Jesus who also would be true Sons of God in the strict Christian sense. I hope that is not possible either. We could use that unusual DNA to argue about how to make attributes of God. I do not think that orthodox Christians would like to make their case about Jesus being the unique begotten Son of God on the basis of unusual DNA, present or absent. Yet, if they ignore modern ideas of biology, they run the risk of totally invalidating the statement from the Nicene Creed that Jesus was the only begotten Son of God and was both fully human and fully divine. So, genetically, who was Jesus mostly, and what does that imply for what he was all-about? It is best to accept that he was a normal human being with a normal human mother and father. He got paternal DNA from some normal man. I am not sure of the implications for a theological one-and-only begotten Son of the one-and-only-God, for what Jesus mostly-is, and for what he is all-about.

Jesus as All-Knowing.

Jesus might not have been all-knowing. Some Christians with whom I have talked insisted that Jesus knew everything and could never make a mistake in fact or theory. He could easily have answered our questions about quantum mechanics such as about the duality of wave and particle. He would know exactly how far any star was from the earth right now. I think most Christians are more sophisticated. They do not expect Jesus to know everything about everything but they do expect him to know what was necessary for his life and mission, and they expect him to have the basic outlook of a Jewish person of his time. They expect him to think in terms of earth and water rather than in terms carbon, silicon, oxygen, and hydrogen. They expect him to think in terms of spirits rather than in terms of viral infection.

The second view is better but it still has problems for modern people. Jesus believed in demons, Satan, and exorcism. He believed that faith could work real cures, beyond what modern people ascribe to the power of the mind over the body. Fighting evil by fighting Satan and demons was important to his intention and mostly-is. He was just wrong. Jesus expected that the world would transform into the Kingdom of God within his lifetime or shortly after but it did not. Jesus was just wrong. If Jesus was wrong about such important things, how do we understand his intentions, mostly-is, and all-about? How can we believe that his intentions, mostly-is, and all-about could still remain together? Do we insist that his intentions and mostly-is as a fighter of demons and evil determine his all-about as the messenger of God’s better world? How can we think he might be right about other important things such as the Golden Rule or the Kingdom of God if he was wrong about demons? If he was right about other important things such as the Golden Rule and the Kingdom of God, do we then have to start taking demons seriously? If

Jesus could be wrong about demons, then how could he still be God or the Son of God? Can we take seriously the intentions and mostly-is of a person who was wrong about fundamental aspects of his intent and mostly-is? Can we select only those things from his intent, mostly-is, and all-about that we like?

I believe Jesus was wrong about some important things such as demons and Satan but that we can still take seriously his intent, mostly-is, and all-about. We have to stop looking for supernatural literary-type integration. That Jesus held some wrong beliefs and odd (to us) intentions does not undermine what he mostly-is and is all-about. Jesus could still deliver an important message from God and could still change the world even if he did mistakenly believe in Satan and in demons. We can still take seriously the idea of the Kingdom of God even if Jesus was wrong about its exact nature and its timing. We can select from Jesus' intentions and mostly-is if we are honest about what we do, and if we give reasonable evidence within the limits of our understanding. We can live with some discrepancies in intent, mostly-is, and all-about.