

Chapter 2.04 Some Alternative Religious Stances

This chapter describes some religious stances. This material helps keep Judaism and Christianity in perspective later. I do not point out the connections to Christianity here. I do not comment on the connections even when they are obvious. Skim through to read what seems interesting. I use some of the ideas here in later chapters without repeating the explanations. I reuse the material from "Deification" later in the book so you might want to read it here.

Dualism.

Dualism is seeing in terms of two contrasting ideas, such as "good versus evil", "light vs. dark", "us vs. them", "system vs. intuition", "reason vs. feelings", "organic vs. mechanical", "low vs. high", "right vs. left", "cool vs. un-cool", "hot vs. not hot", "conservative vs. liberal", "simple vs. complex", "real American vs. phony liberal", "real American vs. Tory conservative", "angel vs. devil", and "Sith vs. Jedi".

All people use contrasts and dualities to simplify complex situations and thus to get on with practical matters, so using dualities is not necessarily bad in itself. We divide restaurants into "fast food" versus "sit down", vehicles into "cars" versus "trucks", and people into "friends" versus "acquaintances". We tend to link pairs of contrasts, as for example, "fast food" links with "informal" while "sit down" links with "formal". In more harsh terms, "us versus them" links with "good versus evil" and with "light versus dark".

The problem comes when we see all people and all issues in dual terms, and line up all people and all issues in pairs of linked contrasts. When we see the whole world in terms of "liberal and conservative", and line up all contrasts along those two poles, then we go too far. When we see all people in terms of "friend" versus "enemy" or "saved people of my religion" versus "damned non-believers", then we go too far. Scholars do not often use "dualism" for the practical dualisms for getting along in the world. Scholars usually reserve the term "dualism" for complex religious-and-political system built up with linked contrasts, and with the going too far that is a normal part of such systems.

An especially bad kind of dualism sees the whole world in terms of "good versus evil", with us always on the side of good and them always on the side of evil. The good guys are like angels while the bad guys are like devils. This kind of dualism is called "Manichean dualism" after the religious teacher "Mani", (about 216 CD (AD) to 276 CE) for reasons I do not explain here. Manichean dualism is common with fundamentalists of all religions and political orientations. It runs rampant among conservatives and the Right in America. Political Correctness of the Left condemns Manichean dualism and indulges in it about as much as other fundamentalisms. Manichean dualism prevails during economic duress, such as during the Iraq war and in the recession of 2008. In this dualism, we "demonize" other people, especially competitors, so we can do things to them that we might not otherwise do, such as torture. We turn "them" into evil enemies. The middle class and the rich sometimes demonize the poor this way, and use it as an excuse to oppress the poor.

I do not know if dualism prevails especially in hard times but it does prevail in hard times, and many religious ideas are born in hard times. So dualism often is an important force in the birth and

development of religions. The early Christian Church incorporated some moderate dualism, such as an opposition between body and soul, but it also successfully fought even worse dualism such as Manichean dualism.

Basic Gnosticism.

The Greek word “gnosis” comes from the same root as the English word “know”. It means knowledge, particularly knowledge of obscure things that other people ordinarily do not know, especially knowledge of the way the world really is on the deepest level, how you are on your deepest secret level, and how to live true to your hidden nature in the deepest real world.

“Gnosticism” is a system based on gnosis, often a religion or philosophy. There are many kinds of Gnosticism. They have enough in common so that we do not need to look at varieties here.

Because not everybody can understand the obscure, Gnosticism tends to divide people up into adept versus inept, hip versus square, spiritual versus material, or people who get “it” versus people who do not. For instance, devotees of modern painting see things that ordinary people do not. Some ordinary people can learn to see as in special ways, but not everybody. So Gnosticism is frequently elitist.

The knowledge is not necessarily secret but it cannot be obvious and easily understood or else there would be no mystery and no point to any fuss. That the trees are green and the sky is blue is a beauty and a wonder, and few people understand why, but nobody makes a big fuss about it. Secret knowledge works best. People do make a big fuss about what will be the next fashion trend even though that is a lot less beautiful and important than trees and sky. Gnosticism that uses such secrets has to explain why the knowledge is obscure and secret and why at least some people have access to the knowledge even though it is secret.

Gnosticism tends to line up dualistically with success and power. Knowledge is power, especially secret difficult knowledge. There are winners and losers. Successful people know something that losers do not. Successful business people know things about trends in the stock market that ordinary people do not. Ordinary people could be about as successful if they could only gain access to this secret knowledge. Losers do not know or cannot know.

Gnosticism goes along with the normal human yearning for secrets, and for being part of an “in group”. I do not want to anchor Gnosticism in the genes, but it is common enough so that we have to take it into account almost as part of human nature.

Religious Gnosticism.

“Gnosticism” has become a technical term that usually refers to a group of related religions based on secret knowledge. That is why the term is usually capitalized. Most Gnostic religions share these features: deep secret knowledge about the world, how the world works, what spirits made the world, what good spirits want, about bad spirits, who might be our spiritual enemies, how to overcome our enemies, how to get back to our spiritual centers, how to align with the makers of the world, and how to

go home to our proper spiritual place with the ancient spiritual makers of the world. Various Gnostic religions differ in details. I go into a couple important variants below.

Gnostic religions always have specialists that know the secrets. The specialists usually want to share their knowledge. They cannot share it with everybody. They seek other similar people with whom to share. People that are already adept recognize each other and recognize other people that are predisposed to join: "it takes one to know one". The learners have to go through a process of learning and changing. Sometimes the learners have to pay the teachers. Often the learners have to pay a personal price, as when Odin the Norse God had to give up an eye to drink from the Well of Knowledge, Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden for eating the tree of Knowledge, or Luke Skywalker had to lose a hand.

Professions, ethnic groups, and many non-Gnostic religions share much in common with Gnostic religions. Graduate students need a chief advisor to initiate them into the secrets of the discipline and to protect them. So do young workers going to work at a factory with a union. In current terms, these guides are called "mentors". "It's a Black thing", means, "we are doing something that only we can understand and so you had better not even bother trying".

Emanation.

The idea of a completely good God is not compatible with the obvious evil and shortcomings of this world. Partly to protect God from being responsible for evil, and partly because it is fun, people devised the idea of emanations: The highest God did not make the world directly. The highest God made another lesser god or a few lesser gods. The lesser gods emanate from the highest God. The lesser god(s) made the world. The world in turn emanates from the lesser gods. Because only the high God can be perfect, the lesser gods are not fully perfect, and the world created by the other gods must be imperfect. Imperfection opens the door to mistakes and evil. In versions of emanation, there are several steps between the highest God and the material world, with each step being more prone to error, imperfection, and evil. There might be steps below this obvious material world. Those lower steps would seem like Hell or would be the equivalent of Hell.

In common versions of emanation, one of the secondary but very high gods tries to take over what has been created. Sometimes a lesser god but very high god creates the present material world, which he hijacks and turns to evil. Although that secondary god is not the highest God, that secondary god can still be close to the highest God and can still be immensely powerful. That lesser god becomes what we think of as the devil. In the "Silmarillion" and "Lord of the Rings", the first rebellious god was Morgoth, who ceded his attempt to Sauron.

The highest God does not like to get directly involved in creation so he creates at least one very good slightly lesser god who helps lesser creatures and who opposes the bad god. This lesser but still very high god becomes the representative champion of the highest God. Sometimes the champion god actually created the present world, which was then hijacked by the bad god. The good champion opposes the bad hijacker and tries to redeem the world. Sometimes the bad god created the present material world, and the good god has to rescue the world from the bad creator and turn it into a good world. Sometimes the good god redoes the fallen world and sometimes the good god destroys the fallen

world so that a better world can take its place. Often the champion is a goddess, maybe because people think of mothers as protective and nurturing. Some Mahayana Buddhists see Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in this way. In Chinese versions, one champion is the woman Bodhisattva Kwan Yim. In Thai versions of the same idea, it is Jaaw Mae Kuan Im, or "Lord Mother Kuan Im". For a satirical take on the idea, listen to the song "Bodhisattva" by Steely Dan. In Hinduism, the champion lesser god comes in versions of the male Krishna. In Western ideas, the champion secondary god often is associated with logic, words, and speech. It is "the word" or the "Logos".

In the Near East at the time of Jesus, the champion god knew all the secrets of creation and was completely wise, so she was called "Wisdom" or "Sophia". She was the basis for several versions of Gnosticism. Sophia played a large role in the two centuries before Jesus and for several centuries after Jesus. According to some legends, she supplied the wisdom behind the Tanakh and inspired some of its writers. Sometimes the books of Job, Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes are attributed to her. Some early Christians saw Jesus as a version of Sophia. Some present day Christians think of Jesus as a version of Sophia (ultimately wise) although they do not know the Sophia legends and probably would not use Sophia terminology.

Avatar.

The term "avatar" comes from Hinduism but the idea is widespread. An avatar is a manifestation of some god on this earth. Usually the avatar comes to help people. Then the avatar is the material realization in this material world of the champion god. The avatar does the work of the champion god here. Rather than appear as a spirit in full power, the champion god prefers to appear in the flesh as a specific person at a specific time even with the limitations inherent in a finite person in the flesh. The specific person who is the avatar might or might not know that he-she is doing the work of the champion god. The specific person might or might not know that he-she is an avatar. The specific person might or might not retain his-her specific identity. Normal people perceive the avatar as a hero such as Alexander the Great and Martin Luther King or as the unusually adept sidekick helper of a hero such as Grant under Lincoln or Jesse Jackson under Martin Luther King. When the gods are more like ideas than like people, the avatar is the physical manifestation of an idea and is the agent by which the idea works in this world now. When Justice becomes an abstract idea and a force in its own right, then particular people can act on behalf of justice and can represent justice. Many Americans feel this way about George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Bob Dylan, or Martin Luther King. Some Americans felt this way about George W. Bush. On the TV show "Andromeda", Dylan Hunt was an avatar of an archetype, probably the archetype of Justice. Conan the Barbarian became the avatar of good and light. Krishna the Charioteer is the avatar of Vishnu the Sustainer in the Hindu epic, The Mahabharata.

Many Christians see Jesus this way, as the manifestation and instrument of God the Father taken flesh. I tend to see Jesus as an instrument of God but not as God in the flesh. I am not sure how important the distinction is to an atheist. In the orthodox Christian version, Jesus is not subordinate to God or distinct from God whereas in my version and in popular understanding he is both.

Combinations.

It is easy and effective to combine versions of Gnosticism, dualism, Manichean dualism, emanation, and avatars. The good secondary creator god goes along with light while the bad usurper secondary god goes along with darkness. The facts that there is a highest God, lesser gods, Sophia-Wisdom, a devil, levels of creation, and escape from it all, are aspects of secret knowledge. When a person begins to understand how the world really is in all its levels, he-she escapes. While he-she is waiting to escape, he-she knows how to act well to find some happiness in this world and how to bring some happiness to other lesser people. Sophia brings the lucky people close to this understanding. Some people act as helpers of Sophia, as teachers of Wisdom. Teachers of Wisdom seek kindred souls to which they can impart secret knowledge and lead to release. The reader should dream up interesting combinations, or practice seeing popular current fiction in these terms.

Later and Modern Gnosticism.

The early Christian Church was infected with dualism and Gnosticism. It rejected Gnosticism officially but did not reject all dualism. As we will see in later chapters, Saint Augustine was dualistic and legalistic. Elements of Gnosticism inevitably hung on with lingering dualism even after the Church rejected obvious Gnosticism. Fully developed religious Gnosticism is not prevalent today but the ideas are still around and still powerful, as any short viewing of TV can show clearly. Any group is Gnostic that claims there is secret knowledge or a secret force, which ordinary people can use to become extraordinary, especially to fight evil or in the service of evil. Any group that claims you can tap into your secret inner nature and thereby overcome the limitations of a fallen world is Gnostic. Any group that claims your secret inner nature and secret inner potential are kept locked up by a fallen, deluded, and deluding world is Gnostic. Any group that allows you to think that you are really better than other people and so deserve more than other people is a little bit Gnostic. Any group that claims to call on divine help or divine objects to get you "out of your rut" and into the prosperity you deserve is somewhat Gnostic. TV evangelism is chock full of Gnosticism, especially when it sells magic trinkets or explicates mysterious passages from scripture; and so are "Star Wars", "The Matrix", and most movies about hidden government plots. To me, Scientology seems like Gnosticism. When strong proponents of the free market and Invisible Hand claim that it is a secret force and can right all wrongs, we can live our lives best in accord with its secret force, and they can teach us how to do so, then they are Gnostic. Advocates of the mystic power of PC to change lives and society are Gnostic.

Apocalypse.

The term "apocalypse" refers to "formerly hidden things that are revealed now". The Book of Revelation in the New Testament is a book of revelation because it is a book of apocalypse. The connections to Gnosticism and dualism should be clear enough because apocalypse claims to reveal the hidden core dualisms at the root of Gnosticism.

Apocalypse usually also implies great change, with upheaval and reversals in social order and power. The hidden truth that is revealed brings about great change or it is revealed as part of great changes in the world. In peasant versions of apocalypse, the land-rich ruling class will be reduced to poverty and servitude while the land-hungry peasant class will have all the land it needs and plenty of food. In the modern populist version, the workers will own the means of production and everybody will have a good job on which they can raise their families while the capitalist owners will finally have to work for a living.

In most Christian versions, the Devil will fall from his place as the temporary ruler of this material world, and a spiritual being from God will serve as God's viceroy in ruling the blessed world that replaces this world of woe.

Eschatology.

The term "eschatology" means "(words) about end things", in particular about the end of the world. Apocalypse and eschatology combine when people think that large events will bring forth hidden truths and bring on the end of this bad world and bring the transformation to a new better world. Originally the Tanakh had no apocalypse or eschatology except in the very late book of Daniel or maybe in Ezekiel. For simplicity, because they often go together, and because they often combine in Christianity, I use both "apocalyptic" and "eschatology" to mean about the same thing.

Among other versions, eschatology-apocalypse can refer to the end of all worlds, the end of any physical world, the replacement of this physical world by a spiritual world, or the replacement of this physical world by another better different physical world. Usually the precise idea is not clear, and the ideas are mixed together. I do not use any particular version unless I specify a particular version. Probably the most common idea is that this physical world will end but not all physical worlds will end, and this world will be replaced by a better and more spiritualized physical world in which people live a long time, never get sick, never die, have a good marital life or a good sex life, and have many obedient children.

Apocalypse and eschatology tend to have their own style of poetry, stories, art, and music, as in the "Mad Max" movies, Heavy Metal rock, and hip hop. Apocalyptic writers tend to be vague and indirect. They use symbols instead of saying things "straight out". Often they use multiple layers of symbols and/or symbols that do not have a specific referent. The symbols are like a secret code that you have to unravel. When you do unravel it, you feel that you know something that other people do not know and you feel that you are part of a secret group with an advantage over other people. You feel this way regardless of whether any decoded message is true or not. It is a classic case of getting something from nonsense, and of using attitudes instead of reasons. So just reading and getting apocalyptic writing tends to confirm the ideas of secret-knowledge-of-a-secret-world and that the reader is "in" on empowerment. Using indirection tends to automatically recruit readers into the world of the apocalyptic writer and to perpetuate the idea of the world. Apocalyptic style writing has a power in itself whether it is true or not and whether the reader agrees or not, rather like Voldemort's (Tom Riddle's) diary had power over Virginia Weasley in "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets". Usually an apocalyptic text has more than one interpretation so that groups of readers play games about which interpretation is the best and the most empowering. These techniques can make it hard to say what people believed and how much their belief affected action. I find post-modern (pseudo-)academic writers and their readers to be similar to apocalyptic writers and their readers. I find much political rant of the Right and Left to be badly done apocalyptic.

When the end of this world does not come on schedule, people that still want to believe in the end of the world tend to push the change on to another plane. They divide existence into this bad world versus a good heaven. Instead of this world changing some day soon, good people go to heaven when they die while bad people go to hell. Sometimes they also divide into inside and outside: good people change

hearts, change spirits, and change existence in this world as part of preparation for the next world while bad people linger on in a state of desperation and confusion. Most religions that want the end of the world but have to face the continuation of the world combine two outside features: (1) Until the world ends, good people go to heaven while bad people go to hell. (2) Eventually, this world will end. Then either (A) everybody, living or dead, will go to heaven or hell, or (B) this world will change to become better than heaven so that the people up in heaven can return to join the good people on the new earth in a new even better heaven here. The new heaven is a continuation of the good attitude that good people had on earth. The bad people, living or dead, still have to go to hell. Hell is a continuation of the bad attitude that bad people had on earth. This is approximately the view of most traditional Christians now.

A person does not have to be a religious apocalyptic-eschatologist to think in terms of apocalypse and eschatology. Groups that expect a revolution think in these terms, and use many of the same rationalizations when the transformation does not come as it should. Capitalism should transform the world but that has not happened yet, and so the lucky few can live in the paradise of consumerism until it does come. The Marxist-PC revolution is supposed to transform the world but that has not happened yet, and so the lucky few can live in academic enclaves cultivating Sophia, feeling superior, until it does come.

(1) Mystery Religions (Mystery Cults).

Four stances prevailed in the Greco-Roman Classical world in the time of Jesus. I cannot say much about them here, and they are not important to understanding Jesus in this book, but I need to mention them because you will encounter them in other reading. "Classical" means, "pertaining to the Greco-Roman world" and does not mean "timeless" or "chic".

Some Classical people that lived in cities tended to join groups that we would think of as cults or as secret societies, like the popular idea of the Knights Templar, the Dan Brown portrayal of Opus Dei in "The Da Vinci Code", or current odd ideas about the Free Masons. The mystery religions had a particular god, goddess, or pair to whom they were devoted such as Bacchus or Isis and Osiris. The god(s) were the source of secret knowledge. The adepts of the cult taught the secret knowledge to initiates. When the initiates had reached a certain level, they did not learn more through instruction but through experience. They went through secret ceremonies. The ceremonies changed the person. The ceremonies brought external intellectual knowledge to life. Sometimes the god(s) at the focus of the cult were dying-and-reborn gods (see below).

Civil authorities generally tolerated mystery religions because mystery religions did not cause much civil unrest and, except for some cases, mystery religions made their believers more willing to accept this world and to live under Roman rule. Sometimes the ceremonies did involve sacrifices, drinking, sexual behavior, or even violence, and so did get out of hand. In that case, the authorities cracked down. Jews generally did not join mystery religions because to do so would be heresy against God. It would get them expelled from Judaism. Also, people other than Jews knew that Jews did not appreciate god(s) other than God (Yahweh), and so did not often recruit Jews. To many Jews, Christianity looked like a mystery religion disguised as worship of the one true God. Perhaps to some Jews, Christianity seemed a tolerable compromise between mystery religions and worship of God.

(2) Dying and Rising Gods.

Jesus was not the only god to die and rise again. He had many predecessors, often with female helpers, including Osiris and Isis, and Bacchus with Bacchus' women devotees. I do not describe the details. Dying-and-rising is not uncommon in agricultural societies with experience of vegetation and annual seasons. The dying of the god is like the changing of the seasons toward winter and like the planting of grain. Unless you plant the grain, so that it dies in its present form, it cannot rise again as something more and better. The rising of the god is like the changing of the seasons toward spring and like the sprouting of the grain. The dying of the god allows for the fertility of the land and allows for the continuation of life. The dying and rising of the god brings abundant life. Unless the god dies, and unless the devotees consume the god in some way, there can be no new life and no abundance. Eating the god allows devotees to participate in divinity and in new abundant life. Wine often symbolized lifeblood and especially the blood of the god. Even when it did not, wine was a symbol for regeneration of life and for the intoxication that comes with understanding life and participating in divinity. The cult of Bacchus was famous for intoxication. "Dionysius" was the Greek name for Bacchus. Members of the rock group "The Doors" described life with Jim Morrison as "like partying with Dionysius".

In the early to middle 1900s, some scholars of religion thought that ideas of dying and reborn gods shaped Christianity, that Jesus was nothing but another dying and reborn god. Ideas of dying and rising gods certainly influenced Christianity but I think it is wrong to think of Christianity as "nothing but" another religion of a dying and rising god. It is better sometimes to look for what makes a religion unusual and what makes it itself rather than to look for similarities to other religions; and whether Jesus rose from the dead is not important to me; so I do not go into comparisons. C.S. Lewis was much vexed in his youth by the idea that Christianity might be nothing but another version of a dying and rising god religion. His devotion to Christianity came when he got over this problem, partly at the instigation of a former skeptic schoolmate, largely by seeing the dying and rising of Jesus as real while the dying and rising of other pseudo-gods were only myths.

(3) Civic Religion.

Most cities in the Classical world had patron gods and had particular ceremonies for those gods. Cities that were named after gods, such as Athens for the goddess Athena, were dedicated to their namesake. Residents expected to participate in the rites and were expected to participate. If residents did not, they were suspected of sedition. Prominent residents were expected to help pay for the rites, including holding offices that required them to pay. If prominent citizens refused, their business might suffer, and they were suspected. At that time, there was no separation of church and state as we have in modern democracies. The city was under the patronage of a god and had to respond. There were no secular rites; all rites were religious. Usually the obligations of a normal resident usually were not heavy, perhaps only lighting incense to the god at correct times of year. Even people that did not grow up with the patron god, or that came from a different religion, usually had no trouble performing the services. Egyptians that lived in a Greek city had no trouble performing the rites to Poseidon or Athena, and Greeks in Egypt had no trouble with rites to Isis and Osiris.

Jews would not participate in civic rites because civic rites necessarily implied worship of a god other than God (Yahweh). At first, Jewish refusal to participate led non-Jews to suspect Jews of sedition and to blame Jews when trouble befell the city. It seemed as if the god was angry at the non-performance of the Jewish residents, and the god took it out on the whole city for not enforcing full participation. This

viewpoint might have helped begin the use of Jews as scapegoats. Eventually, some places came to see that Jews were not seditious even if they would not participate in the civic rites. They tolerated and accepted Jews. I do not know how widespread and deep tolerance became.

Civic rites have not disappeared, we just do not identify them with Classical civic rites and we do not always associate them with a patron god. In the United States, the major holidays necessarily have civic rites. The speeches of Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, and end-of-the-year holidays are not just hot air. They are necessary rites. So are fireworks and gifts. Mom and apple pie are not just American, they are holy American. It used to be common to invoke God and Jesus, and it is still probably done more often than not. Groups that will not participate in those ceremonies are suspect. They cannot be full Americans. Americans have learned that full participation, including invoking Jesus, is not required, and that people can be good Americans without full participation including invoking Jesus. But Americans are still happiest when immigrants finally “come around” and “get in the spirit of things”. It is the same all over the world. A resident in a Muslim country who does not acknowledge the Muslim holy days is not comfortable.

(4) Deification (Sons of Gods).

Jesus was not the first or only human to be declared the “Son of God”. In the Classical world, prominent people sometimes were raised to divine status, usually by declaring they were the child of an important god. Heracles (Hercules) was the son of Zeus (Jupiter). When Heracles died, he was given immortality and taken to heaven as a minor god. The same was true of other famous warriors such as the twins, Polydeuces (Pollux) and Kastor (Castor). The Roman emperors became the sons of prominent gods, often, I think, like Hercules, of Jupiter. Founders of a city, or prominent citizens of the past, might be raised to divine status, often as children of the patron god. This happened to legendary Theseus of Athens. When prominent people were raised to divine status, they became part of the civic rites, so they were worshipped along with the major city god. Classical people were not silly about this deification. They did not give the Roman emperor the same status as Jupiter. They were more likely to pray to Diana or Venus than to the reigning emperor. But the emperor and other humans were granted divine status and were the objects of veneration and rites.

As with civic rites, Jews refused to acknowledge the deification of people and refused to participate in any rites in which deified people were honored or worshipped. The result was the same hostility toward Jews.

Jews would not use many kinds of coins in the Classical world because Jews would not “traffic” in idolatrous images, and Jews were afraid that coins with any human (or sometimes animal) image were idols. Jews would only use coins that had no human image, preferably only coins that had no images or only images of plants. This is why the Second Temple in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus had money changers, so Jews could use only acceptable money in transactions at the temple. This attitude also led to hostility toward the Jews.

Jews and non-Jews would have been confused by the early Christian claim that Jesus was the “son of God”. To a non-Jew, the simple claim that Jesus was a god would not have made Jesus too special. He was just another important person who was raised to the status of a god, or who was really the son of a

god in disguise. A problem only arose when Christians claimed that there was only one God, yet Jesus was the son of this God and also God, and that Jesus was the only person who could ever make this claim. The problem became acute around the civic rites because, like Jews, Christians refused to participate in civic rites, yet Christians claimed to be distinct from Jews. The claim that Jesus was the only person ever to be born of a god, or the only person ever to be raised to be a god, or the only god ever to come down to Earth, would have seemed like nonsense because there were other cases where the same thing had happened. To claim that Jesus was the son of a god, and the only such person ever to be the son of a god, would have seemed like trying to have your cake and eat it too. It was to claim there was only one God yet also to claim that somebody had been deified to become God too. Christians wanted the idea of deification but they also wanted to maintain that there was only one God and one deification. To a Greco-Roman, if Jesus was deified, then other people had been deified too and the Christians should participate in civic rites that included worship of other deified people. If the Christians would not participate in civic rites and continued to insist there was only one God, then Jesus could not be God, could not have been born of God, and could not have been deified.

To a Jew, it seemed as if Christians were trying to infect Judaism with Greek and Roman ideas, and doing a bad job of it. In Judaism, all Jews are the children of God in that they have the rights of inheritance and protection from God. They are descended from the patriarchs and matriarchs, who were special in the eyes of God, and so it is as if Jews are the adopted children of God. Nobody else can have this status. If that is all Christians claimed for Jesus, then it was nothing special at all. It only meant that Jesus had an obligation to be a good Jew. If Christians claimed more, then there was a problem, but it was not clear what more Christians could claim. If Christians understood Judaism, then they could not possibly argue that Jesus was really God, or a son of God in any way other than by being a good Jew, or the only son of God, or born directly from God. To make such claims would be to misunderstand God, not be a Jew, and therefore not be in a position to make such claims in the first place. It would be to make a claim that undermined the grounds for making the claim. If instead Christians claimed God adopted Jesus and deified him, then Christians were imposing Greco-Roman ideas on Judaism and so misunderstanding Judaism. The Jews were right, the Greco-Romans and Christians were wrong, and that was that. Any way you look at it, the claim did not make sense to most Jews, and the claim invalidated Christianity in their eyes.

Yet clearly some Jews did make some similar claim and did mean it. I will return to this topic in later parts of the book, where I will repeat these arguments.

Wandering Cynics.

Now we return to general religious stances. Always, not just in the time of Jesus or in modern times, some people have seen through the conventions of everyday life and have sought something better, more direct, honest, and deep. Usually their insight makes it impossible for them to live in normal society. They tend to wander, having no fixed way to earn a living. They tend not to marry. They do not suffer poseurs or fools. Sometimes they teach. Sometimes other people see they are special, and ask them questions. Their responses usually are unsettling, especially if pressed. They do not primarily explain; they try to get people to see through conventions, to understand for themselves, and do for themselves. One school of philosophy in the Greco-Roman world especially tended to produce people like this. The school was called "Cynic" from the Greek for "dog". Because of their skepticism,

the word “cynic” has come to mean somebody that does not value ordinary life very much, thinks most people are not much good, tends to see the bad in a situation, and is hard to get along with. That was not the original meaning of the term. Originally it meant a wandering thinker and plain speaker.

Cynics were not the only people that acted like this, and not even the only school of philosophy or religion that tended to produce people like this. Buddhists, Taoists, and especially Zen Buddhists all tend to produce people like this, and they have nothing to do with Greek philosophy.

Jesus had much in common with Cynics. He was plainspoken, insightful, often rude, did not suffer fools, did not marry, and had no steady job. Modern “family values” Christians would not have let Jesus hang out with their children. But Jesus was not a Cynic. He was not a trained philosopher. He might have picked up some ideas from Greek philosophers or thinkers around him but his ideas seem much more Jewish than Greek. I think similarities to Cynics come because Jesus shared the same deep tendencies in human nature that produce that kind of person regardless of the culture, society, or situation.

Anti-System.

Thinkers like Cynics tend to fall into a bind (which a true Cynic would only laugh at). Convention is based on rules. Overcoming convention seems like getting rid of rules. Not having rules leads to chaos and confusion - not what was intended in the idea of overcoming rules. To defend against chaos and confusion, people resort to more rules. Christianity has a particular problem with this bind because of how it developed in opposition to imaginary Judaism (which I explain below) but it is not the only religion with this problem. Hinduism and Buddhism both cast doubt on the ultimate reality of the self, of the world as we ordinarily see it, and on conventional rules. There seems no reason why any person is, and therefore no reason why any person should follow moral rules. Yet Hinduism and Buddhism insist the universe is intrinsically moral, that the universe rewards moral behavior and punishes immorality. Both insist that followers act morally even if there is no self and even if some moral rules seem only conventional. Taoism has a similar problem in that it gives no ultimate status to any moral code but still insists that the universe (the Tao) rewards good behavior while it punishes bad behavior, and still insists that followers act well.

The trick is to explain how a universe without ultimate selves and without normal rules still insists on morality. Why is the universe intrinsically moral? How does the universe generate morality and enforce morality? What does the intrinsic moral nature of the universe say about God?

What does it mean for normal people? I cannot answer these questions but I do meet them again in a later part of the book.

Christianity developed by opposing itself to an unrealistic exaggeration of Jewish law. In the Christian polemical exaggeration, Jewish law was supposed to be extremely detailed, stultifying, and conducive to hypocrisy. Christianity liberated people from the law so they could encounter Jesus and God directly. Instead of points of law, Christians had judgment and intuition. Of course, this stance leaves a lot of normal people awash in a sea of relativity and leaves the way open for moral-intellectual pirates to hijack them. In fact, early Christianity had a problem with Christians who claimed they were above not only

Jewish law but also all law, even moral law, and could do whatever they wished. Paul had trouble trying to control the “libertines” and trying to explain how Christians could be above Jewish law but not above civil law or above basic moral decency. I do not here go into his answers.

I do not think the question is settled in Christianity or in Western life. People still hear that Christianity liberates people from excessive legalism but that Christians have to be very moral and follow strict elaborate rules. Conservative Christians are at least as constrained by laws and by feelings of guilt as any Jew in Christian polemics. People still rebel against legalism, but now against Christian legalism. Libertines still use the situation to do what they wish while saying they are above conventional law. Rebels still drift in the sea of relativism and still are vulnerable to spiritual pirates. After people cast off the legalism of standard Christianity, they panic at their relativistic freedom, and then grasp at whatever system offers them security. Paradoxically, by casting off convention people often bind themselves with bizarre cult.

Existential Commitment.

This section does not explain Existentialism in general

Christianity is about as prone to hypocrisy as other religions, in some ways more so because of its commitment to social action. Christians should help the poor and should seek social justice but too often they do not. They are content to go to church and to give a little donation. Even when Christians do act, too often they act to make themselves feel righteous and superior rather than because they have thought through a situation and have done the most good. Too many Christians do not “have Jesus in their hearts”. They do not feel a commitment to Jesus and what he stands for.

Suppose instead of worrying about fine points of morality (see above) we take as our standard of behavior genuine commitment. What matters is not what you do but your motives in doing it. You are justified when you act in accord with your true self and true motives. Hopefully, most people have good selves and good motives.

A person acts correctly when he-she has a sense of what he-she is all about and acts accordingly to the best of his-her ability. If a person is an artist, the person should be an artist with whole heart and whole mind. If a person is a politician, the person should be a good politician with whole heart and whole mind. We allow no poseurs, fakers, hypocrites, or wishy-washy half-hearted efforts. Even if a person is not exactly what we would like in a human being then we can still respect that person if he-she behaves according to his-her nature. If a person is a biker at heart and likes meth, then we can still get along with that person as long as he-she is a good meth-head biker and does not hurt innocent people or us. The greatest sin is being insincere to yourself or to others. I do not dwell here on whether your nature comes from society or if it comes from some deep spring of self.

By modern American standards, it is better if your nature does not come from society but it is also better if your nature does not come from just being an animal. Americans feel there is a self inside of you that is neither society nor biology, and your nature comes from there. That is what you are true to. This approach is similar to what the Bhagavad Gita of Hinduism teaches.

So it seems that a sincere Christian is a true Christian and vice versa. A true Christian feels what it means to commit to Jesus and is willing to make that commitment with all his-her heart and mind. Christianity is not about understanding some ideas or assenting to some creed but about having a change of heart and then living according to that change of heart all the rest of your life.

Three problems arise. First, what does it mean to understand true Christianity and commit to that? People have different ideas of what true Christianity is, and they demand different commitments.

Second, what if we just cannot find our true selves? What if we just cannot find true Christianity?

Third, a bigger problem frames the first two problems because it is more general to the whole existential approach. What if what we are is not very good? What if at heart we are a serial killer, rapist, child molester, spouse abuser, hippy, Republican, frat boy, Valley girl, or slacker? What if at heart we are superficial poseurs? What if we cannot find a self that we like? What if our self is so bad that other people do not like us and they want to stop us? This is the stuff of TV crime dramas about serial killers or teen movies about mean girls. Keep in mind there are no standards other than genuine commitment. If we have a commitment and are true to it, then we are correct. But if we do not like what we are or want to be better, then we have to accept objective standards other than only our own subjective commitment. If we accept standards other than genuine commitment, then we have to accept limits on our selves that do not come from our own true nature. Then genuine action is not just action according to our selves but is also action according to objective moral standards. We have to learn how to mix self with morality, and we have to figure out what morality to mix self with. This is another version of the problem of anti-system from above.

Americans think a sincere search for the true inner self automatically results in finding a true inner self that is both noble and acceptable to other people. The advice to Hamlet was something like, "To thine own self be true, and it follows as night from day that thou cannot be false to any man". No serial killers allowed. Enthusiastic Christians think if they make a deep and genuine commitment to Jesus then he will lead them to a true self that is both in line with God's plan and of service to others. Both versions are charming and have more truth than we might expect but neither version is true enough so that we do not have to worry. Hamlet found out that sincerity is not enough, and we all know some hearty Christians that meander or behave badly. We still need objective references.

So we cannot accept that even a real commitment to some subjective Jesus automatically makes a person a real Christian. We have to think about what makes a person a true Christian, and for that we have to look to moral rules such as helping the poor and promoting social justice. We also have to think about what makes Christianity objectively true. Does Christianity reflect the innate moral tendency of the universe or the commandments of the one true God, or both?

When we think about objective morality and the objective truth of Christianity, we reopen the door to hypocrisy. We adopt rules that people can follow superficially without understanding and with the intent of serving themselves. We worry whether superficial adherence to the letter of morality is genuine Christianity, as in going to church and giving a little donation, being vocal at an anti-abortion rally, or rallying for leniency in immigration laws. By guarding against subjectivism, we reopen the door to phonies and hypocrites. There is no easy way reconcile all this.

From the 1940s through about the 1980s, the existential commitment approach to Christianity and the Bible was fairly common. What mattered to ministers then was that Christianity was able to evoke a deep commitment. This version of existentialism and Christianity is an extension of Romanticism although in part it was born out of a revolt against Romanticism. You still encounter this idea in reading and among Jesus enthusiasts. In Bible scholarship, it came across as the idea that the real Jesus, the historical Jesus, did not matter nearly so much as the "Christ of faith" (note the dualistic opposition of Jesus versus Christ). What mattered was the ideal of a Christ and all that the ideal entailed rather than the historical Jesus, what he might have really said or really done. It was never clear where the ideal of the Christ came from if it did not come from the real historical Jesus, why it should be true, why it is better than alternatives, and why it should be able to inspire a genuine commitment, especially to inspire a genuine commitment better than the real Jesus could. Conservative Christians avoid this issue by insisting that the real Jesus and the Christ of faith are absolutely the same, and by merging the real Jesus into their version of the Christ of faith. Normal people like me cannot be so sure, and so have to think it all out.