

00 Introduction

A “stance” includes: the Golden Rule, be true to the rebel code, be your “true you” regardless, honor, life is good, life is tough, do good, avoid evil, and many more. Some stances are not compatible such as: honor versus getting ahead; all paths lead to God vs. there is only one way to God; life is only a game vs. life is real; help your neighbor vs. “look out for number one”; and simple decency vs. hard-ass “gangster” attitude. Then we have to choose. Religions are big stances that include small stances, and organize the stances around themes.

This book assesses stances that are important for modern people and it assesses major religions. I say both what is right and what is wrong. This book is not neutral. I do not assess political stances such as liberalism or the Tea Party outlook. I focus on life stances such as “be a rebel”, religious stances such as “all we need to do is act naturally”, and major religions such as Christianity and Romanticism. I point out the political implications of stances and religions. I avoid standard theological issues such as about the Christian Trinity, faith versus works, and the Will of God.

As everybody does, I use my beliefs and values as the basis for assessing. I use both my religious and political values as the basis for assessing. I state my own beliefs and values briefly below, and again in later chapters in more detail. You can still benefit from this book if you disagree with me.

The point is not to harangue anybody into agreeing with me. The points are: to present clear standards; give basic description of stances and religions; see how standards can be used rightly to assess stances and religions; urge you to develop standards; and help you relax so you can be a better person, act well, make the world better, feel better, not waste yourself, do less harm, and avoid mistakes. I use no tricks. People already know much of what I say even if they have not heard it said clearly. I just say it in writing so you can think about it at your own pace.

Theory and Practice.

I care more about what people do than about doctrine. I want people to act well. I hope people act well because they have good ideas but having particular ideas is less important than acting well.

Still, ideas matter. Ideas shape what we do. Bad ideas often lead to bad acts while good ideas do lead to good acts. To guide what we do, we interpret ideas such “what would Jesus do?”, and “follow the middle path of the Buddha”. We reject bad ideas such as “only the sacred book of group X tells the Will of God” and “we have a right to be obnoxious because we are oppressed”. I want people to hold ideas that are clear, simple, moral, realistic, practical, true to human nature, mostly consistent, and go along with science. I want people to act according to good ideas. I want people to reject bad ideas. So I assess the ideas behind stances.

All religions have good and bad doctrines. Some doctrines promote good ideas and interpretations. For instance, Christianity teaches the Golden Rule and it interprets the Rule through the parable of the Good

Samaritan. Some doctrines teach bad ideas and enable bad behavior, such as “all people who disagree with us go to Hell and we should hurt them even while they are still on Earth”. Luckily, nearly all people in all religions act well most of the time regardless of dogma. Usually people act well to neighbors even when neighbors believe another religion. Nearly all people interpret dogma so as to act well, get along with neighbors, and help each other. Sometimes believers override the dogma of their religion so they can act well by modern standards, as when people use birth control although their religion tells them they may not. I assess religions according to the ideas they offer and according to how people interpret the ideas so as to act well in the modern world.

My Basic Religious Stance.

The Enlightenment lasted from about 1650 to 1900. George Washington, Ben Franklin, James Madison, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson were people of the Enlightenment, and the Constitution of the United States is an Enlightenment work. My basic stance is like the Enlightenment. Many people now hold a stance similar to the stance given in this book.

This section lists the main points in my religious stance. Order does not indicate importance. The first chapter gives a full account of my religious stance while the second gives my political stance. Briefly, I assess stances and religions by how well they accept the following ideas and how well they promote some of my political ideas. .

-God created a world that could be very good.

-We all go to meet God when we die.

-God loves you. Try to love other people as God loves you. You can't fully succeed but you can try.

-God wants you to do the right things for the right reasons, not from fear or from hope of reward.

-You do not have to accept God, or Jesus as God, to live by the remaining points.

-The Golden Rule (act toward other people as you want them to act toward you). Be kind.

-All rules apply equally to everybody, including you, your kin, your friends, neighbors, enemies, etc. Act as if you have to do what you want everybody to do. Allow everybody to do what you want to do. Do not do what you do not want others to do. Allow everybody to do what a free person making up his-her own mind could do.

-Treat people as persons rather than as objects.

-Respect nature and take care of nature.

-Decency.

-Work hard to make the world better.

-People who have more talent, wealth, time, energy, or power need to do more.

-Live and let live.

-Be useful.

-Pay it forward.

-Morality has to be mixed with practicality.

-Don't be bad. Don't be indecent.

-Do not enable indecent people. The Golden Rule means to help people deeply, not to give them what they want, enable them, or make them dependent. Sometimes the best help is the truth.

-"The truth will set you free". Seek the truth. Be honest about the truth. Accept the truth when you see it. Reject what is false, and reject lies, when you see them.

-Be open to getting better. Be open to letting other people, life, the world, and God guide you. You do most of the work on your own, but you can get help, and, very likely, you will get help if you ask.

-Science is correct.

-Religion and stances should be free of hurtful dogmas and wrong ideas.

-Assess what needs to be done and what you can do. Use your time, energy, and resources to do the most good. Don't waste what God has given you.

-Be committed and strenuous (zealous) when the feeling and the cause take you, as long as you really do more good than harm.

-But don't be zealous mostly to make yourself feel good, don't let zealotry cause more harm than good, and don't let zealotry become immoral. Avoid hurtful bad zealotry.

-A simple decent act done without regard to system often works well enough. Don't be confused by dogma, ideology, or system.

-I say the following many times in many ways throughout the book: God cares far less that you worship Jesus as God than you do as Jesus taught. If you do as Jesus taught but don't worship Jesus as God, then you are alright. If you worship Jesus as God but do not do as he taught, God will scold you severely. If you neither worship Jesus as God nor do as he taught, then I can't say much more. If you both worship Jesus as God and do as Jesus taught, then good for you, but please stay humble, and don't think you are better than other good people in God's eyes.

-I expect religions to be compatible with the main ideas of American plural democracy, and to promote those ideas within the limits of their beliefs.

Not All Paths Lead to God; Not All Religions are Equally Useful.

Our time hopes to ease strife by declaring “all paths lead to God” and “God is one”. The intent is good but the idea is false. By claiming all religions are the same, we lie to ourselves, do not ease strife, and wrong all religions. We do better to face differences squarely, see what we can live with, see what we can negotiate, and see what we have to worry over. I hope all religions promote the good ideas, acts, and people that we need in modern plural democracies; and I hope all believers act well. But religions don’t always promote good ideas and good people for our times. We have to be clear about ideas and actions so it makes sense when we assess a religion.

My values come from the West. Western values come from a mix of Jesus’ ideas with European ideas, mostly from Greece and Northwest Europe. My view is like American Christianity but does not insist that Jesus is God. This is the religious stance that I see as best and against which I measure other stances and religions, including standard Christianity. I do not think other religions are much inferior to this stance and I do not overlook their particular good points. Yet I do insist this is the best stance that I have found and that other stances are not as good as this stance overall.

Religion, Power, and Pop Culture.

Religion causes some pain but religion causes fewer problems than economics, politics, ethnicity, and gender. Sometimes people argue over pure religion but not often. People use religious ideas as tools in fights that really are about other issues. The main vehicle for ideas now is pop culture. The Beatles got “nailed” when John Lennon deplored that they were “more popular than Jesus”, but he was right. People get more from pop media than from traditional religious ideas and heroes. We get more from Spiderman (“with great power comes great responsibility”), rock rebels, and hip-hop “gangsters” than from Moses, Thomas Aquinas, Mohammad, or the Buddha. Ronald Reagan owed more to Captain America and to a wrong pop version of Adam Smith than to Jesus. People suffer more from lack of good political, ethnic, economic, and gender visions than from the lack of religious ideas. If we could make capitalism work well we would argue less about the greatest god and what he-she demands. To assess relevant stances, it seems I should focus on power, politics, wealth, ethnicity, gender, and pop culture rather than on religion.

First, sex, economics, politics, world order, ethnicity, gender, and pop culture are big topics themselves and they should be treated on their own.

Second, we can’t get clear about power, wealth, ethnicity, gender and pop culture until we are clear about stances and religion. Confusion in one fosters confusion in the other. Americans don’t have visions of politics and economics that actually work in the real world. So, instead, we use bad ideas from religion as tools to attack other groups and to get ours. We can’t make a workable political or economic vision until we calm down and get clear about stances and religion. This book aims to clarify issues and calm people down. Hopefully the insights about stances and religion can carry over into politics, economics, ethnicity, gender, and pop culture.

Use Your Mind; Not Blinded by the Light.

We need to think things through even if we had a religious education and even if we have had religious experiences of our own. We have to use our heads and hearts. Even people who have strong religious experiences rarely know what to do on the basis of the experience alone. They need to interpret their experiences and they need help doing so. Sometimes they are wrong in their interpretation and need correcting. Even people who have seen God still need to think things through when they stop being blinded by the light. Even Paul needed help. When the light slowly fades to the level of mere summer sunshine, what ideas do you accept or reject? What do you do? Who do you help? How do you help them? This book helps people who want to think things through.

Religion of “Just do Good”.

Boiled down, I tell people to “just do good”. This stance might sound simplistic and easy to do but it is not. To borrow from the chapter on Zen, people are taught this idea since they are two years old but few people eighty years old actually do it. We need help. Many situations are hard to decide. We seek dogma. We are born into the dogma of particular religions and political parties. We are born Christians and Democrats. Some of the doctrine is good but not all. Conniving bad people put bad ideas into our heads so as to use us. We use dogma to fool ourselves to get what we want. So we will not let go of dogma enough to “just do good”. We need help fighting bad ideas and bad people. It doesn't take much space to say “just do good”. It takes many pages to describe the pitfalls and to put up fences around the pitfalls so we can “just do good”.

For major theistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, “just do good” cannot be enough. People not only have to do good, they also have to know right dogma and worship the right God correctly. If people do not also recognize God and worship him correctly, then doing good alone will bring down the wrath of God. For non-theistic religions, Buddhism, some Hinduism, and some Taoism, “just do good” alone is not enough because it does not lead to fully seeing how the world works. For them, in “just do good”, we become part of an illusory painful world of Dharma, karma, and dogma. Both traditional theistic and non-theistic religions are wrong.

I would like people to acknowledge God but I don't insist on it. If doing good is not good then something is badly wrong. If we can place doing good in the context of ideas such as God, then maybe better; but we should work on doing good first and then let dogma follow of its own.

What the Book is Not.

I do not condemn. God, and only God, is the final judge of stances, religions, and people. I am not the final judge. I do assess and criticize.

This book does not show you how to find God, find grace, have a huge religious experience, or find God's love. Other books do that. This book takes for granted God's love but not that you have found it. If you have found God's love already, this book will help you think through what to do next.

This book is not as would be written by a true believer orthodox (standard) Christian. It is not a devotional book. It is written by a moderately smart person who wants to understand with both heart and head.

I am not interested in exposing hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is in all religions, it is obvious to most people, and it has been exposed so well that there is no point repeating. There are more important points. I only bring up hypocrisy when it is relevant in a way that is not usually obvious.

I am not interested in deriding popular religion. Mostly I just leave it alone. People can be gracious and helpful through popular religion and despite popular religion.

Superstition is silly but I don't bother to debunk it. That too has been "done to death". People still believe in ghosts but their belief does little damage except to credit card statements and to the quality of movies, TV shows, and talk. Mostly superstition funds the entertainment industry. Long live vampire love.

The biggest religion in the world is not Christianity or Islam but "spiritualism" or "animism". Briefly, it is belief in spiritual powers, animal spirits, ghosts, mediums, seeing the future, people with hidden power, amulets, etc. It tends to rely on "us versus them". I don't bother with spiritualism except as it mixes with major religions to make popular religion. Spiritualism is false. Spiritualism is not relevant. Intelligent educated aware people should not believe in it.

Popular religion is a mix of spiritualism with the official doctrines of major religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. It is part of all major religions no matter how much officials of major religions argue with it. Rather than the ideal pure orthodox religion of priests and theologians, popular religion is really what most believers follow in major religions. Popular religion, especially the spiritualistic part, is what atheists attack when they attack all religion. I devote one chapter to popular religion.

(Spiritualism-animism typically has the following features: spiritual power such as "juju" or "the Force"; use of spiritual power such as through relics of saints and through "voodoo"; beings that embody power such as spirits, saints, animal guides, demons, ghosts, and angels; adept humans, such as Jedi, Sith, witches, wizards, priests, pastors, imams, and modern-day prophets; people who "tap into" power, cajole more powerful beings, and who speak for powerful beings such as "witch doctors" and shamans; devotion to mid-level "powers" such as saints, leaders, mountain spirits, and tree spirits; and much fear. Animism-spiritualism thrives in major "high" world religions that otherwise officially dislike it. It is how Communism used to work when Communist leaders were deified, such as Marx and Mao. It is how politics actually works now when we expect political leaders to be "close to God" and to work miracles with the economy, weather, and immigration. Spiritualism-animism is big in popular culture; pop stars effectively are little animist-spiritualist adepts.)

Although I love the art and the amazing ideas that come from mysticism, I do not assess mysticism much. It is not relevant to most people. I do assess ideas that have mystic roots, such as we are all part of each other or we all live many lives.

I am not interested in arguing theology such as about the Christian Trinity, the Hindu Trinity, baptism, sacraments, miracles, or non-dualism. Those topics are not relevant to most people and do not affect

much what people do. I am not interested in defending my version of God. I do present my version of God, and hope people find it appealing.

This book is not a text on “introduction to religions”. I explain everything that you need to know here but I do not give a survey of major religions. This book does not repeat the ideas of old stances that are not important to most people, such Stoicism and Cynicism. Sometimes an old stance has a modern version. The 1950s Beats can be seen as a modern version of wandering Cynics. In that case, what is important is the modern version, and that is what I describe.

This book is not as would be written by a scholar. This book is not a pop book by a philosopher looking to reach a wider audience for his-her ideas. This book is by one religious seeker trying to help other similar people.

Bibliography.

Because this is not a scholarly book, there are no citations and notes in the text. A list of readings is at the back. There you can find some support for points.

My Qualifications.

I write as a religious person. I write as a believer in God. Unlike other people who write about religion, I am not a religious standout. I am not a priest, pastor, minister, or monk. I am not a professor although I did teach for about ten years. I am not enlightened. I am not a saint, mystic, arahant, ryshi, bodhisattva, Taoist adept, Sufi, wizard, shaman, vegetarian, vegan, would-be Jedi, or would-be Sith. I have no ability to contact spirits. I have never seen an angel. I doubt there is a spirit world except for God. I eat healthy but love chocolate and ice cream. I love nature but do not worship it. I do some Tai Chi and a little karate but I do not believe in magic dance, magic healing, chi, or “the Force”. I am not pure of heart. I am about as sinful as most of us. I am not a Romantic “bad boy”. My sins are small and boring, and they do hurt other people. I am sorry for that. I do not go to church, mostly because I am lazy, partly because I do not agree with the doctrines, and partly because it is boring. I am comfortable with “churchy” people. I like all people who live their religion in a way that helps people and nature.

I am a Darwinian (evolutionary) anthropologist but I do not write here as a Darwinian or anthropologist. Do not take me to stand for scientists, Darwinists, or anthropologists. Many would disagree with me. The views here are my views alone.

As an anthropologist, I did eight years of fieldwork in Thailand and several years in Alabama, mostly on economics and families. My work did help me with my stances and my religious views.

I have had a life-long interest in religion. I have been reading about religion since I was about ten years old, including non-Christian religions. Although raised a Greek Orthodox where almost all my neighbors were Protestants, my neighbors were always kind. They never pushed their views, they patiently told me about their religion, and tolerated all religion. Thai Buddhists and Thai Muslims treated me with the same grace when I lived in Thailand.

While living in the United States, I have met people from almost all faiths, including nature mysticism, martial arts mysticism, New Age, Right Wing zealotry, atheism, political correctness, and postured indifference. In Thailand, I lived mostly with Buddhist rice farmers and fisher people. My wife and I worked for a year with Muslim fisher people. We met people of many other religions including Hindus who worshipped various gods and Chinese people who respected their ancestors.

All this has not made me an expert, but most experts have little important to say to people like me.

Book Style.

I do not cite from the Christian Bible or any other religious book. I never studied religion so as to preach it to other people; I did not read about religion so as to write another book; I originally read for curiosity and self help; so I don't remember scripture in the way preachers do. I wrote this book long after I had read about religion for other reasons, so scripture was not fresh in my mind. Besides, citing scripture annoys me. You have to get the idea. If you don't get the idea from plain words, waving a citation at you won't help. When you are in the mood, reading scripture from all the major religions is fun and almost always worthwhile.

This book is not an academic book or intellectual book. It is written from experience. I do not comment on any stance that I have not had personal experience with. I have gone down most of the roads, and made most of the mistakes, that I write about. I write about what I know about.

This book is less like a college lecture than like a twelve-year-old boy wondering aloud about God and the meaning of it all. We need a balance between wondering-about-the-world versus work-to-a-purpose. I had some of that balance when I was young, and that is what I am after here.

I refer to American pop culture and to some fun classic books such as by Walter Scott and Jane Austen. I don't do this to show off, boost interest, or because it is trendy. I learned much of my morality from old movies and from TV shows such as "The Twilight Zone", "Star Trek", and "Gun Smoke". That was a good way to learn morality. These days, people are likely to have seen movies such as "Star Wars" but are not likely to have read Plato or Confucius. To make a point, it is best to refer to what people do know. Even if you don't get a pop culture reference, you can still get the point.

Here are some pieces that are fun and that show some main points of the book:

The novels "Waverley" and "Ivanhoe" by Walter Scott

The novel "The Warden" by Anthony Trollope

The novel "Kim" by Rudyard Kipling

The novel "The Way of All Flesh" by Samuel Butler

The movie, "The Invention of Lying" starring Ricky Gervais and an excellent cast

The movies, “The Searchers” and “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance” directed by John Ford

The movie “Blade Runner” directed by Ridley Scott based on a story by Philip K. Dick

The movie, “Scott Pilgrim versus the World” based on a graphic novel

The books “American Jesus” and “God is Not One” by Stephen Prothero

Advice about Reading this Book.

This book is not nearly as long as it might seem. Many chapters have optional material. About half of the first chapter is optional. The second part of the book can be skipped entirely at first reading. The book is not hard to read.

The book comes in four parts: basics, optional philosophical issues, general material on religions, and the assessment of major religions. Read the first part, the first eight chapters, straight through. Chapters Nine through Fourteen are on issues that appeal to academics but bore most people: atheism, self, free will, badness, and picking apart. Unless you like the topics, skip the middle chapters at first. Chapters Fifteen through Twenty One are ideas that appear in many religions, including mistakes to avoid. You can skim for interesting sections. Chapter Twenty Two starts the assessment of major religions. If you want nothing but basic ideas and my assessment of major religions, read Chapters One through Eight and then Twenty Two to the end. Because I anticipate some people will skip around, I have written the chapters to be somewhat self-sustaining and so they repeat material a bit.

The World and God.

In this book, usually the phrase “the world” means “the common world of experience for most people” and-or means “this whole universe”. Sometimes the phrase refers specifically to planet Earth. You will be able to tell by context what I mean. I accept that the common world of experience is very largely true and very largely real. The world is not an illusion. The world does have some illusions but we can figure them out, and most have been dismissed. The only supernatural is God. The real world is as it is and it is not otherwise. We see the real world as it is well enough, especially with a little help from our intellects and our friends.

When I say “God” I mean almost the stereotype, but not a bearded old man: a person, not material and not energy, who is outside the world, sentient, understands morality and beauty, created this world and all other worlds, used the Big Bang to create this world, used evolution to create sentient-moral beings on various planets, sometimes (but seldom) acts on this world, likes his creation, wants us to do well here, and sometimes sends teachers to help us. We can relate to God as we do to other persons. God is not simply male or female but I learned to think of God as “father” so I use male pronouns. Feel free to use female pronouns. I do not draw a sharp line between God, the world as mind, nous, dharma, Heaven, the Tao, spirit, etc. I relate to God as a person, and I cannot relate to those other things as persons, so I think of God as a giant person. I do not think of God as Nature or as the sum total of all. God is distinct from his creation and is more than his creation. God is not merely embodied in the world or identical to all-the-world. My image of God is not fully correct, but I hope it comes close, and I doubt God dislikes it. I

hope he is amused. I assume my God is the same as in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim tradition. I assume the same God was known, a bit differently, in other traditions, as in China and India. You do not have to believe in my God to act well or to benefit from this book. Disagreeing with me does not make you wrong. I do not assume, because there is only one God, all religions are one, equally good, or equal. People can be wrong even when they refer to the same God. Read this book, and then figure out your own image of God and your own ideas about God's relation to religions.

One Apology.

In a few places in this book, among other examples, I use mud slides to show how people have ignored nature when they eat up the world, such as when they cut down the forest to build houses. I wrote these examples before the horrible mud slide disaster in Washington State in March of 2014. After some worry, I decided to let the examples stand. We suffer when we exploit nature. We need to do better. I am sorry for the people who died and suffered not only in Washington but around the world. I do not mean to insult them or add to their pain. I hope they recover as well as possible. I thank all the wounded people for their courage. I hope we learn from their hurt, and we change our attitudes so nobody else suffers and nature does not suffer.