

01 Basic Beliefs

This chapter gives my religious beliefs. The next chapter gives my political values. I use both to assess stances later. No ideas here are new. Many people share my beliefs. The point is not to declare anything new but to state ideas clearly and to build a solid base so people with similar views can feel confident. I repeat ideas, so be patient. This chapter is not as long as it seems. If you want to go straight to my beliefs, go to Parts 2, 3, and 4. Part 5 is optional.

My religious beliefs come mostly from the Hebrew tradition, from Jesus, and from his view of the Hebrew tradition. My political values come mostly from classical Greece, Northwestern Europe, and in particular England. These traditions came together to form one stance. My view is similar to the Western Enlightenment of the 1700s: God, the teachings of Jesus, Western political ideas, and practicality. This stance does not insist that Jesus is God.

I hold these values not only because I was born into them. I have studied other values, religions, and cultures, with a sincere open mind, and still I saw that these are the best values. The values of Jesus and the West made the world better, and did so more effectively than other values. I do not denigrate other views but they are not as good and have not done as much good.

I do not persuade. I don't argue that the world is real, God exists, or we should act morally. I do try to get people out of errors such as zealotry. I simply give my beliefs. If they convince you of some good ideas, then I am glad.

Some Christians dislike my beliefs even though I hold Jesus highly. They focus on the fact that I don't believe Jesus was God and they tend to overlook my other points. In essays apart from this book, I comment on relations of my beliefs with orthodox Christianity. Some non-Christians reject my ideas because I took them from Jesus, the West, Christianity, or any religion. Being assailed from two opposite ends does not mean I am in the reasonable middle and I am correct. Please decide for yourself.

PART 1: Principles.

Where Ideas come from Doesn't Matter; What Matters is Truth and Usefulness.

Where good ideas come from doesn't matter much. Ideas can come from a spill of letter tiles in a board game, evolution, Greek culture, Thai culture, art, science, pop songs, priests, atheists, old spouses, dreams, bad people, and even thoughtful consideration. Albert Einstein got ideas from imagining he chased a light wave, fell off a roof, fell down an elevator shaft, and spun a cylinder. I don't have to know where Hebrews or anybody got the idea of one moral God, Jesus got the Golden Rule, or Thomas Jefferson and James Madison got "We the People".

(Optional philosophical “covering of bases”: What matters: (1) an idea is very likely true, (2) an idea is very likely false, (3) an idea accords, or does not, with other ideas that we take as basic and true, (4) how an idea fits in with general theories about how things work, (5) if an idea might change general theories of how things work, (6) how true an idea is, (7) how we can tell if an idea is true or false, (8) if we can test an idea definitely to see if it is false, (9) an idea is redundant to other ideas, (10) how an idea is useful or harmful, (11) when it is useful or harmful, (12) when an idea is more useful than harmful, (13) we can logically deduce an idea from accepted ideas, (14) an idea explains in simple clear terms, and (15) the use of this idea requires less explanation than other ideas. Often we assess not single ideas but comparisons of ideas and idea systems.)

We should assess ideas by how true and useful they are. Values and beliefs are ideas that we take as true enough to use as basic and to assess other ideas.

My beliefs are basic ideas that I use to assess other ideas, and-or my beliefs are likely true, fit with how I think the world works, more useful than hurtful, accord with historical facts as much as I can figure out facts, and are more so than ideas from other systems.

We should NOT evaluate ideas by: who said them; what culture, ethnic, religion, socio-economic class, gender, or age group they come from; or if they reflect a type such as a rich man, poor single mom, professor, poet, priest, saint, or tyrant. It does not matter that an idea came from anger, love, concern for fellows, patriotism, practicality, sex, greed, conniving, or hate although we naturally pay more attention to ideas that come from good motives.

We cannot “explain away” good ideas or “explain in” bad ideas. “Nothing but” is not allowed. We cannot “explain away” true good ideas by saying they came from some person or motive that we don’t like. A good or true idea from a Muslim, Jew, Christian, European, Asian, man, woman, friend, enemy, lunatic, sinner, or saint, or from love, anger, greed, generosity, sex, or sexism, is still good and true. A bad or false idea from a teacher, preacher, spouse, rebel, marginal group, rock poet, hip hop artist, professor, or our self, or from love or anger, is still bad or false. We cannot say a false bad idea is true and good by saying it came from a person or motive we like, or leads to results that we like regardless of overall benefit. We cannot adopt a false bad idea because it serves us. We cannot stop a true good idea because it does not serve us well or it gives them an advantage. Too many ideas in politics, religion, social life, and social science have been adopted or rejected for bad reasons.

Sometimes it is useful to consider motives and origin in discussing ideas as when we say that a song is typical of a bar band, Western Swing, or teen love; legislation is motivated by desire for ethnic support or business support; a political analysis is typical of man-bashing feminism or right wing backlash; or a vision comes from the Spirit or the Devil. But that practice never means we need not assess an idea on merits and never means we can explain away an idea or explain it in. We still have to use our heads and experience. Using motives and origin to explain away or explain in, and using “nothing but”, are so heavily abused, and so often kill reason, that we should not use them for politics, religion, or social life until we have practiced for decades assessing ideas only on grounds of truth and usefulness.

This stance toward ideas also applies to the ideas of Jesus but people react strongly to the ideas of Jesus and of most religious leaders. People assess according to bias rather than truth and usefulness. Because Jesus offered a unique way of life, played a key role in world history, and began a major religion, it can matter that Jesus was the person who set some ideas into Western culture and world history. First, some people who follow religions other than Christianity, or who dislike Christianity, discount Jesus' ideas. They explain away the ideas of Jesus as coming from the wacky male Jewish (or anti-Jewish) leader of a cult run by poor people, or as "merely ideas of Western males". Second, Christians who worship Jesus as God focus on some ideas that they like and use the status of Jesus as God to validate those ideas, such as that we can approach God only through the Church. They overlook other ideas of Jesus such as that rich powerful people care mostly about wealth and power, or that what matters is what we do for the Kingdom of God. They use Jesus to bolster ideas that came from elsewhere such as the Trinity. We have to seek the truest meaning and best use of Jesus' ideas without regard for feelings about Jews, Christianity, the West, men, and women. What difference it makes that Jesus' ideas came from him emerges throughout the book.

What matters is that we follow Jesus' ideas because they are good, true, work well with Western political values, work well with practicality, and have led people to do great things. In that way, "it does not matter where ideas come from" is still true even with Jesus.

Guessing Well about What to Do.

I don't know the deepest secrets of existence. Nobody else does either, not the most glamorous mystic, highest church person, or strident logical atheist. I have to guess. Everybody does.

We do not guess in a vacuum or only to indulge ourselves. We guess because we have to live, have to use ideas to live, and have to consider the motives of other people. We do know some ideas that are effectively true enough to live by such as that this world is real enough. We make reasonable assumptions such as that persons are real and goodness matters. We infer even if we can't prove, such as that God exists. We accept principles to live by such as the Golden Rule. We use all this assuming and inferring for good guesses about what to do.

Doing matters more than dogma. "Actions speak louder than words". If Taylor officially believes religious zealotry, but never hurts anybody, and gives food and medical care to a child out of his-her group, that counts most. If Chris officially believes the Golden Rule and "love your neighbor" but acts like Scrooge, a racist, or zealot, that is what counts. If Kim says "Green Lives Matter" but allows Green people to kill each other in huge numbers, selective inaction is what matters. If Kelsey shouts "Pro Life" but attacks nurses and confused unhappy women, and never adopts any babies, that matters. If Jo doesn't understand the Holy Trinity or how Jesus saves but helps at a food bank or an animal shelter, those acts are what matter.

People often officially believe one thing but act as though they believe another. Through their acts and words, we can guess at what they really believe, and we can assume what they really believe pushes their acts. Still, we should look first at what they do, regardless of what they say or what we guess about their true motives.

We can act well even if we haven't figured out deepest truth and even if we do not hold rounded logically consistent theories of everything. We can act well even if we are wrong about some things and even if we hold some silly ideas. Monotheists, polytheists, people who are "spiritual but not religious", atheists, spiritualists, animists, nature worshippers, Calvinists, and Roman Catholics all can act well even though they can't all be right.

Theory and practice come together but not entirely together and not equally. What we think and what we do (1) are not the same; but (2) are related; and (3) what we do is more important than what we say. (1) Nobody drives a car strictly according to a manual and the traffic laws just as nobody plays golf from a book. (3) In driving, we act mostly on reflexes and common sense, and we let safety trump the law. (2) Although nobody drives according to a book, still people's ideas (attitudes) influence how they actually drive. Defensive drivers differ from "squirrels" that jump lanes. People who drive to go safely from A to B differ from boys who drive to impress girls, the gang, or the "hood".

Even without knowing deepest secrets, we can still figure out enough to guide us in what to do. You can act well, or at least better. You can "drive" life well, or at least better. If you don't get anything else from this book, you can still get a sense of what to do.

In life as with driving, ideas-attitudes-and-principles do shape our acts. What we do differs if we: (A) hold goodness most important versus hold success is most important; (B) think "I want to do good because it is good" versus "I want to do the Will of God so God will think well of me and send me to heaven"; or (C) think "What goes round comes round" versus "I am entitled and can do no wrong". We guess about truth, theorize, accept or reject authority, and follow principles. Even if we can't know for sure, we would like to know as well as we can. We look at ideas and at acts based on ideas with the aim of holding reasonable ideas and of acting well.

It helps to guess and it is fun to guess. Imagination is one of the best parts of being human. I urge you to guess what the world is all about and what that means for what we do and should do.

When imagining, keep in mind the link between ideas and acts. Think about what you want and about how that affects how you think. It is easy to rationalize. Think how one person shapes what another person thinks so as to guide behavior. Think how other people do that to us, and how we do it to other people.

Don't let bad guesses subvert basic principles like the Golden Rule, and don't let people lead you astray through your needs for imagination and ideas. Stick with simple decent sensible ideas. Don't get caught up in ideologies that make you do bad things or stupid things.

Don't believe people who assert they do know the deepest secrets of the world, whether they are mystic, bishop, monk, atheist, prophet, politician, professor, artist, or rebel. Don't be misled by people who say they know what you should do, who say they are masters of morality. Don't be misled by zealots. Disagree with me. You don't know all about theory and practice but you do

know enough to guess well. This book intends not to give you all the answers but to help you find likely truths, make good guesses, find principles, and feel confident about acting well.

We Need Some Principles.

If we could just act spontaneously, from the heart, and everything worked out well, then we would have little need for religion and government. Sometimes this works among small groups of kin or friends. Sadly, mostly when people do what they want, things work out badly. Even when most people get along, enough people act badly to ruin it all. Even when people act mostly on good motives, enough bad motives arise in everyone. Even when people act mostly on good motives, not all good motives are compatible; and even a small amount of conflict is enough to ruin it all.

Nearly everybody has common sense and a sense of simple decency, and the two senses are similar for nearly everybody. If these senses were enough to get by and to run government, then we would be fine. But even when most people try to act on the basis of common decency, things don't work out as well as we need. Common decency doesn't tell us what to do about terrorists, identity thieves, and thugs. Enough people overlook common decency to do what they want so that they "screw it up" for all of us. All of us overlook common decency too often. All of us twist common decency so that our version becomes not really common decency but excuses, and we do it enough to "screw it up" for everyone. People differ in ideas of common decency enough to cause problems and enough so we cannot base society only on intuitions of common decency. While we can never overlook common decency, we need something more. The fact that human life cannot be based on simply acting from the heart or on common decency is one of the great sad realities of human life.

If all people had mystic insight, the insight guided us in how to act, and everybody agreed on the insight and advice, we could trust mystic insight alone. If all of us were mystic visionary saints and we all shared the same religion, it might work out. But most of us do not have mystic visions; any intuitions that we do have do not give realistic guidelines about how to act; and the intuitions of mystics do not all agree.

If God had given us a clear set of commands that everybody agreed on, we could live by those. The major deistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam claim that God did just that. But even they do not agree on what the commands are or how to interpret them. The commands that they attribute to God are not alone enough to live by. The commands that they offer do give us a good starting point to figure out what more we need.

If (1) God gave us a clear set of principles such as "do unto other people as you would have them do unto you" and "all rules apply equally to everyone", and (2) the principles covered behavior well enough, then that would work. Just as God did not give us a clear simple adequate set of commands, so also he did not give us a clear simple adequate set of principles, although deistic religions do claim that he did that for each of them in particular and did it best for each of them in particular. Jews, Christians, Muslims, and some Hindus each claim that God gave them the best principles, better than other religions. Deistic religions disagree about what the prophets said and about which is the most important message; so they disagree on the principles. We need a more

solid foundation for principles than “I say God said”. We need some criteria for good principles, we need logic, and we need the experience of the past.

If we could get a simple clear full set of principles from logic alone, and people would go along with principles from logic alone, that would do. Once we had the principles from logic, then we could find a way to reconcile the principles with decency, common sense, intuition, commands, and the teachings of various prophets. “Do unto others” and “all rules apply equally to everybody” are two of the best usual candidates that philosophy offers for principles based on logic alone. Logic is one good place to start but, by itself, logic is not enough.

First, we cannot get a full set of clear simple compelling principles from logic alone. Some key principles we can't get from logic alone, such as “work hard to make the world better”, “pay it forward”, “love your neighbor”, and “love your enemy”. We need an outside source of good principles. Logic can be used to help assess principles once we get them from other sources, such as religion, but logic alone cannot originate them.

Second, even when people agree intellectually with principles that have their roots in logic alone, people will not act on principles that are merely logical. People must feel commitment and passion in addition to logic. People don't follow the Golden Rule because it is logical but because Jesus said it and because it makes gut sense after he said it.

Third, even if most people agree with principles-from-logic-alone and act well, too many other people refuse to accept principles-from-logic-alone and-or refuse to act well enough on that basis. A person can accept a logical argument but still not act on the conclusion. Kirk did this to Spock all the time, and men and women accuse each other of this constantly. Too many people do not accept “all rules apply equally to everybody”. Too many people understand and accept “all rules apply equally” as beautifully logical but do not carry it out well. Logic is useful to guide us through what major religions have offered as candidates for good principles but logic alone is not enough without outside suggestions and an added push. Often we get both suggestions and push from major religions and from human experience.

We need a simple clear set of principles that go along well with common sense and the sense of simple decency, accord well with principles that were given us by the major religions, and make good logical sense whether or not we can derive them from logic alone. We need principles that appeal to people, on which people will act, to which people will commit, and by which we can assess what people do and the institutions they make. We need to accept that the principles are basic and have weight. We need principles that can serve as the basis for personal action, good institutions such as charities and schools, and good government. We need principles that we can interpret for varying situations in our changing world. We need principles that we can blend with practicality without betraying the principles. We need principles that can serve as the basis for good modern pluralistic democracy.

I find these principles in the teachings of Jesus mixed with practically and with Western ideas about persons, citizenship, and government. Below I give specific criteria for good principles. Here I just point out that the principles already exist and where to find them.

Other religions, including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism, do have similar ideas. But the principles in those religions that are similar to ideas from Jesus and the West are not as basic in those religions. Other ideas are more important in other religions, such as submission to God and his representatives, enlightenment, dharma-as-social-duty, being a member of a great joyous cosmic system, and a Heavenly Kingdom. Principles similar to those from Jesus and the West do not arise as naturally in other religions. The key principles of other religions have not served as the basis for good institutions and good government in societies that were founded on those religions. Ideas similar to the principles from Jesus and the West have not served to found good institutions and good government in societies that were based on other religions even when those religions had similar ideas.

Luckily, all religions can work with the ideas of Jesus and the West without distorting the religion much. All religions can adopt these principles in their own ways and can make them the basis for their versions of good modern societies. So I do not press hard on the fact that these principles came to be important through Jesus and the West; but I do make the point several times.

Principles are my way to combine simple acts of decency and goodness with a system without letting the system take control. They are my way to mix simple acts of decency and goodness with ideals, practicality, and proven values such as “rule of law”, without forcing everything into a theological or political system. Principles are my way to combine the simple direct insights of Jesus’ stories with practicality, ideals, and Western values. We will see what that means as we go along in the book.

The Principles Have to Feel Holy, and Usually Arise from Religion.

Logic alone does not give us all our principles; and logic alone does not lead people to act well enough even when it supports principles. Besides reason, we need other sources for principles and we need passion and commitment. As people, we have to feel that the principles are our principles and that our principles matter enough to stand on. For this book, and to give good advice generally, we have to find what can lead us to proper commitment to good principles but not lead to zealotry and other badness.

Without going into a long defense, I can fairly say that people need to feel that their principles are grounded in something bigger-than-me, and this bigger-than-me is usually God, Dharma, Tao, Heaven, a god, or the core “force” of a religion. People need to feel their principles are grounded in religion and-or are holy. When people feel their principles are holy, they more likely follow their principles. They more likely follow morality, laws, and rules.

To fully get this point, take away overt religion so we can see how tacit religion still asserts a role. Some people do not feel very religious but still feel democracy is special and we should follow it. They might not know it, but these people effectively feel democracy is holy. Democracy gets its power to govern because democracy is holy in general even if not holy in one particular religion. If people did not feel democracy was holy, they would not die for it. Some people feel this way about Truth and Science. Even atheists feel that their principles are grounded in logical morality,

and logical morality reflects what the universe is all about. In effect, atheists hold logical morality holy. If they did not feel that logical morality represents the universe and so is holy, they would not follow it and would not push their ideas on to other people.

Not only do we need the power of religion behind good principles but often good ideas about morality and human social life came first from religion. People did not get ideas such as “love your neighbor”, “one moral God”, or “live and let live” from abstract thinking but from religion, even if, later, abstract thinking supported the ideas. We need to accept that many good ideas came from religion. This does not mean we need not assess ideas by truth and usefulness but it does mean we should be historically accurate. It means we have to take into account the power that religion has for originating good ideas and supporting good ideas.

Because good ideas often came from religion, and religion provides the power behind ideas, it is hard to separate ideas from one particular religion. Particular religions generate and support ideas, not general religion. If humanity develops a general religion in the future, then we can talk about how general religion supports ideas but, in the real past, and for the real present, we have to see ideas in the context of the particular religions that made and support them. Even general ideas that obviously apply beyond their religion of origin, and were intended to apply beyond their religion of origin, tend to be tied to one particular religion. Although Christians intended the idea to apply beyond the circle of Christians, people think “love your neighbor” is Christian. Although Hindus intended “you are that (those people and those animals)” and “great compassion” to apply beyond Hindus, people still think it is a Hindu idea. People still see “one moral God” as a Jewish idea although it is now the basis for other religions. People think “the Middle Path” is a Buddhist idea although the idea appears all over including Aristotle. People think democracy is a Western idea although it is becoming the common form of government in the world.

People follow ideas better if they think the ideas are peculiar to their own religion. People usually feel that good principles come out of one specific religion, their own religion, and only from their own religion. It is hard for people who come from one faith to feel that the ideas in another faith are holy enough to follow, even when the ideas are really good, and even when, oddly, the ideas are nearly the same in both faiths. People who believe the same ideals about democracy care if we ground the ideals in Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, or Buddhism. Muslims and Jews follow the same dietary laws but feel the laws are different and essentially of their religion alone. Atheists want people to follow morality because it is rooted in their logic and not because it comes from Krishna or Confucius even if the points of the morality are the same.

People want other people to follow not only the same values and morality that they do but also the same religion. This conflict can be resolved but it is not easy.

In the modern world of plural democracies, we still need religion to get our principles and we still need religion to back our principles but we cannot use any one particular religion and there is no “general religion” to which particular religions can assent. People live by particular religions from particular groups yet different groups have to live together, each particular religion has to support democratic values, and people in each particular religion have to feel that democratic values are

congenial to their particular religion. Overcoming this dilemma is a big task of the modern state. This conflict appears again throughout the book.

We have to figure out the relation of religion to principles. We have to figure out how to use the feeling of religion to back the right principles without leading to abuses.

Usually as children, we get our principles along with our religion, and our principles are backed by religious authority, so we feel bound to work with the principles that we inherit even if not all of us fully understand them. Religion works with moral values to give power to get people to act well enough, usually beginning when they are children.

As long as the principles are correct enough, then things could work out well, even if most of the people don't fully understand the principles.

Correct-enough-principles-not-always-deeply-understood-but-widely-followed worked fairly well when everybody was of the same race and religion. In an old agrarian village, people could find a set of principles to live by, and the principles could accord well with decency and common sense. In the modern world, this accord is hard to find because people of various religions and stances have to live together, and people hold to the literal words of religions. The old life of everyone going along with common principles even when we don't all personally understand them is what many people wish for in our modern complicated vexing world.

Unluckily, when taken uncritically in a heritage, now for the modern world, too often principles are not good enough, and they are often not well understood, but still widely followed. Tradition can work against us. Even tradition that once was good can work against us now. People denigrate ideas even when they know the ideas are good because the ideas came from another religion and another group and did not come from our religion and our group. People support ideas even when they know the ideas are inferior because the inferior ideas came from our religion and our group and the other better ideas came from another religion and another group. Modern religious zealots deny principles such as the equality of women and equality of ethnic groups even when they know those are the truest best ideas because the ideas came from White Christian Western men and women. People deny the idea of one moral God because it came from Jews, Muslims, and Christians. This attitude makes modern plural democracy hard.

Everybody thinks his-her principles are good and are best, but, in fact, people do settle on bad principles sometimes, or at least bad in the modern world of complicated economics, complicated government, international relations, and mixed peoples. Think of terrorists, crusaders, zealots, and thugs. What if the principles are not good although backed by religion? What if principles are downright bad? When people of different religions and needs compete, they likely stick hard to their original ideas, even to poor principles and bad principles.

Luckily, people also do reject bad ideas when better ideas arise. People do accept better ideas. People can change, and do change when better ideas appear, as long as better ideas do not undermine their personal and family success much. People change especially when better ideas can improve the success of their children and grandchildren.

Suppose people adopt new better principles. A leader gets people to see a better way. After people adopt new principles that do work well enough at the time, then their children get born into the principles. Then the situation is as if good principles were always handed down from on high. Thinkers within the prevailing religions find ways that their religion can support “new” principles – or really did support new principles all along but we just didn’t see it. Even atheists find how to ground democracy in logical morality. Then religion gives its validation, passion, and commitment to good principles. Then the fact that principles seem holy is good because it gets people to live by correct principles even when many people do not fully understand. This is happening to new generations now that are growing up in modern plural democracies. I doubt this effect alone will lead to a general religion to which all particular religions can assent but it can provide enough common ground to live together peacefully.

This book is largely about presenting the right principles. I do not try to prove the right principles. I hope I say enough for you to feel the principles and commit to them. Enough good thinkers from every tradition have seen the value of the principles that I present here so that people can accept them without much anguish. If you understand them, agree with them, and feel them, you can try to get your fellows to go along even if your fellows do not fully understand. The best principles can do the job of guiding modern life and can serve as the basis for modern pluralistic democracy if we put them into practice.

I am lucky because I stumbled on the right principles, and I think God endorses these ideas. The ideas are holy enough to live by. I am happy if other religions have versions. I hope we all look into history so we can appreciate where the ideas came from. Most people can believe in these ideas, and can hold them holy enough to act on, even if a person does not ground the ideas in the Judaic God. If the ideas appeal to you, and are important enough to live by, then think about why you hold to them as if they were holy.

PART 2: Essential Beliefs.

This part of the chapter states my religious ideas. Below, and in later chapters, I expand on the ideas. I do not argue for these ideas. I merely state them. Take the ideas here as my assertion of basic principles like axioms and definitions in mathematics.

Briefly.

We should be able to get any religion in half-an-hour. If not, something is wrong. The material in this section is what you could get in half-an-hour. I repeat this material below at more length.

God exists. God made the world and set the rules. God is the only supernatural that you have to think about.

God loves you and wants you to do well spiritually.

Trust God. Love God as much as you can. You don’t have to love God perfectly.

Polioudakis: Religious Stances

After you die, you have to face God.

Be decent.

Do good and avoid evil.

Do the right things for the right reasons. God wants you to do the right things for the right reasons, out of your own choice. God wants you to do good because it is good.

Treat all other people as persons. Love other people as God loves you, as much as you can.

The Golden Rule: Treat other people as you want them to treat you. Act as you want all people to act. Don't do what you don't want other people to do. Act as if all that you do rests on general principles that apply to every person equally. Treat all people as persons just like you regardless of social status, wealth, power, religion, ethnicity, gender, etc.

Work hard to make the world better.

Enjoy life and the world.

Make the world better by making it more fair, honest, just, beautiful, productive, interesting, fun, better governed, with less disease, with less hardship, and more enjoyable.

Be proactive. Pay it forward.

Do what you are good at and what suits you.

Thinking hard is part of doing, so think things through.

Treat nature well. Be a steward of nature. Treat animals almost as if they were persons.

If you have more talent, wealth, power, or energy, more is expected of you.

God considers your problems when assessing you. You are naturally able to deal with most of life's issues but not all.

Don't hurt anybody.

Oppose evil. Fight evil physically if you must. Don't become evil when you oppose evil.

Although God loves you and wants you to do well, the world is not about you. The world around you is not about you. You can play a useful role, if you wish, but that does not make you prince.

God only seldom intervenes directly in the world. It is unlikely that God will intervene directly to help you or your group. Instead, God set up the world so that you can get most of what you want if you try hard. "Knock and it shall open for you". God understands that you can try hard and still fail, and does not hold that against you.

A simple act of decency or goodness often works well enough. Don't get confused by systems. Don't get confused by people who claim to know the will of God and want you to do something that feels bad.

Learn from prophets such as Jesus. Almost everything I say is based on Jesus and his message. God wants us to do good because it is good and Jesus tells us how to do good.

The blend of Jesus and Western ideas changed the world, and changed it as no other man has done. Although his message is not completely unique, this is unique: Jesus' vivid presentation, he really lived it, and he put it in the context of the Kingdom of God. We need to accept all this and think about it. We need to take Jesus and his message seriously.

It is impossible to follow Jesus perfectly and live up perfectly to his ideals. We have to combine ideals with practicality. We have to cultivate ideas and institutions that help us govern well. We have to combine ideals, practicality, and governing well. The ideas and institutions that best support good government are Western ideas and institutions.

Our minds are a gift from God. Use your mind. Science is part of our minds. Respect ideas from science including biological evolution and Big Bang cosmology.

Search for truth. Be open to truth, even if it is not what you expected and are used to. Rely on truth to take you to goodness. Follow the truth. From Jesus, "The truth will set you free".

If you open yourself to the truth, trust God, open yourself to God, and work toward getting better, then you will get better. You will find out about yourself and the world. You will learn how to be better. You will not find heaven on Earth but you will find enough to work on for yourself.

God wants you to love all other people but God knows that is an impossible ideal for humans. Do the best you can. God will understand.

Not everybody is like you and not everybody is good, kind, sweet, honest, and knows God as you do. Most people are fun in their particular ways. Let people be who they are as long as they do no serious harm. Many people do not feel God closely and do not accept the ideas given here, yet do a lot of good for the world, and do more good than harm. Some make the world interesting in ways you could not. Accept that and enjoy it.

Don't try to make everybody the same as you. Accept and enjoy as much diversity as you can.

Some people are hurtful. Reject bad. Reject what is harmful. Control what is bad and harmful. Reject and control bad harmful people. Reject and remake bad harmful institutions.

You do not have to feel like one of God's special children to be a good person and to stand well with God. You only have to do what you can as yourself. If you do feel like one of God's special children, then fine.

Longer.

God created the world, including you.

The world is as it is. There is no mysterious level of reality. There are no secrets. God is the only supernatural that we have to deal with. We are not deluded by any supernatural beings such as the Devil and we are not helped by any supernatural beings such as angels.

A daffodil is a daffodil, flowers are flowers, a tree is a tree, an oak is an oak, a forest is a forest, an apple smells and tastes like an apple, red things look red, some roses are red while some are yellow, the wind blows, air moves, honesty is honesty, cheating is cheating, decency is decent, hot is hot, good intent is good intent, and gravity leads things to come together. Good, bad, pain, pleasure, joy, and suffering are all real enough. We do not live in a bad illusion or good illusion. We can begin with things as they are. The world is real enough.

God is good. Life is basically good. Rocks, trees, plants, animals, water, light, sounds, tastes, smells, sights, talking, stars, thinking, morality, struggling, body, mind, interaction, community, art, intellect, science, and most aspects of the world are basically good.

God wants us to enjoy life

God wants us to take care of the world and life.

God loves his creation, and wants it to do well, including you in particular.

Trust God.

Be decent. Play fair.

Despite its basic goodness, sometimes the world can be a hard place. Some problems are just in the world, such as earthquakes, malaria, and cancer.

Besides the problems that are naturally in the world, people cause other problems, mostly without need.

Don't make life any harder. Don't hurt anybody. Repent when you do make life harder. Make up for it if you can.

Learn from life, the good things in life, your problems, and the problems of other people.

(1) Follow the Golden Rule: "Treat other people the way you want them to treat you." Treat them as you want them to treat you even if they don't treat you as you want them to treat you. Follow the strong positive version of this rule by being proactive in helping. Follow the "negative" version as well: don't do to other people what you don't want them to do to you.

(2) Follow this idea: All rules apply to everybody equally, including you, kin, friends, neighbors, group members, and even to your opponents and to all the "other" people too. When you make a rule, make it as a general rule for everybody. Act as if you follow such general rules. If you want to do something, other people have the right to do it too. If you don't want them to do it, then you can't do it either. I call all this "applies equally".

(3) Treat everybody as a person, as free and valuable in him-herself. Treat everybody as a free valuable person regardless of social status, wealth, religion, gender, ethnicity, age, etc. Treat some animals, and treat nature, almost as if they were persons.

(4) Treat every adult as a free valuable person who can decide about him-herself unless he-she is mentally disabled.

The Golden Rule, the idea "applies equally", the idea of a person, and the idea of the free adult, are all aspects of the same idea.

There are a few exceptions to the four ideas such as that we don't treat children and sick people as we do adults and healthy people, but these exceptions don't undo the basic idea. Differences of ethnicity, religion, sex, gender, age (except children), occupation, socio-economic class, nation of origin, etc. are not enough to undo the basic idea.

(I got the Golden Rule from Jesus' statement of it, how he lived his life, and his stories; I know other religions have it too. I got formal ideas of "applies equally" and "the person" from Immanuel Kant from around 1800; nearly all people have strong intuitive versions. I got "free adult person" from American culture.)

God wants you to do the right things for the right reasons, on your own. He does not want you to do them from fear of punishment or from hope of reward.

We all need help sometimes. We all can afford to give help sometimes.

Actively help. Be more than passive. Be useful. Do more than look out for yourself. Be kind. Pay it forward. Do what you can. Use your full ability. Actively do for others what you would like them to do for you. Try really hard. Cooperate with other people when you can. Forgive.

Include everybody as much as possible.

It is natural to live with, hang around with, and marry, people of your age, gender, religion, race, socio-economic class, place, language, etc. There is nothing wrong with that but you have to overcome it sometimes. You cannot hate and love only according to group boundaries. You

have to be open to crossing boundaries. You have to let other people in on a good thing when your group has a good thing and when letting them in can stand the expansion. You have to help other people build a good thing when they might be able, willing, and ready. You have to make your group the kind of people that others want to deal with, help, and accept help from. You have to help other people get able, willing, and ready to the extent you can. You have to make your group able, willing, and ready for a better way. People cannot erase boundaries but we can accept that they are there so as to overcome them, and we can practice overcoming them.

Not everybody is good, sweet, kind, honest, and knows God. Some people know God in their own way different from yours. Most people don't know God much but they are just as worthwhile as you are anyway. Many people are interesting and fun in their particularity. Even if a person is not interesting or fun, don't look down on him-her. Don't try to make everybody as you wish you were or you wrongly think you are. Some people are bad and hurtful. You should control them so they do no harm.

We can, and should, work hard to build a continually better world.

The more ability, resources, time, and energy you have, the more you personally have to give.

Decent people are a particular joy and are particularly useful.

You cannot try beyond your ability. You are responsible for trying hard but you cannot carry the world by yourself. All you can do is all you can do. If we accept this idea, usually we can a lot more than we thought we could. God made the world. In the end, God will decide what to do with the world.

Idealism is not enough. We have to mix idealism with practicality and with knowledge based on real world experience. We can do this.

Common sense practicality is not enough. We have to mix common sense practicality with ideas of good government and with good institutions. The best ideas of good government and the best institutions come from the West.

Usually a simple act of goodness or decency is enough without the need for a system. Don't get misled by systems and by the desire for power that lies behind many systems.

We should forgive but we don't have to tolerate repeated hurtful behavior. We should not enable bad behavior, hurtful behavior, or bad hurtful people. To do so only makes it worse. We would not want other people to enable badness in us, so we should not enable it in others. The Golden Rule requires us to really help people, not to give them what they want. Sometimes helping them means telling the truth about bad situations and it means not giving.

Zealotry is usually hurtful.

Don't intervene when not really useful. Don't be a busybody.

When you see you are wrong, stop it now.

Assess yourself, the world, nature, your country, your ethnic group, your religion, the economy, and the people around you. Don't do things, don't act any particular way, just because they tell you to. Go beyond your group.

Use your abilities, time, and effort as best you can to do as much good as you can. Don't waste yourself or the world.

Don't misuse your abilities on zealotry when your real purpose is to make yourself feel righteous, justified, saved, and smug. Even when the cause is good, you are wrong. If you crusade against abortion to make yourself feel justified and smug, then, even if abortion is bad, you are wrong. If you crusade against business and to save nature so as to feel good about yourself, then, even though nature needs help, you are wrong.

If you feel the call of a cause, then go ahead and pursue it vigorously as long as you do more good than harm, do not act immorally, do not act because it makes you feel righteous, and do not enable badness. Commitment to a cause led to a free America. Commitment to later causes led to freedom for all people in American including women and gays. Commitment to a good cause can be a good thing.

Oppose evil. Fight evil physically if you have to. Sometimes you have to bear the burden of fighting evil so that other people can lead decent lives. Don't become evil when you oppose evil. Zealotry often leads to becoming evil even when it begins by opposing evil.

There is no magic formula. We all make mistakes sometimes. If we trust, let go of fear, and use common sense, usually we can get along well enough.

Some people are exempt from working hard to build a better world and from enjoying the world, such as people who are physically ill, mentally ill, persecuted, quite poor, in jail, or oppressed. God understands. Sometimes you help the world best by helping yourself first. Sometimes the best you can do is to get by from day to day. Do what you can when you can.

Science is correct. To respect science is to respect a gift from God.

Search for truth. Be open to truth, even if it is not what you expected and are used to. Rely on truth to take you to goodness. Follow the truth. From Jesus, "The truth will set you free".

If you open yourself to the truth, trust God, and-or open yourself to God, and work toward getting better yourself, then you will get better. You will find out about yourself and the world. You will learn how to be better. You have to do most of the work yourself but the work will get done. You will get some help from the world and from other people. God might give you a little help but will not do it all for you. You will not find heaven on Earth, you will not solve all your problems, and you will not save the world, but you will find enough so you can work on the world yourself.

God can forgive a lot and God can make us see that past bad deeds do not have to drag us into deep depression. Past bad deeds need not be a barrier between me, other people, the world, or God. It helps to overcome past bad deeds if you work toward atoning and being better.

Although God loves you and wants you to do well, the world is not about you. Not even the small world around you is about you. You can play a role, if you want, but that does not make you the prince of any world.

God rarely directly intervenes directly in the world. It is very unlikely God will intervene directly to help you or your group. Instead, God set up the world so we can find almost all of what we need if we try hard. “Knock and it will open for you”. “God helps those who help themselves”. God knows that some people try hard but still fail, and he does not hold that against you.

Religion and stances should be free of any hurtful dogmas, support for bad acts, and support for bad commitments.

Prophets are people who are particularly adept at reminding us what God has in mind. When we find a prophet, we should pay attention. Jesus was an important prophet. Other prophets include Moses, the other Jewish prophets besides Jesus, the Buddha, Chuang Tzu, Mohammad, and the great writers of India. We don't have to believe everything every prophet said.

When you die, you have to face God. God will be more inclined to mercy and education than to stern justice. Still, if you did not use your abilities while here on Earth, or if you did evil, God will be stern with you. God will not punish people who were sick or oppressed.

People do not have perfectly free will in all situations. We have enough free will most of the time to make the right choice. We can decide to be decent, follow the Golden Rule, work hard to make the world better, and mix practicality with idealism.

Often we face a tug between doing the most good we can imagine versus simply being what we are naturally and doing as much good as we can as our less-than-ideal selves. We face a tug between some unrealistic saintly ideal that is “not who I am” versus doing the best I can as who I really am. Usually it is best to be yourself and to do as much that way rather than try to force yourself to play the saint. Trying to force yourself to be a saint backfires. Most people can't be Mother Teresa; too often they do more harm than good when they try; and they usually paralyze themselves with guilt and do nothing at all. Do what you can. You are not required to save the world. It is not a good idea to go against yourself even in a good cause. If your nature is to be an engineer who helps build houses for the poor once a month, and you don't want to devote your whole life to working in the slums, then be that engineer. Be who you are, and do goodness as that person. But don't forget to actually do what work you can. You can't use “that's not me” as an excuse not to do anything but only gratify yourself.

If your nature is to do bad things, then stop yourself. If you can't stop, then kill yourself. Expect other people to stop you.

Originally Jesus said to “love your neighbor as yourself” and to “love your enemies”. We should try to love other people as God loves us. We do not try to love other people simply because God loves us but because it is good, just as parents do not love children simply because their own parents loved them but because it is good. God loves us because it is good, not because it is his duty or because it will get him to heaven. We should use God’s love as a model, just as we use the love of good parents for their children as a model in our love for our children.

Jewish teachers, including Jesus, said that the two most important commandments were to love God and to love our neighbors. From that basis, come all the ideas about good in the Hebrew Tanakh (Old Testament) and come all the specific laws. For convenience, to this wisdom, I add that everything we do rests on the Golden Rule of “act toward other people as we want them to act toward us”.

If you can really love all your neighbors as yourself, and can really follow the Golden Rule, then good for you. You are a much better person than I am. I know what Jesus was after, I see his idea clearly, but I cannot do it. Most people cannot do it. You don’t have to succeed fully at it to do the right thing and to please God. You don’t have to be perfect. If you work on the Golden Rule and “applies equally” then you will approach the ideal of “love your neighbor” and “love your enemies”, and eventually you will feel the idea behind the slogans. Even then, likely you won’t succeed fully. You don’t have to succeed fully. If we try to force ourselves to love our neighbor as ourselves and to love our enemies without first feeling the idea in our hearts, then we freeze, don’t act, get confused, disappointed, and bitter. We do worse than if we simply tried to follow the Golden Rule and “applies equally”, and we didn’t expect perfection that way either. If we hold “love your neighbor” and “love your enemies” as ideals but we don’t expect to achieve them for a long time, we will be better off and the world will be better off too.

Jesus taught other ideas that cannot be recounted here. I urge you to read the New Testament, especially the Gospels, and to read material from all the great teachers and religions.

PART 3: Elaboration on Some Points.

The Golden Rule, Persons, and Political Values.

The Golden Rule strongly implies we are all equally persons and equal under the law. It supports Western ideas of free equal persons with rights and responsibilities. It supports Western political values. At the same time, it does not deny social distinctions and personal differences. Parents and children are not the same; students and teachers are not the same; and police and ordinary citizens are not the same; yet we know what to do in the contexts of those relations and still follow the Golden Rule. I return to the Golden Rule in the next chapter on my political values.

Orthodox Christians Don’t Like This.

My beliefs depend on morality, and I see Jesus as the most important moral teacher. Standard orthodox Christians don’t like this view. They like seeing Jesus as the key moral teacher in world

history but they dislike seeing him as primarily that. To them, Jesus is God, and his mission is to save us. Jesus saves us through his Birth here as God-and-Man, Death, and Resurrection. His life and teachings help. Exactly how Jesus saves in these ways is a mystery but the fact that we don't understand does not diminish that he does save and he does it in these ways.

I disagree. Jesus' teachings are more important than simply his Birth, Death, and Resurrection – even if he really is God and was resurrected. What matters is following his ideas. I went through these issues in another book (“Jesus for Most People”), so I don't dwell on them here. We don't need to settle them to get what I say. See my essays apart from this book.

For books that give the orthodox (standard) Christian view, see the Bibliography in my book on Jesus, or the Bibliography here. For a modern orthodox Christian scholar whose work is well written, not too technical, accessible, and seems to be sound scholarship, read Wayne Meeks. Read the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church or any major church. Roman Catholic writers offer short versions of the Catechism. Most catechisms are available free online. Read Gilbert Keith (G.K.) Chesterton and Clive Staples (C.S.) Lewis. Watch religious channels and religious shows on TV – they are not all silly. Old American Christianity is not really standard orthodox Christianity but most people don't know the difference. They are close enough to say: one way to know standard Christianity, as people show it by living it, a way more fun than preachers, professors, and priests, is to hear American country music and “Gospel” music. Start with small doses. I suggest the Louvin Brothers, Gospel music of Elvis Presley, and collections of classic Gospel, both Black and White. You can get the values from classic Western TV shows such as “The Rifleman” and “Bonanza” but the values in those shows are well mixed with non-standard non-orthodox values similar to mine.

Simply Having a Relation with God and Jesus.

At least since 1900, Protestants have boiled down Christianity to having a personal relation with Jesus. Hindus do much the same in personal devotion to a god or avatar. I don't argue whether this Christian devotion is enough on which to base standard Christianity. I use the idea to make two other points.

First, after you have a personal relation with God, Jesus, Allah, Krishna, Mohammad, Buddha, a bodhisattva, or an avatar, then what do you actually do? You still have to act in the world. Your personal relation will color how you act but you still do have to act. For that, you need principles. You do not get all needed principles only from your personal relation with Jesus – various people who have a relation with Jesus claim to find different principles on the basis of the relation alone – they can't all be right. Besides a personal relation with Jesus, you need the best principles and need to know how to combine them with practicality. In the end, if you find the best principles, you will act on the basis of the ideas here. For acting in this world, principles matter as much as a simple personal relation with God, Jesus, or any figure. If God wants you to do the right thing for the right reasons in this world, then you had better get your principles straight as much as you get your personal relation with Jesus straight. (Some people who know the need for principles even after a personal relation with Jesus claim their church alone gives them the principles. I do not assess this claim much but I do not think it is enough and I ask you to think it through.)

Second, when you see that you need the best principles, think where they come from. If you are not Christian, likely you will not credit Judaism and Jesus, but instead credit your heroes. After crediting your favorites, think how their principles go along with the teachings of Judaism, Jesus, and the West. If you are Christian, open your eyes to how many of your principles came from the Hebrew tradition including Judaism, and from Western values even apart from formal Christianity. Think how Christianity merged the ideas of Jesus with ideas of Hebrews and the West. Recent champions of Christianity, even deeply versed in Western tradition such as G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis, don't do this enough. They credit the Church only while slighting Plato, Aristotle, and Locke. In any case, be honest about what principles you really use and where they really came from. I like to find the roots of good ideas in Jesus but to find them only there is to hurt Jesus as much as never finding them there.

Knowing God and Being a Good Person.

The Proverbs say fear of God is the start of wisdom. Believers say: if you really know God, Tao, Dharma, Heaven, Spirit, Nature, the Universe, etc. ("God etc."), the knowing necessarily changes your life and makes you better; and you cannot be really better unless you do know God etc. I hope people wake up to something bigger than their selves, especially they wake up to God and Jesus, and that this feeling does make them better.

Yet I did not write to make people know God and Jesus in that way. I do not intend to set people on fire for God etc. either for the feeling itself or to use the feeling to get something else. I want people to think about principles and stances.

Some, but not all, religious people who want others to know God etc. as they do; in fact, really they want to make others just like them, want others to believe as they do, or want to control others. That is a reason why we "others" resist believers who say they know God etc. Although bad motives are annoying, put them aside for now. Focus on the issue of acting well.

The feeling of knowing God etc. alone is not enough, not needed, and can be confusing. The feeling is not by itself a guarantee that it is correct, no matter how strong and clear it is.

People who say they know God etc. (1) don't always agree on what God etc. is; (2) don't always agree on how to act better; (3) don't always keep up the feeling; and (4) don't always act better even when the feeling lasts. (5) Some of them do use the idea of knowing God etc. as a tool. People who claim to know God etc. often say: (6) people cannot think out principles and act well without first feeling God etc; (7) people who lapse didn't really have true feeling for the true God etc; (8) anyone who acts badly never had the true feeling for the true God etc; (9) our group does have the true feeling for the true God etc; (10) anyone who disagrees with us on an important point has a wrong feeling and-or the God etc; and so quite likely (11) we are the only group with the true feeling for the true superior being. Academics do much the same with their pet theories, would-be rebels with their pet social fringe, art consumers with their pet art, atheists with not-God, and politicians with their pet ideologies and projects.

In contrast, I have seen good people, who only dimly have this feeling about God etc, yet still do the right thing for the right reasons, not from fear or from hope of reward. Knowing God etc. did play a role in their good acts but not the only role or biggest role. I have seen people who have the true feeling by all the plausible standards of their church, aimed at the right God etc. of their faith, yet still act badly. You can be on fire for God, and backed by the church, yet still act badly. I have seen people act well, of various faiths, who differ about God etc, both with and without a fiery feeling of knowing God etc. In the New Testament, demons know God, what God is, what God wants, the right things, right reasons, and who Jesus was, and demons know all this more than any mere human, yet demons still act badly.

To find principles and act well, it can help already to have a feeling for God etc. but the feeling does not have to be the full-blown fire of certain knowing. A feeling of knowing God etc. is not even necessary. People can think about principles adeptly and can act well as long as they see that some ideas and acts are better and some worse, that is, as long as they take morality and practicality seriously. They do not have to link better and worse directly to God etc. Later, people can think about relations between principles, acts, morality, better, and worse to God etc. Forcing people to know God etc. so that they think clearer and act better rarely works. If we get people to think clearly about principles and get them to act better, they are more open to questions of God etc. See the chapter on atheism.

People who do not have the feeling of knowing God etc, see that the feeling alone is not enough, is not needed, and leaves us open to error, so they get confused. Even people who do have the feeling, when they see that other people who claim to know God etc. don't agree or do act badly, get confused. People who seek to know God etc. without first setting a base for right thinking and right acting almost surely get wrong feelings and get confused.

God is happier with someone who does not have a spectacular feeling of knowing him but acts well than with someone who does know him but acts poorly. God is happier with someone who does not have a spectacular feeling but tries to think it all out, and does as well as he-she can, than with someone who does know him but acts poorly.

If the feeling of knowing God etc. is not enough, not needed, often a tool, and can confuse, rather than seek the feeling first, or rely on it alone, it is better first to seek right principles and acting well. Let the feeling take care of itself. That is what this book does.

People need not burn for God etc., and can have a different knowing of God etc., without lapsing into vacuous "all paths lead to God", bad relativity, bad moral relativity, idolatry, bad dogma, bad ideology, and perversion. Knowing God etc. does not always stop those mistakes. Sometimes good comes even from Samaria and Galilee.

Likewise, not everyone who feels God etc. is conniving to turn you into a zombie. Not everyone who feels God etc. is bad. Most are good. People who love God want you to have the same feeling because it is the best ever, much the same as you might want them to love democracy, Shakespeare, the Beatles, or modern tech. They are bad when they insist only their feeling and

their ideas of God etc. are true and their feeling and ideas must precede acting well. Practice telling apart good ones from bad ones.

If you know God etc., I am glad. You are lucky. Help people without trying to make them as you are. Give them a solid foundation in ideas and acts. Let them think their own way to right ideas and right acts when they can. Let “knowing God etc.” blossom in them as it will.

To insist, as I do, that Jesus had the right principles, and he set the right ideas into the world, is NOT to say we must feel Jesus as some Christians say we need to know Jesus-and-God before we can know good principles and can act well. Here, I present principles and, at the same time, say who set them into the world. The combination of principles and history should help people appreciate Jesus and the West. The combination need not make people feel Jesus-as-God in the same way some Christians know Jesus. If it does so for you, fine; you need to consider your relation to Jesus or your role in a church. If the combination does not do that for you, then it might lead you to think how one person, Jesus, could set the principles into the world, what that fact implies about human nature, implies for the reality of God, for the character of God, and for what God wants of people including you.

Sometimes people feel God etc. on their own, without prompting, and without much context to make the best of the feeling. People can know God etc. even if they are not of your religion and church, or any religion or church. They need help to make the best of knowing God etc. by putting it in the right context. The right context is not always you, your belief, and your group. My first impulse is to show them art and cosmology, then to show them the implications of knowing God for how we act toward people, nature, and the state, and to see that we need right principles too. If you do come to know God etc. on your own, remember: Your task is only starting. Soon you have to figure out what to do, why you do it, and what works in this world.

People who feel they know God, and know they also need principles, often go to their religious organization (church) for advice. They blend feeling with reason by going to the storehouse of reason in their church. I have nothing against this way. I get a lot from religious writing. But often the church is not enough. Churches are not always right. Sometimes we need more even than an old church with a good record. I cast my net widely and I ask God's help in finding right principles wherever I can, including Jesus, other prophets, philosophers, and artists. The fact that I rely on Jesus so much does not mean I find principles in a particular Christian Church or the general Christian Church. My reliance on Jesus partly reflects that I was born into the Christian tradition but more so it reflects the end result of long search and sifting.

If you want to know God etc, or you might be getting to know God etc, here is not the place for me to give much advice. I hope to write apart from this book. Here are a few words: At first, stay away from people who are strong for or against God etc. American culture either extols “God etc. fearers” or makes fun of them; and so you have to search despite the culture rather than with its help. Don't take the attitude of neutral jaded normal people who don't really know God etc. much. Don't suppress the feeling. You can blend feeling and reason, and should. If your friends are true, they won't make fun of you for seeking. Check out groups such as Christian churches, New Agers, Taoists, etc. but don't get “socialized” into a group for at least a year. A role model is good

but modern role models of all kinds have been so polluted by wrong ideologies that likely you have to avoid obvious role models. Find simple decent good people who act well, as if they know God etc, but they don't make a big deal of it. Our times devalue simple decent good people but they are still around. They appear in all groups. Don't hold against them their lack of worldly success or strong worldly success. Read from many sources. Novels, poems, history, and even social science can work about as well as religious material. Don't confuse knowing God with social action, ecological action, rebellion, or right wing backlash. Don't confuse knowing God with any conservative ideology, liberal ideology, political creed, or art movement. Don't confuse God and country. Don't be a bad zealot. Again: Your task is only starting. Soon you have to figure out what to do, why you do it, and what works in this world.

Please keep this section in mind for later chapters on "waking up". We need something concrete to wake up to beyond the glorious feeling of knowing God etc. We need to wake up to the right things, especially right acts and right principles.

Some Basic Criteria for a Good Religion and Good Principles.

A religion should make sense to almost everybody even if not everybody agrees. The religion should rest on basic principles. The principles have to follow some criteria.

(1) The principles should be clear and simple. Almost everybody should be able to see the basic principles.

(2) The principles should go along with basic decency and common sense.

(3) The principles should inspire, that is, they should be somewhat unrealistic and idealistic, or they would not be principles. They should show us a better world.

(3) Yet the principles should seem reasonable, both in the sense that they are moderate and in the sense that we can discuss them and their applications.

(4) The principles should give the basis for realistic acts even if not fully realizable perfect acts. People should be able to act in the real world toward the principles according to their situations as best as they can.

(5) We should see how to combine principles with practicality, without undermining the principles, even if we cannot fully meet the principles.

(6) The principles should support specific ideas about acting well in this world, and should support concrete acts toward good goals, even if the goals cannot be fully met. For example: making the world better by writing clear simple math books, by supporting good schools, supporting modern democracy through finding the facts about corporate welfare and personal welfare, by building houses for the poor with your own hands or your own money, or fighting evil. Principles should not merely say "believe to go to heaven" or "believe as we do". Principles should not support a pyramid scheme of "All you have to do is become one of us".

(7) The principles should support good institutions and government.

(8) The principles should be accessible to normal people. Nearly all people should be able to see the principles well enough, and be able to act well enough on the basis of the principles - even people who are not geniuses, saints, mystics, or half-crazy zealots.

(9) The principles should let us feel we are a part of something bigger than us and we can get along with the something bigger.

(10) At the same time, the principles should lead us to feel that, even though there is something bigger than me, I still matter as an individual, all individuals matter, and most of the specific bits of the world matter.

(11) The principles should never lead people to act badly such as to oppress neighbors or commit terrorism.

You should not have to be unusually smart to get the ideas of a religion or to act on the basis of its ideas. Feeling part of something bigger than yourself should not also make you feel tiny and worth little, and should not leave you open to bad ideas and people. Feeling part of something bigger than yourself should not make you feel gigantic and better than everybody; it should not make you the hero of your own system. Religion should not require a complicated vast system in which you fumble through as an obscure part or hope to blaze through in glory. You do not have to understand how the world works on the highest level to see the ideas and what you should do. You have to act well although you cannot be perfect. You do not have to be a saint to feel you are smart enough and basically good enough. Using the basic principles, you should be able to evaluate other ideas, and reject bad ideas - no matter how clever. You should be able to reject bad visions, bad systems, and bad instances of the "Word of God" when they disagree with the basic principles of a good religion, simple decency, and common sense. If you are smart and can see better than other people, then you should use your talent to explain to other people.

These criteria are why I follow the teachings of Jesus mixed with practicality and with Western ideas of citizenship and good government. They meet the criteria. With them, we all can imagine a better world even if we are not sure how to get there. We all know well enough what is going on, and have a pretty good idea what to do. We all can do something unless we are in a terrible situation. We all can act well enough to feel good about meeting God even if we are not perfect and do not expect to live forever on easy street. Some of us also have a good intellectual grasp of what is going on. You can still know what to do, and do it, even if you cannot intellectualize. We can feel linked to something bigger than us but there is no big system of which we are only an insignificant ignorant part.

It is not always clear what to do but that does not mean we need a complicated difficult obscure religion. The problems with acting on the basis of Jesus' teachings come because the real world is complicated. People make it worse. This does not change the fact that we need principles, the ideas have to serve as the basis for real action in the real world, the ideas have to be along the

lines of what Jesus taught and Western values, have to support modern democracy, and, on the basis of the principles, people can feel they tried hard and acted well enough.

Formal Christianity weaves a big obscure mystic authoritarian system. It gives people confidence only through magic texts, priests, a formal church, and its odd belief system. Judaism and Islam, and often Christianity, rely too much on the arbitrary word of God as explained by people that are often confused and self-interested. Buddhism and Hinduism weave obscure big systems in which only super smart mystics can succeed.

To repeat: All religions can be interpreted to support the key good principles that I offer here and to serve as the basis for modern plural democracy. Many believers are doing that now with their religions. But no other religion came to the basic principles and provided the support as naturally as did the teachings of Jesus mixed with Western ideas of citizenship and government.

Facing God after You Die.

You face God after you die. I don't know for sure what happens then. He talks with you about you and your life. He decides what to do with you next. While alive, if you have a good will and an open mind, and you actively try to help, don't worry. People with the best religious sensibility worry least about the afterlife.

If you want to minimize issues with God after you die, then face what you can face while still alive, and make any amends that you can make while still alive. Admit bad deeds now. Admit them to yourself and in prayer even if you cannot go to the people that you harmed. Admit what good you could have done but did not do. Then try to do some of it while you still have time. If your religion has "confession", then go to confession.

You cannot bargain with God after you die. What he says goes. His "take" on the situation is the only "take" on the situation.

After most people face God, they just disappear like a bubble bursting. Some people who vanish are uninteresting to God. Some people who vanish have just been around a long while and it is time to disappear. I don't believe God promised us eternity; I don't think we can compel him to give us eternity; and I don't think we should try.

God keeps some people around after death for a while. I am not sure why he keeps some people but not others, and I am not sure what happens to people that he keeps. Some might be reborn a few times but not indefinitely. Some people might reside in a place like heaven for a while to rest - but I doubt that heaven is an important alternative, so don't count on it.

You are not rewarded or punished strictly according to your good and bad deeds. If we were, we would all be in trouble. God is merciful. He does not forgive everything, and he does not forgive repeated bad deeds with a bad will. For some people, the best reward is to look back on Earth to see the good results of your deeds, as in the movie "It's a Wonderful Life". For most people, the

worst punishment is to look back to see the bad results of your deeds. I would punish bad people quite severely; I would send bad people to Hell; but, fortunately, I am not God.

I doubt most people are reborn. If you are reborn, you are not reborn strictly according to merits and demerits as in the theory of karma. You are not reborn according to some poetic justice system of karma either.

I doubt that everybody is reborn as often as needed to finally become a good person, to be saved eternally. I disbelieve universal salvation.

You can't affect what God will do with you by worrying about it. God makes up his mind, and that is that. You have to trust God. Worrying is less effective than using your talents here on Earth as well as you can. If you must worry, and most of us must, then use worry to spur your efforts.

Although God likes good people and dislikes bad people, be good for its own sake rather than to please God. You cannot make God treat you well after you die by being extra good while you are alive if that is why you do it. Forget distractions such as salvation, works, justification, heaven, hell, a cosmic ledger of deeds, karma, and rebirth. Just act well according to your better nature.

Some Contradictions.

First, it is a little contradictory, on the one hand, to "threaten" people with meeting God after they die and, on the other hand, to tell them not to think about the afterlife but to live life here as best they can and to do good for its own sake. Do the right thing for the right reasons. On the one hand, people must reckon with God after they die, while, on the other hand, they can do nothing to make sure what God does with them other than what they should do anyway. Do the good thing because it is the good thing. Why? Because God wants you to do it that way. Huh?

Second, you should act well because it is good, and not worry about God. So, logically, if you act well because it is good, then you don't need to think about God. In fact, the idea of God might get in the way of acting well. If you act well because you fear God or want a reward such as Heaven or Salvation, then you act poorly. Likely, you will "screw up". You more likely act well and will do well with God if you can forget about God sometimes.

Third, on the one hand, God loves you, yet, on the other hand, after you die, you might disappear. People who do some good are about as likely to disappear as people who don't do much good or as the people who do some bad. There seems little point to doing good.

I don't feel the urgency of these contradictions but I do see how other people can feel it. The best response I can give is:

Life is a gift of love. The guidance that we get from the prophets is a gift of love. Be happy for what you do get rather than angry and afraid at what you don't get. Use your time to live well and usefully; that is reward in itself. It is natural to "rage against the dying of the light" but rage won't do you any good, and, if rage dominates your life, your life is a waste. You had your time, you

used it as you did, and, when you die, you face up to what you did and who you are. It is not a punishment to be let go after death. It is like an eagle catching a fish and feeding it to his-her chicks, a tree dying and decomposing into the forest that gave it birth, night giving in to day so day can give in to night, the hoot of an owl fading into dusk, or the hoot of a train fading into the dusk. Sooner or later, all of us fade away completely.

It is logically correct that, if we do good for the sake of good, then we don't need to refer to God. That is what atheists say. I still think the idea of God is a good idea, is correct, and useful. If we take morality seriously, then we necessarily open the door to reasonable belief in God and to reasonable guesses about what God wants. It is very hard to be fully moral without also thinking about God. If you wish to prohibit fair belief in God, then you must also give up morality. I choose God and morality, and my choice is reasonable. See the chapter on atheism.

The situation is like an athlete who has trained under a strong coach for the Olympics and is now doing what he-she trained to do. It is like a classical musician who trained under a great teacher and is now performing at Carnegie Hall. It is like a young martial artist who trained under a great teacher and is now in the most important tournament of his-her life, like the movies "Karate Kid" and "Kung Fu Kid". The performance will not be perfect but that is not expected. The teacher will assess the student afterwards but that is not the only thing that counts. The performance counts right now as much as the evaluation after, even when the evaluation is from a master. If you worry about the evaluation later, you will screw up what you do now when you need to do it best. You can look forward to the evaluation not only to hear what you could have done better but to hear what you did right, for improvement, and to know how hard you tried. In the end, sooner or later, every athlete and performer has to give up the game.

One More Contradiction: Simple Decency versus System.

On the one hand, I say a simple act of decency is better than actions stemming from systems. It is better simply to give food to a hungry person than to "give to one of the less fortunate children of God so that you become a virtuous justified saved person and surely go to heaven". On the other hand, intuition is not enough, and we need principles. Yet principles imply a system.

Systems are good and bad. Americans are more sensitive to the bad that comes of systems than the good that comes of systems, and I am American in this way. "Do unto others" and "applies equally to everybody" are simple to see but have spawned thousands of law books and millions of sermons, that is, have spawned systems, and the systems undermine the original good message. Too many simple decent people have been lost in theology and have failed to do the good they might have done. The movie "High Noon" is built around a simple act of decency, a very hard act, by a woman, an act that transcends system.

Once upon a time, Americans thought it was simple decency to have slaves and treat them well; this error was supported by a system; and this mistake also was a perversion of simple decency regardless of system. Many people think it is simply decent to fight when they feel "dissed" ("disrespected"); this mistake is part of a cultural system; and this mistake too is a perversion of simple decency. It is easy for bad people to fool good people with appeals to mistaken decency,

especially if bad people have an impressive system for support. Appeals to systematic “decency” led to rounding up Jews in Germany and Russia and to beating up gay people in America. Any theory invites a system and so invites perversion of decency and opens the door for glib people to “con” simple decent people.

We stray when we trust in systems more than in simple decency but we also stray when we think we personally are fountains of pure decency and we don't need any help, especially not from a system or priest of a system. Self-styled rebels, people who enjoy moral relativity, extol human flaws in themselves and others, and think heroes must have mixed moral character – James Dean, George W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, Han Solo - think of themselves, rebels, and heroes as fountains of decency not despite flaws but because of flaws. Flaws become the source of decency rather than a way to learn about it. In fact, often the best friend of simple decency in its fight against bad systems is a good system and its representatives.

Simple decent people need a framework so they can defend themselves against bad people and against their own mistakes. The best antidote to getting upset over insults is to see people in the right context and to have a solid background for your morality. To stop feeling bad about maybe getting “dissed”, feel good about yourself and your deeds. Get feedback from honest teachers and good decent people. Morality works best when anchored in sensible religion. The best cure for prejudice about any religion, morality, race, gender, age, etc. is a good grasp of (the system of) democracy. The best cures for a bad act born in a bad system are, first, a good decent act; second, principles; third, a good decent system; and, fourth, good representatives of the good system. While there were certainly bad people in Christian Churches, and the Church as a whole has some poor doctrines, the Church as a whole has worked well as a system.

When you feel your situation is wrong, and you are doing wrong, then stop. Try to do the simple decent good thing instead. Then think about what kind of system that sort of simple good decent act belongs in. Think how your system perverted good simple decency, and why people go along with perversion. Seek principles and a system that best support your good simple decent act. Make sure that your system does not have problems of its own, such as glib answers to abortion, choice, welfare, race, war, gender, sexual activity, drugs, and terrorism. Make sure good acts and good principles fit into the system. Try the system for a while, and make up your own mind. Don't look down on other people if they find another system but do criticize them if their systems and acts are bad. This book carries out this plan.

I don't know how to resolve contradiction between spontaneity and system at the level of theory because any theory leads to a system. All I can say is that most people can resolve this issue, in practice, if they take their time and get help from people, traditions, and experience. Learn from your mistakes and the mistakes of others. You can't be perfect, and God does not expect you to be. When you waiver, waiver on the side of simple decency and goodness.

Misleading Religious Goals.

Akin to burying good acts in a bad system is burying good acts in misleading religious goals. God wants us to do the right thing for the right reasons. Doing the right thing for wrong reasons is not

as bad as simply doing bad but still not what God wants. Two wrong ideas vex me even when they lead to good acts. One idea is common in deistic religions such as Christianity and Islam while the other idea is common in dharma-based religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism; but versions of both are in all religions and are in professions such as academia and the law.

In the first error, people do good things to be saved. I am not arguing about “faith versus works”; I don’t care about that. This issue is more basic. If we do good things for a reward, even one as apparently important as salvation, then we miss the mark, we sin in an important way. The best antidote to this misleading attitude is not to think of salvation at all even though salvation seems most important. Thinking about what you need to do to be saved is a kind of selfishness, and that selfishness blocks clear thinking (it would block salvation if salvation were most important). Just act well and salvation will take care of itself. Don’t think about “what must I do to be saved?” Think “what can I do to be really useful?” Don’t think about getting God to save you but instead think about merely serving God as best you can and letting the chips fall. If you believe in God and trust God, then you don’t have to worry about what you have to do to be saved, and you can merely do as God advises. To serve God by doing the right things for the right reasons, and to enjoy his world, is as much of salvation as we can ever hope for. There is no higher salvation. I say this point several times in different ways.

The usual form of this error is not to seek salvation directly but indirectly through justification, and to seek justification through widely-praised semi-heroic acts, such as confessing Jesus, even when your version of your religion explicitly denies that people can earn justification and so earn salvation, and even when your version explicitly teaches that justification and salvation come only through God’s Grace. People do good deeds really so they can feel good about themselves and stand out. This error leads people to crusade against abortion or fight capitalism when they don’t know much about the deep real issues. It leads people to pick fault with the police while ignoring attitudes that make crime rampant in their own group. It leads people to go on shooting sprees. It leads academics to seek fame so they can be justified and saved in their arena.

In the second error, people do good deeds to be a person who is superior, good, saved, saintly, adept, spiritual, aware, mindful, enlightened, cosmic, almost-perfect, getting perfect, educated, artistic, a leader, cool, or many other wrong images of what superior is all about. Almost always, people seek this position in a system that validates the position and seeking. Doing those things makes you a superior person in that system. Instead, in reality, it leads to looking down on other people and nature, and to vanity. Doing good things can help shape our nature and can change us for the better. But acting well does not change us into a superior being. Don’t do good things because they make you better or more perfect; do them because they are good. If they also help make you a better person, that result is “gravy”, and “better” is not “superior”. The best people don’t worry about their rank on a spiritual scale. They simply do good things; they simply do what is needed and what is in their capacity.

As humans, we cannot completely get rid of the needs for justification, salvation, and superiority. We cannot be perfect. We cannot control our minds that way. That is part of the point that I am making. But we can see when we err in these ways, and we can correct ourselves. We can back off and try something better for a while.

Be Sensible.

God likes people to “think outside the box” and to overcome their limitations; but God is not crazy. God does not expect you to do more than you can, or to try so hard that you hurt yourself, fail to do any good, and fail to enjoy the world. God does not want you to bother people by forcing your goodness on them so you can feel better about yourself. If you are physically sick, mentally sick, in prison, in an abusive relation, live in a tyranny, or otherwise hurt, God knows your limitations, and God expects you to work within them. If you are mentally ill, then God knows you have to heal yourself before you can help other people. Healing yourself makes the world better. Some people are not suited to working hard to make a better world, it would destroy them to force them, and it would diminish the world to hurt them. Some people are temperamentally unsuited to the stereotypical call of “God’s social work”. The world is better off if “free spirits” act freely, and they enjoy the world. The world is better off if mystics enjoy the world and commune with God, as long as mystics don’t try to force others to do the same, or think they are better. The world is better off if monks meditate. Some artists both can do their own art and can work to make the world better in other ways too. Some artists only can do their art; and the world is better off when they stick to that. Be reasonable. God is more reasonable than you are.

You can work hard to make the world better through your occupation, as do some politicians, civil servants, teachers, police officers, professors, etc. I think members of “Doctors without Borders (Frontiers)” succeed at both. But don’t fool yourself about this. If your work becomes just work, if you make a lot of money, then you can still help people through your work, but likely that is not the “more” that you know you really should do. As an office holder, if your primary job in office is to get re-elected, you aren’t using your office to make the world better. You are better off giving up your office.

If you live where the government is bad, then working to make your government better is working to make the world better. In some cases, you have to overthrow the regime, as in the American Revolution. If you can’t work to make the government better or to overthrow the present regime, God knows that. I don’t know what God thinks about revolution in general.

In a modern democracy where the government is tolerably good already, you have to work hard to be a good citizen in addition to working hard to make a better world. Working hard to be a good citizen does not count toward working hard to make a better world. Not working hard to be a good citizen does count against you. Working hard to be a good citizen is more than just voting for your party. It means working to understand issues, and voting for the greater good even when the greater good is not in your immediate interests. Not enough people do this. After you are a good citizen already, then you can work hard to make the world better too. See the next chapter on my political standards.

Here is an example of working hard to make the world better by making it more interesting, and it shows that God is sensible: the story of “Le Jongleur de Notre Dame”, or “The Juggler of Notre Dame”. In Paris, a juggler wishes to please God but does not know how. So he goes into the cathedral of Notre Dame (“Our Lady”) where he juggles in front of the statue of Our Lady until he

faints. The statue comes to life, dries his brow, and comforts him. Rather than juggle in front of a statue in a cathedral, I prefer that the juggler give a free performance for everybody in front of the cathedral, dedicate the show to God, juggle until he collapses, then someone carries him into the cathedral, where the statue comes to life to comfort him. But my mind is corrupted by the populist democratic dogma of our age. To their credit, Hinduism and Buddhism have the same sensibility as in this story; but they undermine good instincts with elaborate theology about being a superior entity in a system.

Meeting God Before You Die.

Mystics do not fully meet God while still alive, merge with God, or know they have been one with God all along. I do not doubt their sincerity, their experience, or that they have important things to say. Sometimes they are misled by the power of their experience. Even though they do not know God fully, mystics do have beautiful and interesting ideas, and true mystics rarely purposely mislead other people. If you have a mystic temper, go ahead with it, but do not let it mislead you or cause you to mislead others. If you like to learn from mystics, and you feel it brings you close to God, go ahead as well. Meditate, read books, read poetry, fast, or dance. Don't forget that you have to do something when you are not "in the clouds", and, for that, you need something like this book.

You can partially meet with God before you die. You do not have to be perfect to meet God while still alive. Many people partially meet God in small ways, so the experience does not have to be overwhelming. Every prayer is a partial meeting with God. Every time you help somebody, enjoy life, you meet god. As Jesus said, every time you help any small person or animal, you do it for Jesus – which is the same as doing it for God in this case. Every time you don't help a person or animal, you deny Jesus and God. If your own experience is overwhelming, then go along with it, and try to make some good come of it. Don't demand that other people go through the same big experience.

If you have done bad things, and you want to lessen the impact when you meet God, it is natural to repent, and to talk with God about the issues. It is natural to try to meet God a bit beforehand while still here alive. While this motive is not pure, if it leads to good results, I can't say much bad about it. Understand that you might start out with this motive but end up with other motives, other goals, and other tasks. Those might be even better but a lot harder.

Artists and other creative people do not necessarily meet with God here just because they are creative. Not all ecstasy is a partial meeting with God. Such ideas about the privileged status of art and artists are misleading modern stances. I don't know which acts of creation and ecstasies count as meeting God before you die. I advise not trying to be creative or to reach ecstasy so as to be in a state of grace and to be near God. If you have some talent, then use it, and don't try to get more out of it than it is.

Prayer.

Try to communicate directly with God. In standard terms, try to pray. You do not have to use formal prayers – the only one I ever remember is the “Lord’s Prayer“, or “Our Father who lives in heaven...” I recommend that you do not use formal prayers. Just talk with God. Don’t expect to hear voices back. You can do it anytime, for as short or long as you wish. You can do it sitting, standing, or lying down. If you can only recite formal prayers, do that. If you can’t talk with God, don’t worry. Just act well. If you can’t talk with God now, you might do it later. Even if you never are able to do it, don’t worry. Just act well. If it is easier to talk to Jesus, then talk to Jesus. You can pray for other people, your country, whole groups, nature, and the world.

The Middle Path of Strenuous Focused Effort between Apathy and Bad Zealotry.

The phrase “the middle path” is from Buddhism. The phrase “strenuous focused effort” is from Islam and is my understanding of the true meaning of “jihad”. The underlying idea of “walking the correct middle path of passionate commitment to goodness” is from Jesus and from other good thinkers too. Jihad is the appropriate middle path when we commit to doing good acts in a good cause. Jihad is not usually religious war. It is like commitment to Jewish “mitzvah”.

On the one hand, without committed passion, without strenuous focused effort, we would not have romantic love, the American Revolution, Arab Spring, monotheism, gay rights, the women’s movement, atheism, most science, most engineering, and most business. On the other hand, in the Christian story, zealotry killed Jesus. Zealotry leads to hatred, group versus group, killing, bigotry, and much evil. In the modern world, people adopt zealotry less from belief in the cause but more to feel good about themselves. Even when the cause is good, zealots ruin it, as when zealots ruin pro-choice, anti-abortion, protecting nature, and the free market.

We need the middle path of committed strenuous focused effort. We cannot lapse into apathy or leap into self-serving zealotry. We have to combine reason and passion. That might seem like a contradiction but it is not. People do it all the time. If you don’t do that, you cannot be a good artist, athlete, or business person. For a version that is not silly, see the opening scenes of the Bruce Lee movie “Enter the Dragon”. At least, we have to think about the deep real problems of the world, our country, our group, and our family. We have to think what can be done about deep real problems and what cannot. We have to think about what we can do to make the world better even if we cannot act directly to solve the worst problems. We have to think about how best to use our talents and efforts. If there already is a group working on these causes in these ways, we can think about joining the group. If it slides into zealotry, then leave it. Jesus invited people to do this when he invited them to join the Kingdom of God. People do this all the time. We just need some balance so we can do it properly without zealotry.

PART 4: Jesus and the West.

Jesus as Origin Point.

The good modern way of life, including science and democracy, came from the West out of fusing Western ideas with the teachings of Jesus and with practicality. Although similar ideas appear in many religions, in their modern form, around the world, they come almost entirely from Jesus.

Jesus made these ideas important. He made them into a way of life. He was unique in making them into a way of life and in living it fully. He was unique in changing the world. Without Jesus and his movement, these points would not be important. At best, they might be silly ideals among privileged elites. They would not be the basis for democracy, good government, good citizenship, economic development, the useful way of life that is the key to a good state, and good reformers. We would not have the way of life that flowers into Christmas. We should give Jesus his due. I do not denigrate other religions but I cannot overlook the value of Jesus.

Personal Note.

This story might help. I was raised Greek Orthodox but did not go to church often. When I was about thirteen, I read the Roman Catholic version of the whole Bible all the way straight through. When I was about nineteen, I read the “New English Bible” straight through, including Apocrypha. I have since done the same a few more times, in various translations. Reading the Tanakh (Old Testament) first, I deeply felt that there is only one God, God is moral, and we should not stray into any idolatry. To even think God is not one is bad. When I got to the New Testament, I was confused and scared. I knew of the idea that Jesus is God from Church teachings but it clearly contradicted what the Tanakh said. I inclined to the Tanakh. The New Testament view of Jesus seemed like another Golden Calf. Rather than see Jesus as a person and assess his ideas, Christians turned him into a cosmic principle like an avatar in Hinduism, and so they too often overlook his message. Jesus was the best and smartest person I ever read, or read about, different from anybody; and his message is better than any other message; but that didn't make him God. I put the issue inside to cook. Eventually I had to face Jesus, including the claim that he is God. I learned that the Old and New Testaments were not literally what God said or Jesus said. I have not been able fully to reconcile the Tanakh and New Testament views. I have been able to decide what to do, and I have learned to trust God and Jesus.

Message of Jesus.

Most of the points given above can be traced back to Jesus. Some of Jesus' important ideas that I want to stress are below. If you need facts about Hebrews, Israel, Jews, Jesus, religions of the Middle East, Classic World, early followers of Jesus, or early Church, see the Bibliography here or in my book “Jesus for Most People”. Most points of Jesus' message already were in Judaism and many can be found in other religions. His message is unique not so much in specific points but in commitment, clarity of vision, importance of acting from the heart rather than any ideology, and using the ideas as the basis for a way of life. I do not explain how Jesus came from Judaism, how similar he was to Judaism, or how he differed. Jesus teaches more than I say here. It is not hard to read all of the Gospels; it can be done in a few hours.

1. The Golden Rule: do for other people as you would have them do for you. Act pro-activity. Pay it forward. The philosophical version of the Golden Rule is “applies equally to everybody” and “treat everybody as a person regardless of wealth etc”.

2. The Kingdom of God. See below.

3. God loves us each in particular as individuals. God loves you.
4. We should love other people like God loves us, as much as we can.
5. Trust God, other people, and ourselves. Usually we can do what we need to do if we let go of fear and if we trust. Usually we get what we need to get if we let go of fear and if we trust.
6. Mercy. Show forgiveness with few requirements.
7. The importance of intentions. Here is where we see an emphasis on the spirit of the Law.
8. Treat everybody as a person regardless of wealth, power, social status, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, etc.
9. Include as many people as possible. Include sinners and other marginalized people. This is an intrinsic part of “applies equally to everybody”, the Golden Rule, and “treat everybody as a person regardless”.
10. Act on the basis of ability, to the full extent of ability. Try hard. You cannot do more than that. God expects more from people with greater ability, wealth, and power.
11. There is no magic ritual, formula, set of rules, or set of laws to establish and maintain a relation with God. We must respect laws but we have to trust God more.
12. Non-violence, with few exceptions.
13. Allow other people to hurt us rather than that we should hurt them, even to defend ourselves, our family, what is right, or any property. We should trust God to advance the cause of right if we cannot do it ourselves other than through violence.
14. You should be willing to sacrifice a little bit so that the common good for everybody benefits even more. If you sacrifice a little bit in this way now, you are likely to receive even more in return later as a result of society and life becoming better. But even if you do not, be willing to give up a little for the common good.
15. God is bigger than any ideology, program, law, or theology. God is bigger than evil. God is even bigger than Jesus.
16. God invites you to join the world and to enjoy it if you can. Enjoy it in your own way but do not hurt other people. Understanding that there is a God and he cares about you can be a great joy. Even when we are in distress such as when sick or in prison, we can sometimes take comfort from knowing that God cares about us and can feel joy in the world. If you cannot join and enjoy because your own distress is too much, God still understands and still cares.

17. Individual people are precious. Your integrity as an individual person is the most precious part about you, more precious to you than all the world. Following the above points helps you to maintain your integrity. Failing in any of the above points can undermine your integrity. You can call your individual integrity your “soul”; but Jesus probably did not think of individual integrity, and even of the soul, in the same ways that the modern Christian term “soul” conveys.

18. If you understand all of Jesus’ the message, then sometimes you can cut through silliness, personal problems, ill will, clinging, setbacks, and handicaps of yourself and the world to a sudden insight.

I learned Jesus’ message more indirectly from his parables and actions than directly from his declarative teachings.

I don’t know if people behave better when they act along the lines I listed or when they do what they think they should do as part of worshipping a god, that is, Jesus. I know I do better when I follow simple truth without folderol, when I act according to what I set out here. I suspect many readers of this book are like me. I suspect people who stress the worship of Jesus as God are likely to waste a lot of energy doing that instead of following his message.

If Jesus, as God or demigod, came back tomorrow to set things right, and he was really angry at me for not worshipping him as God, but still he did right by other good decent people who did the right thing as well as they could, then I would be happy with that result. It doesn’t matter what happens to me as long as God does right by good people, even if Jesus is God, and even if he gets angry at me. The satisfaction of knowing that Jesus did well by good people would more than make up for what happened to me. No true good God could do anything else but be good to good people. Feeling this way is enough to lead me to act right by what I think is truth rather than by what awes me, scares me, or tempts me, from somebody else’s theology.

The Kingdom of God.

Jesus intended some ideas differently than his immediate followers understood him, as the early Church understood him, as standard Christianity understands him now, and as modern people understand him. We have to try to see as Jesus did. We have to go along with him as much as we can. If we disagree with him, we have to accept that problem, and make of the total situation what we can.

Jesus understood this by the “Kingdom of God”:

-Israel would be free of political control by any other state or ethnic group. Israel would not necessarily dominate other nations but no other nation could dominate Israel, and God would aid Israel in case of any conflict.

-God would run Israel. Israel had two governing authorities (other than the Romans), which were not entirely distinct: the Temple priests and the aristocrats. Likely God would run Israel through the Temple priests with the cooperation of the aristocrats.

-Other nations would look up to Israel for moral, religious, and political guidance. Other nations would acknowledge God as the one god, and acknowledge the special relation of God with Israel. Other nations would not feel lessened by being under the dominion of God and the leadership of Israel but would be glad.

-War would end, at least as concerns Israel but probably everywhere.

-Social injustice would end. Some wealth and power differences would continue but no person would be injured by them. Everyone would have a chance. Nobody would fall into hardship through the conniving of another.

-Most disease and poverty would end.

-The Devil would be defeated. The main sign of the defeat would be the end of social injustice. If social injustice persists, the Devil is not yet defeated.

-it is not clear if Jesus expected a resurrection of prominent Jews of the past such as Abraham, Moses, David, and Elijah, and/or a general resurrection of all Jews, or no resurrection. He did not make a point of it.

-It is not clear if Jesus expected himself to be resurrected in case he should die before the Kingdom came fully, but probably he did.

-People would not die anymore.

-People would be transformed to be more spiritual than they are now but not to lose their physical bodies entirely.

-It is not clear if Jesus expected people to continue to feel sexual desire, get married, and have children. I think not.

-People, especially Jews, would change their thinking and behavior to accord with the new way of life of the Kingdom. They would change in accord with Jesus' message as above. This is the most important point about the Kingdom.

-Jesus expected to be the major instrument by which God would start the Kingdom, and he expected to play a major role. He did not expect to be King but he probably expected to be the major prophet speaking to the Temple priests.

-Anybody who followed Jesus and acted as if the Kingdom were here would already be in the Kingdom and would be like Jesus as an instrument that brought in the Kingdom. Followers would change their behavior to be as if they were already in the Kingdom. It is not clear if their bodies would change before the full coming of the Kingdom. Followers both already lived in the Kingdom and brought it in for other people. This is the second most important point.

-All Jews would participate simply by being Jews. It is not possible that any Jew would see the changes and not wish to participate fully as a good Jew.

-The Kingdom was primarily for Jews. All of Jesus' original followers were Jews. Non-Jews could participate as much as they accepted God and the leadership of Israel. They did not have to convert to Judaism, but, if not, some benefits were not available, such as close communication with God through Temple priests. I am not sure what all benefits were available or not available to non-Jews. Non-Jews could fully belong by converting to Judaism.

-If any non-Jew did not fully accept all changes, he-she would be excluded. It is not clear what exclusion meant but probably it meant social ostracism, isolation from God as had happened to King David, and then death without possibility of resurrection.

-There was no Hell in the Christian sense.

Beneficial Early Church Modifications of the Message of Jesus.

If you know traditional orthodox Christian doctrine, note how the above differs. Note differences from popular ideas of Jesus. Most Christians wrongly take the message of Jesus to be: if you believe in Jesus as God strongly enough and worship him through the Church diligently enough, then, after you die, you will go to heaven to be with Jesus and your loved ones forever. I do not explain all the points of difference.

Jesus died because the Roman and Jewish authorities became annoyed and wanted to prevent any unrest. They killed Jesus about the year 35 in the Common Era (CE or AD). Jesus' followers were frightened and confused. They had to stop all talk of a political-religious kingdom and they had to explain why Jesus died before the kingdom of God came. Fairly quickly, non-Jews began to join the movement; fairly quickly, non-Jews outnumbered Jews; and then by about 100 CE, no Jews were in the movement and the entire movement was non-Jews.

Because the movement had to suppress talk of a political-religious kingdom, and because non-Jews became central, the movement re-interpreted the kingdom to mean an organization focused on faith and non-political behavior, and the movement gave full membership benefits to non-Jews without requiring conversion. At first, the movement redefined benefits to mean resurrection and eternal life. When resurrection did not happen, for most people the Church eventually redefined the benefits as going to heaven to be with Jesus.

Because the early Church redefined the movement, the scope of membership, and the benefits, we have ideal Christianity: moral, inclusive, doing good, and pro-active. We have the idea of a community of good awakened people actively working toward a better world, loving fellow people and nature as much as they can. We have the idea that people who feel this way already are in a good state, and that this community will be able to change the world. The message of Jesus now applies to all people, and aims to build a better world rather to restore Israel and make Israel pre-eminent.

The message of Jesus, augmented by the Church, carried important Jewish ideas about social justice, the individual person, one God, the importance of law and morality, and nature. Jesus' ideas combined with Western science, ideas about government, and about citizenship, to make the great Western civilization that we inherited. His ideas eventually spread around the world. His message is the morality we see in much of modern art and popular culture. It dominates TV and movies. It lies behind the action of good political activists even when they say they are not religious. It is the ideal of citizenship that most people around the world work for. It is the idea of "paying it forward" and of being pro-active for good. It leads to hospitals, schools, belief in natural laws, belief in the rule of law, disaster help, medical research, sustainable development, and working to be good stewards of nature. It leads to the "Christmas spirit", good fellowship, and most of the best that we feel toward each other and the world.

By about the year 100, Jesus' movement had become the Church and Jesus had become God for Church members. In modern times, people have come back to the idea of a community and have dropped the ideas of a Church and that Jesus is God. Even if they don't belong to a formal church, people who get Jesus' message still form a kind of community, work for a better world, and try to love fellow people and nature. Getting the message makes you a part of the kingdom and means that you are helping to bring in the kingdom for the whole planet.

I think Jesus would approve of changes such as including everybody. Whether he would approve is not as important to me as that his message forms the basis of a great message, great work, and a great community, that was not available before him and his movement.

The Kingdom as the Association of Godly Good Guys.

When the Kingdom did not work out as Jesus originally wished, the early Church redefined the Kingdom to be the association of people who believed correctly and who acted accordingly. In effect, the Church redefined the Kingdom to be the Church because only people who were in the Church could believe correctly and act rightly. After the first Church split, each separate Church has continued with that idea, with itself as the Kingdom.

People who do not belong to any particular Church but think of themselves as following Jesus or as doing the work of God think pretty much the same way. To them, the Kingdom of God is made up of good people who try to do the work of God and who act as God wishes them to act. These people are not necessarily insipid "goody two shoes". They work in slums or fight to clear land mines.

Even good-hearted good-minded on-the-mark active people tend to think as Churches do, partly out of frustration with how obnoxious people can be. They think of the Kingdom as made up only of people who "get it" as they do and act accordingly. They exclude from the Kingdom people who don't get it as they do and who do not act accordingly. Sometimes they exclude people from rival activist do-gooder groups and rival churches, exclude people who just will not get it and start acting better, and people who are obnoxious.

It is hard to fault people for thinking of the Kingdom in these terms. It is perfectly natural. I do it myself although I recognize it as a fault and try to stop it. In this view: the Kingdom includes, and is limited to, only people who see Jesus and see God as I do and who act accordingly. Out of my superior benevolence, I include people who receive help from me and are properly grateful. I can include people who half-way get my ideas and are basically decent but who can't make the final leap to fully embrace my ideas because of limited ability or worldly constraints.

While natural to think in these terms, it is still wrong. It rejects people, too often for bad reasons. It leads to narrow-minded "us versus them" thinking.

It is also wrong to think everybody automatically is in the Kingdom. Some people really are in, and some people really are out. This does not mean some people are saved and lost in old traditional Christian terms. I don't know how "in the Kingdom" aligns with "saved" or how "out of the Kingdom" aligns with "lost". Some people just do not get the ideas well enough. I don't know how to draw lines between the people who are in and the people who are not; and I don't worry about it too much. God makes that call. I try to enjoy people who get it, decent people, people who might not get it entirely but act well, enjoy people who make the world interesting, and deal with obnoxious people as best I can. It can still be useful to think of good people, decent people, and active people as making a Kingdom of God as long as we are not rigidly dogmatic about it.

Eventually the Kingdom of God shaped modern ideas of what a good state is and what good self-government is. Our modern ideas of democratic self-government are our version of the Kingdom of God on Earth as much as we can make it on Earth without direct intervention by God. If we did not have the idea of a good and just order from Jesus' idea of a Kingdom of God, we would never have had the ideas of a good and just state that lie behind Western ideas of citizenship and good government, and especially behind democracy and self-government. Just as all people are equal before God, so all are equal under the law and all people are equal in power as voting citizens. Just as the Kingdom of God aims at goodness, justice, and mercy rather than power and control, so do democratic self-governments. The ideas of John the Baptist about good civil servants, and the behavior of good Church officials after Jesus died, shaped our ideas about good civil servants of the people. The idea of the Kingdom of God can guide the behavior of people even in states that are not free or democratic, but it is the best preparation for when states do become free, self-governing, and democratic. I can think of no other religious stance that prepared us for good self-government in the same way as Jesus idea of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus as God or Not God.

Here, the question of Jesus as God naturally arises. The simple answer is: "Follow the message of Jesus. If you do that, you don't have to worry much about Jesus as God. If you don't do that, worshipping Jesus as God won't help you". I was surprised how much this stance annoyed many Christians. I did not mean to vex them. They insisted that I follow their idea of Jesus as God and that I could not follow Jesus unless I followed him as God. Because I was raised with the idea of Jesus as God, at first their demand frightened me. Eventually I got over the fear.

Accepting a Modified Message from a Mere Human.

Jesus' original ideas about the Kingdom were good, but flawed in some respects, such as that the Kingdom was coming soon, it would center on Israel, and non-Jews would not be full members. Jesus' original message about human behavior was excellent. The expanded message from the Church of full inclusion is better. The modified message takes great insights about human action and puts them into the better context of building a better world for everyone.

Is it odd to get religious insight from a limited imperfect human being? Is it odd to think normal human followers could modify the original message to make it even better? It is only odd if we demand religious leaders are God, superhuman, or perfect. Not only Christianity, but all religions make this mistake, even Islam and Buddhism. The real oddness lies not in looking for insight from normal human beings but in thinking that religious voices cannot say anything important unless they are perfect. The oddness lies not in thinking normal limited flawed humans can be improved on but in thinking they had to be fully perfect in the first place. I expect to get great insights from limited humans who do make some mistakes. I could not get insight from anywhere else unless God spoke to me directly, and he has not done that. We have to look at the ideas themselves. We have to pick out the good ideas from the bad ideas. We can add to the good ideas. Jesus' followers did that.

At the same time, be careful not to make the current trendy mistake of thinking that a message is correct only if the giver is flawed, and that a message is more correct if the giver is more flawed. Not every messenger is a flawed tortured artiste. Not all flawed tortured artistes know what they are talking about. Evaluate the message for its content regardless of source.

Jesus as Special, and Other Prophets.

Every religion wants its leader to be the greatest of all time, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, and even Taoism. To do so is wrong. It would be easy for me to simply rail against the trend except I have said Jesus' ideas are best. So I have to reconcile two opposing trends of thought.

Jesus is not special because he was God, was the last and greatest of the prophets, or because his ideas were unique but because he had the right ideas and he made his ideas a positive way of life. His way of life led to the best social ideas and to the best societies in the history of people so far.

If you wish to say that your prophet is overall better than Jesus or any of the other prophets, then you need to give good reasons. You need to say why the ideas of your prophet are better than the ideas of Jesus or of other prophets. You can't simply say your guy is better because your guy is better. If you can say why the ideas of your prophet are better than the ideas of other prophets, then we don't need to argue about which person was better. We can appreciate which ideas are better, and we can leave the people out of it.

No Great Realizations Needed.

You do not have to go through a great experience, inside or out, to understand the basic ideas and Jesus' message. You do not have to go through a great experience to work hard to build a better world, do unto others as you would have them do unto you, and apply all rules equally to other people as well as yourself. Many people do this without even knowing that they are doing anything special. As long as you do this, you are fine. I think people who do this as part of their character, without need for any justification, are quite lucky.

Some people do have an awakening in which they realize some connection to God, and then act well. If you have an experience, and it leads you to act well, then good; but it is not necessary. I hope, when you awaken, you come to see the ideas in this chapter, but I care less that you agree with me than that you act well. If you have an experience, don't try to force it on other people no matter how good it felt to you. Don't stupidly think you are better than other people. Don't think you know better than other people who already act well just because you had an experience. A lot of people have a great experience but then act no better or act even worse.

The Christian idea of "salvation" is misleading; see later. People mix together the ideas of having a big experience and salvation. What I said about having a big experience applies to salvation as well. You are not saved because you get the ideas in this chapter. You are not lost (damned) if you don't get the ideas in this chapter. You are not saved or damned due to any rigid set of ideas or beliefs. If worrying about being saved thwarts acting well, stop thinking about being saved and start acting well. What counts is acting well.

To act well, you likely need some intellectual understanding of working hard to make the world better, doing unto others, and "applies equally"; but you don't need a degree in theology. You can act quite well with only a basic understanding, and many people do. If you have this already, then go with that, and don't worry.

Christian Sacraments.

You don't have to participate in the Christian activities and rituals of baptism, communion, mass, confession, confirmation, marriage, and blessing at death; not all Churches recognize all these practices as sacraments. If these practices are part of your Christianity, then I recommend that you continue them. If you feel a close connection to Jesus, and join a church as a result, then I recommend that you follow its sacraments. See the movie "Tender Mercies" with Robert Duvall. If you are in another religion, then what you do is up to you.

Whoever you are, in whatever religion or church, or no religion, try to see the idea of sacraments as a mixture of the divine and material. See them as more than superstition and animism. The sacraments bridge the material and divine. They are a mix that is superior to the merely material or merely spiritual. They show why the mixture of material and divine that is human is superior to the merely spiritual that is angelic. They show why even death can be a blessing. They show why angels and (in other religions) gods might be jealous of us humans. Try to see the Christian view of sacraments. Sadly, you have to keep in mind that views of the sacraments differ between major divisions of Christianity and often keep apart groups of Christians.

Feeling Close to God.

You don't have to feel close to God to do the right thing and be useful. If you don't feel close to God, don't worry about it. Do what you can, including, if you can, praying. Just knowing you are trying will make you feel closer to God and feel better about yourself although it might not make you feel close to God in any stereotypical religious sense. Maybe things will change and you will feel close to God someday, but, if you still don't, still don't worry about it.

If you do feel close to God, then good for you, and you are lucky. Keep some things in mind. You are lucky rather than skilled. Most people feel close to God more for psychological reasons that have little to do with actually being close to God. I don't discredit the feeling but I do want to keep it in perspective. Feeling close to God is nothing to feel proud over. You are not more likely to be saved or to go to heaven, and people who don't feel close to God are not more likely to be lost or go to hell. If you feel overly proud about feeling close to God, you are in more danger than they are. It is alright to feel happy about it. Don't use it as a way to proselytize because you are much more likely to use it to assert your superiority. Saying "don't you want to feel close to God? It feels so good." is really a way to say "I am better than you are and I have a right to tell you how to think". That is obnoxious. Just because you feel close to God does not make you everybody's spiritual advisor. If people get curious, then simply explain it to them, and tell them how you think it happened that you feel close to God. Keep in mind the human desire to want to feel close to God, and so to think they feel close to God. Keep in mind how much other people can suffer, and try to alleviate their situation without making it an issue of being close to God or not.

Other Gods.

I recognize only one God. Traditionally in his relation to Israel, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, this God was jealous. He did not like people of those religions worshipping other gods. He did not like people of those religions even theoretically recognizing other gods. In line with this old attitude of God, I do not recognize Jesus as God, and I do not expect people to recognize Jesus as God in order to follow his ideas.

I don't know how God feels about people following Jesus while still recognizing other gods. I do not recommend it. I recommend you give up other gods if you can. My wife is Thai of Chinese background. After I was married, a few times a year, my wife's mother carried out a ceremony in which she offered food and other goods to the family ancestors and then the family ate the food. My wife's mother did not think of the family ancestors as gods, and she knew this ceremony was as much for mental comfort as literally a sacrifice to spirits. Still, in the Old Testament (Tannah) prophets rail against Israelite men for allowing foreign wives to continue to worship the wives' original gods and rail against Israelite men for participating in ceremonies to other gods for the sake of their wives. The prophets blame the demise of Israel specifically on this fault. In the New Testament, Christians are told not to participate in ceremonies like this and not to eat any food offered during the ceremony. At first, I did not like being in the ceremony conducted by my wife's mother. Then, after a while, I felt that it would do no harm. I did not feel bad about it. Eventually I got to like it. After my wife's mother died, we stopped doing it, and I miss it. I think I would be alright doing it with other families who respect their ancestors as long as the other families knew

how I felt, and that I did not believe in family ancestor spirits. I would not feel happy about doing it for other gods. I do know how bad it is to create family unhappiness and how hard it is to resist family pressure. If I understand, then God gets it too.

If you know God yet have grown up in a tradition with Heaven, Dharma, and the Tao, then I am not sure what it means to continue a relation with them. It is probably alright to have a relation with them as long as you do not also worship the lesser gods, such as Vishnu and his avatars, or the many bodhisattvas. Buddhism already insists that you do not worship the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama as God, but many Buddhists break this command. You have to try out worship and non-worship for yourself, and then assess your feelings. If you can, pray about the matter. Pray to God and only to God.

You may not worship saints, Mary, angels, archangels, old monks, new monks, or bodhisattvas. You should be careful about having a relation with them so they will help you – I think most of that is misleading idolatry regardless of official dogma. Much of what Christians call “veneration” is really worship in disguise (“if it looks like a duck...”); and, if you do that, you should stop. You may not continue spiritualism-animism even if officially you accept Christianity. If you can’t stop, I understand; but you should try; and you should pray to God about this. Pray to God, or Jesus, and only to God, or Jesus, about this issue.

Not All Paths Lead to God.

Not all the ideas in every religion are correct. Some are misleading, wrong, or hurtful. The idea that we can force others to believe as we do is wrong and hurtful. The idea that we can preach joy without also working to make the world better is wrong and often hurtful. The idea that we can be above it all, and can find heaven for ourselves alone, is wrong. The idea that Israel, America, Muslims, Chinese, or any group, will dominate the world for God, is wrong and hurtful. The idea that people will go to hell because they refuse to accept that your prophet is the best, or because they refuse to accept some strange point of dogma, is wrong and hurtful. The idea that you can advance your religion by bombing civilians is wrong and hurtful. The idea that dogma is above the evidence of the senses, and above science, is wrong and hurtful.

This book champions the ideas of Jesus, and the ideas of the West that mixed with the ideas of Jesus, because they are correct and useful, and they are not wrong and hurtful. When ideas are wrong and hurtful, this book criticizes them no matter where they come from, even if they come from Jesus and Christianity.

Hard World Now to Follow Jesus’ Message.

Many people would follow the message of Jesus if they felt their effort would make a difference both to individuals that received direct help and to the world in general, the world could be made better, the world would be made better, and the helpers would not suffer too much for giving help. In the middle 1900s, many people felt this way, and there was a great outpouring of aid not only from Christian nations but from Muslim and Buddhist nations. Hindus would help too under the right conditions but, in the middle 1900s, India was still too poor to help other nations.

Sadly, things have changed. In the 2000s, although we can still do good in particular cases, we suspect we cannot help the world as a whole, we think the world as a whole is going backwards, all the help done in particular cases is not enough to keep the world from sliding backwards, and trying to help is likely to put our families at serious risk. People do not think past methods of help, such as through charity, churches, movements, and government, are working. People still want to help but they don't know what to do. When people don't feel as if they can help, and that trying to help is a great risk, then they stop trying and they feel really bad about not trying. They even get a little "wacky".

Even though we do not save the world, and the world might fail, it is still worth trying, and it is still worth trying along the lines taught by Jesus. We can't give up. If the world fails, eventually it will take down everybody, including the people who did not help at all and who only tried to make it for themselves. Even if you feel bad about the world as a whole, try to find ways to act along the lines of what Jesus taught.

This was one of the hardest lessons that I had to learn growing up, along with the lesson that not all people can be saved. Despite the prosperity of the 1950s through 1960s in America, some people saw it could not be sustained and we faced serious problems in the future. Yet people in power would not accept the situation, and even "do good crusaders" focused on their chosen groups while ignoring the overall situation. This fear paralyzed me for decades. Thinking about the topics in this book helped me to come alive again and to do what I could. I hope the ideas here can help you as well.

Practicality and Good Governing Again.

It is worth stressing that we have to combine ideals with practicality and with ideas about good governing and with institutions of good governing. I talk about governing in the next chapter. We all know this world is not the Kingdom of God. From time to time, Christian leaders say this world could be the Kingdom if only states would govern along the lines taught by Jesus yet this kind of governing has never been given a chance. Bertrand Russell aptly made fun of this idea in his essay "Why I am Not a Christian". It is just not in human nature to act fully according to the ideals of Jesus. We can get closer than we usually do but we can never close enough to make a real society run along those lines. We have to accept this fact and then deal with how we mix Jesus' ideals with real human nature, with how we mix Jesus' ideals and practicality. We get a lot closer to Jesus' ideals if we accept that they are not enough than if we pretend that they are.

I am not sure but I think all religions, like Christianity, would claim to offer the best society if we let them rule the world, and it is too bad wicked people have not let them rule the world. I don't know how to judge such made-up scenarios, so I don't.

All I can say is that we have to look at historical results for guidance. Part of practicality is good governing for all the people by most of the people and by the naturally talented people. By that standard, the West stands out. The West developed the ideas and institutions that lead to best government for the people by most of the people and by natural leaders – even though Western

states are far from perfect. Western success validates the idea that Jesus' ideals, combined with practicality, good institutions, and good ideas about how to govern, offer the best real hope.

This conclusion does not mean we have to push Jesus' ideals as absolutes and it does not mean everybody has to convert to Christianity. It is easily possible to accept the message of Jesus, combine his message with ideas from your religion, and use the combination to develop ideas and institutions for good government. That is what early Christians did with non-Jesus ideas of governing from Greece and Rome, and what Christians have continued to do. But, to do this, you have to take seriously Jesus' ideas, ideas of the West about governing, and institutions from the West. That is what I want people to do.

PART 5: My Other Deep Values

If you don't want to read any more about me or my Western values, then skip this part. This is the last part of the chapter. While the roots of my values go back to Israel, Jesus, and Europe, still, America developed its own version of these values, and I am an American. This part describes some of my specifically American versions of the values.

Oregon.

From growing up in Oregon, in the Western United States, among mostly middle class working people and middle class skilled people, I internalized some values. My feelings for my native values are as deep and strong as my feelings for the teachings of Jesus and for other Western values such as rule of law. That might, or might not, be a good thing. My native values include: decency, duty, integrity, strong egalitarianism, dislike of inequality and rank, citizenship, honesty, love of nature, respect for innocence, protecting people and creatures that need help, honor, responsibility, fair play, self-sacrifice, self-reliance, self-control, respect for public welfare, working for the public good, we are all in it together, professionalism, don't cause unnecessary trouble, don't presume, don't stop other people from enjoying life, imagination, creativity, actions have their consequences, democracy is sacred, power is bad, institutions are bad, people who support institutions are bad, and democracy is sacred but also an institution so we live in a contradiction. My values make me a cultural cliché. I don't care. I have seen other values elsewhere in America, among other Americans, in other classes, among other subgroups, and in other parts of the world; and I like the values that I learned growing up.

These values are similar to the teachings of Jesus. I am not sure of all the relations between these values and the teachings of Jesus, and I don't sort it out. I assume that most of the time the ideas of Jesus and these values go along well enough.

Sometimes these values do not go along with the teachings of Jesus even when we mix the ideals of Jesus with practicality. For example, people who are not honorable disgust me. I have trouble seeing their humanity as Jesus wished. Jesus taught that the more you have the more you should give. So I feel disgust less for poor people than for middle class and wealthy people who have resources but misuse what they have. A public office is a sacred resource, a sacred trust. Academics have been given a gift by the public; they have a public sacred trust to seek the

truth. Careerist academics who pretend to promote the public welfare but really promote their own career have betrayed their public trust and have betrayed an office. They are dishonorable people. I have trouble with them even when their work might help the general public.

When my native values and the teachings of Jesus conflict, usually I can feel it, and usually I try to go along with Jesus as much as I can. I don't always succeed. I don't think God expects me to succeed all the time. Issues with these values, and issues with conflicts between these values and the teachings of Jesus, have been so belabored in the popular media that I don't go into it in this book. Watch any good cowboy movies, detective movies, sci-fi epics, or films noir. You can start with "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance" by John Ford.

Part of growing up in Oregon in the 1950s and 1960s was watching the TV and movies of that time, and listening to the music. I am also a product of ideas that came from TV shows such as "Leave it to Beaver", "Andy Griffith", "Maverick", "Bonanza", "Twilight Zone", "CBS Playhouse", "77 Sunset Strip", and "Batman", and the ideas that came from rock and roll, rhythm and blues, folk music, pseudo-folk music, the Beach Boys, the Beatles, the Who, and, later, New Wave. I always saw these ideas as going along with the values that I learned in Oregon even though I knew the fit is not perfect. The fit is close enough so that it all reinforced itself.

In the next chapter, these values show up in the context of my politics. In a later chapter, I write about decency and indecency.

Nature.

I like nature and I deeply regret what people are doing to nature now. Nature was a gift from God that we are biting off, chewing up, shitting out, and throwing in his face. God doesn't like that. We should treat nature, animals, and all life, almost as we treat human persons and God-as-person. I say this not because I have a romantic idea of nature, worship nature, want to preserve all nature intact, or I want to use crusading for nature as a way to justify myself.

The romantic idea of nature that prevails among some Westerners and some people from the Far East was not originally in Christianity or Greek thought. Jesus did not teach much explicitly about nature, nor did the early Church. Jews saw nature as the direct creation of God, as close to God, and as originally good. Jews had much respect for animals. They condemned the bad treatment of animals. I am not sure how much their attitude came from seeing nature as the creation of God. Jesus did say God knows each sparrow, and notes the dying of each sparrow, individually. The Modern near-worship romantic view of nature arose around the Renaissance and flowered in the 1700s and 1800s. For a charming account, read "Orlando" by Virginia Woolf. The romantic view of nature might have had some roots in Celtic thought and it certainly had roots in growing unhappiness about over-civilization, industrialization, and capitalism. Here is not the place to go into the question of its roots.

In any case, when the Church expanded the idea of what counts as a person to include all people regardless of gender, wealth, social status, power, age, etc., the Church also opened the door eventually to include nature, and especially to include animals. Although the modern attitude has

roots other than in the Church expanding inclusion, the modern attitude could not have developed without the Church expanding inclusion. People who revere nature now are the descendants of Jews, early Church thinkers, and Christianity whether they know it or not. I think Jesus would like this trend. Nobody who sees panda, tigers, giraffe, or elephants on the news can doubt we have expanded our idea of persons to include animals. If you doubt that we have expanded our idea of plants along lines of our idea of persons, think of giant redwoods or old pines.

The fact that modern reverence for nature has roots in Jewish ideas or Church doctrine does not mean much either way any more than the fact that modern reverence for nature might have roots in Celtic culture means much. What matters is a clear view of nature, seeing animals and plants somewhat like persons, working for nature as we work for people, and not using nature as a way to justify ourselves.

While I am happy we expanded our idea of a person to include animals, plants, and all of nature, we should keep in mind that animals, plants, and nature-as-a-whole are not persons like human persons or like God. To keep in mind differences not only protects us from the silly mistake of seeing a dandelion on the same footing as a child – and thereby inviting bad backlash - but also protects nature by keeping us from seeing it wrongly. The clearer we see rhinos and all of nature the more likely we are to do the right thing for rhinos and all nature. A clear view of nature easily can include deep respect akin to what we have for persons.

Christian Charm.

Here I use the term “Christians” to include Christians who follow Jesus as God and people who follow the teachings of Jesus without necessarily taking him as God. I use the term “values” to include practices that go along with the values.

Apart from the message of Jesus as explained above, Christians have values that most of the world now finds charming. The values come from the Semitic base culture of Jews and Arabs, Jews in particular among Semites, Jesus in particular among Jews, early Christians of many origins, Europeans, Europeans in America, and Americans. I can't untangle what came from where. I think Jesus would approve of these values, and I can't untangle what he would approve from what he might be a bit about, so I don't try. In the list below, I duplicate from above.

Religions and peoples other than Christians have these values although they do not have them as a full set and as the basis for their world and action. Christians rarely live up to the values. I do not point out when Christians fall short. I do not speculate on how well Christians have to live up to the values for the values to characterize Christians and for the values to be successful.

-Christmas. Christmas is the best example of what makes Christianity and the West charming. There is nothing like it in other traditions. Nowadays Christmas is not about the birth of Jesus. Christmas is about acting on universal siblinghood. It is about being one big family. It is about making other people happy even at your own expense. It is about the giving rather than the gift. It is about getting along in one society together. It is about all the other charming Christian values

rolled into one holiday. You can celebrate Christmas while not even believing Jesus was God. Celebrating Christmas says nothing about whether you think Jesus was God.

-Intentions matter in both Christianity and in the West. We take into account what people did but we also take into account their intent. This attitude has two edges. We ease up on people who did not have bad intentions, or had good intentions, but we insist that those intentions really be not bad or really be good. We look for real intentions, not feigned intentions or stated intentions only. If you want your intentions to be considered then your heart had better be real. So taking intentions into account also leads us to consider people on a deep level.

-Moral growth is as important as face-value moral actions. It is important that a child share her cookies, as on a well-done Keebler ad, but it is as important that a child learn to share. A child who starts out selfish but learns to be good is likely to stay good and she/he gives more delight to the people around him-her than a child who is never tempted. In the movie "Pulp Fiction", the character played by John Travolta does not grow morally despite having chances to do so while the character played by Samuel L. Jackson does grow even if he is not perfect. The Travolta character dies while the Jackson character lives. The characters played by Bruce Willis and Ving Rhames also grow morally and so flourish in the end despite initial conflict. In "slasher" movies, the "kids" who get stoned, have sex, cause trouble, and do not grow morally, die, while the kids who can control themselves and do grow morally live and defeat evil. Americans and Christians think these results are just fine.

-Jesus said people rejoice more over recovering one lost sheep than over the ninety-nine that are not lost and over recovering one lost coin than over the nine that are not lost. In the great movie "Casablanca", the husband of the heroine is a great moral hero who has always fought for the good. We are not surprised when he continues the fight even at great cost. The ex-boyfriend of the heroine, Rick, played by Humphrey Bogart, usually did not care much about morality or about other people, yet he "finds himself" and he sets out to work hard to make this world a better place. We are happier for Rick's change of heart and his salvation than for the "mere" continued bravery of the heroine's husband. This is strong moral growth.

-Maybe from the same sense of preserving, Americans do not abandon somebody without great reason. We might have to insulate bad guys to keep them from doing harm but we really don't want to give up on them. They might have a change of heart. This attitude can go to extremes and lead to error, such as enabling bad guys. In a good way, this attitude leads Americans never to abandon dead soldiers or prisoners. This practice also can go too far but it is probably better to keep the value even if it leads to mistakes sometimes than to lose the value and instead to calculate gains and losses habitually; see the movie "Blackhawk Down". I am not sure how wide this value is spread among Christians.

-Jesus urged people not to limit themselves to people and things that they already knew but to be open to people unlike them and to unfamiliar situations. He urged people to be open-minded, curious, and accepting. We should not reject other people and other ways as long as they do not clearly hurt us. Try out new ideas and new customs.

-Americans in particular, and Westerners in general, like new things. In fact, they make a fetish of new things. They prefer the new to the old even when the old is just as good or when the old has a lot of value left. I don't know if this attitude is an extension of Jesus' willingness to accept what is not familiar. This attitude drives American innovation and creativity.

-“Cleanliness is next to godliness”. Until recently, Europeans and Semites, including Jews, were not known for cleanliness. Jews and other Semites did have frequent ritual baths as part of their religion, and Pharisees might have been as clean as American suburbanites. Now, Americans, Thais, and Japanese are by far the cleanest people I have ever met. American bathrooms are the wonder of the non-American world. I am not sure how admirable hyper-cleanliness is in the grand scheme of things but I have come to appreciate Thai and American cleanliness.

-Christians look out for other people, even for people they don't know and for people who might be bad and might be enemies. I know of no others who carry out this attitude as consistently and as usefully. They take the parable of the Good Samaritan seriously. The institutionalized form of looking out for other people includes hospitals, charities, and schools. Most looking out for other people is done on the personal level of friend-to-friend.

-The Christian attitude of caring for other people builds strong communities. You don't have to be a member of “us” to be taken care of, but, among people of one community, the attitude of taking care of others leads to strong communities built not out of political or military obligations, fear, or guilt, but out of mutual cooperation. The downside is busybodies but we can overlook them for now. One of the best examples of this attitude still is the classic movie “It's a Wonderful Life”. The movie still is correct and still is a great example even if it has been shown far too often on TV. The idea of community can be appropriated and twisted by any group (Nirvana: “Smells like Teen Spirit”) but that does not make the idea wrong. It is appropriate to rebel against misuses of the idea but not against the idea.

-The combination of cleanliness and caring leads to clean communities, houses, yards, streets, neighborhoods, and to no littering. Until you have lived where people are not clean and garbage covers streets, you cannot understand how wonderful public cleanliness is. Clean cars do not make up for dirty houses and streets. The fact that Christians value public cleanliness makes the dirt of American cities all the more tragic and disgusting. Of all peoples that I have seen, only the Japanese might be cleaner than American Christians, although the Koreans seem clean too, I have little personal experience with their villages and small towns, and many Koreans are good Christians.

-Community extends to include nature. The Jews respected animals as God's creatures, they did not abuse animals, and their attitude carried over to Christian ideas about nature. Westerners used to worship nature in a way that Jews did not. Even now, Western nature worship can be a little creepy and sometimes it leads to bad ideas about the cuteness and kindness of nature. The Western attitude of nature worship might show up in Celtic and Wiccan religions. Virginia Woolf makes fun of Western nature worship in her short novel “Orlando”. The modern Christian attitude is a combination of Jewish and Western ideas. It is not quite worship and it leads to a healthy respect for nature, a desire to know real facts about nature, and a desire to help the planet. That

is what we see on “Discovery”, “Animal Planet”, “National Geographic” and the “Nature” specials on PBS. It leads to studies such as Jane Goodall’s long-term study of chimpanzees.

-Christians traditionally support the underdog in conflicts with over-dogs. In Christian societies, there is no shortage of the poor going along with the rich in practice and the poor hurting other poor but at least there is an ideal of supporting the underdog and it comes out sometimes in real acts. This is such a big theme in pop culture that I don’t go into it here.

-Jesus favored the poor over the rich. He did not disdain the humanity of rich people, he wished them all-the-best, and he was glad to eat free at their table; but he did not trust them because he knew that they had to make serious compromises to make wealth and keep it. He did know that the poor were corrupt as well.

-Christians still have a soft feeling for the poor and try hard to help the poor out of poverty without making the poor feel more miserable. Ideally Christians try to help the poor by teaching them how to make a living but sometimes you just have to help the poor by giving them food, clothes, and shelter. Since the rise of the comprehensive state (personal welfare and corporate welfare) in the 1800s, Christians have tried to help the poor through state programs. This way of helping the poor leads to dependency and abuse just as helping business leads to dependency and abuse. Christians have to find the right way to help the poor.

-One of the great themes of the Old Testament is social justice, of which helping the poor is only a part. Christians inherited the concern for social justice. Of course, since the Church became an established part of the state, and the rich control the state, sometimes Christians do not act on the concern for social justice as much as they could. Since the rise of capitalism, often it is hard to figure out how to act to achieve social justice. Still, Christians have never let go of the ideal and they act on it when they can. This ideal too can lead to dependency and abuse.

-In traditional Israel, as with other traditional states, there was no separation of church and state. The state was the agent of social action, which means the state should be the agent of social justice. Christians still look to the state to be the agent of social justice even when they respect the modern separation of church and state. This is why Christian nations pioneered the social programs that have caused such anguish in the United States and have caused great benefit as well.

-Perhaps as part of nature worship, Western Christians also worship innocence. We think it is a positive thing in itself, like a state of grace. We attribute innocence, usually falsely, to people and animals that we want to admire and raise up, such as children, Bambi, Thumper, tiger cubs, girls, women, Boy Scouts, handicapped people, and non-White ethnic groups.

-American Christians, at least, and now most Americans, assume innocence and take people at face value. At first, Americans trust people. This attitude of American Christians is well-known internationally and sometimes people make fun of Americans for it. Even Americans make fun of Americans for it, as Henry James did in his short story “Daisy Miller”. Yet most people appreciate this value and most people seek out Americans because other people know Americans will give

them a chance and will treat them fairly. Americans get taken advantage of less than you might expect.

-Forgive as much as you can. I have found other ethnic groups such as Thais and Chinese to be at least as forgiving as American Christians but at least Christians hold the value and act on it when they are reminded.

-You have to be willing to sacrifice yourself to make society better. This applies to high and low, rich and poor, and smart and average. You have to be able to see the greater good, have to see when the greater good outweighs the good of yourself and your immediate group, and have to be willing to choose the greater good. This idea is not nationalism in disguise. What you choose is the greater GOOD not the greater society. The greater good can show up at many levels other than the nation, from the family to the community to the cause of a group such as gay people or unborn children.

-Offices are sacred, so you have to carry them out honestly and fully. In effect, every office is a priestly position. When you hold an office, you are a priest. Not to carry out the full duties of your office honestly is to betray holiness and God. Offices include not only obvious high offices such as President of the United States but all political offices down to meter reader. Offices include not only political offices but also jobs and professions such as plumber, teacher, doctor, police officer, and business person. Each office has a code that you have to accept and carry out.

-Christians gladly offer help and, when they need help, Christians also know how to take help. At the same time, Christians are self-reliant. Don't be a burden to other people, either personally or through the state. Don't cause harm that other people have to pay for. Don't take help that other people might need more than you do, and which, if you take it, they might not get it. If you can find a job, then don't take unemployment, welfare, disability, food stamps, or free food. Don't accept state help for your business whether your business is large or small. Don't send lobbyists to the state capital or to Washington.

-So as not to be a burden, not to need help, and to be able to help when others need, look ahead. Don't get into bad situations unless you have to. If you have to take a risk, try to have reserves to cover your own ass. Wayne Shell, a friend of mine, said that the merchant in the story of the Good Samaritan broke this rule when he knowingly went into an area of bandits. Whether he did or not, I cannot say, but, whether he did or not, other people don't have an excuse to be stupid. If you are too young, don't get pregnant or get a girl pregnant. If you can't hold a steady job with a high enough salary and some benefits, don't have children. If you have a genetic defect or you have a condition that is likely to be passed on to your children, such as diabetes or obesity, then don't have children. Make sure you can pay for the education for all your children.

-Until recently, for many decades, Christians were by far the greatest givers on Earth. Charity is a duty and a privilege. Charity is not just giving alms to some local starving person in the hope of earning religious credit ("merit") but doing something to really help. If we count actions as well as money donations, Christians likely still are the greatest givers. Charity is figuring out why that person got in trouble to begin with, and then doing something to get him-her out of trouble and

doing something else to make sure others like him-her don't fall into trouble. Charity is both an individual personal act and something you do through organized institutions such as Red Cross and United Way. Whenever I see them in action, I am deeply impressed by the willingness of Christians in the Midwest and South of the United States to personally put in hours and labor to help people, even people they might not otherwise approve of.

-All successful civilizations have valued education and all successful groups within civilizations have valued education. I am not sure Christians stand out except that Christian, beginning at about the same time as the rise of capitalism, set up public schools to make sure that nearly all children received a decent education. As with hospitals and good government, Christians set up institutions to back up their values. Given the long history of good public education in the United States, the decline of public education here beginning in the 1980s is a great tragedy and likely a disservice to God. If your ethnic group or religious group does not support education at the personal, family, and institutional levels then you are a burden on other better groups and on the state as a whole. Education is not about producing compliant citizens of a big state but about teaching people how to think so they can see to the root of problems and figure out ways to solve problems. This is another form of charity and of carrying out your office as a citizen.

-Christians have fun. They encourage people to have fun. They enjoy it when other people have fun. Fun is not a duty. Fun is just fun. According to Paul McCartney, "fun is the one thing that money can't buy" which means it is what you can't force. Christians don't worry about going to hell, and so they can enjoy themselves while they are on Earth. Christians make the world more interesting.

-Christians know we all make mistakes and that we all have to do things that we are not proud of. Sometimes "questionable acts" (Roy Blatty (Rutger Hauer) in "Blade Runner" and Tom Donovan (John Wayne) in "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance") can make the world a better place too as with good acts based on good intentions. We can't let bad guys run wild but we can be realistic and we can appreciate all kinds of people and all kinds of contributions.