

Chapter 6.02 Human Nature and Some Sacraments

This chapter and the next two chapters, three in all, focus on questions for individual believers. This chapter urges us to accept real human nature and to follow Jesus on that basis. It is not all sweetness and light. Part Four described the role of the Eucharist, Crucifixion, and Resurrection in the development of the early Church. This chapter describes what they mean to me.

Accept the Truth.

People lose faith because of the gap between ideal and real. They seem to feel the gap between ideal and real more with Jesus than with other cases. The best antidote is to face up to what people really are, to face that ideals just do not work, and then to seek what we might really do about it. Accept the implications of Part Five that we are mixed beings. We have ideals but we can't live up to them. Often our best work comes not from striving for ideals but from striving for family, community, friends, and country. Mold religious and political institutions to take advantage of strengths while allowing for weaknesses. Don't expect too much but expect as much as we can.

We are evolved animals. We are evolved social animals. We are about half carnivores, so we will kill to eat, and we know how to kill. Sometimes we show signs of intelligence but usually only in moderation. Do not confuse talking with intelligence. Just because people talk does not mean we are all philosophers and saints. We are about as altruistic as other social killers such as dogs or killer whales. We are self-interested. We live in a short-to-medium time frame. Self-interest wins out over general interest most of the time and even beats our own long-term better interest most of the time. Our competition is comparative. We dwell on overt signs of success and promise such as wealth, youthful appearance, fame, talent, job, rank, and power. People do not want to do evil. But they will not take the chances and make the effort to create a good society. We can expect people to be heroic and good intermittently but not consistently. Most of the time people do not understand socio-political-economic problems or have genuine solutions but they blather on anyway.

We cannot turn people into good Christians through harangue or severe laws. Christian revivals work for a while but mostly they create a mob of self-righteous people who will impose their unrealistic vision on everybody else. Even in the United States, Christian revivals have more in common with China of the elder Mao or with strident fundamentalist Islam than with Jesus' mission.

We cannot use reason alone or ideals alone to overcome the desire for worldly success. We can use force but only at great cost. The best way to get people to act well is to keep them out of situations in which they act badly and to create institutions that channel self-interest to serve the greater good, as in ideal capitalism. Even this tactic will not create angels out of pack hunters but it is probably good enough. The sooner we accept this situation the better we will be able to work for it.

Part of being evolved social animals is having pretty good capacities to get along such as to talk out problems, share, not kill each other right away, and to feel morality. This gets us much farther than an

observer from space might have guessed about social carnivores descended from apes. We can use these capacities in planning institutions even if we cannot rely on these capacities alone.

Children, new converts to good religions, and idealists everywhere, think other people will become good if only we are good to them first and sustain being good to them long enough. There are some valid evolutionary reasons to take this approach, into which I cannot go. It even works sometimes. When it does work, it is like a miracle. It does not work often enough to base a society on. We can still use a smile as our first approach but we have to accept that we need a backup plan.

Part of the problem with letting go of the ideal is that the backup plans all seem so mundane, sordid, dreary, and animalistic. They are not the first level of falling away from the ideal but the third or fourth level of falling away. We need police, armies, laws, courts, jails, punishment, schools, teachers, socialization, evaluations, meetings, votes, power blocs, procedures, and all the rest of it. We have to endure ex-politicians on the Sunday talk shows. We have to endure all those things that good Taoists despise. The institutions themselves go wrong about as much as they go right, and we end up with another layer of disappointment.

Most of us now live in towns and cities where most people do not know each other but have to interact anyway. Think about walking through a shopping mall. The huge majority of people are not assholes, at least then and there. People get along. People even help each other with small problems. People look out for old people and children. I worked with monkeys, wolves, raccoons, and gerbils. If I put a big group of unrelated animals in a tight spot like a shopping mall, the floors would run red with blood. People are a lot better than the animal average. This is enough to build on but it is not the end in itself.

Divine Intervention.

If we could expect God to intervene on our behalf regularly then it would be easy to follow Jesus. God almost never interferes in this world. I think God has interfered in my life but not in any way that would impress other people. Probably there are a few cases of real divine intervention in the many cases where people feel like God lent a hand but I find no pattern in it. People that seem really worthy do not get any obvious help, and people that seem only faintly worthy seem to get a lot of help. Except perhaps for the early Hebrews, I am almost certain that God does not intervene to help whole nations, even in cases of clear worthiness such as World War II or with the fight against terrorism. So I offer no advice on when to ask God or on how to make yourself more likely to receive.

For about a year, my wife and I worked in a Muslim fishing village in Southern Thailand. I asked some of the men what they said when they prayed, in particular what they wished for. They do have stock prayers, and some people said they prayed for help with particular problems. Nobody admitted to asking for a winning lottery ticket but I suspect they did. I was pleased to learn that a common prayer was for guidance. They did not ask for guidance about buying a particular used car but for guidance in bigger things such as how to help their children go to school, keep children off drugs, deal with socio-economic problems in the village, or deal with a central government that treated them poorly. They did not want God to banish their problems, because they knew that some problems cannot be solved forever and that life on this Earth includes problems. They wanted God to give them advice on what to do now to make things better if not ideal, and how to provide a future. That seems reasonable to me.

I think I have gotten help from God. The help I got from God is guidance too. God did not guide me in finding a lucrative and secure career because I never had that. God did not help me find the right dentist, a good mechanic, or a decent reasonably priced house. I haven't won the lottery yet. God guided me toward experiences that helped me understand how the world works, how people work, how the world might be better, and how the world might not get better. Sometimes God steered me toward people that I needed at the time. When I did not understand, I found the right person or book to help. God steered me toward the right books to read to understand Jesus and to prepare for writing this book. When I needed to be alone to work things out, God let me be away from obligations. When I needed friends, sometimes a person popped up, although not often enough. God helped me stay away from traps including traps of employment, career, society, intellect, and spirit. I do not think God ever sent a bad person or a bad situation as a challenge; those came up on their own. I have met a few bad people but I have not died yet from bad people or bad situations. God never "provided" in the sense of making sure I had wealth; my jobs have been crappy but enough to live, support my mind, and enjoy life. I don't know how big a role God gave in finding get-by jobs. He gave me sense enough to take the opportunities to get by when they came up. God gave me the sense to know when I was done avoiding traps and so could get on with life. God never tested me in the sense that the Tanakh (Old Testament) says he did with Abraham, Isaac, and Job. None of this help sounds like much but it has made all the difference in my life. I say a bit more on what God did for me in the next chapter.

What God Wants for Us.

We want God to give us family, health, wealth, long life, joy, freedom from oppression, and the other benefits of a good human life. We want God to deliver us from evil that befalls us, our families, or our nation. Yet most people do not live a prosperous life. Many people are truly poor. A lot of bad things happen to good people, and God does not intervene. God does not give us what we think we need. So his view of the situation has to be different than ours.

God is not interested in whether or not you get wealthy, powerful, stereotypically happy, or even if you are healthy. Prostate cancer does not mean much to God. God is not interested in whether or not you have a large and healthy family. God is interested in your development as a human. He wants you to be a better person. "Better" does not mean "saintly". He might want you to be wiser, braver, fiercer, calmer, more creative, more stubborn, or more helpful. God is not a version of the 1960s human potential movement or a sci-fi movie in which we evolve into radiant angels. God does not expect us to live up to our full capabilities, only to try hard and to get better. God does not think we can be fully happy if we somehow do live up to our full abilities. God does not expect us to find bliss on this world, just opportunities.

When you ask for help from God, he might not give you help directly with the problem you have in mind. He will not cure your headaches or find a way to pay the mortgage on your stupidly big house. That is what doctors, prudence, and regret are for. He is more likely to use the problem to help you become a better person. What you think of as a problem, such as a lawsuit or a treatable illness, God might think of as a situation to use to let you find a way to get better. You have to be open to what God has in mind, and willing to give up what you have in mind. I don't know what God has in mind about problems that totally overwhelm us.

Why Bother With God.

God does not care if we succeed in normal ways but instead wants us to succeed morally or as small-time heroes. God rarely intervenes in this world. We cannot expect God to bail us out. It is not possible to make a world in the image of religious ideals. Trying to do so makes the world worse, as with the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Christian fundamentalists, or PC fundamentalists. Ordinary people cannot live fully according to religious ideals or their families will be at a comparative disadvantage to other families. People distort religious ideals so as to sanctify their competitive way of life. Sometimes we can find a compromise between religious ideals and the needs of ordinary life but that leaves us in uncertainty. God and religion do not seem to do a lot for us. So why bother? A lot of the time, I get discouraged too.

This is where Christian apologists try to prove the existence of a good God, prove that this good God is the God of the Bible and is Jesus, and prove you can have the blessing of a good God while you live your ordinary ambitious life and go to church. I can do none of that, and I don't want to. If you get the message of Jesus, you get it, and I cannot explain it further. If you do not get Jesus' message, I cannot lead you to it through arguments here. This part of the book is not about that. It is about letting believers feel good about believing despite the problems, and it is about how to behave well.

Even though believing in God, having a relation with God, and trying to follow Jesus puts us at a comparative disadvantage often, it also gives a lot of satisfaction. Getting occasional advice and guidance from God is enormously worthwhile even if it does not add to our bank account or get us elected mayor of Casterbridge. If you act on the basis of belief to make a better world, you feel very good. If you cannot act very much, but only believe that God still loves you and will take account of your situation, that is good enough. If you are in prison, sick, or afraid, then belief in God is a lot of help. The satisfaction we get from believing in God is probably the result of evolved capacities to believe and to keep hoping as long as we are alive no matter what - but so what? Many things that we evolved to believe turn out to be real enough. I do not have to claim to be absolutely correct on all points, and I am sure I am wrong about some things. I only claim to be correct enough to make normal belief reasonable, and it is. I will find out for sure when I die.

Last Supper.

This section and the next three are not my theological speculation about sacraments but my imaginings about some common Christian issues and experience. I do not want to be a theologian. These sections help you to see Jesus in the modern world and they help inoculate you against rigid dogma. I had these ideas first as a child, long before any New Age and long before I began reading for this book.

The Last Supper (Eucharist) consists of drinking wine and eating bread, and the interpretations that go along with the practice. The standard interpretation in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches is: the bread is the literal body of Jesus, the wine is his literal blood, and we have to literally chew and gulp if we want eternal life. We really eat a real body and really drink real blood. We cannot get eternal life if we do not chew and gulp. If we believe, and do not commit heinous sins, then the simple act of chewing on them almost guarantees eternal life. It is Christian magic. It seems like Christian black magic. The Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Churches use passages from the New Testament to support

their interpretation. Some Protestants disagree with the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Churches, and give their interpretations of the passages to support their own ideas. In effect, some Protestants say the practice is not a literal eating of meat and blood but uses meat and blood as a metaphor. It is not always clear what they are a metaphor of. I agree with the Protestants somewhat but I do not go into details of what various groups of Protestants believe so as to support my version.

Not all early followers of Jesus interpreted the practice as standard Christianity does now. Something like the standard Roman Catholic and Orthodox interpretation only won out after several decades. The victory was part of one subgroup taking control of the whole Church. Passages in the New Testament that describe the activity of ritual eating and drinking do accurately report some of Jesus' words; but the passages also attribute the ideas and words of the winning faction to Jesus as a way for that subgroup of early followers to assert itself. The act of eating bread and drinking wine, and the standard literal interpretation, became part of a secret ritual for advanced followers that brought them to innermost membership in the Church (along with Baptism).

Some other people who wished to follow Jesus could not accept this meaning of the practice. Some followers of Jesus left the early Church when they reached the stage where they learned of this idea and secret ritual. I do not know of other interpretations of ritual eating and drinking from the early Church because alternatives were suppressed and forgotten. There is not much point in guessing because I am too likely to project my own ideas backwards. The winning faction distorted Jesus' words so as to create a magical ceremony that would separate believers from non-believers and thus make their faction-Church a strong in-group.

Here is my interpretation. My family when I grew up never said a blessing at meals so I never say one. But I always love when other families say a blessing, and I love when people come to dinner and say one at our table. In Jesus' world, bread and wine together meant a complete meal and thus meant satisfaction. That is why the Kingdom of God is like a banquet. To me, the bread and the body of Jesus mean the solid and fairly unchanging things of this world, such as hills, trees, animals, good ideas, rigorous logic, and good institutions. The wine and blood of Jesus mean the liquid, flowing, changing, adapting things of this world, including water, life, blood, rain, fog, wind, free imagination, and not clinging. The solid and liquid together represent all the world. Eating the bread and wine, or eating any meal, means being in the world, depending on the world, and interacting with the world. It does not mean something romantically stupid such as "say 'Yes' to Life". Jesus used bread and wine because of their role in his culture. People can use rice, fish, vegetables, and water if they wish, or can use pizza and beer, or hot dogs and cola, if those get across the idea. Jesus made every simple meal a ceremony. Jesus put into simple ceremonies an invitation to think about his teachings and his life, and an invitation to his banquet. Jesus did not disdain the official rituals that gave indirect reliance on God but he wished to supplement those rituals with direct reliance on God and on what God gives us. He set up as reminders simple rituals such as a common meal. Jesus augmented finding God in grand places such as the Temple in Jerusalem with finding God in the simple food, drink, acts, and relations of everyday life. Jesus did not mean to do away with ceremony or man-made institutions but wished to make us think about the higher level even in ordinary life. He did not mean to establish a secret rite with a bizarre interpretation. If any Taoists read this, they can think that Jesus teaches Taoism with every bite and swallow. It is sad and ironic that the early Church turned Jesus' words into a secret ritual, to mean almost the opposite of what I think they originally meant.

Crucifixion, and Failure.

To me, the Crucifixion shows that God is one of us and that God knows what we go through, including sometimes failure. I do not speculate on how much God can or cannot be one of us, and can or cannot know what we go through; I only say he can do it enough. The Crucifixion does not mean Jesus sacrificed himself for us, that he was a sacrificial lamb, a scapegoat, took Adam and Eve's sin upon himself, took our sins upon himself, or offered himself to the Devil in our place. I do not even know what most of those interpretations mean. If Jesus was God offering himself for us, it was through the work of Jesus' life, not in his death. The Crucifixion meant that, if God were human, he could get chewed up by empire, politics, formal justice, injustice, expediency, betrayal, and being abandoned, like any of us. He could feel pain. He does not only see through our eyes when we look at a sunset or a healthy child but also when we see the scowling official and when we read "malignant stage four no hope". We do not have to explain a lot to God or explain like a poet because God already gets it. When you are actually in pain, I am not sure how much comfort this argument can be but I hope it is some comfort.

Failure and Evil.

The Crucifixion shows that failure is real and that failure can be evil. We can fail externally, as for example when a business we have worked on all our lives goes bankrupt or an idea we had been working on for years does not pan out. We can fail internally as when we lose will, lose faith, or descend into despair or addiction. We can have failure of the body and of the spirit. Failure of the spirit hurts worse. Apologists for capitalism like to say real failure has to be a part of real success. Where there is no genuine risk there can be no genuine success. That is true not just of capitalism but also of life in general. It was true long before capitalism arose.

Yet usually only people say this who succeed. We do not ask the opinion of people who fail in spirit. Failure breaks people. Broken people do not talk unless they are great blues artists. Failure can be a lesson too hard for the people who fail in spirit. People who fail in spirit are too broken to learn many lessons.

I do not know if failure is necessary to appreciate success. I do not know if failure and success are mutually related as some people think that good and evil are mutually dependent. If so, it seems as if some failure is too hard to learn the lesson, so hard that it breaks us and makes us unable to learn any lesson. Maybe the Crucifixion was a sign that God knows this too.

Too many bad people fare well. Too many good people, with real talent, and a big heart, fail. Too often bad people succeed on the backs of good people. There really are "mute inglorious Miltons" - people with talent but who never find a way to develop it or never get the chance to show it. People fail not just because they shoot themselves in the foot but also because bad stuff happens and bad people take advantage of good people. People fail because sometimes crap comes so fast that nobody could adapt. We cannot blame every failure on the victims. Not every failure is a useful lesson that produces more good out the other side. If it were, there would be no idea of evil. To get sick, to see your children sick, or to get old and poor, is painful in a way that is rivaled only by cancer or war.

Some early failure does give you an appreciation for later success and it does give you more sympathy for other people. People who have not been poor or sick really cannot understand people who are. Some early moderate failure is really a prelude to success. Not all failure is like that. You have to be able to recover for early pain to be a benefit and for you to appreciate the pain of other people. Sometimes the pain goes on far longer than needed to open eyes or teach lessons. Hard pain early in life or long pain teaches bad lessons. Sometimes early failure is so hard, or goes on for so long, that the pain cannot be erased and you lose your ability to give sympathy, build a bridge, or even get up in the morning. Even when people are partly responsible for their own failure of this kind, we cannot blame them entirely.

Usually you get little help when you fall into in the hole of failure and usually you have to try to climb out on your own. Hopefully God helps you.

Not all people climb out of failure. People cannot climb out of failure on a ladder of platitudes. Some people deep in the hole can climb out only if other people see that the failure and pain are real. When Jesus said we need help, he was not just being a good teacher. Other good people cannot pull all the failed people out of the pit but at least successful people can give people in pain the recognition that the pain is real. We can do this without promoting the culture of victimization that is so common now in the United States. The abuses of help are no excuse to deny help.

Hopefully the idea that God knows what you are going through helps. Yet even when people understand the message of the Crucifixion and Resurrection, that might still not be enough to soothe the hurt of failure or to give hope in this life. We cannot blame people for that either. They do not reject God; they just do not have enough heart left to admit God. I do not know what to say other than Jesus understands because he went through some of that too, and God understands because Jesus understands. That is not enough but it is about all I can say.

The Resurrection.

When I wanted to get my ideas about Jesus straight, I read about Jesus, and I reread the New Testament. I was surprised how afraid I was not to believe in the real physical Resurrection. I had not thought of it for years. I had never worried much about it. I did not think I would care much if Jesus was resurrected or not, but I did. I do not like believing in miracles, and yet I felt I had to believe in this one. I had to think, worry, and pray a lot before I understood and then accepted that it did not matter. What matters is following Jesus' message. If we do that, then whether or not Jesus was really physically resurrected is not important. God could turn the world to green cheese if that would make people better. But a green cheese world would not do it and neither will raising Jesus from the dead if we do not understand and follow his message. Once I saw the primacy of the message and the irrelevance of miracle, I could see meanings in the idea of the Resurrection that do not depend on Jesus being actually raised from the dead. We will get to those shortly.

One reason the Resurrection got to me so much is the persistence of belief from my childhood. The Resurrection was drilled into me as a child. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Resurrection is more important than Christmas in the West. To deny it is to deny something fundamental in my childhood.

Another reason the Resurrection got to me was the stories of it from the New Testament. Some of them can be dismissed as glorified rumors or glorified wish fulfillment but some of them seem as if they come from sincere simple people who had little to gain by pushing ideas of Jesus' Resurrection. The first people who saw Jesus were neither stupid people prone to hysteria, nor con artists. They were hard-headed peasants, urban workers, and small merchants. Talking about Jesus' Resurrection was not liable to get you big bucks from a cheering mega-church audience but liable to get you laughed at, beat up, or stoned, cost you a job, or cost you trade. Early witnesses had little to gain and a fair amount to lose. They had no theology to explain the Resurrection, they had not theology to defend, and they had no elaborate institution to perpetuate by clinging to the idea that Jesus was still alive somehow – that all came later. I still have no good explanation for all the stories.

I can point out some contradictions. Jesus appears as a pure spirit, as a spirit that should not be touched by mere mortals, as a spirit-like body, as a normal body hungry to eat fish, and as a normal body who vanishes at mealtime. I doubt he was all these at once and I doubt all the variations are compatible. The versions of Jesus reveal later elaboration by early Church "idea men" (or women) for ideological needs. But the contradictions are not complete proof against some of the simple stories. One reason the Resurrection got to me was the need for magic in the lives of ordinary people, including me. If I knew for sure that somebody had come back from the dead, I would much more likely pay attention to what that person said and to what he-she required of me. I would feel much more comfortable about going along with that person, even if going along meant a departure from ordinary life. This is the reason that other religions attribute miracles to their leaders, including rising from the dead. It is hard to let go of that source of certainty.

Another reason is that denying the Resurrection felt like a betrayal, whether Jesus really rose from the dead or not. Jesus gave up a lot for us. God wanted us to pay attention to Jesus. Maybe God raised Jesus from the dead so that we would pay attention to him. Denying the Resurrection was not like asserting our God-given senses over magic but like refusing to get God's message and refusing to go along with God to make the world a better place. It was like denying God. It is not a big thing to believe in one resurrection from among the many billions of people that have lived and died. Why not let go of common sense in this case if letting go means siding with God and feeling better? Why cling to common sense if a breach in this case feels so bad and if a breach in this case does not erode common sense in general?

In the end, I put the questions aside. The Resurrection came to mean endurance and hope, even a "New Hope". When we give up something, we really do get something better back. We can endure the sickness and death of a loved one. Some abused kids really recover. Some victims of ideology wake up. Democracy did really arise in this nasty world. Freedom of religion arose too. Sometimes capitalism escapes the rich and really does become the kind of free enterprise that serves the people. Sometimes free enterprise gets along with nature. Medicine finds cures. Slums develop. Poor people learn skills and find jobs. Politicians accept the real problems of capitalism and actually do something for all the people. Political prisoners go free. The immigrant learns the value of his-her new home and learns the true burden of neighborliness, citizenship, and freedom. The Hubble telescope got rescued and served science beautifully for twenty more years. Science keeps going deeper and deeper. Darwin and Einstein come along. Rock and roll evolved.

The Resurrection means that, no matter how bad things get, they will get better. No matter how bad things get, God will make them better. If these plans fail, we can always make new plans about something else. Even if we die, or our plans die, new people will be around to carry on, and somebody else will make a new plan. If I do not publish this great idea, somebody else will. If we do not defeat this tyrant now, somebody else will defeat him-her later. By working hard, we personally might prevail after all. But we also need to see beyond ourselves and our present circumstances to other people in other circumstances. All of these are Jesus' Resurrection. There is no better Resurrection, not even if Jesus really floated out of his tomb. We resurrect Jesus every time we do his work, every time we hope, every time we endure, and every time a good thing rises out of the ashes.

I do not know if this hope is borne out by facts. I do not know if this is the kind of hope that leads people to work harder and so to make things work out and so to justify the hope. I do not know if this hope is a self-fulfilling prophecy. I hope so. But I do not care about the mechanisms right now. Hope is not always stupid and irrational. Jesus' Resurrection says that some hope is good and useful.

I know the capacity to hope evolved as part of natural selection. I know too often hope is not met. Sometimes failure breaks people and that some people lose hope. We want hope to apply to us and our family, and not to other people who make plans, get well, become famous, or find freedom. Sometimes tyranny goes on for a long time and ruins lives. Nazism or Communism might have succeeded and might have corrupted the Earth forever. Unbridled pseudo-capitalism still might destroy the world that took God eleven billion years to make. Some pseudo-religious fundamentalism of the Right or Left might yet do the same. Still we need to struggle and hope.

If God wanted us to interpret the Resurrection in terms of hope then it seems he would have made sure the Resurrection was true and would have made sure everybody could easily verify it. Even if the Resurrection is true, the stories in the New Testament do not do the job of verification and publicity. It seems Jesus should have appeared to more people, not just to followers, and it seems that non-followers should have written clear consistent accounts of his return. If God wanted us to see the Resurrection as the basis for hope then not to really resurrect Jesus and not to make it clear seems like lying. It is odd to use an imaginary event, or a lie, or a half-ass job, as the basis for real hope. We do not want to base hope on a lie. If so, then maybe the Resurrection really is true just so that God will not be a liar. Maybe we have to believe in the Resurrection because God would not lie to us or allow Jesus' followers to lie to us. This reasoning can make sense but I do not want to make anything of it. It is a step backwards. I do not like thinking that God used us, or used Jesus' followers, or that God lied to us, so as to get us to believe Jesus' message and to act on hope; but I would rather face up to that possibility than to believe in a miracle just to achieve consistency and theological splendor. I can still have hope and follow Jesus' message even if I do not fully know God's character, if I do not think Jesus was really raised from the dead, and I think God might have used the human desire for miracles.

Jesus as God.

See the section on Jesus as Son of God in the last chapter in Part One. Because, as a child, I read the Old Testament (Tanakh) before the New Testament, it was not as hard to let go of the idea that Jesus has to be God as it was to let go of the idea that he was resurrected; but it was surprisingly hard. Letting go of the idea that Jesus has to be God also felt like a betrayal of God, Jesus, and the Church. It helped

to know that, when early Christians talked of Jesus as Son of God, Jesus was not the only son of a god. It helped to know how the early Church changed Jesus the Prophet into a son of God, then to The Son of God, and then into God. It helped to know that God would judge me more according to what I did to carry out Jesus' ideals than by whether or not I had a correct orthodox belief in Jesus as God or as Only Begotten Son of God. It helped to know the biological problems in the idea of Jesus having a mother as his only human parent while having God as a father. But I still had trouble.

If you have been raised in the belief that Jesus is God and you cannot let go of that belief, then probably you should not force yourself to try. That belief in itself is not as important as what you do about it. If you act on that belief by following the teaching of Jesus then you are respecting Jesus as God.

If you believe that Jesus is God then you will necessarily be at odds with Jews and Muslims. If you believe there is only one God, Jesus is him, and God did not manifest himself in any other historical persons such as Karl Marx or John Lennon, then you will be at odds with some Buddhists, Hindus, and Taoists. I advise not to push or to push back. Be able to state your belief clearly. Do not try to force your belief on other people. Do not undermine their belief. Do not argue with them if they try to undermine yours. Argue for fun if you want. Point out how you act on the basis of your belief to follow the teachings of Jesus, and ask other people what they do on the basis of their belief to build a better world. If they give you a positive account, respect their sincerity and admire their achievements.

Maybe the root of the problem about Jesus as God is that we have no good theory of prophets. We feel that people like Moses, Lao Tze, Chuang Tze, Siddartha the Buddha, and Mohammad were both human and more than human, and they somehow expressed the will of God to us; but we have no explanation for what they were or how they could know the will of God (the Truth) better than anybody else. Depending on our faith, we want to feel that our particular religious leaders were more "that way" than anybody else's religious leaders. We want to feel that our prophet was most special. I certainly feel that Jesus' teachings were "the best" and that somehow he was smarter, wiser, and nobler than other prophets. It is hard for me to be objective. I do not know of any theology or philosophy that can make sense of this. Until we have one, probably people will continue to cling to their particular prophets, and some people will continue to see their particular prophets as divine.

People seem to need a connection with God through a person that is somehow both human and God. Hindus, Buddhists, and Taoists can understand how Christians cling to the idea of Jesus as God by looking toward avatars of Vishnu or Siva, toward the transformation of the Buddha into God, the transformation of a male bodhisattva into the divine mother Kwan Yim (Jaaw Mae Guan Im), or the transformation of Lao Tze into the Son of Heaven. Jews might gain insight into the Christian attitude by thinking of the status not of Moses but of David. Although Jews revere Moses as a greater prophet than David, it seems that Jews have a special love for David. They appreciate his joie de vivre, creativity, skill in fighting, and skill as a ruler; and they take his attributes as the ideal for Jews. They envy his close relation to God when he still did have a close relation to God. They understand the pain of his separation from God. David was quite talented, but he was also a rebel, conniver, murderer, seducer, wanton, guerilla, usurper, and might have killed his own king. He traded on the love of Jonathan, the son of King Saul, to put Saul in a horrible position. David had a man killed to get that man's wife. While he was King, David ordered men murdered in cold blood. He then killed his own assassin to keep it quiet. He might have written a few psalms but he certainly did not write even a small fraction of the psalms attributed to

him. The Tanakh rationalizes many of David's sins toward the family of Saul and rationalizes David's sins in general. For a Jew to admit all this of David is about what it would take for a simple Christian to admit that Jesus might be only a prophet. Maybe the most we can ask of people raised to believe in Jesus as God is that they also act on Jesus' ideas to build a better world and that they do not condemn us out of hand. Jews should feel free to stress that Jesus is not God but a prophet, and I hope they also ask how to implement his teachings.

Kingdom of God as a Banquet.

Jesus often spoke of the Kingdom of God as a big banquet or party to which everybody was invited. People that came were happy. People that did not realize the importance of the party did not come, and were sorry about it afterwards. It is easy to misunderstand this image. The question eventually comes down to the joy of following Jesus' message. To enter the Kingdom is to feel a kind of joy.

On the negative side, the Church tended to see the people that did not get the idea of the banquet as the people who did not understand the importance of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, and did not understand the significance of the Church. They were people who would not join the Church. So, for standard Christianity, to be left out of the party was to be cast into Hell for not joining the Church. I doubt Jesus was this severe about people who did not come to the party. He seems to have looked at them more as idiots who could have no idea of what they were missing, and were to be cut off forever from the Kingdom of God and from a good relation with God. In philosophical Christianity, Hell is just exclusion from God.

There are several positive interpretations of the Banquet, none of which, I think, Jesus had in mind. For the standard Christian Church, joining the banquet was joining the Church, and the joy of being at the banquet is the joy of belonging to the Church. Many standard believers now identify the Kingdom of God with heaven, so that going to the banquet for them is going to heaven to be with Jesus. At the level of crass pop culture, Jesus is inviting everybody to the kind of joy that is promoted by televangelists, spiritualists, drug dealers, leftover hippies, condo developers, and upper middle class gourmet trippers. Better versions think of the joy that comes from being a good citizen, good parent, or good neighbor, or from having a group of good friends to have dinner parties with; the banquet is made up of those kinds of people. Yet, in the Bible, those are just the kinds of people who excluded themselves. In more sophisticated versions of the party, people reach ecstasy by "saying 'Yes' to life", or by discovering the deep irony of postmodern Life. Mystics think everybody is a part of the banquet whether he-she knows it or not: It's all alright. Mystics also think every breath can be full of joy. People in other religions might think of the joy that comes from enlightenment in Hinduism or Buddhism or that comes from finding and following the Tao.

The problem with the joy of following Jesus is that it does not hold up for very long by worldly standards. Real life contradicts the promise of joy. The banquet seems to be serving TV dinners. The party eventually ends. We wake up the next morning with a hangover. Most people feel the joy for a little while but then the real world intrudes to remind us. People that seek Jesus to get ecstatic joy might find it for a while but then their girlfriend or boyfriend dumps them and they dump Jesus. When that happens, some people turn to philosophical substitutes such as the joy of being a good person, of taking responsibility, or

of saying “Yes” to Life. These joys are not unique to Jesus, they are not very satisfying for most real people, and they do not hold up very well in the long run either.

This problem is a version of what happens to people when they submit to God. Submission does bring joy but it does not solve the problems of living and it also brings its own worldly hardships.

Jesus had something in mind, so I will speculate on what. I do not know what to say to people that are in a bad situation from which there is no way out, so I say what I can to normal people in normal situations. The trick is not to look for ecstatic joy but to look for a deeper more persistent enjoyment, and to look for other people that can feel the same thing. The banquet is serving neither TV dinners nor gourmet food but instead is serving fresh fruit and vegetables, nuts, and fresh caught fish. My version comes off like any average middle class person saying “make the most of life while you can” while he-she enjoys an imported beer; but it is more than that. I don’t know how to get across the more without sounding like one of the shallow philosophical versions.

Jesus would not deny real world intrusions nor would he ask people to be joyous in the face of car accidents, cancer, and war. He would not expect you to live constantly in the kind of joy you get when your child wins the Nobel Prize.

Jesus accepted the Tanakh idea that creation is good. Creation is mostly good even after natural selection evolved beings that can do both good things and bad, and that have a moral sense – even after the Fall. Jesus would disagree with Augustine and Calvin. Jesus saw that God is bigger than evil, bigger than any theory, law, ideology, or theology, and bigger even than Jesus himself. God is bigger than any present nation of the world. The world is already as the world is. We might as well enjoy it while we can. Not to enjoy it is an insult to God. Enjoy it the way that suits you as long as your joy does not hurt other people. A big part of the joy of the world is the joy of other people. Accept that also to the extent you can. It is especially fun to be at a party where other people “get it”, even if what we all “get” is being at the party where other people get it. But it is not necessary that all the people at the party get it. A lot of people never fully understand what kind of party they are at but they contribute to the overall party just the same. Jesus was inviting us to this party. It is like having a job that you actually like and that contributes to the world as well. It is like being a citizen of a free country that works and that contributes to the world too. These ideas are simple but people usually forget them and get caught up seeking a different joy. Jesus forcefully reminded us, and he forcefully reminded us of how bad we feel when we pass up his party.

We cannot expect to feel a “party high” all the time, not even from Jesus’ party, not even in the limited version described here. It comes and it goes. Be thankful when it comes.