

PART 2: General Background

Chapter 2.01 Avoiding Common Mistakes

This part of the book is only on the Internet. I have not edited this material very much so it might be a little rough. I intend to rework this material to put in a book (for the Internet) that compares religious stances and life stances.

This chapter is a long list of common mistakes about religion. You can skip it if you have a good background in philosophy, theology, or social science. Skim it for anything that catches your eye. In later chapters I refer to some of these mistakes but I also provide enough background where needed so that you do not have to come back here to know what I am talking about. The discussions here are fuller so, if you do come back, you might enjoy it.

This list does not include every mistake. Many are natural and hard to avoid. Sometimes I commit these mistakes myself. When I do, and I see it, I say so, and tell you why. If we never commit any mistakes, we end up with an austere religion that is focused on moral behavior. I do not expect most people to be so austere. We can still make a few of these mistakes and not betray our better ideals.

The Bible is Not Infallible.

This idea is self-explanatory. The Bible is not an objective explanation of history, biology, physics, political science, or even of theology. It is a collection of stories, some of which are based on real historic events, and some of which convey messages about morality, life, and God. Some messages are good and some bad. The Bible is not consistent, and it can be contradictory. It is not self-evident. It requires interpretation. Various interpretations differ and cannot be reconciled. It makes sense to say that God spoke through the Bible, but that does not mean we have to accept every line as literally true or as binding. The Bible has a lot of bad stuff in it, such as genocide, which we cannot take as binding. We have to evaluate every statement for ourselves. The Bible does not speak to many modern issues such as cloning. Many issues we have to decide for ourselves independently of the Bible such as whether or not to have national health care. Even when the Bible is clear on some issues such as helping the poor, many Christians apparently decide for themselves not to follow it. For issues that we cannot decide ourselves and on which the Bible does speak, we can fall back on the Bible as a reference. In those cases, do not forget the potential for dispute. If we really cannot decide for ourselves about divorce, we can fall back on the fact that the Old Testament allowed men to have more than one wife and allowed men to divorce women but not women to divorce men, or that Jesus seems to allow only monogamy and seems to forbid divorce, or that Paul and Matthew seem to allow both divorce and remarriage in some cases.

Balance and Judgment.

We can avoid many mistakes by seeking a balance between tendencies, sometimes between two opposing tendencies, and sometimes between more than two. We can be too strict with our children or

too lax. In law, we can seek the common ground between justice, mercy, and strictness. So seek the balanced middle first to see if that makes best sense.

Passion.

Sometimes the balanced middle is not the best position. We can be like the ass that starved to death because it stood between two exactly equal stacks of hay and could not choose between them. That is what passion is for sometimes. It can be better to make any choice, even a slightly wrong choice, than to make no choice at all. When we decide, usually we should act with clear commitment and not vacillate.

“No” to “Nothing But” and Reductionism; “Yes” to Essentialism.

People used to laugh at Freudianism because it seemed to say that everything was nothing but frustrated adolescent sex: cigars, football, striving at work, erecting tall buildings, etc. Other “isms” have their own “nothing but” too. Some religion sees human misery as nothing but the devil or nothing but a bad human will. Bleeding hearts see all bad behavior as the result of curable misguidance, as when Riff in “West Side Story” says, “I’m depraved on account of I’m deprived”. Batman movies and graphic novels are nothing but pop culture silliness. Classical music is nothing but elitism.

“Nothing but” “explains away”. “Nothing but” reduces something so much that it loses its identity. We want to be able to explain but we do not want to explain away unless explaining away is right. It makes sense to explain by saying that something is an instance of something else but it can be misleading to explain away through “nothing but”. Watching TV, golf, drinking, listening to music, watching trees sway, and figuring out a mathematical theorem are all fun but they are not “nothing but” fun. Each is fun in its own way and each is something besides fun too.

A dog is a large, complicated electrochemical machine designed by evolution but it also can be our best friend, a lot of fun, and it might even be a little soul. Spot the dog is an electrochemical machine but is also more than “nothing but” an electrochemical machine. People name their cars just because the car acts very much like it is alive and has a personality. We do not want to explain away Spot the dog or Betsy the car.

Of course, a big part of explanation is reducing, and sometimes reducing is the right thing to do. If we want to fix our car, we have to think of how it is made and how it works rather than its name and personality. We have to think of it as nothing but nuts and bolts, at least for the present needs. If Spot gets sick, then the veterinarian has to think of him as an electrochemical machine.

Sometimes something is two or more things at the same time, and we are not sure which takes priority when or how to handle the overall blending. American football is both a sport and a war. Social parties are both sport and war. A walk in the woods is fresh air, exercise, appreciating nature, and a chance to see the principles of biology in the flesh. A motorcycle is basic transportation, a great ride, and art. A painting covers a spot on the wall and brings us to esthetic rapture.

Sometimes we use “nothing but” when we want to get to the heart of a matter. We might not mean to distort but we have to get things done, and we are willing to lose some detail to find out “what is going

on” so that we can act or not act. When we hear about a fight between the neighbors, we want to know that our car is not damaged, what they were really fighting about, who got hurt how, if they are liable to carry a grudge, and if the fight will spill over on to us. We do not want to know if the shouting upset the dog for a while. If they are really fighting because somebody’s wife flirted with somebody’s husband, we want to know that; we do not care if they used the excuse that somebody’s bumper stuck out into the driveway. We do not want to know what they were wearing or if the sky was overcast. We do not even care if somebody called the police unless the police changed the basic situation. Seeking the heart of a matter is called looking for the essence. Looking for the essence is out of fashion now in philosophy and social science but people still do it because it makes sense. Even social scientists that deny seeking the essence still see the essence of social relations in power.

We seek the essential Jesus without reducing Jesus to “nothing but”. Jesus might have been both a moral teacher and the Son of God who got crucified to save us from our sins, but we want to know which is more important. We want to know what is really going on. It might not be appropriate to seek the essential Jesus, but it is natural to try, and the trying often leads to good results that we did not intend. We seek the essence of Jesus without reducing Jesus to nothing but some ideology or idealization.

We have to look for all the possibilities, to look for the most important possibility if there is one, not to rest on our favorite alternative as the essence if it is not the essence, and to stress alternatives properly. If one alternative is really the essence, then say so. This kind of care in assessing takes practice, but a lot of people do it in their businesses and family lives because they have to.

Philosophers have not decided when to insist on “nothing but”, when to insist on something besides “nothing but”, how to do both at the same time, and what we end up with when we do reduce or do not reduce. Philosophers have not decided if everything has an essence, and, if so, how always to find the essence. So we have to find balance for ourselves between seeing things in terms of parts or wholes, and how to see one thing as many things at the same time. We have to decide if a think has an essence, if we can seek the essence, and if finding an essence is reducing the thing to “nothing but”. Even if we can reduce something entirely to its parts and workings, it still might have an identity that we have to consider. Even if something is clearly one thing at one time, it does not lose its ability to be other things at other times, and its total identity is not summed up in the one thing at the one time. Sometimes morality is about doing the right thing, sometimes about following a rule, sometimes about the good of everybody, sometimes about rights, and sometimes about duties. We have to decide which when how much. We have to think about what religious realities we want to take seriously. We have to think about whether or not we can reduce God, prayer, morality, and human relations to nothing but something else such as fear of life, and if we want to. Even if we can reduce them to “nothing but” in one way, does that stop also seeing them as something in their own right in another way? Even if religion is nothing but an evolved defense mechanism (like Spot the dog) does that fact mean it is not also true too? Even if Jesus is nothing but a Jewish eschatological prophet does that mean he is not also correct? I do not answer the questions now but you will see me dancing around them in the pages below, and I return to them in the part of the book on sociobiology.

Animism.

People tend to see things as alive and as having intent even when we know they are not and do not. Cartoons on TV are not alive, and we know they are not, but we prefer to see them alive anyhow. If you shine two flashlight beams, and make one dot chase another, a spectator will see the two dots as alive and as having a purpose. You can make one dot hide, another seek, one jump up and down in panic, another jump up and down in joy, one tease, the other get angry in response, and so on. We tend to see the world this way. Dragons hide in clouds hiding in them even when we know they do not. Brooks murmur. Trees sway. A stick in the road is a snake, not just a stick. Thunder is god's anger. Hurricanes are god's punishment.

Of course, some things really are alive, and many living things really have intent and passion. Bears are large walking electrochemical machines but they are not only that. They are alive. They have intentions. They have passions. They use their neural-chemical-mechanical abilities to express their life and passions. We would be foolish not to think of them that way. The same is true of other people and of our self too.

It is a mistake both to make the world too lively and to make it not lively enough. It is a bigger mistake to make the world not lively enough. We can survive thinking a-stick-is-a-snake-when-it-is-really-a-stick while we might die thinking a-snake-is-a-stick-when-it-is-really-a-snake. It is a lot of fun to make the world lively as long as we do not go overboard.

Sometimes we see God behind many things when really we should see other forces at work such as gravity for a waterfall, the diffraction of light for a rainbow, strategy for winning a war, and genes for causing cancer. Sometimes God is behind some things even when other forces are obviously at work. God might have used evolution to design the bear. We need not rule out the possibility as long as we do not go too far and too often.

We make a mistake if we see some kind of spirit behind everything that might be big, unusual, unique, powerful, fearful, cute, interesting, or generic. People tend to see spirits behind big mountains, big rivers, big animals, waterfalls, the weather, the planets, or a species such as "the bear spirit". Even if there were more than one kind of spirit, we still have to think about what to best explain in terms of spirit and what to best explain in terms of physics, chemistry, and biology alone. We can use both kinds of explanation at the same time as long as we do not get too confused.

Scientists can explain almost anything in terms of only physics, chemistry, and biology, and I go along with them. But I do not let their success rob me of seeing the world as alive when that is fun and not misleading. It is only human to see the world both ways.

We cannot explain God in terms of science or in the same terms that we would use to explain any lesser spirit such as the tree spirit.

Divine Gift.

Between people, giving and taking mean something. Even between animals, or between people and animals, giving and taking can mean something. Giving and taking help make bonds and relations. If I give something to somebody, I expect someday to get something back. I hope we can keep up the giving-and-taking and the relation. If I loan a friend a music cd of mine, I hope someday to borrow one

of his. If I give a biscuit to a dog, the dog takes me as a friend and acts accordingly. If the other person never gives anything back, then I know the other person does not want a relation with me. If I never get my CD back, and never get the offer of a DVD, then I can give up on that person as a friend.

If the other person is a lot bigger and more powerful than me, I might give the other person a gift so that I can get something from him-her that I could not get myself or could not get from anybody else. If I give something to the big powerful person, and the big powerful person accepts the gift, then I have a pretty good hope that he-she will give me what I want.

People that believe in spirits think we can get into a relation with the spirit by giving the spirit a gift. Both attitudes are wrong. There are not small spirits, so we cannot get into a relation with them by giving. Even though there is a God, we cannot cajole God with gifts. I could never understand why God might want a burned dead animal or even a wreath of flowers. We cannot even give God something like a gift (not drinking beer for Lent), or a task (working for the homeless for a month), or a pilgrimage (going to Notre Dame Cathedral or the birthplace of Luther). If we want something, we can just ask for it, but we should not be too hopeful.

The only real gift we can give to God is a good heart. The only benefits of a gift to God are that the gift might show our intent, and it might help us to understand our selves. The gift is more about us than about God or our relation with God. We can think of it as a gift to God as long as we do not get confused. I say more about this topic in later parts of the book.

No Negotiating.

Giving a gift to God in the hope of getting something good back is a kind of negotiating with God. We cannot negotiate with God. As Jim Morrison whined disrespectfully in the 1960s, "You cannot petition the lord with prayer". We cannot ask things like, "If you only save me from this sinking ship, I will say a special prayer everyday for all the rest of my life". We cannot even ask really laudable things like, "If you save my daughter Amy from cancer, you can kill me right now, or you can give me her cancer instead". In some cases, such as with a sick relative, it is impossible not to try negotiating like this, and I doubt that it hurts much to try. But we should not expect to have our prayers answered, and we should not get angry when they are not answered. I do not know what not being able to negotiate implies about the kind of relation we can have with God or about the place of prayer.

One of my favorite passages in the Bible is in Genesis. Abraham negotiates with God about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. God says he will not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if there are only twenty righteous men, but there are not. Abraham quibbles about the number, saying, "well, if twenty is enough, how about fifteen?" God says, "OK then, fifteen". By clever wheedling steps, Abraham gets God down to five. The Bible does not say anything about righteous women. Unfortunately for the twin cities, there were not even five, so God smoked the place anyway.

Abraham did negotiate with God in the Bible, but that does not mean it really happened, that we could do it, or that it applies in all cases. Abraham did not negotiate to get something for himself or for a loved one. Abraham did not give God a gift to butter God up. Abraham negotiated on behalf of humanity, decency, and mercy in general. We could do the same. I am not sure if negotiating on behalf of the

greater good would help but I see little harm in trying if we feel up to it. Abraham's example shows us that we can have a relation with God and what a relation might be like. Humor and irony play big parts.

No Bookkeeping.

God does not assign points to good deeds and bad deeds. There are no points. So we cannot add good points or add bad points. We cannot subtract bad points from good points. We cannot use good points to overcome bad points. We cannot use good deeds to make up for bad deeds. Bad deeds do not erase good deeds. We do not go to heaven if the sum of good points exceeds the sum of bad points. We do not go to hell if the sum of bad points exceeds the sum of good points. How long we spend in heaven or hell does not depend on our point total. We should stop thinking of points at all. God might have a long memory but he does not keep books. The Buddhist idea of points is usually translated as "merit". There is no "merit keeping" either.

No Transfer.

Since we do not have points, we cannot transfer points and we cannot get points transferred to us. We cannot use our good points to ease our sick brother, or to get God to make our sister see the stupidity of alcoholism. They cannot do the same for us. We cannot transfer our good points to our dead mother to get her out of purgatory faster. We cannot transfer our good points to our dead father to get him a better rebirth. Everybody has to make do on his-her own.

Better than Achilles.

As a Greek, I like Homer. The lesson of the Iliad is the need to be a good citizen of both the human world and the moral world. The movie "Troy", with Brad Pitt as Achilles and Eric Bana as Hector, gets across the message well. The Greeks came to besiege Troy. Achilles was the unstoppable warrior for the Greeks. He had a huge chip on his shoulder, took nothing from nobody, and quickly avenged any slight. Hector was Prince of Troy, a great warrior too, but, more importantly, a great man who put decency and the fate of his people over himself. Achilles thought that Hector had wronged him but Achilles was mistaken. Achilles killed Hector and abused his body. Hector's father, King Priam, came to Achilles to beg for Hector's body so as to perform the needed rites. Achilles had to stop thinking that it was all about him and all about honor. Achilles had to see that Hector was a better man than him even if Achilles was the better fighter. Achilles had to realize that respect for the dead Hector, and for the religious beliefs of his kin, was important even if Achilles thought Hector had wronged him. Achilles had to put decency ahead of honor, and he had to see that decency has a lot to do with social life. Achilles became a good citizen.

After returning Hector's body, the gods arrange for Achilles to die. Achilles did not die because he saw the greater good. Being a good citizen does not kill the spirit within. Being a good citizen does not necessarily prevent you from being a free spirit Romantic rebel salt of the earth in touch with the underbelly walking on the wild side. Maybe Achilles died because there was no longer a place for the old Achilles in the better world of decency and good citizenship, as there was no place for Butch Cassidy or the Sundance Kid in the developing modern world.

We have to go as far as Achilles, and then we have to go even farther. We have to be good citizens in that we have to respect decency and normal social relations. We also have to be good citizens of the Kingdom. We have to strive for something better. We cannot rest only with being good citizens, with only voting, only voting the right way, paying taxes, or supporting the right political causes. We have to think about right and wrong, and then we have to actively do things to advance right and wrong, at least in situations under our control. We have to go beyond passive decency to active decency. We have to go beyond Achilles to be the Good Samaritan.

I do not know if being a good citizen in the way of Hector or Achilles impedes being a good citizen of the Kingdom of God in the way of the Good Samaritan. I can imagine cases where it is more important to be a good citizen of the Kingdom of God than to be a good citizen of Troy or Greece. Jesus died because he was being a good citizen of the Kingdom of God rather than of Rome. I do not know if being a good citizen of the Kingdom of God makes you a Romantic rebel and qualifies you to flaunt normal citizenship but I doubt it. It does not give you the right to flaunt decency. Most of the time being a good citizen in the way of Hector and Achilles is the best preparation for being a good citizen of the Kingdom of God. Using the idea of moral superiority to indulge in romanticism about yourself is to go back to what Achilles was before he met Hector.

Better Than Family Values.

Just as Jesus requires us to be more than good citizens, so also Jesus requires more than family values. There is nothing wrong with family values nearly all of the time, and there is much right with them nearly all the time. But family values are not the same as the teachings of Jesus, and they cannot substitute for the teachings of Jesus. To substitute family values for the teachings of Jesus is the same thing as to substitute romantic self-indulgence for the teachings of Jesus. It is to come short of the mark.

The Greater Good Undoes the Lesser Good.

Being a citizen of the Kingdom of God can require us to be a bad citizen of the civil state sometimes, as when we refuse to follow a bad law or refuse bad military service. Being a member of the family of God can require us to be a bad family member sometimes, as when we allow a person to have freedom of choice even when we can see that the person might make a bad choice, and even when that person is our child or the child of a family in our community. A greater good can sometimes undo a lesser good. Advocates of family values often can see the first case but not the second.

This is really dangerous ground. I do not know of any hard-and-fast rules here. This is where we need both rules and judgment. I cannot say more here.

Not Morally Right Because It Is Useful.

I make this mistake a lot, as do most people that think they have the ability to tell other people about religion and social life. We want to make good whatever we find useful.

A quick way to see this mistake is through a particular version called "Pascal's Wager". Blaise Pascal was a French mathematician and philosopher in the 1600s. He pioneered the mathematics of probability,

chiefly to help gamblers that asked him how to bet. He also used logic to defend Roman Catholicism. He said, "You are a gambler. You do not know for sure that God exists or does not exist. Suppose you bet that God does not exist by leading an indulgent life, and God does exist. In that case, you lose a lot. Suppose you bet that God does exist by leading a good life. If God does exist, you gain a lot. If God does not exist, you might lose a little; but you would not lose nearly as much as if God did exist and you led an indulgent life. So the smart thing to do is live as if God existed." Maybe. I do not like his logic. I do not want to believe in God because it is convenient. I want to believe because of what is in my heart, because I think it is true. If God does exist, I want to face up and do what is needed. If God does not exist, I want to face up and do what is needed. I do not want to run my life on hedges. I want to make a commitment that reflects my belief.

Moral logic is just different than strategic logic. Yet the two are bound together. I think moral logic originated historically (evolutionarily) from practical logic. But they have since parted ways, and we cannot reduce one to another. We have to accept the force of both, and see how they interact. A funny and poignant version of the mistake of this section shows up in the song "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" where children get a taste both of moral problems and of philosophical problems with omniscience.

"He knows when you are sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows when you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness' sake"

The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said, "We cannot will to will". He did not mean only that there are some actions that do not work on themselves, although there are some actions that do not work on themselves. Schopenhauer meant that there are some actions that are starting points in themselves that we cannot get beneath. We can usually recognize foundation actions if we think of them in terms of willing. Westerners think of deep emotions, tastes, commitments, values, and preferences this way. When we will something, we just will it. We cannot do anything to create a will for something. We cannot love democracy just because we would like to love democracy if we do not really love democracy. If we love democracy, then we just love democracy. You cannot will to love Nancy because you should love Nancy. Either you love her or you do not love her. You cannot fake some actions. "Willing" and "believing" are in themselves. They work on something else but cannot work on themselves and nothing else can work on them. We can will to climb a mountain but we cannot will to believe. We can only believe in something because we think it is true. We cannot will to believe the sky is green if we really think it is blue. We cannot will to believe in Jesus' resurrection just because to do so gets us to heaven. We can only believe it or not. Later in the book I break these rules somewhat but they are true enough for now.

Another version of the mistake: "We should judge an idea according to its social consequences. Even if an idea is a little bit wrong, we should judge it according to its social consequences. Whether God exists or not does not matter as much as the social consequences of belief or disbelief. People that do not believe in God are much less moral than people that do believe in God, any God. Non-believers are not as honest. They cause a lot of crime and social problems. We cannot rely on them in business. In contrast, believers fit into society better. So we should promote the idea of God so as to make people

behave better, make business prosper, and make society run better.” This idea is common among politicians, business people, and religious leaders. I have even seen eminent economists suggest it, and even jokingly say that the state should pay the salaries of preachers as public servants.

I do not like this version either, for the same reasons I do not like Pascal’s wager and for another reason too. First, as against Pascal, I want to believe because I think what I believe is true, not because what I believe is useful for me or makes the city run well.

Second, how wrong does an idea have to be before we have to see that truth is more important than social order? When leaders want people to believe so as to promote order regardless of truth, then people who seek the truth regardless of social consequences become enemies of the state and they also become heroes. The people that want the state to run well but bend reality to do so are necessarily bad guys. The bad guys are the good guys, the good guys are the bad guys, all politicians must be evil, and the city does not work well after all. See “V” for Vendetta”, countless movies on uncovering secret government plots, and Republicans on global climate change. Maybe the way to make society better is not to try too hard to make it run better, or at least not to try too hard by bending the truth.

Atheists and agnostics have their own version of this mistake. They justify their morals not by saying their morals are objectively true but by saying their morals help society to work better. “Do not murder” is morally true not because murder is wrong but because not murdering makes society run better. A rule is morally true if it helps society run better and morally false if it does not. Some versions would say a moral rule is true if it increases my reproductive success and false if it hurts my reproductive success, but we can avoid thinking about those versions until later in the book. I do not count moral rules as true because they make society work better but because they are morally true. I want to act on morals because they are right even if my actions impede society a bit. The problem gets harder: When I subordinate moral truth to the idea of making society work better, I really have no standard for what a better society is. I cannot say that a better society is a more truthful society because truth is what works within society as society defines what works. I cannot say a happier society is a better society because I have no standard to say that happier is better unless society tells me that happiness is better. I need some moral standard outside of society to judge whether or not society is working better, and so I cannot establish my morality (my standard) by its results within society.

We cannot always decide questions like the existence of God or whether some particular act is morally right or wrong, and we often have to act anyway. When we do act, we should take into account the consequences of our actions. But we should not try to back-think so as to convince ourselves that what we do is true because it is useful. We need to think about whether it is independently right or not.

Good God. Good is logically different from God. Something is not good just because God wills it. If God willed something, I could be pretty sure God willed it, and doing it did not entail anything immoral, then I would try to do it. But I would not be doing it because it is good.

If I was sure that God wished me to kill an innocent child, or even an innocent kitten, I could not do it. I cannot do something that is immoral just because God wishes me to do it. Suppose that we accept an authority over us. Being willing to commit an immoral act just because that authority wishes it is a sign of depravity, not uprightness. In the movie “Batman Begins”, Bruce Wayne leaves his mentor (Liam

Neeson) because his mentor wants him to murder a defenseless man. The man is a criminal, has evaded the law, and will not be punished unless by Bruce Wayne; but still the man is helpless, and Bruce Wayne refuses to just murder him. Anikin Skywalker becomes Darth Vader when he learns to kill at the Emperor's request regardless of who the victims are. He learns this even before he becomes a machine. Becoming a machine is only the final stage in his transformation. David Webb becomes Jason Bourne when he willingly kills a helpless, bound, hooded man just because his CIA developer urges him to do it. He begins to undo Jason Bourne when he cannot kill a bad man without also killing the man's innocent daughter, and so he does not kill the bad man. Suicide bombing of civilians is wrong even if God wills it. Collective punishment of civilians because some among them are terrorists is wrong even if God wills it.

We like to think that God would not do anything immoral or amoral or that God would not want us to do anything immoral or amoral. The Book of Joshua might cause us to reconsider because God encourages the Hebrews to commit immoral genocide. At least, God allows evil. So God might not do anything immoral or amoral but there is no clear one-to-one relation between God and morality. God created a world in which morality was very important, but he also made a world with a logical distinction between himself and morality.

So we still carry the burden of having to think out the morality of acts and ideas for ourselves, and we cannot just rely on the opinion of a religious leader as to the mind of God.

One of the most famous stories in the Bible is of Abraham and Isaac. Isaac is Abraham's only son. God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and Abraham is willing to do it. At the last minute, when God is sure of Abraham's intent, God stops Abraham. This is horrible, even if God did stop Abraham. I can give this story a spin that makes it a bit easier to take, but I do not want to let spin distract me from my main repulsion. It is wrong to ask someone to do something wrong. God would not do it. It is wrong to do something wrong just because an authority asks you to do it. God should not do it. I get back to this story later in the book.

God and Evil.

Evil cannot be reconciled with a god that is all-powerful (omnipotent) and all-knowing (omniscient). No theology I have read has bridged this gap. Evil can only exist because God allows it. If God allows it, then God is partly to blame for the evil.

If free will cannot exist without the possibility of evil, and it is better to have free will with evil than to have no evil and no free will (see the movie "Time Bandits"), then God might be limited in his power. At the least, God might have better prepared us for the combination. If some evil was inevitable with free will, God might have found a way to limit evil to less than what we see in this world.

Allowing a devil into the equation does not solve the problem. The devil is less powerful than God, and so God could prevent the devil from doing too much evil, but God does not.

Limiting the power of God does solve the problem but it raises other problems, and it is not allowable under strict Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.

Allowing multiple gods can solve the problem but that raises other problems and it is not allowable under Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. In fact, the devil in the popular versions of those religions is another god, and so the popular versions of those religions are polytheistic and not correct.

Calling God “the Dharma” does not solve the problem because the Dharma is intrinsically morally good and should not allow evil any more than does God. Calling God “the Tao” does not solve the problem even if the Tao is only vaguely moral because the Tao does not allow for evil intrinsically within itself. God might explain this problem to people after they are dead but that solution does not help the living. As far as I know, nobody has come back from the dead to solve this problem for us, not even Jesus. So living people have no solution.

We the living must learn to live with the problem. Mostly we learn to live with it by fighting evil and by trying to reduce evil. That seems reasonable to me under the circumstances.

Not God of the Hearth.

People strongly tend to seek religious validation for their way of life: God loves businesspeople, or the working class, or intellectuals, or families. God might love all those people but I doubt that he loves any of them in particular, or blesses their way of life in particular. If he does, Jesus was wrong about diversity.

People seem to need a god as the patron of family life in general, of their kind of family life in particular, and even of their own families. In Rome and China, ancestors became minor gods who defended their descendants. In traditional Mormon Utah, God wanted polygyny (one man with several wives). In the Old Testament, God helped the Israelites proliferate in part by approving polygyny, and God tolerated prostitution. Yet now in America, God wants us all to be strictly monogamous, to be celibate at marriage, to have only one sexual partner our entire lives, and never to use prostitutes. Now in America, God helps the right families and punishes people that do not have the right families. Now in America, for many people, as in many other religions of the world, that is the principal role of God.

God’s principal role is not protector of family values, any kind of family values. God is not primarily the god of the hearth. God dislikes immorality, including some kinds of sexual immorality and some kinds of family immorality. We should not have incest with our children. Still, God did not have only one kind of family in mind, and God does not take a highly active role in protecting that kind of family.

Later in the book I talk again about the relation between God and families.

No Rapid Punishment and Reward.

God does not punish and reward us now for our deeds in this life. God might punish and reward us in this life sometimes, but, if so, it is beyond my knowledge. I know of no case that I can attribute to divine justice. We do have to reckon with God after we die, but we do not reckon while still alive except in prayer. If we murder our annoying neighbor with the yappy dogs, God does not punish us. If he did, there would be much less murder. If we save a drowning child, God does not reward us. If he did, there would be many more heroic acts.

The flip side of this mistake is more important. If something bad happens to us, it is not because God is angry with us and has punished us. That is called “blaming the victim”. If something bad happens to a person, he-she should not feel guilty on top of the bad event, and should not search for some sin to make up for. If a girl is raped, that is bad enough, and it did not happen because she provoked it. If a hurricane hits Alabama, it is not because Alabama put the lottery up for decision by the voters. If I get a flat tire on the freeway, it is not because I yelled at my wife. In the same way, but in the other direction, if I win the lottery, it is not because I am especially good. If being good could win the lottery, I would be very good. The movies sometimes have nuns winning a big bet on a long shot in a horse race to save the convent, but that does not happen in real life no matter how much we wish it would. Health, wealth, and success are not rewards for being righteous, and we should not take them as signs that way. Sickness, poverty, and failure are not punishments for sin, and we should not take them as signs that way.

One version of this mistake is funny. After a town in Pennsylvania decided to keep Creationism out of its school textbooks, Pat Robertson warned them that God would send disasters such as storms, earthquakes, and plagues. Nothing happened, so maybe God approved of their decision and disagreed with Pat Robertson. During the Bush administration, America has faced an unprecedented line up of natural disasters including Hurricane Katrina, drought in the Southeast, and fires in California. In my head, I know this is only coincidence but sometimes in my heart I wish this were divine punishment for the arrogance and un-democratic conniving of the “Bushies”.

One version of this mistake is sad. People sometimes think that, if only they are good enough, then things have to turn out all right. At the risk of being sexist, I have seen this attitude mostly among girls and young women aged about 10 to 30. I do not know why. People with this attitude try so hard to be good that they twist their lives. If things do not turn out as they hoped, they blame themselves and they sift their lives looking for the tiny fault that provoked God.

God does not primarily want to make you rich. The “prosperity gospel” of the televangelists not only is false, it is also likely immoral. According to the Old Testament, God did make some of the patriarchs rich as a way to promote their offspring and the Hebrews. But he did not make all the patriarchs, judges, or prophets rich. Most of us are not prophets and will not found a nation.

Morality Does Not Require Reward and Punishment.

This mistake is related to the idea that people have to believe in God to be good for society. Most people are mostly moral without fearing punishment for a bad deed and without expecting a reward for a good deed. This is part of what it means to be an adult.

I am not saying that all people are saints and that we can do away with the courts and police. Everybody makes mistakes, and some people make a lot of mistakes. Some people hurt other people. Some people cannot control themselves. We need the courts and the police.

I am saying that no amount of courts and police would be enough to control the people if the people did not have a lot of self-control. The overwhelming vast majority of bad deeds die as fantasies in the hearts of generally good people, and we need it to be that way. People internalize morality and that is a good thing.

The courts and police probably do discourage some people that are ordinarily moral but might transgress sometimes if they did not think they would be caught and punished. I probably would kill my neighbor's yappy dogs if I thought I could get away with it because I have rationalized killing them to the point where I do not think it would be immoral anymore.

Some people think that people in general would be a lot less moral if people in general did not fear divine punishment or did not hope for divine reward, and so some people promote God as vindictive, as a giant mean ever-watching parent with a big switch in his hand. Do not trespass on the church lawn or God will give you gangrene in your sinning feet. I do not agree. People just do not fear divine punishment the way they fear the courts and police. Fear of divine punishment might stop a murder now and then but I doubt that it stops nearly as much embezzlement as does a good forensic accountant. We do not need to hold up God as a giant mean parent with a switch in hand so that we can get people to act well. I think people that say we need divine reward and punishment do so mostly because they claim to be able to specify for God just what behaviors we are to be rewarded or punished for, and so are able to control their fellows to their own advantage.

People do not give to charity because they expect God to reward them in this life, and probably do not give because they expect God to reward them in the next life either. They give because they know it is good.

Some sin leads to its own punishment and some virtue leads to its own reward. As Dickens so ably showed in several books, if we are mean to all our neighbors then we are liable to be miserable, and if we are good to our neighbors then we are liable to rest easy at night. If we are good to our children, they are liable to turn out well. They might even take care of us in our old age. But we should not confuse these natural connections with divine intervention.

Absolute Same.

In the movie "The Matrix", Agent Smith is the devil. The machines made him, but then he transformed, and now not even his makers can stop him. His chief goal, and main technique, is his ability to make everyone exactly like himself. When he has made everyone exactly like himself, then he no longer has to put up with the diverse smells and tastes of the pseudo-liquid-pseudo-organic matrix world. Many stories in Western civilization have variations on this theme.

Movements of all kinds, religious, political, and intellectual, are like Agent Smith. They make everybody within the same. Even worse, often they want everybody in the world, in or out of the movement, to be the same too. People that cannot be the same are condemned. Despite declarations of diversity, among the people most determined to make everyone like themselves are some politically correct (PC) people I have met, including atheists, rock-n-roll bad girls, and liberal Christians. Conservative Christians and Muslims are little different. After the sociobiology movement gained strength, I realized I had some differences with it. I had several unhappy moments with prominent leaders as they tried to "straighten me out".

So it seems as if the answer is some kind of real diversity and not merely the slogan diversity of PC. But this cannot be quite true either. Remember Achilles. We want someone like Achilles in our world to protect us from the bad guys but not if he is out of control and hurts us. Not if he becomes a bad guy. I do not know about you, but I do not want people that are rude, trashy, dirty, loud, have yappy dogs, otherwise intrude on neighbors, or make it harder to live in the world. I want people that get the idea of decency. I want somebody like Achilles to force louts to behave decently even if they cannot get the idea of decency on their own. Diversity is good but within some limits.

Groups have an identity. Even when people do not cause trouble through bad manners, it is important that they understand the group identity, conform to the group identity, and actively support it. If they do not understand the group identity, they are liable to accidentally go against it. If you sign up for Boy Scouts, you have to get the idea of a Boy Scout or you are liable to betray it. People that do not really get the sense of a group cannot make up much of the membership or the group will fall.

So within a group we want people that both understand basic decency and that get the group identity. Whether we like it or not, any group has to be made up mostly of almost Agent Smiths or it will fall. Now we come to a basic problem of democracy. A democracy cannot have too many louts or it will fall. People that do not get the ideas of decency and democracy cannot make up most of the citizens or the democracy will fall. But a democracy is not a voluntary organization. If you are born in it, or immigrate into it, you are a part of it whether or not you are a lout and whether or not you get the idea. If too many louts or stubborn people live in a democracy, it will fall.

Christianity shares some of the same problems as a democracy. It cannot have too many louts and the members have to really get it. Not everybody is naturally accepting and forgiving. People do not always transform to be accepting and forgiving just because they happen to see the importance of Jesus. Churches cannot have too many stubborn hard-hearted people or they fall. On the other hand, if churches are too soft, they fall too. People take advantage of diversity and forgiveness. Non-Christians accept things from Christians but never give back, to the point where Christians can go broke supporting non-Christians. Poor people become Christian in name so that they can get support from better-off Christians. People do not always change after they have been accepted and forgiven. Prostitutes do not necessarily stop "the life" just because somebody forgave them. People that have been accepted do not necessarily extend the same kind of acceptance to other people. Gamblers do not always accept and forgive alcoholics. If too many people like this are part of the church, then the church will fall. To keep the church from falling, some members of the church have to turn all members into almost Agent Smith. This was a real problem in the early Christian church.

I do not know any sure way out of this problem that preserves both diversity and group identity, either in democracies or in Christianity. I do not know how to draw the line between Stepford Wife and Queen of the Damned. Lara Croft might be the modern idea of the unrealistic but attractive middle.

Faith Is Not Enough.

As a young child, I participated in what was likely the greatest social psychology experiment ever. A Disney TV program showed the adventures of Peter Pan and Tinkerbell the fairy. One day, Tinkerbell was mortally wounded, I think poisoned. The physical poison represented the spiritual poison that some

children did not believe in fairies, even in Tinkerbell. She would die unless all the children watching the program believed in her and believed she would recover. Only overwhelming faith could bring her back. I think we had to demonstrate our faith by clapping our hands at the right moment. Tinkerbell would hear, know that the children believed in her, and know that they loved her. The faith and love of the children would save her. It must be true because she recovered.

In "The Empire Strikes Back", Luke is trying to levitate his star ship from a swamp as Yoda looks on. Luke almost succeeds but not quite. Luke obviously has the ability but lacks something to complete the ability. Yoda tells Luke that he failed because Luke did not believe. There is no trying; there is only absolute black-and-white faith with doing. Either you believe and you succeed, or you do not believe and you fail. Absolute faith is able to overcome any physical barrier.

In the New Testament, Jesus is able to heal people because they believe. If they do not believe, he cannot heal them. Peter started out walking on water but sank when his faith in Jesus wavered. Jesus says that faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains.

If only the power of faith were true. Mohammad had a good idea. He said, "If the mountain will not come to Mohammad, then Mohammad will go to the mountain".

Faith can be a powerful component in success. It can push us over the threshold we need to succeed, as when we give a talk in front of people, we fight a disease, or try to make it as a rock band. Self-confidence is good. That is why people want to be able to will to will, to will to believe.

But we cannot will to believe, and faith alone is not enough, and faith might not even be the most important thing. Several times I had serious infections. Faith alone could not have healed me. I needed some powerful exotic antibiotics.

Saying that faith alone is not enough does not kill Tinkerbell, deny the Force, condemn Luke never to finish his Jedi training, leave lepers and sick children to die, sink Peter in the water, or defy God. Not having your prayers answered does not mean that you did not believe strongly enough and that you should believe more.

Trying to believe more is making the same mistake as in Pascal' Wager above. We cannot will to will. We cannot believe more because we try to believe more. We believe as much as we believe because we think it is true.

Insisting that God do something for us because we believe is not a good show of faith but is a way of coercing God and defying God.

Someday the Israelis will burn animals in the Temple again as an offering to God. Many Jews hope the act restores the kingdom of Israel while many fundamentalist Christians hope the act brings the end of the world and the Second Coming. Neither will happen. Even if their faith were genuine, it cannot coerce God.

I have faith, and often it is childish and foolish. It is better to wait till later in the book to discuss the specifics. It does not include mystic energy or forcing God, and it does include relying on science.

Not Everything from Nothing.

The point of this section is that we can derive just about any silliness at all from nonsense, yet many religious fundamentals seem like nonsense, so we have to be careful. If the next two paragraphs annoy you, skip them.

Logicians have developed a formula to make sure their systems come out right. An "if-then statement" is like this: "If I let go of the ball, then it will fall". We can tell if the whole if-then statement is true or false by looking at the component parts to see if they are true or false. If "I let go of the ball" is true and "it falls" is true, then the whole if-then statement is true. If "I let go of the ball" is true but "it falls" is false, then the whole if-then statement is false. Maybe the ball is really a helium balloon. Usually assessing by parts makes sense even to people that are not logicians except when the "if" part of the if-then statement is stubbornly false. Suppose the "if" statement is "If the sky is green" so that we have "If the sky is green, then the ball will fall". The sky is not green and we are not sure about the falling ball. So then what do we know about the whole statement "If the sky is green, then the ball will fall"? Logicians decided that, in cases where the "if" is false, then the whole if-then statement is true regardless of the "then" statement. "If the sky is green, then the ball will fall" is true as a whole even though "the sky is green" is false. So the following if-then statement is true as a whole too just because the "if" statement is false: "If the sky is green, then the moon is made of cheese". This result goes against common sense and logicians know it does, but this technique has the value of showing us how whole systems work and of directing our attention to problems and holes. I do not show how.

It is better to see this peculiarity where the "if" statement is undeniably false. Some if-then statements have a pair of statements together as their "if": if ([I drop the ball], and [gravity still works]) can count as one "if" statement. We can use these double "if" statements in a larger "if-then" statements, such as the "if-then" statement above {if ([I drop the ball] and [gravity still works]), then the ball will fall}. We can make sense of this because we can decide if the two-inside-statements-in-one are together true or false. But suppose the pair of statements that together make up the "if" statement are contradictory and so undeniably false: if ([the sky is blue] and [the sky is not blue])? Then what do we make of the whole if-then statement for which the two contradictory statements together make up the "if": {if ([the sky is blue] and [the sky is not blue]), then the ball will fall}. What do we make of this? Logicians say this whole if-then statement is true anyway: {if ([the sky is blue] and [the sky is not blue]), then the ball will fly}. This is just strange, and seems like justifying nonsense.

Now resume the section. The equivalent to this kind of weirdness in everyday life is an if-then statement based on an "if" that cannot be evaluated: "If Jesus is God, then everybody that does not believe goes to hell". We cannot evaluate for sure whether or not Jesus is God, but we have to do something about the whole if-then idea anyway. It seems like the whole if-then statement is true even if Jesus is not God, so it seems like we have to accept the "then" part. It seems that we are going to hell if we are not careful, whether or not Jesus is God. We get confused and make mistakes.

With this logic, we can derive all we want from ideas that cannot be evaluated but have to be taken or rejected on faith. Starting from nonsense, we can say whatever we want, nobody can contradict us, and it seems like our conclusions must be true. In that case, we had better be careful what we say and what we accept.

This is why scientists are so keen to make sure that statements can be evaluated true or false. They need to know what conclusions we can draw from the statements and if we are liable to get confused. Since we cannot evaluate "If Jesus is God" then we have to be really careful about what conclusions we draw from it.

This is why we have to be careful about reading the Bible. It is self-contradictory and it says things that cannot be evaluated through experience or common sense such as that the earth stood still do help Joshua win a battle. From its self-contradictions and its statements that cannot be evaluated we can derive just about anything we want. This is why we have to be careful about faith and about thinking that faith alone is enough. Faith cannot be evaluated and so we can derive from it anything we want. We can make some pretty big mistakes by starting out "if you only believed enough". We find it hard to correct those mistakes.

Some religious have as their basic ideas statements that we cannot evaluate or that really are just nonsense, such as "Jesus is God", "the Dharma is everything", "you and God are one", or even, alas, "cultivate a relation with God", and "Spot the dog is both only a machine and more than a machine". The statements might or might not be true, and they might or might not mean something, but we have to be careful even if we do think they are true and meaningful.

To avoid the possibility of getting anything from nonsense, some groups fall back on very specific statements as a part of what you have to believe to "get it" and be part of the group, such as "You must be baptized to be saved, and you may have only one baptism for the remission of sins". In their own way, scientists do this, such as my belief that we have to explain in terms of parts rather than wholes. Yet People feel constrained by specifics. Even at risk of lapsing into nonsense from which we can derive anything, people want noble generalities that cover a lot of cases and that unify their worlds, such as "Do the right thing" and "God loves you".

People want specifics, feel constrained by them and so want generalities, but can be tricked by generalities. In the end, we have to balance generalities which might be nonsense and from which we can derive anything versus specifics that cannot do justice to the world and our beliefs.

No Magic Formula.

Now I give you some meaningful nonsense from which you can derive more nonsense if you wish, or from which you might get some insight.

There is no magic formula for exactly what to do as a result of religion, for what to believe, what God is, or how to have a right relation with God. There are always some guidelines. Guidelines are necessary. They are sufficient for most cases but not for all. We need something more sometimes and we need to be able to change the guidelines sometimes. The something more is trust. We have to let go of absolute

security, let go of fear, and then trust. If I try to specify exactly what this is, then I try to provide a magic formula, and I negate myself.

Trust does not mean that the world will turn out all right, that we only have to play our part, and God will do the rest. For all I know, we can go along with God, do what we should, and the world will still go to hell. For all I know, we can be right with God and our spouse can still die of cancer. Trust is not trusting in the world alone or trusting in God to magically save the physical world. Trust is trust. Trust is “fear not”. Trust is believing that we can be all right with God regardless of what happens in the world. Trust also extends to human beings but that is trickier, and I prefer to let that go until towards the end of the book.

This idea of trust is similar to ideas of trust found in various religions, and I do not know how to draw a clear line between this version and other versions, or even if there are no real differences. This idea is like the idea of trust in the Star Wars movies, as in “Luke, trust your feelings”. When we have no magic formula, then we cannot trust in any obvious logic, and so it seems as if we have to trust our feelings. Yet I do not want to say, “trust your emotions” because emotions betray us too. Both the Jedi and the Sith trust their feelings but one turns out good while the other turns out evil. Trust is not logic but it is not only emotions either. Star Wars understood the problem, and the basic idea of trust, but offered only a pop culture solution.

For a better solution, first we have to accept that we need the guidelines even if we cannot absolutely rely on them. Great religious adepts continue to act morally even if they put morality into a greater context. Jedi remain good. After we see that we need guidelines yet we need more too, then we can move into trust. This idea of trust is like what is found in some forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism but the similarities and differences are too much to go into here.

I do not know if trust is the same as love, and I do not speculate more here.

It is possible to say that trust is the same as faith or grace, but I do not want to use that formula because I think Protestants have misused the ideas of faith and grace and Roman Catholics have misused the idea of grace. Protestants think that: we have faith; faith leads to God bestowing grace; grace makes us righteous, and righteousness leads to salvation. Instead, I think we should not even think about righteousness and salvation. Faith and grace become means to the ends of righteousness and salvation rather than something in themselves. We need to think about a direct relation with God rather than about what God is good for and about the means to get it. The differences will become more apparent later in the book after we learn more about the Protestant ideas of faith, grace, and righteousness, and learn more about what I have in mind with the term “trust”.

Maybe it helps to say what this idea of trust is not. We cannot think that we trust God and are all right with God if we are merely righteous, if we achieve righteousness through faith, if we achieve righteousness through grace, if we are perfect in following the Law of the Bible, if we understand the correct dogma of the Church, if we follow the sacraments of the Church, if we follow the correct festivals, if we seek holiness for ourselves, if we seek holiness through separation from sinners, if we seek holiness in the middle of living in the corrupt world (the “floating world”), if we seek holiness for our nation or our ethnic group, or if we follow specific commandments.

Maybe it helps to look at what trust is liable to do to people that have trust, and what they are liable to do as a result of having trust. People that trust follow Jesus' teachings. They do unto others as they would have others do unto them. They are useful. They actively try to build a better world. They are merciful and forgiving.

I can see how someone could think, "The idea of trust has no content. I can make it mean whatever I want. From it, I can derive almost any conclusion, and can derive almost any justification for what I want to do for other reasons. The idea of trust is a potential goldmine of rationalization." The idea of trust can be abused like this. Ideas that are potentially empty at the core can be both powerfully good and open to powerful abuse. The ideas of Dharma and Tao are like this. I cannot offer sure safeguards against abuse for the same reason that I cannot offer a magic defining formula. We have to trust that trust will not lead to abuse most of the time. We have to trust that our judgment can get us out of abuse when it happens, most of the time. Unlike "willing to will", we can trust in trust.

Salvation.

Being saved is getting the ideas of Jesus and doing what he wanted to the extent that we are able. I am not sure what it could be otherwise in Christianity. Whether or not salvation leads to heaven is irrelevant. Jesus asked us to follow him because it was the right thing to do and not so that we could go to heaven.

Pure Morality.

Somewhere in the Bible it says that we should do good to our enemies so as to heap coals on their heads. This idea is perverse. It mocks the sense of good. We do not do good for any personal end, such as riches or security. Especially we do not do good so as to indirectly do bad, to our enemies or to anybody else. Jesus said to do good to our enemies so as to do good to our enemies, not so as to hurt them or so as to help ourselves. Morality is something in itself. Legions of philosophers have written reams to make this point, and I cannot make this point any clearer by saying it at greater length.

Of course, real people mix morality with practicality. We have to, or we could not get along, prosper, and raise families. I cannot condemn the mixing of practicality and morality out of hand. I cannot ask for perfect people who might doom themselves out of their own perfection. I also cannot excuse immorality. Later parts of the book talk about relations of morality and practicality.

A standard scenario in soap operas is second-guessing somebody who appears to go a good thing but might really be doing it for selfish motives. Lady X gives a million dollars to charity but really does it as a tax dodge. People can even fool themselves into thinking they act out of good motives by forgetting their own self-interest. Lady X might overlook the tax dodge in her own mind. We can spend a lot of time wondering whether the poor widow Y donated her only pair of Gucci shoes to Goodwill because she wanted somebody to benefit from them before she died or because they aggravated her bunions and she wanted a tax write-off. At some point, it is better to stop wondering about the motives of others and of our selves, and to just take good at face value.

Related errors are the ideas that something has to be hard to be really moral (“no pain, no gain”), if an action is not hard then it is not moral, and that if an action is hard then that action is really moral. “It cannot be really moral to give to the poor if it is not hard. The more it hurts to give, the more moral and virtuous. Because it is hard not to have an abortion but instead bear the child and raise it, then it must be moral not to have an abortion or to raise a child in poverty. Because it is hard to die for your country, it must be right. Because it is hard to go against the big capitalist corporations and the conspiracy between big business and the government, it must be morally correct. You have to do more than the easy thing.” Morality often is harder than alternatives but hardness does not make right any more than might makes right. Right makes right.

Faith and Works.

(1) Suppose a person gets Jesus’ teachings but is poor, sick, and can do little about building a better world. That person has faith but no works. (2) Suppose a person is not sure about the divine source of Jesus’ ideas but does good things all the time, and is pretty selfless by any normal standards. That person does good works but does not have standard faith. (3) Suppose someone knows of Jesus and his ideas but thinks that believing that Jesus-is-God-and-died-for-our-sins is enough to go to heaven, and does not do very much else to build a better world. That person has faith but no works also. (4) Suppose someone gets Jesus’ teachings but does good not to help people or to build a better world but to get to heaven. That person has good works but does not rely on faith.

Which of these people is right or wrong? The best answer is: “That is not my business. That is between God and these individual people.” I personally think the first two people are in much better shape than the last two.

I doubt you can earn your way into heaven, or earn your way into a good relation with God without also having good intent. I doubt you can have a good relation with God if you believe in God but do nothing about it. It makes no sense to say that good works are enough or that faith is enough.

If we cannot absolutely look into the hearts of people then we cannot pronounce on the correct mix of faith and good works. To echo passages whose citation I cannot recall: Faith without works is sterile and works without faith can be cancerous. Encourage a mix of the two.

God Does Not Test Us.

I do not even argue about whether or not God knows us well enough so that he has to test us. Even if God did not know us well enough, to test us by shoving us into hardship would be cruel and unworthy. We are not hunting dogs so that God needs to see if we can stand the early morning damp and cold. Life is hard enough. It provides enough obstacles. God can find out enough about us from watching us slog through life.

Thinking that God tests us is a way to explain the evil in life without accepting that it is really evil and without blaming God. If badness is a test, and we get through it by faith, then God is even better than we thought. But there is evil, and God allowed it, and God allowed it to happen to you or to a loved one even though you did not deserve it, and it is not a test. I do not know why.

Not Conducive to Being Useful.

Buddhists classify ideas in categories besides the usual true and false. Some ideas might be true or false, and might be important if we could decide true or false, but we have a hard time evaluating them. Heaven is one of these. It might be important to know about heaven one way or another but we really cannot say one way or another. The mix of faith and works is another. We can waste a lot of time and energy on these ideas that might be better spent elsewhere, such as in being useful. When we run into one of these ideas, we should stop thinking about it and get on to better ideas. Buddhists call these ideas “not conducive to enlightenment”. Following C.S. Lewis, I say “not conducive to being useful”.

Free Will and Determinism.

The problem of free will and determinism, together with all the problems that go along with it, are not conducive to being useful. The problem is interesting, and, if you have spare time on your hands and you like this sort of thing, or if your job requires you to think about this sort of things, then go ahead. But being useful does not depend on solving the problem of free will.

Being useful does not require solving the problem of predestination to salvation or to damnation, especially since I do not think there is salvation or damnation in the fundamentalist sense anyway. We are not absolutely free. We are free enough to recognize the teachings of Jesus and to follow them as best we can if we wish. That is as much freedom as most of us need.

Saved and Damned.

This is another issue that is not conducive to being useful. We cannot know for sure in this world if we are saved or damned. We can know whether or not we get the ideas of Jesus and whether or not we intend to follow them as best we can. Worrying about whether we are saved or damned only gets in the way of carrying out the ideas of Jesus. Looking for signs of whether we are saved or damned especially gets in the way of following Jesus. Judging other people on the basis of signs about salvation and damnation that we make up directly thwarts following the ideas of Jesus. Taking worldly success as a sign of being saved, and then treating people better if they are rich or powerful or famous or beautiful or athletic, directly gets in the way of following the teachings of Jesus. Ironically, looking for signs of salvation is likely to damn us. Get over it and be useful instead.

Not Merely in the Presence of the Lord.

In his book, “Till We Have Faces”, C.S. Lewis tells about a group of people that have serious questions for God about justice, duty, why we should strive in life against so much hardship, and about our how we have hurt other people. The questions come right out of their hard life experiences and their roles as public servants. They think they will see God someday because the sister of one of them has gone to live with God, and she promised to come back. When she and God do come back, the people do not bother to ask God the questions that once seemed so urgent. The mere presence of God is answer enough. Many real people outside of books have this experience, both in and out of Christianity. Many real people feel the presence of the Lord, and it can be satisfying and fulfilling. Many people who have had a near-

death experience say that they stop worrying about the little things and go on to focus on enjoying life and on doing what is important in life. The doctrinal expression of the idea that the mere presence of the Lord is enough might be "saved by faith alone". Orthodox Christians hope to induce a similar experience at Easter when they greet the risen Lord and act as if he is among them. Some people feel this way at a Lord's Supper. Some people feel this way at a great natural sight such as the Grand Canyon. Some people feel this way when the trees sway, and I do not want to doubt the truth of their feeling.

The trouble is, what next? Now that the people have seen God and had all their questions set aside by awe, what do they do? I would not have to ask this question if all people that had this experience were transformed in the same way, and all immediately understood Jesus' teaching and acted to build the same better world, or all acted in accord with the Mosaic Law, or all acted in accord with all the teachings of Mohammad, or in accord with the Dharma. But they do not. They act according to different religions, not all of which are compatible. They act in different ways even when they share the same religious background, such as when they are all Methodists. They forget. Even when they remember, they still seem able to act immorally such as by defrauding the poor. A lot of good Christians who have felt the presence of the Lord do bad things.

The presence of the Lord alone is not enough. Devotion alone is not enough. We need more. We need ideas that can guide our actions in accord with experience and morals. We need to do what some people with near-death experiences do: forget about little things, appreciate life, and get to work on what is important.

In the high days of Hippies, people thought using drugs would be enough, usually strong drugs such as LSD, but even softer drugs such as marijuana. They were wrong. You have to have something to follow the experience.

Some people do not even need the experience. They can understand the ideas and act on them without the extra urging. I think they are as lucky as the people that do have the experience.

I am not saying that I would not be swayed by such an experience. Listen to the Blind Faith song "Presence of the Lord". I have come close enough to this experience to know that it could change my life and that I would act in accord with whatever I believed gave the experience. If the God of Presbyterians thrilled me, I would be highly inclined to convert and to act like a good Presbyterian. But what if I was not sure of the source? Or what if I was a good Roman Catholic and I thought the experience came from the Hindu Shiva? Or if I was a good Hindu and I thought the experience came from the Muslim Yahweh? A lot of people who have this experience but did not previously believe in any particular god, and do not associate the experience with any particular god, say that the experience changed their lives by making them appreciate life more, appreciate nature more, and be kinder and more peaceful. The experience might be powerful, but we still have to evaluate it according to our best understanding of life, morality, and religion. Devotion alone is not enough.

God Does Not Harden Hearts or Abuse Innocents.

When the Hebrews were trying to get out of Egypt, God, through Moses, threatened Egypt with plagues if Pharaoh did not let God's people go. Pharaoh did not, so Egypt had to endure locusts, rivers of blood,

and even the death of its firstborn male children. It is natural to ask why Pharaoh did not let the Hebrews go given the penalties the Egyptian people had to endure. The Bible says God “hardened the hearts” of the Egyptians (or at least Pharaoh) so they would resist God so that God could show how powerful he was, how much he controlled any nation, and how much he favored the Hebrews.

This story is not obnoxious because God favored the Hebrews – that is their good luck and not our bad luck.

This story is obnoxious on two other counts. First, God should not use innocent people, the Egyptians, to make a point about how powerful he is. If he did, he would be the devil, not God. Second, God should not harden the heart of an individual person because to do so would take away that person’s free will and take away the rationale for a lot of other teaching in the Bible such as the importance of intent. I do not even know what it means to harden the hearts of a whole people apart from hardening the hearts of their leaders or hardening the hearts of each person individually. This is another instance of self-contradiction in the Bible if we take the story literally. To “harden hearts” is nonsense from which we can derive whatever we want. As with the story of Isaac, it is possible to rationalize this story to make it less obnoxious but I think it is better to face the implications, overcome what is wrong, and seek something better.

God Does Not Soften Hearts: Grace.

The flip side of not hardening hearts is harder to see and not as directly obnoxious. In fact, it is appealing: God bestows grace on some people by leading them to believe and by saving them. God softens their hearts. Yet God does not soften hearts either. If God softened the heart of anybody so as to make that person believe in him, then God would take away the free will of that person. God would take away the soul of that person. God would take away the very thing that God wanted to save. He would “destroy the village in order to save it”. By softening one heart but not another, God would act to favor one person but not to favor other people. God would put the other people at a disadvantage. God would condemn some people by not giving them the help that he gave to a few special people.

The doctrinal slogan for saving a person by softening that person’s heart and then saving is “salvation through grace”.

I do think that God helps people. I think he helps some people more than others. I think that his help can be crucial. God sometimes helps people that do not even know of him or believe in him while he does not help sincere believers that ask for his help on important issues, and that might even need his help. I do not know why.

I do not think that God’s help is needed in every case where people get the teachings of Jesus, see the beauty of the world, see morality, or see the need to have a relation with God.

I doubt we can fully understand this situation. We face potentially contradictory statements, where we can derive whatever we want from nonsense, and we can get confused. We can ask for help and grace but we have to be careful to think about the implications of whatever doctrine we might use to explain

grace. We should not invoke grace to explain events, such as conversion, just because it is convenient.

Minimal Magic. Magic works because we want it to work, mechanically without our having to understand why. We use it to coerce the world into doing what we want. All we need to know is that we have a formula, and it works. Magic is not the same as “magical”, imagination, a sense of wonder, or a sense of delight in the world. In fact, magic can be the enemy of those feelings. Whether magic is White or Black depends on the nature of the process and on the intent of the magician. Any process that requires the sacrifice of an innocent animal or child, or the truth, is Black regardless of the goal.

Social scientists used to distinguish between magic and religion by saying that magic was a private thing, done in private, by an individual or small group, for private gain. In contrast, religion was a social thing, done in a public group, for group welfare that might or might not benefit any particular person in the group. This distinction is good to keep in mind but does not hold up when pushed. A lot of groups perform public acts for the group but that are still best understood as magic. Most Christians classify a Black Mass as magic even though it is similar to an ordinary Mass.

Some everyday activities are like magic but we do not think of them that way because they are so familiar and because we think there is a mundane explanation behind them. When I press F8 on my computer keyboard, things happen automatically, for my benefit, in private, and I do not know how; but that is not magic. As every science fiction reader knows, the modern world would seem like magic to somebody from even only a couple hundred years ago. Read “A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court” by Mark Twain.

On the other hand, a lot of religion is magic, even if the participants do not see it as magic and even if the original intent might not have been magic, especially rituals such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist). Also counting as magic are acts or ideas we invoke even if the original conception was not magic, such as blind faith, the presence of the Lord, the idea that God will help us often, or that God will make us rich.

Magic often gets in the way of true religion, such as following the ideals of Jesus. One goal of this book is to present Christianity with as little magic as possible.

Near the end of the book “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe”, the White Witch thinks she has defeated Aslan the Lion (Jesus) because she invoked a magical formula to the effect that a good character (Aslan) may be required to substitute for a bad character that committed treason (Edmund, who liked Turkish Delight too much). Later when Aslan is resurrected, he reminds the Ice Queen that there is an even deeper magical formula: whenever a good person willingly undergoes such a sacrifice, he-she will return even greater than before. This is charming and we hope it is true. But, if it is true, it is not magic. Too often, it is not true. When it is true, it almost never involves literal return from the dead as C.S. Lewis wrote about but instead involves keeping the spirit of a martyr alive in the hearts of followers, as with Wallace in “Brave Heart”. It is true not because of magic but because of human nature and human imagination. Perhaps God planned human nature and human imagination to work that way. If that is magic, then it is not natural magic and not magic of the kind to found Christianity on. Focusing on the magic of the resurrection and salvation through the resurrection can actually impede following Jesus.

The Vehicle and the Message.

True or not, bad or good, people need magic. Magic can be a lot of fun if we are careful. Good religious teachers sometimes use magic as a vehicle to convey deeper ideas. The stories about the voyages of Sinbad have magic but they have important messages too about friendship and honesty. Parables are message in a magic wrapper. Sometimes people can only understand or accept a message if it is in a magic wrapper, as with the plagues that God sent against Egypt. The problem is that people too often focus on the magic wrapper while forgetting the more important pearl of wisdom inside.

I believe this is what happened with Jesus' death and resurrection. They are the magic wrappers. They should get people to think about Jesus' teachings but instead people get stuck in the glitter of the wrappers. By thinking that Jesus died to save our sins and thus we are saved without having to do much else, or that Jesus' resurrection means that we too will to be resurrected and go to heaven if we only believe, we get distracted by the wrappers and forget the important message within. What does it mean to be forgiven and saved if we do not contribute to Jesus' mission? What good would it do to be resurrected to a world where Jesus' teachings do not matter? This is a kind of pyramid scheme (see below). To focus on the wrapper while forgetting about the pearl inside is actually a type of idolatry.

Christianity is not the only religion where people get distracted by the wrapper while forgetting the pearl inside. Christianity is not the only religion in which magic hijacks religion. Other religions might do a better job of warning their followers of this danger and of providing good means of escape.

Not About Justification.

People need to feel successful. Especially in Indo-European (Western and Indian) cultures, and Judeo-Christian-Islamic cultures, people also need to feel justified. They need to feel they are basically correct, not guilty, their lives matter, and are "right with God". People go to great lengths to feel justified. They join causes such as "save the whales" or "pro life". They stress single-issue politics such as energy independence or national "defense". They bomb abortion clinics. They blow themselves up along with a lot of innocent people.

Sometimes the need to feel justified can lead to social good, as it did when northerners agitated for the abolition of slavery in the United States. But the need to feel justified is misleading and can lead to great social damage. People hurt the poor because people go on moral crusades against welfare, gambling, abortion, or soft drugs so as to make themselves feel good without thinking about the freedom of other people and without thinking that the results might hit the poor hardest. Seeking justification is an abuse of religion. Jesus did not wish us to be active so we could feel justified about ourselves. He wished us to be active so as to build the Kingdom of God, build a better world. The teachings of Jesus are not about justification. When seeking to feel justified gets in the way of getting the teachings of Jesus or building a better world, then seeking justification is wrong even if the cause it serves might be right otherwise. People need to get over the idea that they can feel justified because they work hard in a cause that might be right

We need to really think about whether we are acting primarily to do good or to make ourselves feel better by making ourselves feel justified. We need to think about how we can be useful overall, and to pick where we can best help rather than where we might better chase justification. We need to think about what all needs to be done, and how we can best use our energy and abilities.

Religion and Morality as Weapons.

Religion and morality are not fully objective. Thus we cannot always agree about right and wrong. People argue and disagree. People give opinions, want to convince others, and want their opinions to prevail as the group norm. When people can do this, then people use their opinions to get other people to do what they want other people to do. People use morality and religion to get other people to do what they want the other people to do. People use morality this way not because they really are right but because they can control people. People use morality this way even when they know deep in their hearts they are wrong. Sometimes people do this for power and sometimes they do it so they can feel good by feeling justified. People say it is wrong to have a beer after work not because they have thought it out but because they want to control the mood and behavior of others. People want other people to feel as if they are always being watched and under control. People say it is wrong to have sex except for procreation, and in any other way except missionary position, so they can “get into the heads” of other people and control the reproductive lives of other people.

I especially dislike when people use morality to control the poor. Ideas about sex, abortion, drugs, alcohol, gambling, and demeanor are important for a decent society but they are also ways to control the poor by “getting into their heads”, by setting up rules that make it hard for the poor to enjoy what little they have, and by setting up rules that make it easy for the police to harass the poor.

We have to think really hard about why we think something is right or wrong, and, if we think it is wrong, how much we need other people to conform to our standards of right and wrong. Especially we have to think really hard about whether or not we want to use the state (government) to enforce our ideas of right and wrong.

No Simple Duality.

“Dualism” is seeing a situation in terms of two contrasting and usually opposite ideas: “good and bad”, “Red Sox and Yankees”, “East coast working class versus West coast smooth”, “classical versus pop”, “West coast jazz versus East coast jazz”, “realism versus naturalism”, “abstract versus representational”, “freedom versus oppression”, “rich versus poor”, “workers versus owners”, “country versus city” “Republicans versus freedom”, “Yankees versus Southerners”, “conservative versus liberal”, and “straights versus gays”.

“Manichean dualism” is seeing most of the world, including especially religion, deities, and morality, in terms of opposition between the forces of good versus the forces of evil. Usually the forces are personified into a good God versus a bad devil. Western Christianity, especially Protestantism, tends toward Manichean dualism. Republicans since Reagan live in Manichean dualism, of which the Bush-Cheney administration was a sad example. Western arts use Manichean dualism as a framework and as a plot so much that giving examples would be wasteful.

It is easy to make fun of dualism, and I will, but dualism can be useful. It can be hard to see the forest for the trees. In some situations, we need to simplify so that we can see enough to understand, and so that we can do something. Dualism can help, as with the sports dualisms and pop culture dualisms above. It helps to follow the NFL if you like some teams better than others, and if you see some teams as heroes and other teams as villains. American arts of at least the last 100 years would have been fairly boring without dualism such as in most space movies, westerns, and spy movies. We just have to remember that there are always important boundary cases and exceptions, we might have to let go of our dualism if it does not work or if another works better, and human judgment is more important than any dualism.

I tend to see Christianity in terms of morality versus blind faith, with the good God lined up on my side and the deluding devil behind the blind believers. Their blind faith allows people to do bad things that they would not do if instead they focused on morality, and allows people not do the good that they should be doing. I am sure I am right, but I also know that it can be carried too far. My way tends to elitism and moralistic causes.

We can never have only one dualism at a time, even in the same situation. Even if we believe in simple good versus simple evil, are the poor always on the side of good or always on the side of evil? We usually have lists of dualisms that we take into a situation. We then spend a lot of time and effort juggling and re-shuffling our various dualisms to make them line up. Sports discussion programs (sports news) often are just a parade of dualisms with each speaker in turn offering his-her take on the list and the priorities. Panels at academic conferences often are little different. Sometimes when we juggle we try to minimize the contradictions so as to find the heart of the matter but mostly we try to make the various dualisms line up so as to make us seem right.

Expansion Because.

It is easiest to explain this mistake if I describe how I came to see it. In the 1960s and 1970s, Americans faced not only evangelizing Christians but also evangelizing Buddhists, Hindus, and Taoists. I recall facing a Buddhist in a strange sect. What would happen if I joined? I would feel good, and I would see the world as it really is. I would go out and get other people to join. Then what? We would go out and get even more people to join. Why? Because people in the movement are happy and have good lives and go to Buddhist heaven while people outside do not. What makes you have a happy good life? Seeing what the world is all about and getting other people to join. This is another version of Agent Smith.

For me, this does not work. There has to be a point to the movement, like saving the whales or ending government interference in the free market. If we think there is a magical experience that automatically makes people inside feel good and makes them want to go get other people into the movement, then really the movement is empty even if it goes on for a long time.

Movements that feed on themselves do not need any content. In fact, the less content the better. If that sect of Buddhism had promised me I would be able to levitate, and then I could not, then I would have

quit. By promising me nothing except a vague “wow” experience and the call to call others, the movement had nothing deniable, and could go on forever. A great pyramid scheme.

Even a modest private “wow” experience works almost as well as nothing at all, for example the social whoosh at a party or the warm feeling of yoga. A modest private experience helps to get a person in. By promising me a feeling of tranquility and the ability to see the world “as it really is”, the Buddhist sect was more likely to get me into the movement and keep me long enough.

Once in, successful movements have methods to keep people in.

This is the way that pyramid schemes and chain letters work. “If you send this email on to ten other people, you will be sure to get your secret wish”.

In fairness to Buddhism, most Buddhism is not like that, and most Buddhism has a definite concrete agenda after the “wow”, an agenda aimed at ending suffering.

Unfortunately, a lot of Christianity is like that. You have a “wow” experience in the presence of the Lord, in the presence of other believers, or at a ceremony in church. You think that you are forgiven and saved just because Jesus died. You think Jesus was resurrected, and that his resurrection has some cosmic importance, and so you will be resurrected and live forever in heaven too. You go out to get converts so that you can continue your “wow” experience and share it. The “wow” can be as explosive as sensing cosmic love, seeing angels, and then fainting or it can be as subtle as a sense that finally you now belong in the right group. That’s it. “Come with us and be saved.” What happens after I get saved? “You go out and save more people, who go to save more people, and so on.” The church grows on itself, like the housing bubble of the early 2000s or like a chain email. Most bubbles burst but some can go on for a long time, such as some forms of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Taoism.

Lots of religious groups have the “wow” experience. The “wow” should not be too important. Whether or not the “wow” is true as far as it goes does not matter so much as what happens after the “wow” experience. If growth of the group is based on what you do afterwards, such as feed the poor, then it makes sense. If growth of the group is based primarily on recruiting then it does not make sense. “Try it you’ll like it, and then you can be a part of us too” works for religions as much as it works for junkies, sects, gambling, or for a particular style of sex. For religion to be more than junk, it has to be more than “wow” and has to be more than “us ever expanding”.

“Building a better world” has enough independent substance to it so that we can strive toward that for a long time as the basis for a religion apart from any particular “wow” experience or on top of any “wow” experience. If ever we run out of the need to build a better world, and I hope we do, then we really can be happy, and we can look for another basis for religion.

For some people, the “wow” is enough. It is self-explaining and self-justifying, a “being in the presence of the Lord”. For people that have such an experience and for whom it is enough, it is natural to want to share. I do not want to deny the validity of this experience for some people, or their right to share it, or their joy in sharing it. I only warn other people to be cautious, not to feel bad if they cannot have the

same experience, and to go ahead doing your religion even without sharing in that experience or joining that group.

Groups of people that have had the “wow” experience fall into two large camps. The first kind does not depend on recruiting but only wishes to share the experience with other people that can appreciate it. The second kind depends on recruiting, especially by trying to induce the experience in other people. Enjoy the first kind of group but avoid the second.

If religion were limited only to people that have the “wow” experience, then it would not be religion as I understand it or as I understand God’s intent. Religion comes in many ways and gets expressed in many ways. I have seen people do good things who have not had the “wow” experience but who have only simple faith. Not everybody can have the same “wow” experience, people can have genuine religion without having that experience, and a full religion has to include more than that “wow” experience alone even if that “wow” experience seems to be enough for some people.

Religion, Morality, and Evidence.

In science, the relation between facts and theory is usually pretty clear, scientists can usually decide if a fact is true or not, and scientists can usually decide if a fact supports a theory or denies a theory. We can see whether or not an apple falls if we drop it, and we can decide if that fact supports Newton’s theory of gravity or not. The relation is not perfect, and scientists use judgment to improve the relation between fact and theory. The falling apple supports Einstein’s theory of gravity even better than Newton’s although that difference is not obvious.

The relation between fact, morality, and religion is more complicated. Ideally, we would like to be able to read right and wrong directly from facts. We go to court so that we can decide right and wrong from facts. But, as many thousands of lawyer shows on TV have demonstrated, facts do not speak for themselves, and we cannot always know if a fact supports a theory or denies it. Two men are sitting in a room, with guns on their laps. One man lifts up his gun and kills the other man. Is this murder or self-defense? We cannot decide by looking at the facts alone. Even with a film, we could not decide. We have to know the intent, history, mood, and even physical condition of the two men such as if they were high or not. Even then, we decide what is right or wrong; the facts still do not speak for themselves. The philosopher David Hume said that we cannot deduce “ought” from “is”. We impose our ideas of rightness and wrongness of physical situations that have no right and wrong in themselves. A lion kills and eats a gazelle. One lion kills another lion in a fight over mates. A male lion kills the cubs of a female lion so that she will go into heat so that he can be the father of all her children and so that his own children will have no rivals. A person kills and eats a puppy. A person kills his neighbor for driving around in a rolling boom box that shakes the dishes. A man kills a woman’s boyfriend so that he can have her all to himself. In one case she wanted him to do it and in another case she did not. Which of these cases is right or wrong, where do we draw the line, and why do we draw the line?

Yet facts are relevant. We do want to know the intent, history, mood, and condition of the two men with guns, and at least some of those items are facts. Suppose one man had substituted the bullets in his rival’s gun with blanks. That is a physical fact, and it bears on our judgment of right and wrong. When one man kills another for the woman who wanted him to, we want to know if her boyfriend abused her or

not, how badly he abused her, and why she couldn't go to the police. TV lawyer shows are not really about how hard it is to assess right and wrong from given facts but about how a previously-hidden-fact-but-now-suddenly-revealed-fact changes our assessment of what is right and wrong. We do not have to judge; the facts judge for us. Really, the shows let us off the hook.

With science, there is pretty good theory about the relation between facts and theory. With right and wrong, there is a relation between facts and theory but there is no good dominant theory about the relation between facts and theory. We have to assess as we go along. We just have to live with this situation until a great philosopher comes along. We will return to this issue later in the book.

This problem shows up in religion and morality because people cite facts to support or deny religion and morality. Sometimes the facts might bear on the case but too often they do not. Yet people continue to cite facts as if they did bear, and other people go along with it. I find this situation rather strange. It is one reason I studied the biology of people.

Before looking at Christianity, it is better to look at Buddhism. Buddhists use stories of the young Buddha to convey ideas. In one story, to show that Buddha is really special, and that we ought to venerate him, even if we do not pay attention to what he says, the Buddha walks and talks since he was born. If Buddha really did walk and talk since he was born, would that validate his teaching? If Buddha did not really walk and talk since he was born, would that invalidate his teaching? Some facts are relevant and some are not, no matter how spectacular. A major tenet of Buddhism is that life might be interesting sometimes but on the whole it is not really worth it. Life is to be endured until over. Endure life with grace if possible, but do not get too attached to life or you will suffer. If we could find one happy person who found life really worth living and was deeply attached to life, would that invalidate Buddha's teaching? This is not so clear. We have to argue further about whether the person is really happy, and what would happen if the situation changed. If the situation changed but the person was not able to sustain his-her happiness, was the person really happy to begin with? What if we could find a person that could sustain his-her happiness even through changes? If everybody in the world at one time were miserable, would that fact validate Buddhism? I leave the reader to ponder.

While I was writing this, I was reading theologians arguing about whether or not Jesus was really resurrected, so I will use that issue as an example, but the idea applies to other aspects of Jesus' life such as the virgin birth, the miracles, and the magical ability of the crucifixion to forgive sins and save. Suppose we can divide people into conservative Christians who believe in the resurrection, liberal Christians who deny the resurrection, and atheists. If Jesus was resurrected, does that necessarily mean that he was also the Son of God, God, Lord, Messiah, and co-creator of the universe? If Jesus was the Son of God, does that necessarily mean he was also resurrected, God, Lord, Messiah, and co-creator of the universe? And so on for each term? If Jesus was resurrected, does that validate conservative Christianity along with its entire social and political program, and invalidate liberal Christianity and atheism along with their entire social and political programs? If Jesus was not resurrected, does that validate liberal Christianity or atheism along with their entire social and political programs and invalidate conservative Christianity along with its entire social and political program? I can easily imagine a conservative Christianity that could survive the fact that Jesus was not resurrected just as I can easily imagine a liberal Christianity that could survive the fact that Jesus was resurrected. I can easily imagine the resurrection energizing liberal Christianity while invalidating the social and political program of

conservatives. I cannot imagine an atheism that could survive Jesus' resurrection, although I can imagine a social and political program held by atheists that could survive Jesus' resurrection. So we can see that facts are still relevant but we are not entirely sure how. If Jesus really was resurrected, does that mean we all have to give up alcohol? If Jesus was not resurrected, does that mean we all have to become homosexual and marry another homosexual? If Jesus really said we have to hate our parents to follow him, does that mean we really have to? We do not know what facts really support or deny Christianity in general, and support or deny conservative or liberal Christianity in particular with its particular social and political programs, or support or deny atheism with its social and political program. Yet liberal and conservative Christians pick particular facts to argue about as if those facts somehow totally validated their kind of Christianity and totally invalidated all the alternatives. They act like Perry Mason or Matlock. They act like the lawyer on a TV show after he-she has revealed the surprise fact that should clinch the case. They act as if all other kinds of Christianity and all other religions were the poor DA who is proven wrong, utterly defeated, and banished to loser hell.

It is hard to decide facts about the resurrection, the virgin birth, or the magical efficacy of the crucifixion. Perhaps this is just as well. Liberal Christians, conservative Christians, and atheists can continue to argue and to have a good time while avoiding other issues.

If there were a good theory as to which facts did support or deny what, then we would still have to decide what the facts are. That is what historians would be for. If we knew all the facts, we would still have to decide what they mean according to our good theory of relevance. That is what good minds are for. If we had the theory and the facts, and had made all the decisions, this book would not be needed. I cannot answer these questions. All I can do is show you enough of the arguments so that you do not get lost or confused.

Other Grounds, Other Arguments.

Perhaps arguments about the virgin birth, the miracles, the magical efficacy of the crucifixion, and the resurrection are not conducive to following the teachings of Jesus. In the end, if we decide that we cannot decide the facts about questions such as the resurrection, then we have to use other grounds to decide what to do. We have to decide the validity of the conservative, liberal, or atheist social and political programs on other grounds. We need arguments based on morality, human nature, and human social life. These arguments force us into questions about relations between the state, religion, morality, religious groups, social groups, political groups, and other interest groups. In those discussions, the teachings of Jesus will still be key even though we cannot decide the facts about the resurrection and other magical episodes of Jesus' life.

The State as Our Agent.

People find it natural to use the state to support their religion and morality. Liberals are more likely to blame conservatives but conservatives are correct that Political Correctness is as prone to using the state to enforce its morals as is any conservative theocratic agenda. This is wrong. It is right to use the state to uphold some moral positions, such as "do not kill". It is wrong to use the state to impose some moral positions that we want such as "do not commit abortion" even when we are sure that those moral positions are correct and even when we are sure that violating these moral rules hurts people.

Not so long ago, people used the state to make sure that everybody went to the right church and that everybody had sex the right way. Now we understand we should not use the state to do that, if for no other reason than that it can backfire on us. If we use the state now to make everybody go to a Protestant church, in the future someone can use the state to make everyone go to a Muslim mosque or Buddhist temple. If we use the state now to make sure everybody has sex in missionary position with the man on top, then some other group later can use the state to make sure everybody has homosexual sex regularly. The ambiguities in morality and religion, and the tendency of people to use morality and religion as weapons, make it all the easier and all the more tempting to use the state.

The early Christians disapproved of abortion. They did not try to make their idea of supporting life the law of the Roman Empire. They did not try to change the behavior of all non-Christians. Instead, they went along with the basic rules of the Empire, they did what they thought was right among themselves, and they tried to change the minds of people that were willing to listen. They kept their own stricter rules within their group and did not try to impose their own stricter rules on people in general. When Christianity became the official religion of the empire, and Christians tried to impose their morality, a lot of things began to go wrong, some of which still haunt us to this day, such as laws against divorce.

We have to find which general moral rules we need the state to enforce, such as against theft and murder. We need to find which rules we want to prevail in our group but which we do not necessarily want the state to enforce for us, such as rules against divorce. We have to let people who are not like us do as they wish even if what they do seems immoral and self-destructive to us, such as allow homosexual marriage or not allow anyone in their group to get a divorce. We have to not be obnoxious, such as by hurting the environment, being dirty, or causing loud noise.

It is not always easy to draw the line between what we need the state to enforce and what we want among ourselves but do not need the state to enforce. Abortion is one of these cases. People that want to use the state to stop abortion genuinely believe they are protecting innocent children. People that want to use the state to preserve the right to an abortion genuinely think they are preserving free choice and defending the need for a woman to plan her family life for the greater good of a greater family. I do not argue any more about it here.

Sometimes another group uses the state to impose its morality, thus violating the rule above. Sometimes that other morality hurts us. Sometimes the other group intends to hurt us and sometimes they do not care. Sometimes another group uses the state to support behavior that we think is detrimental to society in general or to us in particular even when the laws are not aimed at us, such as when conservative Christians think that liberals use the state to impose the acceptance of homosexual marriage. Liberal Christians see using state lands for Christmas displays in the same way. If we really feel threatened, then we might have to defend ourselves, and we might have to use the state to defend ourselves. We might have to use the state to impose our ideas of morality so as to defend ourselves against a group that wants its ideas to prevail.

Fortunately, I do not think this situation arises nearly as often as people fear. Unfortunately, I think people invoke this situation to generate fear to get what they want. I think people use fear to create artificial battlegrounds to get their own way. This is part of using religion and morality as weapons. I think

most argument over abortion is more about getting your own way than about protecting innocent babies or preserving freedom of choice. I doubt that allowing homosexual marriage or allowing Christmas scenes on the courthouse lawn will cause the heavens to fall or will corrupt all children. So we have to be really cautious before deciding somebody else is using the state to hurt us, and we have to think hard about how to respond. It is better not to impose our own morality if we can help it, and especially better not to use the state.

Morality, Religion, and Human Nature.

The argument in this section has four parts.

First, morality and religion have strong roots in human nature. We cannot ask people to tell the truth, and not to lie, if people do not have a good intuitive idea of what is real and what is not, and what it means to conform to reality. We cannot ask people not to steal if they do not have a good intuitive idea of “mine” and “yours”. We cannot say, “God is like a person” and “God loves us like children” if we do not already have good intuitive ideas of what a person is and of love between parents and children. We need to look for the roots of religion and morality in human nature.

Second, even though morality and religion have deep roots in human nature, they transcend human nature sometimes. “Do not lie” means, “Do not lie”; it does not mean, “Do not lie except when you feel like it or when you can gain”. It is an ideal. It is not how people act all the time or how we expect them to act all the time. The same is true of stealing, murdering, adultery, and most of the common human moral ideals. Moral logic is not the same as practical logic. Likewise, to believe in God is to believe in something we cannot sense. To love other people is a clear part of human nature but to love our neighbor as ourselves is clearly beyond what could be expected in nature. How anything beyond our nature can arise from our nature yet and be sustained within our nature, and what that might mean for Jesus’ teachings, are questions for later parts of the book.

Third, even though morality and religion transcend our nature somewhat, they cannot go too far. Everybody “borrows” paper clips, and we have to learn to live with that. To live with that is easier than to massively police every desk in the world. Nobody really can love his neighbor as him-herself. Or, at least, nobody can do that and have a normal human life such as a family. Even if we want to love our neighbor as ourselves, we cannot love our neighbor’s children as much as we love our own children. We cannot run society based only on religious and moral ideals, even if we appeal to ideals from time to time. We have to take into account both real human nature and occasional leaps above human nature. We can use the ideals of religion and morality to guide how we make the real institutions that guide real human nature. We cannot expect to transform real human nature to conform to our religious or moral ideals or to our ideals of human society. Moral logic, and religion, originated (evolved) out of practical strategy even if they diverged logically, and we cannot completely separate them.

Fourth, we are correctly suspicious of people that insist on the ideals of their religion and morality even when we agree with the ideals of their religion and morality. When somebody insists that we never steal, or that we love our neighbor fully and at all times, we should be suspicious. We can suspect them of having ulterior motives and of using religion and morality as a cover for what they really want. We should suspect people that want us to be too good. When conservative Christians say that the poor should be

harshly punished for stealing, then we should be suspicious, especially when liberal Christians use lobbyists as the means to steal from the government. When liberal Christians tell us that we have to love everybody, we should be suspicious, especially when liberal Christians do not love conservatives and when they want to force us to give full moral status to people we do not like such as child molesters. We have to think, "What do they really want?"

We need to think about the balance of human nature and ideals without betraying our ideals and without betraying the need to make a living and raise families. This is not easy to do. Part of worthwhile life is trying.

Chapter 2.02 Natural, Popular, and Local Common Religion

“Natural” religion is not any particular real religion. It is an idealized religious capacity. Natural religion is what people have abilities to believe from having biologically evolved, such as the propensity to believe in spirits. It is part of evolved folk physics-biology-psychology. I list some of the characteristics of natural religion in a section below and list some of the abilities of evolved folk physics-biology-psychology in another section further below.

Natural religion does not have much intrinsic content, such as “we must thank the spirit of the oak” or “there is one and only one supreme God”. It has general categories into which we put specific content. We fill in specifics according to how we earn a living, raise a family, our environment, technology, culture, society, and history. For example, all people have the ability to believe in spirits but only some people in some societies believe in the particular spirits of trees, deer, cars, or football. Only some people believe in angels or devils. Only some people believe in one supreme omniscient omnipotent God, and do so only under certain conditions of culture, society, and history.

Natural religion and natural morality go together and support each other, so that, for example, common moral precepts such as “do not steal” get religious backing while people also expect that the gods will not be mostly honest. I do not go into this relation much here.

Different societies fill up the contents of natural religion in different ways. All the various particular real religions could claim to be “natural religion” but it is not very useful to think of religion that way. Instead, it is more useful to create an abstract natural religion, and then to look at some of the patterns of how natural religion gets filled up into particular religions.

During nearly all of the time humans evolved, we made a living as hunters and gatherers (or gatherers and hunters, or foragers). Natural religion evolved in that kind of life. So, in a sense, natural religion is the natural religion of hunters and gatherers. Yet various hunters and gatherers differ enough in their particular religions so that even with them it is worthwhile paying attention to the characteristics of religion in particular hunter and gatherer societies, and not taking any one hunter and gatherer society as typical of all natural religion. It is worthwhile making the distinction between the natural capacity for religion that all people share and which is similar in all people versus the realization of the capacity in any particular society, even a hunter gatherer society. So I reserve the idea of natural religion to the general capacity that is similar in all people, and I treat any particular religion as that particular religion, even the religion of hunters and gatherers who live much as humans lived while we evolved.

On the other hand, because conditions influence the content of natural religion, societies with similar conditions have similar contents of religion even if not exactly. People that hunt and gather have similarities in religion regardless of their own culture, society, or history. The same is so of people who raise grains (millet, wheat, rice, and maize) in large state societies such as in Egypt, Babylon, China, India, or the Yucatan. Judaism and Christianity developed in agrarian societies where people were peasants living by farming or fishing, and paid taxes to the military elite in a city, so this chapter describes

some basics of their religious type. This chapter also describes some basics of religion in modern states where people get a salary by working for a large institution, and pay taxes to the elite in a large city.

Because Judaism and Christianity developed in agrarian states, the ideas behind the terms “popular religion” and “common religion” are useful mostly to understand religion in states, including modern states.

For convenience, we can call “popular” religion the religion that is widespread in a society and that most people believe without consideration of official church doctrine. Where there is no official church in a society, popular religion is simply the widespread religion of the people in that society. Popular religion is natural religion as shaped by particular situations without considering any official religion. The popular religion of most Native Americans before the Europeans came was just the common religion of any particular group, such as the religion of the Navaho or Shoshone. In Thailand, China, and Korea, there is at least one “official” religion (Buddhism) so there is a difference between the official religion and the popular religion. The popular religion of Thai, Chinese, and Koreans is based on ideas about fortune, spirits, fortune tellers, amulets, potions, and ways to improve fortune. In China, the popular religion is largely a variation of “magical” Taoism. In the United States, popular religion includes nature worship and worship of organized activities such as business, politics, and sports such as football. There can be more than one popular religion in a large society. Most major subgroups in a large society have their own popular religion or have a major variant of a dominant popular religion. That is too much detail to go into here. Popular religion can coincide with official doctrine or not; the point is not that they clash; the point is that popular religion is not a direct reflection of church doctrine.

When modern people think of “natural” religion, they mistakenly think of popular religion of a particular circumstance, such as among particular Native Americans of the central plains. Modern people make up romanticized features of this religion and then attribute the romanticized features to all people as natural, such as the “Great Spirit” or “trickster”. If you are inclined to do that, you have to practice not doing it. “Common” religion is usually a mixture of popular religion with some doctrines of official “church” religion. Common religion consists of ideas that roughly accord with the doctrines of the official church but not entirely. Usually people give their own “spin” to ideas of the church, leave out ideas of the church, and add ideas. Common religion usually is the version of official religion that most people share. Common Christianity is not the same as official dogmatic Christianity, especially in venerating saints (Francis) and heroes (Martin Luther, John Calvin, various Popes).

Common religion can be fairly similar in different state societies even though the states have different official religions. People in states need a kindly deity to trust and to get help from. Many Christians trust Mary, and seek help from her, more than Jesus or God. Mary is in official Christianity but is not supposed to be central. Westerners and Hindus have similarities of common religion because they both developed in agricultural state societies; they differ in common religion due to history. Instead of Mary, Hindus might trust a version of female Kali, the consort of male Siva. In China, Korea, and Thailand, people worship Lord Mother Kwan Yin (Kuan Im). In ancient Greece, Hera was the wife of the supreme God Zeus, powerful herself; with a large devoted following; her name means “protector”. In Thailand, common religion is a variation of Buddhism that stresses accumulating spiritual “brownie points” (“merit” or “boon”) through relations with monks and temples.

Popular religion, common religion, and official religion can conflict. Then, popular religion and common religion usually defeat official religion, as with Mary worship. Many Christians believe in guardian angels and the direct intervention of saints even though those ideas are not in official religion. Christians believe in animal spirit companions, and those are not any part of official Christianity. Some Christians even believe a little bit in vampires, as the movie series "Twilight" showed. Every year some strict Christians try to ban Halloween and fail.

Philosophers and priests think of popular religion and local common religion as "superstition". They fight them, dismiss them, or tolerate them. Unless we can definitely say some belief is false, or causes more harm than good, there is no intrinsic universal standard by which to dismiss some beliefs as mere superstition and extol others as high reasonable religion. All are human beliefs, even atheism. Even so, we can apply some standards and come to some conclusions. We can assess beliefs according to whether they do more good and harm, by consistency, and by evidence. It is reasonable to think there can be only one highest god who is pretty moral rather than many small competing gods with dubious morality. I find little evidence of animal spirit companions. Belief in witches leads to persecution.

This chapter explains as much of natural, popular, and common religion as we need for background. A fuller treatment is found in the anthropology of religion and in religious studies. Natural, popular, and common religions all show some of the mistakes described in the previous chapter. That is not a concern here.

The fact that much of religion can be reduced to the ideas of this chapter does not mean all religions are the same or all religions are false. Just because we can see bits of The Force in Christianity or Taoism does not mean Christianity or Taoism are the same or are false. Physics can reduce the flight of a baseball and the roll of a billiard ball to the same natural laws. That does not mean there are no baseballs or billiard balls, baseballs are the same as billiard balls, or the different games are really the same game. We cannot reduce various religions to "nothing but". That error was exposed in the previous chapter. After we understand the ideas that make up religions, we have to decide what is distinct, true, and important.

Natural Religion.

I do not say too much about this topic because I trust intuition to supply the gist of the matter. For most people most of the time, much of the world is alive.

Most living things have not only a physical presence but a spirit. Animals, trees, fish, insects, and even some plants have spirits.

Various natural things that we modern industrial people might not call alive are alive and/or have spirits. Mountains, houses, places, the wind, and water not only are, they also are spirits and they might be alive.

Not only do individual living things have a spirit, such as the spirit of Fido the dog, but types of living things have spirits, such as the spirit of dogs or of wolves. The relation between the spirit of a particular

thing and of the type is not always clear, and might vary between kinds. The relation between Fido and Dogs might not be the same as between Gertrude and Cats.

Most living things and nearly all spirits do things on their own such as walk and fly, have wants, and have intentions.

Living things and spirits can enter into relations with themselves and with us. We can have a relation with our next door neighbor, her dog, the spirit of dogs, the spirit of Mount Hood, or the spirit of Mobile Bay.

Relations can include mutual trust and support. We want to establish a good relation with spirits when we can. We want to avoid bad relations. We want to protect ourselves in case of a bad relation.

Some spirits are superior to us just as some people are superior to us.

Part of relations is giving back and forth. The technical term for giving back and forth is "reciprocity" but I do not use that technical term for a while so you can get used to the idea rather than the technical term. Part of giving back and forth is giving and receiving different kinds of gifts in case of differences in status. We give a different gift to the spirit of the whole forest than we do to the spirits of one kind of tree or one particular tree. We expect different gifts in return from them.

Sometimes the spirits just do things with no apparent reason. That is what it means to be alive and to be self-actuating. The spirits are not always friendly and they do not always care about human beings. Sometimes we can placate them and get them to be considerate through giving back and forth. Some people have greater access to spirits than other people. It is well to seek their advice and take their advice. It is well not to anger them.

Apparent coincidence often has some sort of hidden cause. Sally did not hit that pothole and blow her tire completely by accident. Sometimes the hidden cause lies in the spirit world. Sometimes the hidden cause lies in somebody using the spirit world to affect us. Sometimes it is for good and sometimes for evil.

It is not entirely clear why sometimes the spirits help us and sometimes they do not.

We try hard to avoid conflicts with other people and with spirits but sometimes conflicts happen. Sometimes we can enlist the aid of the spirits in conflicts. It is not always clear why the spirits might help us or the other person, but the relation of giving-back-and-forth might be relevant. We might be able to expect help from a spirit with which we routinely gave back and forth.

We sense the identity of our group, especially in contrast to the identity of other groups. Our group can have a spirit too. Any group can have a spirit.

Sometimes conflicts happen between our group and other groups. We also try to get the help of the spirits in these conflicts. Again, the outcome probably depends on the quality of giving-back-and-forth.

Whether or not we are successful in our dealings with the spirits depends on our own condition. If we are in a condition that the spirits do not like, they are not likely to help us even if we are generous in our giving back and forth. For example, the spirits generally approve of moral behavior and disapprove of immoral behavior even if they are not always moral by our standards. So if we have done something bad, they are not likely to help us unless we atone. On the other hand, if we are morally pure, they are more likely to help us.

Just as there is an “us and them” between different groups, people and spirits tend to respond better to people that are like them. We can think of being morally pure as being more like the spirits, so they respond to us if we are more like them in that way. The same might be true of other ways. If the spirits like the color red, for example, and we dress in red, they might be more likely to respond to us than if we dress in blue. We have to think of what the spirits are like so that we can be more like them so that we can have a better relation with them. If a spirit is warlike, we have to approach that spirit with a warlike demeanor or with an attitude of supplication.

People relate to the spirits not only as individuals but also as part of a group. A Packer's football fan relates to the spirit of Packers' football (or the spirit of Vince Lombardi) not only as an individual but also as a member of Packers' nation.

Groups have symbols of their spirit and their identity as a group. Sports teams have mascots such as eagles, bears, tigers, and lions. When people think of the spirit and identity of a group, they think in terms of the symbol. They relate to the symbol. They give back and forth with the symbol. Having a religion in common is one of the strongest forces that make a group a group and that keep a group a group. Denying the religion of the group is the same as denying membership. People form a group to act toward the spirits together, as when they conduct rituals, pray, and give gifts. People tend to use religion for group welfare as much as for individual welfare. The symbol of the group and the religion of the group tend to merge.

Morality is seen not mostly as an individual, philosophical, logical, or abstract code of conduct but as something that comes from the group, is above the individual, and is about the welfare of the group. Morality leads both to individual benefit and to group benefit.

Being cut off from the group can be a disaster. Being cut off group can be expressed through bad relations to the spirit of the group and/or the symbol of the group. When a fan is expelled from the current fans of a sports team, he-she should no longer wear clothes with the team colors and team symbol.

Group level effects arose from individual action in the course of biological evolution. Individual action can change the course of group level effects. I do not explain what happened in human evolution or how that continues to happen in ongoing societies.

Rituals, prayers, sacrifices, and ceremonies in general are a common and natural part of religion. I do not explain how they arose or how they work. People can carry them out as individuals but more often people carry them out as groups.

Knowing things like this is part of what makes a person an expert in spirits and religion.

People evolved as hunter gatherers. The ideas of this section are most “cleanly” seen among hunter gatherers and some tribal people. We can take the ideas here as typical of hunter gatherers and typical of people unchanged by later ways of making a living and making society such as agricultural people. Later religious ideas in tribal and agricultural societies can be understood as elaborations and modifications of these basic ideas. Even so, do not reduce to “nothing but” because modifications can be important. For example, from basic ideas in hunter-gatherer societies, in later societies later we get levels of spirits, priests, sacrifices, and hierarchy. We get the basic ideas of Christianity, Taoism, Hinduism, etc.

The Force.

“The Force” as portrayed in the Star Wars movies is more typical of an agrarian society such as feudal Japan or a mercantile society such as modern California than it is of hunter-gatherer society, but it is close enough to get a basic idea across. The Force from the Star Wars movie is a particular artistic version of an idea that is common among humans. Just as a force is associated with a strong arm, a big rock, a big tree, the wind, or a pregnancy, so the action of spirits can be understood in terms of a mysterious force. Trees grow because of a mysterious force (“the force that through the green fuse drives the flower drives me”, “of which virtue engendered is the flower”). Tree spirits embody the force, partake of it, use it to grow trees, and use it for various purposes other than growing trees such as beguiling forest wanderers.

There seems to be one big force common to a lot of important things such as trees, stars, hurricanes, and lightning. This one big force might be the only true force in the world, so that all other particular forces are merely variations on this one big force (much like there is one God, or like physicists seek for the unification of the four basic forces of nature). The force can be available only to spirits, or it can be a general force that pervades all of creation. Not only people, but also many aspects of creation, might know of this force and share this force. What makes distinct aspects of creation distinct is how they manifest and use this force. The deer is the deer because it puts a deer spin on the force, and so also the bear, rose, and human. Mid-twentieth century philosophy and popular American religion called this force “process”. The force might normally be more available to spirits than people but it is also available to experts. Now, Americans call them shamans, Jedi, Sith, “professor”, or “doctor”. The force is available for good use and bad use. It can be used for special events like levitating star ships or it can be used as part of otherwise normal activities such as flowering, howling, shooting a bow, hunting a deer, or finding a mate. It plays a role in purity, holiness, and innocence, for which see below.

Natural Types, and “On the Borderline”.

People are born with a sense that various individual things of the world come in different types. We are not born with a large catalog of specific types such as for cats, dogs, lizards, roses, grasshoppers, etc. We have a few types, some of which are listed just below. Starting from them, we make other detailed types, such as “dog”, using experience and learning from people around us. We put the various individuals into those constructed secondary categories.

We are probably born with ideas of a few large category types, such as material objects, movement, rest, location, inside, outside, behind, plants, dumb animals (un-talking and not too smart) animals, smart

animals (potentially talking), intent, will, lying, persons, speech, a rule, kin, not kin, friends, neighbors, not friends, not neighbors, us, them, spirits, good, greater good, bad, right, wrong, force, purity, impurity, domestic, and not-domestic, same, different, similar, and type. We are born with general ideas (rules) about how types behave and interact. For example, we know animals can move themselves and that smart animals sometimes can guess what we want. We fill up the types with specifics from our way of making a living, society, culture, and history. For example, we later fill up the plant type with roses and dandelions, the animal type with dogs named “Rover” and cats named “Spot”, the schemers category with people from “Dallas” and “Gossip Girl”, the good category with ideals such as “love your neighbor”, and the bad category with people that compete for our mates and jobs.

We also create entities that are on borderlines and that have mixed traits, such as walking talking thinking trees (Ents), talking animals (many fairy tales), walking talking machines with a soul (Data and R2D2), people that fly (Superman and Neo), and people that do things to the physical world through will power (Ice Queen from Narnia and Lex Luthor). Entities on borderlines with mixed features often have religious importance, including having access to a lot of the Force.

Just being a strange entity on the borderline does not say how much Force the entity will have, especially in relation to other entities, whether the entity is good or bad, and whether we can relate to the entity. Being on the borderline does not say what attitude the entity has toward human groups. Those factors have to be worked out in the culture of particular groups.

Evolutionary biologists call the major innate categories “folk physics”, “folk biology”, and “folk psychology”. I add “folk sociology”. Logically, natural religion is a result of being born with some basic types and the ability to later make other categories from them. Natural religion comes out of folk physics, biology, and psychology. Logically, natural religion should have come after folk, physics, biology, and psychology. I introduced natural religion first because people usually have a better intuitive sense of natural religion than of folk physics, biology, and psychology. Natural religion is a good example of folk physics, biology, and psychology that helps introduce them. I do not explain more here because the details are not clear even to scientists, and they argue. Even the terms are not clear. I get back to the subject later in the book. All we need to know for now is natural religion.

Religion and Social Organization.

Religion can be used to create, mirror, reinforce, change, dissolve, sustain, undermine, and reorder social organization. Religion both is created by social organization and helps create social organization. These relations are so complex and controversial that I do not go into them. I mention this topic because, if I do not, any social scientist who reads this book will throw a fit. If I live long enough, and have energy, I will write about these topics.

Purity, Holiness, Innocence, and Being Like God.

People purity and holiness, and sometimes link them to innocence too. People think the more pure a being is the more holy that being is, and vice versa. People think innocent beings are both more pure and more holy. Theistic religions often encourage people to “be like God” and to “imitate God”. One of the

most influential books in Christian history is "The Imitation of Christ". People keep purity and innocence, and imitate God, so they can be more holy and can be nearer to God.

Americans have trouble understanding these ideas because we do not have an explicit system of purity, holiness, innocence, and the imitation of God. Yet we do have an informal system. Americans say, "Cleanliness is next to godliness". Our idea of "clean" means more than "free of germs" because it is really about an idealization of purity. We strive for impossible sterility. Bob Dylan complained that Maggie "takes about sixteen baths a day". We wash our clothes long before they are dirty, and we do not allow any hint of body odor. We iron out every wrinkle. We scrape away hair and we use chemicals to stop sweat. We think that animals are clean, pure, and innocent and so more holy and closer to God. Anybody who ever worked with monkeys, baby seals, or koalas knows better. We believe children are innocent, pure, and holy despite massive commonsense evidence to the contrary. Because of their purity and innocence, children can see God, angels, and ghosts, and often have a heightened sense of justice, as in the movie "The Sixth Sense". If we wait too long to train children in the ways of the Force, so they have lost purity, they are likely to go over to the Dark Side. We know that a dead body is only a body but still we are squeamish. We feel we have to be careful around them. We have to dress the right way at a funeral. We should not socialize after a funeral except at a wake. We should wait a while after a funeral before resuming normal social activities such as going to a bar. We behave differently around babies. We talk to them in strange ways even though much of what we say is meaningless to them. We paint their rooms in particular colors which are meaningless to them as well. We fill their rooms with objects that symbolize their sexual identities, and symbolize what we hope will be their interests in life.

Some non-Americans, such as Polynesians, formalize their ideas of cleanliness, purity, and holiness, partly as a way to let people know what to do so people can stop worrying, relax, and get on with their lives. Polynesians clearly mark out men, women, adults, children, babies, dead, chiefs, commoners, and other relevant social categories. They know how to behave around each category. They know bad behavior is impure and will offend the gods. They know when people are clean or not clean, and therefore holy or not holy. They know when to go near people and when to avoid them. They know chiefs are nearer to the force of the gods because chiefs are purer and more holy. They can tell apart a dangerous force, such as from a ghost, from a good force that is under control such as from a happy ancestor. They know what to do to cure a problem, such as with a woman after she has had a baby.

Sometimes when people do not have a formal system of purity and holiness, people over-compensate, and they worry too much about cleanliness, purity, innocence, and holiness. That is one reason why Americans are among the cleanest people in the world.

The Jews strove to be holy, and to be like God. They thought that cleanliness, purity, and some kinds of innocence (such as virginity) were holier and more like God. They required a degree of cleanliness and purity before a person could participate in ceremonies, festivals, and sacrifices. They formalized their system with ways to clean the self so as to be pure and holy such as through ritual baths and through well-defined offerings like a dove or some grain. Their formalization actually set most people at ease. The Law defined who and what was clean, pure, holy, and like God, or who and what was the opposite. The Law told people what to seek and what to avoid. The Law told people what to do to restore purity in case they had erred or in case they had to deal with an impure situation such as a death in the family.

The formalization did open the door for some people to be compulsive about rules and for some people to abuse the system by making other people worry about purity, holiness, and errors; but those abuses were not typical of the Jewish Law as a whole and probably did not affect most normal people.

Peasant Society and Uprisings.

A “peasant” is a farmer who lived in a society before industrialization and capitalism. Those societies were run by military-religious elites that lived in cities. If you have never read about these societies, you can get a biased but fun picture of them from “sword and sorcery” movies such as “Scorpion King” and “Conan the Barbarian”.

The peasants usually had to pay about 30 percent to 60 percent of their income in taxes (not far off what modern people pay), and so they usually resented the military, the aristocracy, and the priests. At the same time, the peasants looked up to the elites, and the elites felt a sense of obligation to the peasants (“noblesse oblige”). The elites had the duty to make sure nobody attacked the kingdom, everybody paid his-her fair share, the weather was not too severe, and God liked the nation. The elites knew all about the stars, moon, and cycles, and knew how to perform the correct ceremonies. You can get a sense of the relation both for good and ill through the classic Errol Flynn movie “Robin Hood”, and the excellent remakes with Kevin Costner and Russell Crowe.

For reasons too much to go into here, peasants never felt as if they had enough land for all their family members, and always felt as if the lords took too much in taxes. Peasants felt there would be enough land if only the lords would go away. They told stories about a person rising from the land who would fight the lords so as to do away with the lords and to make justice prevail. When the native hero won, everybody would have enough land all the time and everybody would have a big successful family, as in the end of “Lord of the Rings” in the Shire. The native conqueror was often an emissary from God. I just mentioned Robin Hood. The “Dune” books give a good sense of this myth, as do the various movies about Aladdin.

Because peasant societies always included poor people without any land at all, they also included bandits. The bandits sometimes borrowed from the myths of a native hero to justify themselves. Sometimes the bandits even got popular support. The bandits would play off one region against another by robbing from all regions except their home base. At home, they were generous, so their “home boys” protected them. You can get a sense of relations between bandits and peasants from the classic movie “Seven Samurai” or its remake “Magnificent Seven”. The lordly elite never had much sympathy for bandits except when it could use them against the peasants or against other enemies. Bandits deprived the lords of their taxes and gave the peasants false hope that might cause trouble. Usually the elites hunted down the bandits. In truth, the bandits were usually horrible people.

Peasants were not the poorest people in agrarian societies. Some people had no land at all and had to work as tenant farmers or day laborers. Some people managed to learn a craft, such as carpenter, boat builder, metal worker, or leather worker. Some skilled labor could be fairly well off depending on the craft and times, but skilled laborers were always below the secure landholding peasants in status and wealth. Merchants sometimes came out of the class of skilled labor and sometimes contributed their extra

children back to that class. Merchants could be small-scale or large. Jesus probably came from the class of skilled labor.

Peasants were in chronic debt, and often lost their land or children through debt. Debt slavery is far from over, even in the modern world. Children still get sold from Mexico to the United States to pay for debt, or get sold into prostitution in Asia. Credit card debt in the United States is the modern version of debt slavery.

In America, we are used to saying that everybody is middle class whether they earn \$10,000 per year or \$300,000 per year. In an agrarian society, people were not all the same class and they knew it. Perhaps no more than 10% of the population was in the military-aristocratic-religious elite, often less than 1%. About 50% of people might have their own land, just enough land to raise a family. The other 45% of the population was divided between merchants, landless tenants, landless laborers, and craftspeople. When times were tough, the people that owned their own land might fall to 20% while the percentages of tenant farmers and landless laborers increased. This is the situation that prevailed when Jesus was born.

Magic and Religion.

The line between religion and magic is not always easy to draw but we can get a reasonable feel for it by being simple.

Religion is usually a public activity aimed at the public welfare. Whole societies practice a religion while individual people or small groups practice magic. Religion tends to stress relationship while magic tends to stress technique. Priests read from the Bible as part of a conversation with God while magicians use scripture verses, or other verses, for their intrinsic power to compel. Religion goes along with morality. Religion reinforces good behavior and punishes bad behavior. Magic is amoral and sometimes immoral. Religion is aimed at the public welfare. Magic is aimed at personal welfare regardless of the public welfare, even if getting your way hurts other people, even if getting your way hurts other people more than it helps you. Sometimes magic is all about hurting others even if you do not directly benefit. In religion, some things are proper for public welfare such as rain while others are not such as epidemics. In magic, you can get whatever you want regardless of the public welfare. You can get it any way you want if you follow the proper technique.

In religion, usually we cannot compel God. We ask. We can purify ourselves and make ourselves more holy so that God is more likely to help. We can perform the correct ceremonies so that God can be assured of our knowledge and intentions. But still God has to make up his-her mind. In magic, we can almost compel the spirits. If we use the right potions, say the right words, conduct the right ceremonies, give the right gifts, use the right procedures such as a correctly constructed "voodoo" doll, or believe the right things, then the spirits have to go along with what we ask, even if what we ask is bad.

People dislike magic because they fear being compelled and because magic can get in the way of the moral messages of religion.

Much of Christianity crosses the border from religion to magic even though it might not intend to. Christianity evolved among small groups of people in the context of other people not like them, so it tended to focus on techniques (baptism and other sacraments) and it tended to limit rewards to the in-group of believers. It tended to emphasize what particular people can get out of a relation with God, and to see that relation in terms of “if I do this then God will do that”. Even when Christianity later applied to whole groups and societies, it tended to emphasize mechanics. For instance: If you believe the right things, then God will save you and reward you. If you worship Jesus, then you will go to heaven. If you have a personal relation with Jesus, then Jesus will guide you, protect you, and reward you. If you believe enough in Jesus, he will protect you and your family from disease, bad events, and bad people. If you believe enough in Jesus, he will make you rich. The mere facts that Jesus was born a human, crucified, and resurrected automatically saves all the people that believe even though no theologian has ever explained how that can happen. If enough people in a society believe in Jesus, then that society automatically will become moral and prosperous, and will vanquish its enemies. If not enough people in a society believe in Jesus, then that society might prosper for a while but eventually it will decay morally, become poor, and lose to its enemies. Even the ideas about society are not about good for people but are about using techniques, including mind control, to achieve ends. I believe the magic in Christianity obscures Jesus’ teaching.

Demigods, Heroes, and Villains.

The following traits are more typical of agrarian state societies than of hunter-gatherers but all the major religions of the world developed out of agrarian societies so we need to take these traits into account: power differences between gods, some gods much more powerful than others, high gods and low gods, wars between gods, parties and factions among the gods, demons, half-human half-gods, great heroes, gods that sacrifice themselves for us, gods that listen to prayers and have mercy on us, and terrible villains.

Hebrew-Jewish religion began with two scenarios of multiple gods: Yahweh the most powerful storm god among other nature-and-military gods; and El, head of a council of gods much like their neighbors. Hebrew-Jewish religion gradually reduced the pluralities to one-and-one-only god.

The most important characters in typical agrarian religion for Christianity are the half-humans half-gods. Jewish religion did not have as many hybrids as their neighbors because of the Jewish stress on monotheism. Jewish religion probably borrowed some hybrids from their neighbors but transformed them into angels. Sometimes the hybrids resulted from the mating of angels and humans. In the book of Genesis in the Tanakh, some angels, the “watchers”, see human women as so desirable that they mate with the women. From the matings come giants and unusual humans.

In non-Jewish religions, heroes often started out as merely human with some outstanding attributes, gained more attributes and better attributes, gained super-human attributes, and then changed into hybrid half-gods. Sometimes they took the last step to become minor deities. Jewish religion took the first steps (heroes) but was careful not to stray into deification of the hero. Often the hero gained a pedigree as the offspring of a god, unacknowledged by the parent god at first, but later accepted as his-her exploits grew – see the “Percy and the Olympians” movie. In Greek myth, Herakles (Hercules), Achilles, Helen of Troy,

and the Twins Castor and Polydeuces all had one divine parent. Herakles and the Twins ended up in the heavens as deities themselves.

Heroes, especially divine heroes, need appropriate enemies. Heroes meet and vanquish other beings that might be semi-divine. Herakles was the son of the highest sky god, Zeus. The earth goddess was Gaea, from where comes "giant". Herakles had to pass one of her giant sons, tremendously strong. Herakles killed the giant, thereby finalizing the victory of male sky gods over female earth goddesses. The enemies often symbolized problems in life and thought. The enemies did not often symbolize evil as such except in areas that received strong influence from dualistic religions such as from Persia (Iran).

Moses, Samson, David, and Solomon all began as normal humans but gained attributes that other cultures would recognize as more-than-human. Samson's long hair was a thin disguise for the super-human strength of a hero. Even today Jews revere those heroes much as other cultures revere their demigods or minor gods. The mere names of Moses and David bring awe.

Jesus began as a normal human being, developed the ability to perform miracles and fight demons, was acknowledged as the offspring of God, conquered death (evil) by being resurrected, and ended up in heaven as fully God and as Judge. Jesus follows a progression typical of non-Jewish neighbors of the Jews but his progression went farther down the road than Jews could follow.

Heroes, especially semi-divine heroes, and maybe powerful evil villains, meet a need for people but it is hard to assess the needs and to assess how they are filled. Hunter-gatherers have the ability to make up many kinds of characters, including semi-divine heroes and powerful villains, but they do not seem to need the semi-divine heroes and evil villains as much as do people in agrarian societies, so we should be careful not to say that the need for semi-divine heroes and evil villains is a deep human need that has to be filled by religions. That explanation is too easy. On the other hand, the ability to make up such heroes and villains really is a part of human make-up. We do not yet understand the ability very well. Even if hunter-gatherers did not need semi-divine heroes and powerful villains, agrarian people apparently did. It is easy to speculate why peasants and other people in agrarian societies might have responded to semi-divine heroes and powerful villains much as modern people respond to Batman and the Joker, but it is not useful here to speculate. We need to understand how the ability to make up characters generates semi-divine heroes and powerful villains in agrarian societies but social scientists are not there yet.

American Popular Religion and Local common religion.

Popular religion among peasants and modern people is usually about getting a reward, first here on earth and then later in heaven too. In that sense, it relies heavily on magic such as giving to a TV evangelist now so as to become rich later. The TV evangelist acts as an intermediary between God and the donor. Popular religion tends to be similar across major religions of the world. Popular religion is really not so different in Iran, India, America, Europe, or even China.

In local common Christianity (popular variation on the official religion), most Christians believe they will go to heaven when they die, be with Jesus, and live as a spirit forever. According to official doctrine, they are wrong. Instead of being in heaven with Jesus forever, they will be resurrected. Official doctrine is not

clear about what happens after that. Most people believe that Jesus the Son is somehow subordinate to the Father, and that the Holy Spirit does not matter much – most people are de facto Arian heretics. Many people believe that God adopted Jesus as his son and turned him into God when John baptized Jesus - another heresy. People are usually surprised to learn that they do not believe in all points of official church doctrine, and that they believe in many ideas that their church holds to be false. The differences are not so great that I make a point about them here. That is a matter for priests, pastors, and theologians. The points here are just that popular religion and local common religion differ from official religion and that popular and local common religion often have more in common with each other than with official religion, often even across national boundaries and the boundaries of major faiths.

Both popular religion and local common religion tend to be about the self, and not to be interested in social action except in times of general social unrest, so both tend to be de facto social conservative. They are de facto social conservative because they rely on magic and not despite magic. Magic diverts people's minds from real issues and lets them think they can solve their problems on an individual basis. Established churches and states reach an accord with each other, and with popular religion and local common religion, so they all mutually support one another, so the public is tractable, and so that nobody asks too many questions.

Popular religion and local common religion are more important in daily lives than orthodox religion or than liberal alternatives.

Any large complex society always has more than one local common religion, usually as many versions as there are important subgroups within the society, and it often has varieties that correspond to different personality types. Quiet people have their version of Christianity while boisterous people have theirs. I like some versions of local common religion because they stress quietly following Jesus while I dislike others because they stress believing in God so as to get rich or to go to heaven. There are too many versions to describe here. In the example below, I ignore differences in local common religion. I return to them in later parts of the book.

Here are some points of popular and local common Christianity. These ideas are typical of the religion of many groups in modern societies. By changing "Jesus" to "El", "Allah", "Dharma", "karma", "Tao", "Force", or the "spirit of the universe", the ideas could apply to societies other than Christian America but I keep the word "Jesus" because I want to emphasize how parochial the ideas can be. I do not mean to mock. I do mean to show how natural, popular, and local common religion mix, and how magic plays a role. I intend to make clear that popular religion and local common religion can cause damage.

-God is important, but he is too austere for us to get near.

-Instead, we can approach Jesus.

-Jesus is sort of like God only not quite as much God as God is.

-Jesus loves us.

-Jesus will take care of us. Jesus will cure our illnesses, make sure we are fed, find houses for us, and find jobs for us. Jesus will make sure that our car does not need too much repair, and that our business succeeds.

-Just by being born, dying, and being resurrected, Jesus saved us from hell to go to heaven with him.

-All we need to be sure that Jesus takes care of us is devotion to Jesus. Jesus does want us to do some things, but it is not always clear specifically what we need to do. So what is most important is that we are devoted to him.

-We can show our devotion in specific ways as our religious leaders tell us. If they do not tell us to do anything specifically, then we only have to remain devoted.

-If we believe in Jesus, when we die, we go to heaven to be with Jesus forever.

-Whoever does not believe in Jesus will go to hell forever.

-Jesus will punish bad people.

-Jesus keeps track of the good and bad deeds of people, like in a book. Where people go after death depends on the ledger, and on Jesus' mercy or his wrath.

-We should try to do as many good deeds as we can.

-We can do good deeds and then give the reward to somebody else such as to our sick mother.

-We can make bargains. We can promise to give to the Church so that Jesus will heal our sick child.

-We can even help the dead with our promises and good deeds.

-If we cannot relate even to Jesus, we always have Mary and the saints. Mary is God's wife, and so she is like the mother of everybody. She surely understands.

-Jesus sometimes intervenes in this world to insure that justice prevails, the innocent go free, and the bad are punished.

-When our people (us) argue with another people (them), our people are always right. Since Jesus defends right, Jesus is on our side. In a war, Jesus is on our side. In an internal conflict such as between Conservatives and Liberals, Jesus is on our side.

-From time to time, bad nations or bad movements arise, such as communism, Islam, hippies, or terrorists. They are "them". Jesus allows those movements to flourish for a time, probably to teach good people what not to do. Then he punishes the bad people, and he makes sure the good people defeat the bad.

-Jesus makes sure that history will go the right way in the long run.

-In the past, God made some people rich and powerful such as Abraham. As his followers now, Jesus wants us to be happy like the lucky people of the past. So he is likely to make us rich and comfortable. We have to know how to ask him and how to cooperate with him when he tells us what to do.

-Because we are devoted to Jesus, and because people similar to us are devoted to Jesus, Jesus must like all the people like us. Jesus likes people of our ethnic group, religious sect, national group, gender, or political party. If we are poor and White, Jesus likes poor White people. If we are middle class and Black, Jesus likes middle class Black people. If we are Italian and Roman Catholic, Jesus likes Italian Roman Catholics. If we are Episcopalian and rich, Jesus likes rich Episcopalians. If we are working class, Jesus likes good hardworking people. If we are trendy avant-garde artists, then the spirit of the universe likes us.

-Jesus does not like the people that we do not like or that we fear. If we fear the working class, Jesus does not like them. If we fear the poor, Jesus does not like the poor. If we hate the rich, Jesus despises the rich.

-Whatever kind of family or social grouping we have, that is the natural way to live, and the way that Jesus wants people to live. If most of our people live in small nuclear families with no aged parents or out-of-work adult siblings, then that is the natural way to live, and Jesus wants us to live that way. People that live in other ways, even if they have to live in other ways to get by, live perverted unnatural lives and Jesus does not like them.

-Jesus rewards individuals and social groups with prosperity. Jesus rewards them because they are faithful to Jesus and Jesus likes them. People that are well off deserve to be well off.

-If our group is not well off, it only seems that way. Really we are well off because we are spiritually well off. Other people can appear to be materially well off but really are spiritually poor. Because we are so faithful, eventually we will be materially well off and the other people that do not love Jesus will sink into poverty.

-Just as Jesus rewards good people, Jesus punishes people that are not faithful enough or that are immoral.

-Therefore people that are poor have only themselves to blame. Jesus punishes them for lack of faith or for some immorality, such as living in the wrong kinds of families.

-Jesus is really busy, so sometimes he uses angels to watch over us. He also sends people to help us such as preachers.

-Jesus tests us.

-One test is giving. If we give enough to the right people, we get back much more than we gave. Jesus will make us rich and comfortable.

-There are some magical beings and magical agents in the world. The Old Testament had some magical things in it, such as the magical staff of Moses or the magical serpent of Moses. Some people now might be able to understand the magic of God and use it for us. This world might still have magical manna, or pieces of the true cross, or the bones of saints, or the shroud of Jesus. Some of the TV people might have been sent by Jesus to help us this way.

-There is a devil. The devil causes almost all the problems in the world. The devil is like a rich person or like a leader that rouses the poor. We can fight the devil when we see him, if we have enough power.

-Jesus sends people and angels to help us fight the devil. In "The Lord of the Rings", God sent Gandalf (an angel) and Frodo (a person) to help all the people of the world defeat Sauron.

-The people and groups that we dislike serve the devil. Sometimes they know it and sometimes they do not.

-In the end, Jesus will defeat the devil and will make this world into the paradise it should have been from the beginning.

Routinization.

The term comes from the great sociologist Max Weber, who flourished in the early 1900s.

Routinization is how the ideas and practices of a religious founder get turned into common religion and popular religion. The description here hits only the highlights.

In its early history, to attract adherents, a new religion has to be special and distinct in some ways. The pioneers of the religion might not call the religion a "religion" or think of it in the same terms as the old religion; they might call it a "way". The new religion has to appeal to at least some particular group in society if not to society as a whole. Sometimes what makes the new religion distinct and appealing also makes it hard for the society as a whole to accept, and can make life difficult for the group of pioneer adherents. Still, the benefits outweigh the costs for the pioneer adherents. Often the group of pioneer adherents leads a distinct lifestyle, and the religion validates that lifestyle. The pioneer adherents do not have to be bizarre, they only have to be distinct, such as cooperators in a society of self-sufficient people (Jesus), merchants in a society of camel herders (Mohammad), or aristocratic soldiers in a society of priests (the Buddha).

Then transformations happen. First, people join that do not want to face all the hardships and who follow a greater diversity of lifestyles. Usually the new people are not as radical as the pioneer founders. Newer believers find that they cannot live up to the original ideals. People that have been in the religion for a while want real rewards, not just promises. The believers in general begin to lead a lifestyle somewhat different than the founding pioneers and more like the lifestyle of people in general. Religious ideals and concepts change to validate the lifestyle of the new people. People substitute worshiping the founder(s) as divine beings or divine agents for following the message strictly. The religion begins to become "devotional", what the Hindus call "bhakti".

Second, the process snowballs. When people in society at large see they can gain the benefits of the religion without changing their old lifestyle too much, the religion gets even more adherents. It validates the lifestyle of a bigger group of adherents, so it validates the lifestyle of people in general. It finds a way to validate the lifestyle of the families that are normal for that society, culture, and technology such as the nuclear families of urban craftspeople. Whatever the new religion started out as, it becomes a religion of the family, the hearth, and social decency. The founders can become what the Romans called the gods of the hearth. Devotion increases to take the place of acts or understandings. People have a personal relation with the founders as gods. Usually the religion finds a way to validate power and wealth both within the church and within the society at large. It becomes the religion that validates the ruling class, the military, and the prevailing style of the state.

The religion does not jettison all the original beliefs and practices. But it begins to see the original beliefs and practices as something for people that are “really strict” or for specialists that are capable in ways that normal people are not. The old ideas and practices can even contradict the new comfortable religion in many ways as long as the believers in general do not think they have to conform to the old practices and as long as people do not make a point of the conflicts.

The founders become figures out of mythology rather than real people. They become gods, angels, or avatars. Comets, stars, and angels attend their birth. Demons try to kill them in their cradle. Even if they remain fully human, such as the Buddha or Mohammad, they gain superhuman abilities. The longer the process, the more powerful they become. They walk and talk at birth, defeat demons and dragons, heal with a touch, see what we cannot see, and know the future. In politics, Barry Obama becomes Saint Barack and Ronnie-the-actor Reagan becomes Saint Communicator.

It seems the more that followers let go the ideals and teachings of the founders, the more followers deify the founders and mystify the religion. The less that Taoists seek the middle way of Taoism the more likely they are to see Lao Tze as an immortal riding the winds and the more likely to seek the elixir of immortality. The less Muslims seek unity and peace the more likely they are to see Mohammad defeating the Devil and to anticipate the bliss of heaven.

Jesus and Christianity went through all this too, at least as much as other founders and religions. It began even before Jesus died. What we inherited as Christianity is the end result of routinization rather than the original teachings, personality, and situation of Jesus. Some of the features of the process are described in later parts of the book.

The wonder is not so much that any religion goes through routinization but that so much of the message of the founders is preserved despite the process. The core teachings of Jesus, Mohammad, Chuang Tze, the Buddha, Zen (Ch’an) masters, or the Upanishads have reached through the trappings of magic, local common religion, and routinization to improve the lives of their later followers.

Chapter 2.03 Some Terms and Ideas

This chapter presents some terms and ideas. You can skim through it to read about what you want to know more about. I introduce other terms and ideas elsewhere as needed.

BC, BCE, AD, etc.

Modern politically correct people want a time reckoning system that is acceptable to all faiths, and which does not emphasize the role of Jesus while setting the zero point. This desire is reasonable. So the historical reference term “BC” became “BCE” while “AD” became “CE”. “BC” means “Before Christ”. “BCE” stands for “Before the Common Era”. “AD” stands for “Anno Domini” or “in the year of our Lord”. “CE” stands for “Common Era”. The zero point is still the traditional year of Jesus’ birth, which is probably about 3 or 4 years after his real birth. Thai Buddhists have a system for calendar time with the zero point set at Buddha’s death. Because Buddha lived before Jesus, you have to add 542 or 543 years to the BCE-CE year to get the Buddhist year (it depends on the year, and details do not matter). I use BCE and CE, and sometimes I put “AD” in parentheses after “CE”.

Hebrew, Israelite, Jew.

The term “Hebrew” covers a larger scope than the term “Jew”. A “Hebrew” was an ancestor of the Jews. The Hebrews were real but details about them are mostly mythical. You can tell fact from myth in what follows. In a myth accepted by Jews and Muslims, all Hebrews and Semites are descendants of Abraham. In real life, Hebrews both came from Egypt and might have been traders and herders in what is now the Sinai, Palestine, and Arabia. In Egypt, Hebrews might have been a distinct ethnic and vocational group, rather like “Gypsies” in the United States or the modern Jews in many places. The Hebrews overran Palestine beginning around 1500 BCE, eventually forming a Kingdom that was later called Israel. Israel was the “Promised Land” of the Tanakh (Old Testament). Traditionally, Jacob was the grandson of Abraham through Isaac. Jacob added the name “Israel” to his name after an encounter with God or with an angel. Jacob had twelve sons. The Hebrews traditionally had twelve tribes, which are like Scottish clans, each traditionally derived from one of Jacob’s twelve sons. The twelve tribes are called collectively “Israel” and the nation of the Hebrews came to be called “Israel”. Sometimes the people of Israel are also called “Jacob”. King David flourished around 1000 BCE. For reasons to be explained in later chapters, after David, eventually the tribe of Judah dominated all Israel and the other tribes pretty much died out. Then all Hebrews and Israelites came to be called “Jews” after “Judah”. Israelites were not called “Jews” in the time of King David unless they were from the tribe of Judah or living in the area controlled by the tribe of Judah. By the time of Jesus, most Israelites were called “Jews”. Now, the term “Israelite” usually refers to a resident of Israel in the past. The term “Israeli” refers to a resident of modern Israel. I use “Hebrew” for an ancestor of Israelites and modern Jews, and use “Jew” for most people in Israel about the time of Jesus and for modern Jews. For many people now, the terms “Jew” and “Hebrew” mean the same. Hebrew was the language of ancient Hebrews, the Kingdom of Israel, and it is the language of modern Israel. Modern Jews sometimes can speak Hebrew but often speak primarily the language of the nation in which they were born, such as English if they are from

America; or they speak a language related to both German and Hebrew, called “Yiddish”. Many Israelis now speak predominantly Hebrew from having grown up where it is spoken.

Semite.

The term “Semite” covers a larger scope than the term “Hebrew” or “Jew”. In myth, a Semite could be any descendant of Abraham but was especially a descendant through Shem, a kinsman of Jacob, and through Jacob. In modern understanding, a Semite is a Hebrew (including Jews), an Arab, or a member of related ethnic groups from the Middle East and North Africa that speak similar languages and likely share common ancestry. Egyptians, Jews, Moors, Phoenicians (Lebanese), Saudis, and Syrians are all Semites. “Arabs” are a branch of Semites. Sometimes Americans use the term “Arab” to mean all Semites except Jews, sometimes they use it to mean all Semites including Jews. For Americans, “Arab” is a term of contrast with Jews, as when we talk of “Arabs and Jews, fussing and feuding”. The term “Arab” used this way often indicates prejudice. Not all Semites are Muslims; Lebanese are Semites yet many Lebanese are Christians, as were many Syrians and Iraqis. Not all Muslims are Semites; the Iranians, Afghans, Kurds, and Pakistanis are Indo-Europeans and so are related to Europeans such as the Russians and English.

Any ethnic or religious group can be prejudiced against any other group, but, because of the prevalence of prejudice against Jews and other Semites, and because many Semites are Muslims against whom many non-Muslims feel prejudice, it is useful to list out some patterns. The term “anti-Semitism” usually does not mean “prejudice against all Semites” but means “prejudice against (only) Jews”. There are no simple terms for “prejudice against the larger group of Semites including Jews”, for “prejudice against all Semites except Jews”, or for “prejudice against particular groups of Semites other than Jews such as Syrians”. In addition to prejudice against Jews, anti-Semites usually also dislike the greater group of Semites and dislike most Muslims too, as when some Americans dislike all “Arabs and Jews”. People other than White Christians can be anti-Semitic (anti-Jewish) and can be prejudiced against the greater group of Semites too. Black Christians are sometimes against Jews and other Semites. It is useful to know that Iranians, Pakistanis, Afghans, Malaysians, and Indonesians are Muslim but are not Semites. I have seen prejudice against Semites, including Jews and Muslims, in many places, as among Asians and Africans. I have seen non-Semitic Muslims dislike Jews, Semitic Muslims, and Muslims who are not Semites. I have seen Malaysians and Indonesians who are prejudiced against Jews and Arabs; I have seen Iranians who dislike Iraqis and Syrians. I have seen Semitic Muslims prejudiced against non-Semitic Muslims as when Muslims of Semitic Middle Eastern ancestry (such as Egyptians and Saudis) show prejudice against Malaysian, Indonesian, or American Muslims or against Iranians. Jews can show prejudice against other Semites. Semites other than Jews can be prejudiced against Jews or against Semites other than their own particular group. Egyptians are sometimes prejudiced against other North Africans. Semites, including Jews, can be prejudiced against non-Semites as when Semites are prejudiced against Europeans, Christians, or Buddhists. That is a lot to keep track of and a lot to get over. Nobody is immune from stupid ideology.

Torah, Tanakh, and “Old Testament”.

The basic meaning of the Hebrew term “Torah” is “teaching” or “instruction”. It now has many references. Its primary reference is probably the first five books of what Christians call the “Old Testament”, the books

that were supposed to have been written by Moses, called the “Pentateuch”, or “five books”. It also refers to the entirety of what Christians call the “Old Testament”. It also refers to the entire body of Jewish religious instruction including the Old Testament and commentary. When used with “the”, as in “the Torah”, it can also refer to a scroll on which the Torah (usually the first five books) is written, as when somebody says, “handle the Torah with loving care”. It can also mean “the Law”, as in the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament or the Mosaic Law and its elaborations with commentary. To avoid confusion, I try to use the term “Torah” only to mean the first five books. I use more elaborate phrases for its other meanings.

The Hebrew term for what Christians call the “Old Testament” is “Tanakh” or “Tanak”. The term is adapted from the first letter of “Torah” along with the first letters of two other Hebrew words that mean “Prophets” (“Navim”) and “Writings” (“K(h)etushim”). “Writings” includes such books as Psalms and the Song of Songs. In the same way, the word “Nabisco” comes from “National Biscuit Company” and the word “UNESCO” is pronounced “Yu-nesco”. The order of books in the Tanakh differs from the Christian Old Testament. For clarity and out of respect for the source, I use “Tanakh” to mean “Old Testament” and use “Old Testament” only when a specifically Christian meaning is needed. The term “the Bible” usually means all of the “Tanakh” except when I also include the New Testament. Jews are not entirely comfortable with the term “New Testament” because it implies that the Tanakh was made obsolete by writings about Jesus; but Jewish scholars now use that term, and there is no term better and widely known, so I use it too.

Orthodox and Catholic.

The term “orthodox” originally meant “straight belief”, or “correct belief”. “Ortho” means “straight and correct” as “orthodontics” means “straight teeth”. “Dox” means “idea” or “understanding” or “teaching”. “Dogma” has come to mean “rigid inflexible ideas that are to be imposed on people” but originally it meant only “orderly and therefore likely correct content of thinking and belief”. The “dog” in “dogma” is from the same root as the “dox” in “orthodox”. “Catholic” means “complete” or “whole” and is not limited to the Roman Catholic Church. “Apostolic” means “in the unbroken line from the original apostles”. See below. Originally the Roman Catholic Church was also orthodox and the Eastern Orthodox Church was also catholic. The mainline church as it developed after about 200 CE (AD) was called “orthodox, catholic, and apostolic”. It only split later. After the split, the term “orthodox” came to have two meanings. “Orthodox” refers to the Eastern Orthodox churches after the split between the Roman Catholic and the Eastern churches around 1500, such as the Greek Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church. The term “orthodox” also still refers to correct teaching. For example, any Christian who believes in the Trinity is “orthodox” whether he-she is Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant. Incorrect teaching still is “unorthodox” or “heretical”. The Orthodox Church still considers itself catholic (whole) but not Catholic (Roman Catholic). I do not know if Protestants consider themselves catholic. Of course, they do not consider themselves Roman Catholic. They consider themselves orthodox but not Orthodox. What most Americans call simply the “Catholic Church” I call by the more complete term of “Roman Catholic Church”.

Trinity.

“The Trinity” refers to God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit (Holy Ghost). God is the Father while Jesus is the Son. The Holy Spirit is not the brother of Jesus or another son of the Father or another God exactly like

the father. In orthodox dogma, the three members of the Trinity are exactly equal and of the same “stuff” (“ousia” or “substance”). None is any better or more powerful than the others. They are the same, and not the same. Each has his own distinct “personality” (they are usually male). It is not clear whether they are manifestations of the same underlying thing (sometimes called “godhead”) but in orthodox dogma I think this idea is resisted. In theory, Jesus is not subordinate to God the Father even though in some passages of the Bible he talks and acts as if he was. In theory, the Holy Spirit is not subordinate to either God the Father or Jesus but, in the Tanakh, God uses the Holy Spirit like an instrument. The Orthodox Church has been careful to preserve the full equality of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity but the Roman Catholic Church adopted language in its version of the Nicene Creed that makes it seem as if the Holy Spirit is subordinate to God and Jesus – the “filioque” clause. The identity and activities of the Holy Spirit have never been well developed in Christian thought. Mary and Satan are not members of the Trinity, and they are not co-equal with members of the Trinity.

Satan.

“Satan” originally meant “the adversary” as in a court case. From being a persistent adversary as in the Book of Job, Satan developed into a persistent agent of evil, and then to the originator of rebellion and evil. He had already taken this identity before the time of Jesus. The name “Lucifer” means “bringer of light” in Latin. Satan did not have that name, or the identity as an archangel, until the middle ages. Satan is not the equal of Jesus or equally as powerful as Jesus. Jesus is above Satan because Jesus is God. If there is a counterpart to Satan among the group of “good guys”, it is probably Michael the archangel. In Tolkien’s “Silmarillion”, when God puts down Satan (Morgoth), God sends Michael, not Jesus.

Ideas about Satan are probably related to ideas about an Egyptian god called “Seth”. Seth was part of a holy family of gods, usually the highest holy family of gods, including Isis, Osiris, and Horus. He was the “bad boy” of the family, causing problems through jealousy and intrigue. He killed his father and/or brother, and was replaced by his father and/or brother, largely through the good-hearted diligent intervention of his mother Isis. The details are not important. In another book, the connections between Egyptian religion, Hebrew religion, and Christianity would be worth bringing out but I cannot do that here, and so I leave Seth pretty much alone.

Messiah and Christ.

“Messiah” is the Greek transliteration (“sounding out”) of a Hebrew word that is spoken something like “meschiach” (or “massiach”), and means “anointed person”. It originally referred to the act of pouring oil on the head of a person to signify that God chose that person for a special role. Eventually “messiah” came to mean anybody chosen by God for a special role whether oil poured had been poured on his-her head or not, although it was good if he-she did have oil poured on his-her head. All messiahs that I know of were men. The term originally applied to many characters in Hebrew history, including prophets, kings, judges, and even one Persian king. It was used as part of a title, or as a title in itself. Eventually it came to refer mostly to the King of Israel, especially David or a king in the line of David. After the fall of Israel from about 700 BCE (BC) onwards, at the hands in turn of the Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans, “the Messiah” came to mean the expected heir of the Davidic kings who would reunite Israel into a single free nation with its own territory. I return to this idea later in the book when I talk about Jesus as messiah.

“Christ” comes from “christos” which is a Greek translation of “anointed person”. It was originally part of a title, “Iesou Christos”, which in English should be translated as “Jesus the Christ”, not as “Jesus Christ”. “Christ” is a title. The word “Christ” is not a name to be used apart from referring to an anointed person. “Jesus Christ” is not a name; it is not the same name as for example “Davy Jones”. Strictly speaking, the term “Jesus Christ” does not make sense unless it implies “Jesus the Christ”. When some Christians say “Jesus Christ” they do have in mind “Jesus the Christ”, where “the Christ” refers to the Davidic savior and the Christ of theology. But I think most Christians now do not understand this reference and instead wrongly treat “Christ” as if it were Jesus’ last name or the name of an important god, like “Apollo”. Even within a few years after Jesus’ death, people already used “Christ” as a last name, maybe because it is similar to a common Greek name, “Chrestos”, which means roughly “good and faithful”. Residents of the Empire used “Chrestos” to name a god in some of their mystery religions. “Chrestos” can also be a slave name indicating the master’s hopes for the character of the slave. Some residents of the Empire, including some Christians, might have thought of Jesus as “Jesus Chrestos” and thus as “Jesus Christ” with “Christ” as a name. I do not know if the present use of “Jesus Christ” as a name comes from this use of “Jesus Chrestos” and “Jesus Christ” in the Empire.

It is not proper to refer to Jesus as simply “Christ”. Where I grew up, we could refer to a person by his-her last name only, so we could refer to “Davy Jones” as “Jones”. So, to me, just saying “Christ” seems like shorthand for “Jesus Christ” as a first name and last name. Some Americans wrongly use simply the one word “Christ” as a kind of shorthand for the longer phrase “Jesus the Christ”. The term “Christ” can be shorthand for a theological idea: “the key Christ among many lesser Christs, the one and only universal savior Christ who was incarnated as Jesus”. Some theologians use “Christ” that way. I don’t think most people who refer to Jesus as simply “Christ” have that high theological use in mind. Most people who refer to Jesus as “Christ” seem to use the term as a reference to an important god.

Just as there has been more than one President in American history, there was more than one Christ in Hebrew history. I do not know if Jews refer to the expected Davidic Savior as “the Christ” (I think not) but Christians soon after Jesus thought of Jesus as the one-and-only expected Davidic Savior and referred to him as “the Christ” to show that. From calling Jesus “the Christ”, Christians came to call him simply “Christ”, again as if it were a last name.

When we use “Christ” we should indicate the particular anointed person to whom we refer as in “David the Christ” or “Saul the Christ”. Ideally, we should not use “Christ” without “the”, as in wrongly saying “David Christ”. To use “Christ” to refer to Jesus and only to Jesus is like using “President” to refer to Ronald Reagan and only to him. To call Jesus “Jesus Christ” is like saying “Ronald President” so that “Ronald President” means “Ronald the President”, “President” becomes his last name, and no other President can be referred to as “President”. To use the term “Christ” to mean “Jesus” is like using the term “President” to mean Ronald Reagan and only Ronald Reagan, and to insist that the term “President” can never be used to refer to any other President or any other person. To say “President loves you” (“Christ loves you”) would mean “President Ronald Reagan loves you and you do not have to think about anybody else loving you”.

I do not believe Jesus sought out the title “Christ” or would have accepted it as American Christians use it now. I believe modern Christians mislead in using “Christ” to refer to “the Christ”, the anticipated Davidic

savior, and to refer to Jesus. I think modern Christians are sloppy at best in calling Jesus “Jesus Christ”. To avoid problems with the term “Christ”, I try to avoid the term altogether and I tend to say just “Jesus”. When I need to include “Christ” I tend to say “Jesus the Christ” instead of just “Christ” or “Jesus Christ”; and I mean “one among many anointed persons” rather than “the Christ who was also the anticipated Savior”. If Jesus was the Christ in that sense, then I am sure he will forgive me for not stressing that role, for trying to respect Jewish custom, and for trying to keep titles and ideas clear. If you mean “Jesus”, then just say “Jesus” and do not get caught up in the titles and their implications.

Aramaic and the name “Jesus”.

Jesus’ native language was Aramaic, which is related both to Hebrew and to the Semitic language spoken around the area of southwestern Syria. Aramaic was the common business and political language in the Middle East during the time of Jesus. It was well known even in Israel (Judea). Thus Jesus’ native language was not the same as the language in the Tanakh (Old Testament).

Jesus’ real name was spoken something like “Yeshu” or “Yeshua”, probably with a stress on the “shu”. I think some modern Jews still use it as a given name and still say it “Yeshua”. “Yeshua” is the same as “Joshua”. The original full name was “Yehoshua” in the Tanakh. The “Ye” part of “Yehosua” or “Yeshua” is of the same root as “Yahweh” or “Jehovah”. The change from “Yehoshua” to “Yeshua” occurred with the original Joshua in the Tanakh, and was continued on afterwards. Already by the time of Jesus, “Yeshua” had been further shortened to become “Yeshu” from which comes “Jesou” or “Iesou”. If a similar change had occurred in English, “Jehoshua” would have become “Joshua”, then “Joshu”, and then “Josh”. I do not know if Jesus was called “Yeshu” or “Yeshua”. In Greek, Jesus’ name was originally rendered as “Iesou” or “(y)ee-ay-sou” without the final “a” of Hebrew “Yeshua” or the final “s” of English “Jesus”. That would make sense if Jesus was called “Yeshu”. The modern name “Jesus” comes from the English sounding out of the Greek version “Iesou” with an “s” added. I do not know when the “s” was added or why. If the “a” was originally present (“Yeshua”) and then dropped (“Yeshu”), I do not know. Some languages, such as Spanish, did not add the “s” so that “Jesus” is still “Jesu”. I use the term “Jesus” mostly because everybody knows it and because I do not want to impose on readers by using “Yeshu” or “Yeshua”.

After the rise of Christianity, the name “Yeshu” or “Yeshua” was so stigmatized among Jews that it nearly dropped out of use among them for a while. I think the name “Joshua” is acceptable now among Jews. I think Christians use the name “Joshua” without understanding it is the same name as “Jesus”. Christians from Northern Europe avoid giving their children the name “Jesus” although they do bestow the name “Joshua” or “Josh”. Other Christians give their children the name “Jesus”. In Spanish, the name is common and is pronounced something like “hay-sous”. Many Americans who do not understand Spanish hear “hay-sous” without understanding that it is the Spanish form of “Jesus”.

Biblical Languages.

The original language of the Tanakh (Old Testament) was Hebrew. The original language of the New Testament was Greek, although some of the people that wrote the New Testament could also speak Hebrew or Aramaic, and likely had some Hebrew or Aramaic texts about Jesus for reference, or had lists of supposed quotations from Jesus. The original language of any book in the Bible was not

English. The words in the King James Version are not the original words of Jesus, God, Moses, or anybody else in the Bible. Jesus probably spoke a little Greek and maybe even some Latin. Scholars debate whether or not Jesus was literate but I think that he was, and that he probably read the Tanakh.

YHWH.

“YHWH” is how the name of God is rendered in the Tanakh when it is rendered at all. Written Hebrew did not use very many vowel marks, so we do not know for sure what the vowels were between the consonants, and so we do not know for sure how it was spoken. It is sometimes written out as “Yahweh” or “Jehovah”. I use “Yahweh” when I need to because I guess that is close enough. I am not sure how YHWH would be best translated into English but I think something like “I am”, or “I am that I am” or “I am what (really) is”. Hebrews and Jews did not like to say the name at all. They tended to use substitutes, such as “Adonai”, which is translated into Greek as “Kyrios” and into English as “Lord”. They also used phrases such as “Blessed One” or “Heaven”. “The Kingdom of Heaven” meant “the Kingdom of God (YHWH)”. Not every instance of “adonai” in the Tanakh or in Jewish literature, or “kyrios” in Greek literature, means “Yahweh” but many instances do. Scholars argue about which instances do and which do not, and what the various instances mean for ideas about God and Jesus. They argue whether particular instances implied divinity for Jesus. Some Jews still do not like to speak God’s name or even to write it, so I am not happy about using “YHWH” or “Yahweh” but I do not know what else to do. Mostly I use “God”, which, for me, means “Yahweh” or “YHWH”.

Biblical Names.

Most Biblical names have meanings, some of which are useful to know. “Adam” means “son (child) of the earth” or “of the earth”. “Adam” could be used generically to mean “man” or “person”. Apparently Semitic people are more elaborate in their daily speech than the English-speaking people I grew up with because they use flowery-sounding phrases sometimes for variety. A Hebrew way to refer to any person is “son (child) of Adam”. I do not do “daughter of Eve”. A variant on this use is “son of man”. Any person could be referred to as “son of man” or “daughter of man”. In C.S. Lewis’ “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe”, human children are called “sons and daughters of Adam”. As we will see later in the book, the phrase “son of man” was also a title for a particular character in the book of Daniel from the Tanakh. Jesus referred to himself as “son of man”, and scholars debate whether he meant “person” in general, the particular character from the Tanakh, or something else.

“Angel” comes from Greek “angelos” and means “messenger”. The Tanakh and the New Testament had several (probably) different non-human persons that came from God (I include the “Elohim”), some of which were messengers, some of which carried out duties without necessarily bringing messages, and all of which were referred to in Greek by the term “angels”. By the time of Jesus, various groups of Jews had developed elaborate theories about non-human beings, including Satan, and about their relations to one another and to God. Christians took over those ideas, and added ideas from other cultures as well. The Greek word “evangelist” comes from “eu” (spoken “ev”), meaning “good”, and “angelos”. It meant “messenger of good news”. It now means a person intent on advancing orthodox Christianity, which is good news to him-her.

Disciples and Apostles.

In Greek, a “disciple” is a follower, usually a follower of a teacher but also a follower of a way of life. Greek has a different word for “student” (“mathetes”), and disciples were not primarily students originally. Disciples were followers of the way of life of Jesus. When a modern church calls itself “Disciples of Christ”, I think they have that original meaning in mind. An “apostle” is an emissary, messenger, or ambassador. An apostle had a close relation with Jesus. Usually apostles had to be disciples first. However, the exact meaning of “apostle” is tricky because Paul claimed to be an apostle based on a vision of the risen Jesus even though he had never seen Jesus (before Jesus died) and even though he was not a disciple in the original sense. To insist that apostles be disciples first implies denying Paul the right to be an apostle. Apostles were supposed to be the ideal examples of what people were like in the Kingdom and also were the teachers of the Kingdom and its way.

“Apostolic succession” refers to getting the authority for being a church official directly in an unbroken line from an apostle, or keeping a church continuously in an unbroken line directly from a church founded by an apostle. Apostolic succession confers legitimacy. A person with apostolic succession may confer it on more than one other person. All the original apostles were men. All the people that received apostolic succession were men. In theory, all bishops, priests and other similar officers of major churches have apostolic succession. Major bishops all claim apostolic succession, such as the Bishop of Rome and the Bishop of Constantinople. The Bishop of Rome claims apostolic succession directly from Peter. At first (see below), a person that got apostolic succession became a bishop, and only bishops could confer apostolic succession. I do not know the situation now in various churches. In a church that depends on apostolic succession, only officials that have apostolic succession may set dogma. One community (church) that had legitimate apostolic succession could confer the status on another community (church), usually when the bishop of one church “laid hands” on the bishop of another church. For example, an apostolic church in Corinth could confer the status of “apostolic” on another new church in Athens. This is how the church grows. This conferring often happened when a new “daughter” church broke off from a “parent” church. When churches separated in a non-friendly way, both churches usually claimed apostolic succession for themselves while denying it to the other. The Eastern Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church claim apostolic succession and generally recognize each other’s claim. Some Protestant Churches claim apostolic succession but I do not know on what they base their claim, and I do not know if other churches accept it. I think the Roman Catholic Church denies apostolic succession to most Protestant churches. Some Protestant groups deny the claim of the Roman Catholic Church to apostolic succession. I do not know what they think about the Eastern Orthodox Church. Some Protestant groups deny valid apostolic succession to any church because they say that all legitimate lines were broken in the past and have not been re-established. In that case, I do not know on what they base the authority of their church other than the Bible (which is a pretty good authority in itself).

Bishops, Presbyters, Deacons, and Priests.

It is convenient to think of the original church office as “bishop” and to see other offices in relation to the bishop. Originally all bishops were men. The term “bishop” comes from the Greek “episkopos” for “supervisor” or “overseer” but not necessarily in the sense of “boss”. Bishops both carried out rites and made decisions about church personnel and policies. They were a “justice of the peace” for the church community. The religious duties of the bishop were like the religious duties of the Jewish “cohen” (I omit the high priests). The Greeks would have thought of a bishop as a kind of “hieros”, their term for a

religious functionary, and from which we get the term “hierarchy”. A “presbyter” is from Latin, from Greek, and means “elder”. Presbyters were helpers to the bishops. Some presbyters assisted in both rituals and administration while others helped only in administrative duties. The term “priest” comes from “presbyter”. The office of priest evolved out of the presbyters who assisted the bishop in both his duties as administrator and as hieros or cohen. Some presbyters came to be thought of as a “junior bishop”. Even now, technically, when the priest carries out religious offices, he-she does so not entirely on his-her own authority but as representing the bishop. In some Protestant churches, apparently the priest or his-her equivalent has independent authority. I do not know the status of priest in all the various churches. In English, the term “priest” expanded meaning so that Americans now use “priest” to cover all sacred functionaries of all religions, including even Buddhist monks. This is how Greeks tended to use the word “hieros”. The word “deacon” comes from the Greek and means “one who has energy [to carry out tasks]”. Deacons were one of the original offices of the church, coming into being along with bishops. The deacons assisted the bishop in mundane tasks such as administration, and later assisted the priest after the office of priest developed. Originally, most deacons were men although there were some women assistants that should be called deacons. I do not know how common women deacons are now. The order of authority is bishop highest, then priest, and then presbyter and deacon roughly equal.

In the first three or so decades after Jesus died, groups of his followers did not have bishops in the modern sense although they did have specialists such as prophets, healers, and teachers. I do not explain more here. Certainly by 100 CE (65 years after Jesus died), the Church had recognizable bishops, presbyters, and deacons. Priests evolved soon afterwards. They were seen as natural and integral, not as different and imposed. Each large or medium-sized city had its own bishop, and all bishops were roughly equal at first. The only clearly dominant center was under James the Just, the brother of Jesus, in Jerusalem. Originally all high offices in the Church were variations on the bishop, as the Roman Catholic Pope is the Bishop of Rome, and the Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church comes from the Bishop of Constantinople. Later, Jerusalem declined, offices developed, offices were ranked, and places were ranked. Rome and Constantinople came to be most important. Now, for example, the head of the Diocese of the Greek Orthodox Church of Los Angeles seems to outrank the head of the Greek Orthodox Church in Portland, Oregon. A “cardinal” outranks most bishops in the Roman Catholic Church while a “metropolitan” outranks most bishops in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Some Protestants such as Episcopalians and Lutherans have similar differentiation and ranking. I do not know how all Protestants handle differentiation and ranking. All Protestants seem differentiated and ranked in practice even if they do not recognize the fact officially.

Original Church Organization.

From time to time, groups of Christians wish to recover the original way of Jesus by going back to the organization of the original Church. Usually they denounce formal religious institutions, in particular the archbishops, bishops, priests, etc. of churches such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. They dislike too many offices and they dislike ranking between offices and between places. They draw the line in various years and various ways between the genuine-upright-original Church versus the corrupt-degenerate-later churches. Sometimes they draw the line between followers of the early decades versus everybody else. Sometimes they draw the line between the mildly differentiated and hierarchical church of 100 CE versus the strongly differentiated and hierarchical church later on, especially after Constantine about 400 CE. They adopt various organizations instead of modern

hierarchical churches. Yet often they then evolve their own complex offices and hierarchies later on after having split off first as a movement to preserve simplicity and equality.

I have no opinion to offer people who pursue this quest. I am not sure we know enough about the organization of followers of Jesus during his lifetime and right after his death so we can have a model of proper organization for our time. I do not know what organization would prevent complications and stratifying. I am not sure that all groups of followers correctly understood and followed Jesus even when he was alive. I am fairly sure that groups of followers changed their character within a few years after Jesus died, perhaps right after he died. Groups of followers began to get centralized, hierarchical, and complex almost immediately after Jesus died; and so it is hard to draw the line. It is not clear that a later version of the Church was necessarily less true to the ideals of Jesus than an earlier version. I am not sure that the Church at 100 CE was less faithful to Jesus than his followers right after he died. I am not sure the church at 300 CE was less faithful to Jesus than the church at 100 CE or than early followers. I am not sure that organized hierarchical churches are less faithful to Jesus than egalitarian churches, especially if egalitarian churches are unrealistic, unsustainable, or hypocritical. I am not sure that a sustainable un-hypocritical egalitarian Church would necessarily be more faithful to Jesus but it might be. I have seen no sustainable un-hypocritical egalitarian churches in my lifetime.

Church.

The original term for a group of Christians was the Greek “ecclesia” (“eh-klee-see-uh”). Greeks still use that term. The term “church” developed later from variations of Greek “kyrios” or “lord”. “Church” is cognate with the Scottish word “kirk” as in “James Tiberius Kirk”, Captain of the USS Enterprise. I explain both terms, and their relations, more fully later in the book. The term “Church” now can mean all Christian Churches in general or can mean one Christian church group in particular such as Methodists. To scholars, “the Church” can mean the mainstream church before Constantine (early 300s), or before it split into Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox (1491), or can refer to the entire ideal community of Christians. Yet even to scholars, the term “the Church” can mean the particular church to which they hold their allegiance and which they believe is the one and only true descendant of the original followers of Jesus. Many Americans, even Protestants, use the term “the Church” to mean the Roman Catholic Church. By “church”, Christians can mean both a physical location with buildings and a community of believers. The community of believers can belong to one particular physical location or can include the general group of similar believers in several physical locations. For instance, the church as community of believers can be the parishioners at one St. James Roman Catholic Church located at Vine Street and Holly Avenue in Springfield, or all the members of the Roman Catholic Diocese of North America, or all the members of the entire Roman Catholic Church, or even all Christians. Non-Christian religions tend to be clearer in that they usually have distinct words for a physical location and for the community of believers; but the Christian usage is not hard to learn. The exact meaning should be clear from context.

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.