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Religious Essay 2: Jesus Changed the World, and What That Means

This essay is an extract from the first chapter of my book (this website) “Religious Stances”. I wrote it because I was surprised at how touchy people are about this issue. Because I revise previous writing, the text here might differ slightly from the text in the book.

PART 7: Optional: God on Earth, Jesus as Turning Point, and Other Theology.

This part of the chapter is optional.

I thought I was done with this topic when my apartment complex manager restored extended basic cable and I again watched “The Journey Home” on Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN). EWTN is the Roman Catholic Church cable TV channel. “The Journey Home” is about converts and “reverts” to the Roman Catholic Church. Marcus Grodi hosts the show well. Guests often credit Christian writers with helping them, including Gilbert Keith (G.K.) Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, Clive Staples (C.S.) Lewis, Karl Keating, Scott Hahn, and Marcus Grodi too.

I saw that Christian writers would see me as a standard garden variety small heretic and would dislike what I say. Christian writers would say that I don’t see how much Jesus’ identity as God is basic to his message. I can’t fully and properly follow Jesus’ message until I see him as God and join his Church. Each particular Christian group says it, and it alone, represents his Church. I don’t want to defend myself but I do want to clarify. I dislike theological bickering, and this part of the chapter is that, so I am brief. I do not use jargon.

The major theme for this essay is what difference it makes if God came into his own creation as a human person, in particular whether Jesus needed to be God to change the world as he did. I assume God exists. I think Jesus did not have to be God to change the world. While thinking about God coming into his creation, I also comment on the Church. To give the standard orthodox Church position fairly, I give it several times. It might help to see the material here in light of the four views sketched in religious essay 1: dismissive atheist, respectful agnostic, me, and standard orthodox Christian Church dogma. The arguments of Christian writers are effective against atheists and agnostics but not so much against me.

I think most Christian writers hold the wrong view of Jesus that I described in “Religious Stances” and in religious essay 1, “Jesus as God and Not God”. Christians do not focus on Jesus and his message so much as on Jesus-the-fantasy-person, heaven, hell, salvation, Mary, saints, famous church leaders, a dogma of the church such as Eucharist or baptism, and the church itself. You can worship many things while thinking you worship Jesus. You can follow many things while thinking you follow Jesus. But, at least, I know my problems and try to correct for them.

Doing the Right Thing for the Right Reasons, because It is Right.

Suppose tonight, at distances of every 100 kilometers (or miles), in a grid over Earth, like at the corners of squares on a game board, suddenly appeared thousands of obelisks listing the Ten Commandments and

Jesus' message. People could not think the obelisks came from humans, would conclude God put them up, so God exists, and the message on the obelisks is a direct command from God.

Nearly everybody would do as the obelisks stated but most people would not do so for the right reasons. People would follow the message on the obelisks not because it was the right thing to do but because they took the words to be commands from an omnipotent God, people fear God and fear hell, and people want to please God and so get a reward such as Justification, Salvation, and Heaven.

Such behavior is natural but still God does not want this. God wants us to do the right things for the right reasons. God wants us to see what is right and do what is right because it is right. God does not want us to do the right things mostly from fear or hope of gain. In the novel "Lord of the Rings", this is partly why Galadriel refused the One Ring. She would make a glorious queen for whom people would do the right things but they would do it out of fear.

Suppose instead the obelisks commanded us to do bad; somehow people ruled out that the obelisks were from the devil; and so people concluded the obelisks were from God. Sadly, many people would still do as the obelisks commanded. They would do bad things, and would act from the wrong reasons of fear and the desire for reward.

Thankfully, in the bad case, some people would not do the wrong thing even if they feared that God commanded badness. Some people would still do the right thing despite the obelisks, and they would do it because it is the right thing regardless of (false) God's (false) commands. If God is the good God that I think he is, these are the people that God would enjoy.

God knows that people do the right thing a lot of the time but not often enough, and do the right thing for the right reasons sometimes but not nearly often enough. He knows the world is hard and confusing. He knows we need to do the right thing more often than now, we need help figuring out the right thing, and we need encouragement to actually do it once we have figured it out.

God has two linked problems. First, he has to get us to do the right thing. Second, he has to get us to do the right thing mostly because it is right, for the right reasons, and not primarily for wrong reasons such as fear and reward. He has to do it without forcing us. The second problem is harder. God needs to hint, urge, cajole, educate, and sometimes command, to get us to do the right thing for the right reasons without bluntly clearly declaring that he exists and that we had better do it or he will fry us and without saying he will give eternal bliss to people who do the right thing. This is hard. People respond to fear and rewards. Getting people to do the right thing for the right reasons is like "herding cats". People who see that God exists and do the right thing for the right reasons are rare, and God likes them. He likes them even if they don't believe in him or don't believe in him as El-Yahweh-Allah-Dharma-Tao-or-Heaven.

God knows we are imperfect. He knows we fail even when he hints, urges, asks, etc. He knows people do the right thing for the wrong reasons and people fool themselves that they do it for the right reasons. He knows people have to be pushed into doing the right thing by using the wrong reasons. He takes all this into account. You should too.

“Inferior methods” are ways of getting people to do the right things even for the wrong reasons, such as by hope of heaven, threat of hell, hope of material reward, or hope of family success.

I am not sure if God resorts to inferior methods ever. If God uses inferior methods sometimes, I am not sure how much he uses them. If he does, I doubt he likes doing it. He knows human teachers use the methods, and he takes that practice into account in how he relates to us. We should take that practice into account too and we should assess human messages about God with these methods in mind. Nearly always, when a human tells you to do something so you will be saved, go to heaven, or not go to hell, the human does not speak fully for God.

For the most part, God sends his prophets to do the job of hinting, cajoling, commanding, etc. It is better for God to send a prophet than to appear directly, for reasons that I explain below. I think this much encouragement is enough for people who are even modestly astute and modestly open to God. It is not enough for everybody and not enough for most of us. The fact that God uses prophets to get us to do the right thing for the right reasons sets up the main questions for this essay. Are prophets enough? If prophets are not enough for most people, then what does God do and how does he do it? Does God also have to come here himself? If God has to come here himself, how does he come and what does he do? How much appearance would be too much? How much appearance would spoil any chance for us to do the right thing for the right reasons?

God is in a dilemma. If God gets us to do the right things by making his existence and will obvious to all, such as by coming here as Jesus and proclaiming to all that Jesus is God, then we will not do the right things for the right reasons. God will lose what he most hoped to find in us. On the other hand, we are so screwed up (by nature or nurture, or a combination, it does not matter), that God has to give us help and hints. If God does not give us help and hints, then we will do the right thing so seldom that we will never have a chance to get used to doing the right thing and we will never figure out the right reasons. God has to appear just enough so that we do the right things, figure out the right reasons, and then do the right things for the right reasons.

Christians assume God solved this dilemma by (a) appearing as Jesus, (b) having Jesus reveal that he is God to his disciples only and (c) not to the general public, (d) having Jesus die and be revived, (e) having Jesus be seen by a few people but (f) not the general public. Christians assume that way is the only way the problem could be solved. While I understand the appeal of this solution, I do not agree. I think God solved this dilemma by having Jesus give us the correct code of conduct for the right reasons, strongly enough and clearly enough so that most people can understand. God knew that Jesus would be deified, and God used the deification of Jesus to spread the message. God also had prophets in other religions deliver a similar message, a message similar enough so that people could see and adopt the message of Jesus even if they do not believe Jesus is God.

If God wishes us to do the right things for the right reasons, then, after we figure out the right things and the right reasons, it seems we don't need God. If God sent Jesus to teach us the right things for the right reasons, then, after Jesus, it seems we don't need God. This is a cogent argument. Atheists could use a similar argument although I think they don't. Smart children sometimes hit on this argument. I don't think it is true. How could we find the right things for the right reasons without God? Even if we might not need him after Jesus, still we are led to discover God by the right things, the right reasons, and the people that

he sent to help. I go into dilemmas like this elsewhere, so I don't go into this dilemma here. Don't get misled by your own cleverness.

Here is a little useful jargon: Suppose God conclusively revealed himself to everybody and told us what to do. To reveal and command that way would take away free will and choice. It would guarantee that we act for the wrong reasons. It would banish the right reasons. It would make us not human. To say that we still have free will to choose to do, or not do, what God clearly commands, under these conditions, is silly. It mistakes what free will and choice are. To preserve free will and human choice, God has to do something besides openly reveal himself and openly imperiously command.

Think this out for yourself. If you were God, how would you solve the problem? How would you get us to do the right things for the right reasons? You know we need some help but you know you cannot simply appear and command. What kind of help do you give? How much help do you give? Do you wish to give so much help that you know everybody eventually will get it right? Do you wish to give only enough help so some people eventually will get it right? How many? Does giving enough help so that everybody eventually gets it right amount to imperious command that does away with free will and with choice? If so, then how much wastage do you have to put up with so as to keep free will and choice? What kind of wastage? Parents have to deal with these issues on a smaller level, perhaps one reason why it is useful to think of God as a parent. For a fun take on these issues, but not the full answer, watch the movie "Time Bandits".

Jesus and the Early Church Again.

Jesus saw as his main mission to start the Kingdom of God with Israel at the center. Jesus wanted to focus on Jews but he happily included everybody who was willing to go along with basic Jewish ideas and with his additional message. The early Church turned Jesus into God, contrary to basic Jewish beliefs but following the beliefs of non-Jews. The early Church changed the emphasis in the Kingdom from Israelites to non-Jews, changed the Kingdom to the Church, allowed in people on the basis of volunteering rather than on the basis of ethnic heritage, and made the message of Jesus more inclusive. Eventually the Church rejected Jews. (Jews were not blameless but it does no good to assign shares of blame other than to say I think Christians were mostly to blame.) For whether Jesus thought he was God, see below. I doubt he thought he was God.

In chiefly and state societies, it is human nature to deify rulers, heroes, prophets, and legendary people. About 400 years before Jesus, Hebrews and Israelites had become "Jews", for reasons that are not relevant here. Before Jesus, Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews had never deified rulers, heroes, prophets, or legendary people – at least as far as the Tanakh says (Old Testament). The fact that Jews refused to deify anybody or anything, and held to only one God, is a main point in the Tanakh, perhaps the main point.

At the time of Jesus, in contrast to Jews, other nearby people there did deify. Hellenistic culture (Greek and Roman) permeated Judah and Galilee. Hellenistic culture had a knack for deification. Any big person, especially a prophet with a new lifestyle, would be pushed for deification. Even Jews were tempted to deify such a person, and non-Jews did it easily. In that climate, somebody delivering the same message that Jesus did, in the way he did it, by living it, would have been a certain candidate for

deification. Jesus dying as an outcast killed by jittery authorities, crucified, could have prevented his deification or aided his deification, and did the latter.

There and then, if God wanted to send the message that Jesus delivered, whoever God chose to send the message would be a certain candidate for deification. (1) Should God go himself as a human, let the deification proceed, and so let deification reflect the truth? Or (2) should God send a prophet, knowing the prophet would be falsely deified, and then deal with the mistake and all that follows from the mistake, both for Jews and non-Jews?

Standard orthodox Christians say God chose option (1). I think God chose option (2). We need to think what difference it would make if God chose (1) or (2). To choose option (1) would be to defy 2000 years (now 4000 years) of Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish history, theology, and culture, to go against all the prophets, undo a hard long war to establish the idea of one moral God, and invite a serious split between traditional Jews and the followers of the God-as-human. To choose option (2) would be to invite a huge mistake about God, people, and their relations. It would be to ride the truth on the back of a lie, something God has rarely done.

What difference does it make for us if we follow the message even if we are not sure which option God chose? What differences does it make if God chose (1) but we think (2), or if God chose (2) but we think (1)? I covered these issues. It makes little difference as long as we do really follow the message. It does help to think this issue out and to be as clear as we can.

If the early Church had not turned Jesus into God (or not cherished the truth that Jesus is God), had not shifted away from Jews and their view, had not shifted to non-Jews, and had not changed the idea of the Kingdom to a volunteer organization open to all people, that is, the Church, then it is highly unlikely Jewish ideas would have blended with Western ideas, the message of Jesus would have prevailed, and Jesus would have changed the world. Most people would not do as Jesus asked unless they thought Jesus was God. People need obelisks. You can decide if that is doing the right thing for right reasons or wrong reasons.

Yet, I think, the idea that Jesus is God is untrue, a mistake. These facts taken together bother me: (A) we need Jesus' message; (B) Jesus did succeed and changed the world; but (C) Jesus and the message could only be effective by riding the back of a big mistake. The best answer I have is that God knew this too in advance, did not like using a wonderful man in a big mistake, did not like going against what he had taught Jews, and did it because to do so was best. We will see this issue again.

I think God foresaw what would happen to Jesus and the Church, and God used human nature to best advantage in the situation. He saw that Jesus would be deified regardless. As God will do, he took a modestly bad natural thing and he turned it to an even greater good. I would guess that Jesus knew what was going on, what was going to happen, and he went along.

The standard Christian answer is that God chose option (1). God came down as Jesus. There is no mistake to worry about. The message was effective riding the back of the truth that Jesus is God. God would not lie about Jesus being God, God would not allow such a mistake, Jesus did change the world, Jesus' message did prevail, the world changed, and the Christian Church was a big instrument in the success of Jesus and his message. God would not let the Church make such a mistake about who was

God. So, Jesus must be God, and the Church of Jesus must be the true Church of God for this world. God did not go against what he had taught Jews because he had forewarned them about Jesus-as-God through his earlier prophets. This chain of logic makes sense but I don't think it is true. If true, still the best response is to follow the message of Jesus first. I return to this issue below when I write about what it looked like to Jews.

Salvation, Heaven, and Following Jesus' Message.

Ideas about salvation and heaven are examples of what can go wrong when we do not focus on doing the right thing for the right reasons, when we do not focus on Jesus' message but instead focus on rewards and perils. We get diverted, confused, wasted, and do bad things. Salvation and Heaven are among the confusing diversions that lead to waste. They show what can go wrong when people think more about Jesus as God than about his message and so focus on rewards and punishments. Heaven and salvation are obelisks and can be idols. That does not prove Jesus is not God, but it shows what we have to deal with.

Contrary to what most Christians believe, the original focus of Jesus' message for the future was not "believe in me as God, be saved, and go to heaven". The original message for the future was "join the Kingdom of God; if you join the Kingdom, you will not die; if you die before the Kingdom comes fully, you will rise from the dead; everybody who goes with the Kingdom will have a new body and live a long time; and everything will follow justice and goodness". When that did not happen soon, the Church said "it will happen eventually". When that didn't happen soon enough, most people turned Jesus' Kingdom into "believe in Jesus as God, and you will go to heaven to be with family, friends, and a lot of other good guys". Please read the Creeds of the Church, and consult with a good scholar or an honest priest, to verify what I wrote. (I am not even sure that Jesus cared about living eternally and that he believed in general resurrection for saved people, but that is another issue for another place.)

Originally Jews had few ideas about heaven. Heaven was not important. Following God was. The focus on heaven in Christian ideas likely was not Jewish but non-Jewish, although, at the time of Jesus, Jews were developing ideas about heaven. I doubt Jesus held ideas of heaven like the ideas of most Christians or like the ideas of Christian theologians.

The fact that originally heaven did not play a prominent part in Jesus' teachings does not mean it does not exist. It might exist. That is not an issue for me. God will decide. The most I can do is try to do the right thing for the right reasons, because it is right, and try to be a good citizen in the Kingdom of God by making the world better.

Originally Jews did not have an idea of salvation as Christians do. Salvation was feeling God, accepting God, and doing as God wished as well as you could, at least acting to meet a certain minimum. Most Jews could meet the minimum. You could not be perfect. You could do enough although you were not perfect because God would understand your imperfection and accept you anyway as long as you tried hard and your heart was good. God would make up for your lack by extending his grace. In Christian terms, salvation was "being right with God" in a mild happy way rather than in a scary demanding way.

I am not sure what Jesus' idea of salvation was. I don't feel easy guessing what Jesus thought of salvation and heaven, but here it is: As far as I can tell, his ideas were similar to Jewish ideas but included that you had to be a member of the Kingdom of God. Salvation and heaven were being members in decent standing of the Kingdom of God, and the Kingdom of God mostly was here on Earth. To be saved was to accept God and the Kingdom, and work to be a good member of it. If you are not in the Kingdom of God here, there is little point worrying about salvation and heaven for later. So there is no point working toward salvation and heaven directly, at least as non-Jews developed those ideas in the Church. Salvation as Christians use it now was not an issue, and Jesus didn't think that way. Salvation, as Christians think it, was not a primary goal; being a good member of the Kingdom of God was the primary goal.

I am puzzled by the many Christian ideas of salvation. I think confusion is left over from when "salvation" meant being a member of the Kingdom of God who would live a long time and would be resurrected from the dead if necessary. The confusion increased because heaven and the Church took the place of the Kingdom. It seems salvation is not exactly the same as going to heaven but you need to be saved to go to heaven, and, if saved, you should automatically go to heaven. If you go to heaven, you must have been saved somewhere along the way. People who like the Church say you can be saved only from within it and only if you see its glory. People who are not so concerned with the Church say you need a personal relation with Jesus that includes seeing Jesus as God. With a personal relation, Jesus will save you, and you will be saved almost regardless of what you do. Then they insist you join their church and only their church, or else your salvation is at risk. I can't untangle all this.

We get confused when we focus on heaven-salvation. Focusing on them diverts us from doing the right thing for the right reasons. It leads us to do the right thing for the wrong reasons or to do bad things for bad reasons such as to judge other people harshly and to hurt other people.

I will not divert attention away from the main focus of this Part of the chapter by dwelling on the mistakes that people make when they focus on salvation-heaven rather than following Jesus but it is worth making clear that people do make mistakes and they would be better off focusing on the message. If thinking about salvation-heaven leads you to be a useful person, make the world better, make other people act better, and not condemn others, then just do that and don't worry about not worrying about heaven-salvation.

Most people I have met who focus on salvation-heaven are more fearful than happy. Really they focus on damnation-hell rather than salvation-heaven. They are angry, especially when you don't think as they want. I have met people who focus on salvation-heaven that are neurotic wrecks, self-righteous condemning prigs, look down on me, and want to force me to their will. They do not trust God. They seek to make up for not trusting God by extra effort in promoting dogma and their church. By thinking of "saved-not-saved and heaven-hell" they must also get caught up in other wrong arguments such as faith vs. works, grace vs. faith, and grace vs. works. They seem to think, if they believe hard enough, they can compel God to save them and send them to heaven, even if that thinking is forbidden them by official dogma. Maybe the worst fault of getting caught up in salvation-heaven is not using your energy, time, and talent productively. You waste your mind thinking about false dichotomies rather than thinking about real problems. Should we use the state to promote goodness such as feeding the poor? If we use the state to feed the poor, the poor then become clients of the state, and the end result is worse than before,

should we stop? Can we stop? Are the same pitfalls latent in private help? Then what? These are all real issues about making the world better that we should work on more than thinking about heaven-salvation or faith vs. grace.

Thinking "saved-not-saved" or "heaven-hell" puts us in a "yes-no" "black-white" situation. "Yes-no" can be a useful way to think (traffic lights) but it can also mislead as in absolute-all-good-all-evil. Here "yes-no" misleads because it forces God to choose one way out of two predetermined options. God has more options than that. Thinking that God is forced to choose one or the other of only two options leads us to think we can compel God to choose what we want even though formal Christian dogma and theology tell us we cannot compel God and that we are saved only through Grace. In the "Saved-Damned" view, even when God extends Grace in this world, he still must do it on a yes-no basis, and that leads to the temptation of thinking we can compel him. If we believe hard enough, go to church often enough, say aloud hard enough and often enough that we believe in Jesus, work hard on a personal relation with Jesus, and do enough good deeds along the lines allowed by our church, then God must extend his Grace to us, and we must be saved and go to Heaven. How could God do otherwise if there is a choice only of heaven-hell-or-maybe-purgatory? I find this situation sad. It almost forces people to think and act badly.

In contrast, I do not think God has to choose only one option out of two. God can do whatever he wants with me, and will. I am not sure what God will do. Whatever God does, it will suit what I have done, have become, and need (not as in karma). I have to accept whatever God decides. I cannot compel God to make any particular choice because there is no particular choice. I am not tempted to that error. I still can work hard to follow Jesus but not because I think working hard to follow Jesus will force God to send me to Heaven.

I trust God. I know what it means to feel close to God and close to Jesus even if he is not God. I don't feel strange talking to Jesus although I don't think he is God. I know God loves me. I am glad being in a church helps many people. I am happy the Church saved the teachings of Jesus. Trusting God, feeling close to God, doing the right thing for the right reasons, and working for the Kingdom of God, is as close to salvation and heaven as I imagine. I am not sure what there is to being saved apart from this.

I find heaven and salvation so distracting that it is better not to think about them at all but instead to focus on Jesus' message and on making the world better. Pray directly to God. Talk to Jesus if you can. In these ways, salvation and heaven take care of themselves. God will decide. Don't condemn people who focus on salvation and heaven but don't fear them either.

Endless bickering about Jesus as God leads us astray as in fixating on heaven-salvation. It gets in the way of doing what Jesus wanted us to do. Let people who can follow Jesus do so. Do not require followers either to believe or not believe in him as God. If you find yourself among people who think as you do, enjoy the company without demeaning others.

Of course, Jesus either is God or not God, so we seem to be in a similar dual "yes-no" situation as in heaven-hell saved-damned. This situation is bad only if we think that we have to choose against our better instincts or against our reason; we feel we have to force ourselves to believe completely in one or the other; and we hope our choice compels God to either save us or damn us. If instead we follow Jesus,

let God make up his mind what to do with us, and don't fear God himself is constrained by "saved-damned, then we are off the hook of God-not-God-heaven-hell. We are not tempted to believe in Jesus to compel God to save us and send us to heaven. At worst, we are tempted to follow Jesus because it is a good way to live. Let God do as he will. If you believe in Jesus as God, you can do so as a free choice with a free heart. If you do not believe in Jesus as God, you can trust in God instead with little fear. Either way, don't frighten other people.

Many of the best Christians I have known are not obsessed with salvation and heaven either for themselves or for other people. They are confident in their salvation, and their confidence likely prevents obsession, but I think more is going on. They simply trust God. They are content to be close to God and to do whatever they can to help God. They would like other people to feel the same because it feels good and is good. They might explain their feelings as wanting others to be saved but that is not how they really guide other people. They show other people how to feel close to God and help God. When they see other people achieve that, they feel satisfied that they can help no more, and the other people are safely in God's hands. They are happy to talk about their faith, if they know how to put it into their own words, but they don't push. I wish all Christians would take this attitude, and in their own way, people of all religions too. Christians like this certainly have inspired me.

In the same way as with salvation-heaven, I dislike other long-standing theological issues such as faith vs. works, faith vs. grace, purgatory, sacraments, divine presence in bread and wine, original sin, scripture alone, tradition vs. scripture, and venerating saints and Mary. These issues are not useful to fret over. They more likely lead to bad distractions than to useful ideas and acts. If you like disputing, then go ahead, but keep in mind the central message of doing the right thing for the right reasons and trusting God. Do it. In the chapter on Buddhism, I call these side issues "aids". Aids are dogma ideas, like cause-and-effect, that people think lead to enlightenment, and people think are needed for enlightenment, but really they are not needed and they more often hurt than help.

The Big Qualitative Change; and "If God were One of Us".

Christian apologists point out a fact about human history and draw some big conclusions from the fact. The fact is that Jesus changed history vastly. The change was not simply in amount, it was a change in kind, a qualitative change. Jesus made a big difference in history and changed many individual lives as well. I don't explain the change. The big change is the subject of the first eight chapters of this book, especially the first two.

Christian writers use the fact that Jesus changed human history and human lives to argue that Jesus was God incarnate, and to argue for other things such as the nature of the Church. I don't agree. I think Jesus could have done what he did as a prophet of God without having to be God. Thinking of Jesus achieving what he did as a prophet rather than as God is more likely to lead us to do the right thing for the right reasons. Thinking Jesus did what he did as God is more likely to lead us to do the right thing for the wrong reasons or to do wrong things for wrong reasons. In particular, it leads us to focus badly on heaven, salvation, and the Church rather than simply trust God and carry out Jesus' message. We are better off not worrying if Jesus succeeded in the big change as God or as a prophet but rather to carry out his message and so to continue Jesus' big change. This is the main message of this part of the chapter.

If you get these ideas – that Jesus need not have been God to make the big change, and we are better off simply carrying out his message - then you don't have to read any more. Of course, it is fun to speculate about God coming into his creation, God coming as a human, Jesus as God, and how to get people to do the right thing for the right reasons. If such speculation appeals to you, then read on.

What difference would it make if God did take on human form and visit his world? The TV show "Joan of Arcadia" had for its theme song "What if God were One of Us?" I like the line about God riding the bus. "Joan" did not answer the (rhetorical) question but the show did give examples of how much good comes of believing in God and doing as Jesus taught. On that show, God never appeared as Jesus but did appear as many other people.

What Christian Writers Concluded.

Christian writers said only God coming into his creation could make the big qualitative change that Jesus made. Only God coming into his creation as a human could make a big qualitative difference like that. Only God coming into his own creation as the single human Jesus could make a big qualitative difference like that. So, because Jesus did make that difference, we can say: God exists; God came into his own creation as a human, as the human Jesus; God coming into his own creation as a particular human would always make such a big qualitative difference; and the particular human of God coming into his world would be Jesus no matter on what particular world God-as-sentient-being appeared. Christian writers said that the Christian Church, as the Church begun by Jesus, and the main tool of the change that he made, is the one-and-only true Church of God. They argued that their particular Church was the one-and-only Church of God and used Jesus-as-God for evidence.

Because Christian writers tied Jesus-causing-the-big-qualitative-change to Jesus identity as God and not as prophet, I have to go into the questions as well.

God comes into the world in other religions too, explicitly as Krishna in Hinduism, effectively as Mother Kwan Yim in Mahayana Buddhism, as the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama in some types of Buddhism, and as Mohammad for many Muslims despite official Muslim doctrine. Chinese don't usually see Confucius as God although they give him respect as representative of Heaven (God). Siddhartha, Mohammad, and Confucius were real people, like Jesus. I am not sure what to make of the Holy Spirit acting directly on this world, either in Judaism or Christianity; I don't know about Muslim doctrines of the Holy Spirit. I am not clear if Christian writers thought God coming into the world as viewed in any religion could make the big qualitative change or only God coming into the world as Jesus could make such a big difference. I assume they insisted no other appearances as described in any other religion could make the big change. I assume they insisted: God came into the world as Jesus and only him, Jesus-as-God made the big difference, only Jesus-as-God made the big difference, and only Jesus-as-God could make the big difference. As a matter of historic fact, only Jesus did make the big qualitative change. The Buddha, Confucius, Chuang Tzu, Lao Tzu, Mohammad, and the writers of Hindu texts did not make the big difference. I don't describe how Christian writers dealt with supposed appearances of God in other religions; mostly they dismissed other appearances as mistakes or as tricks of Satan.

God Coming into His Own Creation.

To get clearer about Jesus making the big change as prophet or as God, it helps to think about God coming into his own creation generally, about God coming into this world.

I have no problem with God existing, or with God coming into his own creation as a human, bird, dinosaur, wolf, deer, or even a toad. If God did, I hope how I live is consistent with whatever God had in mind when he came into the world.

I have trouble seeing what God might have in mind by coming into the world as a human. I have trouble seeing what he might have in mind because God could get done whatever he wanted to get done without having to come into his creation as a human. I can "get" God coming into the world as a human to take a look around, for fun, or to feel the world as we do. I cannot fully get God coming into the world to teach us or otherwise change the world because God could do that without coming into the world as a human, and God might do it better some way other. Likely he could get it done better by sending a prophet.

God coming into his own world to get us to do the right thing for the right reasons might work but it also might backfire. It could undermine choice and free will. It could lead people to do the right thing for wrong reasons or to do bad things for wrong reasons. It could be an obelisk.

If God came into the world to get us to do the right thing for the right reasons, he would have to be careful how he did it. It does not seem that coming into his world as the human person Jesus, declaring himself God, and starting a Church on that basis, was the best way for God to go about the task.

God Coming to Know What it is like to be Human and so to Comfort Us.

Maybe God did not come into the world mostly to get us to do the right thing for the right reasons but to comfort us. It is comforting to think God knows what we go through, that God can see with our eyes and feel with our hearts. God knows what it is like to be us because God has been us. God celebrates every child's birthday. When one of us gets cancer, God gets cancer too. When one of us goes hungry, God goes hungry too. Jesus did say that, when one of us helped a little person, we helped Jesus too; when one of us did not help a little person, we refused Jesus too. It might even be necessary for naturally evolved humans to think God becomes one of us, to feel what life is like here, once we get the idea of one God.

God does not need to actually become human to know and feel all this. We can get comfort from God even if God never became human. It is odd to fear we could not get comfort from him unless God became human. Can't we believe God loves us, wants the best for us, and will do the best for us? Can we only believe God loves us if God becomes a human just like us? Isn't this really forcing God into our image? Does God need to be born a rat, and make sure rats know he was a rat, for all rats to take comfort in God? What about amoebas or angels?

Even if God did become human, and did so many times, it is still not clear God had to become the human Jesus to feel what it was like to be human. Jesus' life was not typical. Maybe God should have become someone more typical such as a poor tenant farmer whose only daughter runs off to the city with an abusive cad rather than as someone with super powers such as Jesus. Maybe God should have become

a series of typical people. Maybe God did do this. I am not the first to make this observation but I can't recall the people who preceded me.

For God to become human so as to comfort us, we would have to know God became human, know he became human to comfort us, and know he became human mostly for that reason and not mostly for another. Yet if God did become human so as to feel what it was like, we would not necessarily know it. That is not what Christianity says God did. God certainly has not made all this clear to us. If God did make all this clear to us, he would run the risk of the obelisks, of taking away incentive to do the right thing for the right reasons, giving incentive to do good things for wrong reasons, and giving incentive to do bad things for bad reasons.

God Coming into His own Creation Coyly.

For God to get us to do the right things for the right reasons by coming into the world, God has to be careful about how he comes into the world and what he does while here. He cannot overplay his hand or underplay it. Here I call God coming into the world this way coming "coyly". It is possible that God's coming into the world as Jesus was God's coming into the world coyly to get us to do the right thing for the right reasons; but it seems odd.

Suppose God came into the world as a human, but not coyly; God-as-a-human made clear to everybody that he is God, and this God-as-human told us to do just what Jesus said we should. This is like the obelisks. If God-as-human made clear to everybody he was God, then people would do as Jesus (God) taught, but most people would not do it because it is the right thing. They would act out of fear or out of desire to please God to get a reward – not what God wants.

Suppose God came into the world, made clear he was God, and told us to do bad things. Many people would do them, but, thankfully, many other people would not. Some people still try to do the right thing because it is the right thing.

If God comes into the world as a human and makes that fact abundantly clear to everyone then he overplays his hand. If he comes into the world and does not make it pretty clear to at least some people, and clear enough to everyone, then he underplays his hand. I don't see a good way out of this. Every parent, teacher, boss, priest, spouse, lawyer, doctor, politician, and mall manager, knows what I am saying.

The best way I can see for God to get us to do the right thing for the right reasons is for God to work through prophets who can sense God but who cannot force people to believe in God and so would mislead people to do the right things for the wrong reasons or to do bad things. People can make up their minds about prophets in a way they could not if God himself appeared openly. They can reject a prophet. If they follow a prophet, they might more likely follow for the right reasons rather than from fear or desire for gain. Of course, working through prophets is not God coming into his own creation as a human being so as to get us to do the right thing for the right reasons. Standard orthodox Christians feel that working through prophets is not enough to make the big qualitative change and to get us to do the right thing because it is the right thing.

God Coming to Found a Church to get the Job Done.

God could have come into this world as a human being to found a Church if the primary reason of the Church was not to get us to do the right thing for the right reasons but something else. I don't know enough about this alternative so I don't discuss it here.

God could come into this world as a human to found a Church, and then use the Church to get us to do the right thing for the right reasons. This is a way to coyly get us to do the right things for the right reasons. In effect, the Church acts in addition to prophets, or takes the place of them, in getting us to do the right thing for the right reasons. In fact, one of the big jobs of the Church is to help us find the right thing to do in this confusing world, and help us to do it, and the Church did play a big role in the big qualitative change begun by Jesus. I think "God coming into this world to found a Church so the Church could make a difference in human lives and history" is what some Christians argue but I am not sure because I find them confusing.

Unlike God, and like the prophets, the Church would not have as much problem with overplaying its hand. Even if the Church said it was of God, and had been founded by God-as-a-man, people would not believe it in the same way as if God himself said it and showed it bluntly. With only the Church saying it, then people would have the message but would still have free will and choice. People could still do the right thing for right reasons. Of course, because the Church promises salvation and heaven, and threatens hell, many people would still do the right thing for the wrong reasons or would do bad things.

There are more problems. I do not go through all the shortcomings of churches. (1) The Church could overplay its hand. It could insist on standing in for God, and so make people afraid and make people seek to act well for a reward. It could stress heaven, hell, and salvation, and say it had control of salvation, heaven, and hell. It could set up its own obelisks and set up itself as the greatest obelisk. I think this did happen in real history. (2) If we believe God came as a human, we need not believe God came mostly to start a Church. If God came as a human, wouldn't that coming alone be enough without also starting a Church? If we believe he came as a human, then why do we need a Church too? (3) Even if we think we need a Church too, we are not sure which church is God's. (4) All Churches, even those with a strong claim to be God's original Christian Church, such as the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, advise us to do what I don't see as right: support bad states, accept big wealth differences, promote state dependency, and avoid birth control. If real world hard practical experience leads us to disagree with a Church, even a big important historical Church, then how can we believe that God came to start any Church to get us to do the right thing because it is right, and believe in what any Church says about Jesus as God?

As with salvation and heaven, but milder, it is a distraction to worry about the Church much and to think God came as a human primarily to start a Church. The Church is one among many tools, of which other tools are prophets. It helps to appreciate the role of the Church by thinking hard on its relation to prophets and to Jesus.

If belonging to a church helps, then stick with it, and be a good church member. Don't condemn people who don't belong to a church or to your church. I don't know what to say if your church is not satisfying or you think another church might be better. If belonging to a church doesn't help, don't worry about that,

and instead focus on following the message. Don't condemn people who do belong to a church and don't fear them.

God Coming Coyly as Coy Jesus.

Suppose God has tried prophets, and prophets have led some people to do the right thing for the right reasons, but not enough people and not enough doing. God decides to go down into his creation as a God-human to do the job himself as much as he can without overplaying his hand. What would he do? He would have a strong message. He would not only say the message but live it as well. Then he would tell a few people clearly that he was God-as-a-human, say what kind of God-as-a-human he was, how to relate to him as God, how to relate to him as God-as-a-human, and tell them more in detail about the message than he told people in general. To some other people, but not to everybody, God-as-a-human would tell as much as he could, enough to inspire them and to get them to work hard for the message. I am not sure if convincing these two groups of people would undermine their free will, and would get them to do the right thing for wrong reasons (or worse), but that is the best God could do in this situation. God would rely on the two small groups of people to tell all other people about God and about the right thing in a way even stronger than previous prophets had done before. God would rely on these people to modify the old Jewish Church or rely on them to start a new Church. The Church would be a big instrument in doing the work of God-as-a-human.

This is pretty much what Christians say God did. They leave out the part about getting people to do the right thing for the right reasons and instead talk about finding the Lord, Salvation, Heaven, Faith, Grace, and Works. They emphasize that Jesus started a church. They stress the break of the Christian Church with the Jewish Church (Temple, its priests, rabbis, local priests, cleansing, pilgrimages, prophets, and other institutions of Jewish faith).

Could God have done something similar if he only sent a prophet to declare the message very strongly, and did not come down himself as God-in-a-human? I don't know. Christians say it could not have been done any other way, that a prophet alone would not be enough. This view gives them reason to be sure Jesus is God, and bolsters the role of the Church. I think a prophet alone was enough and, in fact, it was done with a prophet alone, that is, with Jesus the prophet. This is what you have to think about.

To repeat the Christian argument: People would not follow Jesus, join the Church, act on the message, and change the world, if they did not believe Jesus is God. God would not let people believe Jesus is God if Jesus were not God, even if God wanted people to follow Jesus etc. and even if people would only do so if they believed Jesus were God. But it all did happen. Jesus caused a great change. Jesus caused a great change because people believe he is God. So Jesus must be God coming into this world, God coming into his own creation. God came into this world as one of us, as Jesus, in the minimum way that could make sure to get the job done without eroding our ability to do the right thing for the right reasons, without eroding free will and choice. God came into the world to do the maximum that could be done consistent with our doing the right thing for the right reasons, consistent with our free will and choice. God did as much as could be done. God willingly died for us. God came into the world as a human coyly because that was the best way – the only way - to get the job done. God succeeded. The Church was an important instrument in his success.

My Problems with God coming Coyly as Jesus.

I get this reasoning. It makes sense to me. But, if true, it is a sad comment on humanity and a sad comment on God. It does show how much God would go through to help us. This chain of events is thinkable but is sad enough that I don't know for sure what to make of it. So I reject it. I think, in Jesus, God did try another prophet. God foresaw that people would mistakenly think Jesus was a god, and then God turned the natural propensity of people to deify prophets to best advantage. God sent Jesus knowing people would turn him into a god, and God was ready to make the best use of our human inanity.

If God did come into his own creation as a human but was coy about it, so we would do the right thing for the right reasons, I wish he would have been clearer about it. I know if he were clearer about it, the clarity might force a problem with free will and with doing the right thing for the right reasons. But being clear even to wooden headed people like me that Jesus was God also could have helped with other problems without necessarily cutting into our ability to do the right thing for the right reasons. I really am dull and stubborn about some things.

The Resurrection does not decide the issue. Most likely Jesus was not resurrected. God could resurrect a prophet or a goat as well as God could resurrect himself as Jesus. Even if Jesus was resurrected, resurrection does not prove he was God, and it does not show why God had to come into his own creation as a human, or as the particular human Jesus. I do not doubt the ability of God to resurrect. I just doubt it proves anything necessary about doing the right thing for the right reasons, about working hard to make the world better. Hopefully you can see why you should follow Jesus' message because of its merits and not because God raised him from the dead. So I don't look at the Resurrection any more here.

The Gospels and the whole New Testament were written by people who had never met Jesus in person. The Gospels were written by people who were already convinced Jesus was at least half God although, or because, they never met Jesus. The writers of the Gospels attributed to Jesus words that he did not say so they could bolster his divinity and the Church. From my reading of the New Testament and of what Jesus really said, Jesus was not God coyly come into the world. Jesus did not hint he was God. Jesus certainly was not clear to everyone around him that he was God. Jesus did not say he was God even to select disciples. Jesus said he was not God, in line with his identity as a Jew. As a Jew, Jesus would be appalled by the idea that he was God. Christian writers say God did make clear, through Jesus' words and acts, that Jesus was God; they say Jesus said openly he was God to select disciples; but I think not. I think people of the early Church turned Jesus into God, and then had Jesus say that he was God when he did not say it. Then, as only God can, in line with what God foresaw, God turned the Church to best use despite its mistake.

Again: I believe God could come into the world as a human if he wished. I am not clear why he would do that. God could do all that needed by sending Jesus as a prophet. If I am wrong, and God did come as Jesus, that is fine. As long as I do what Jesus taught, I will be fine. Until I can see this another way, I will stick with what Jesus likely thought: he, Jesus, was not God. God did not come into his creation as the human Jesus. Jesus did make the big difference as a human prophet of God. God will tell me for sure when I die, if he wants to tell me.

Suppose, after I die, God tells me he came as Jesus, and did what he did as Jesus, including the coyness, death, and resurrection, because that was the minimum God could do to get us to do the right thing, if we would do it at all. If God did less than that, it would not have been enough. If God did more than that, it would have been too much because we would have done the right thing but for the wrong reasons. Coming as Jesus, with the coyness, death, and resurrection, was just the right amount. Suppose God came as Jesus, many people “got it”, and did the right thing for the right reasons. Of course, I would have to accept this account because God said it, and I would accept it also because it makes sense. But, for now, I don’t think this is the case. I still think God sent Jesus as a prophet. If, after I die, I find I was wrong, then I am sure God will be kind with me as long as I do what Jesus asked now. In the meantime, I have a lot of work to do, and I get more of that done if I don’t worry all the time. If you worry all the time so you don’t get much done, or you decide Jesus was God but don’t do much of what he asked, then I doubt God will be more annoyed with me than with you.

Puzzle 1: Time and Place.

Whether we think God came into the world as Jesus, in some way other than Jesus, or God sent Jesus to proclaim a message, we have an issue: Why did God act that way in that particular time and place? The easy answer is because that act done then and there would be most effective to meeting God’s goals. Coming as Jesus then and there saved people most effectively. Having Jesus teach the message there and then made the message most effective. Coming as Jesus, or having Jesus teach the message, in that time and place, most effectively got people to do the right thing for the right reasons ever after. This answer is reasonable but it begs the most difficult question: Why was that time and place the best for that purpose? Why did God come as Jesus the Jew just when the Roman Empire was taking over Judea? Why did God use Jesus the Jew to proclaim that message just when the Roman Empire was taking over Judea? I can guess but won’t. I can see difficulties however we answer but I don’t go into them. It is possible to answer so as to favor one theory or another but it is not useful to get into this fight generally and I don’t do it here.

It is useful to think about these issues to clarify. Depending on your temper and education, it might help you decide about God coming into his creation, God coming as Jesus, and getting people to do the right thing for the right reasons.

Puzzle 2: Coming to Strictly Monotheistic Jews.

Either: (1) God came into the world as the God-man Jesus; or (2) God sent Jesus the prophet knowing Jesus would be deified and knowing the Church would be based on the idea of a deified god-man. Either way, God put the Jews in a terrible bind. The bind amounts to a cruel betrayal. Thinking about the situation in which God put the Jews does not do much to resolve the issues of whether God entered his own creation, how he did, and if Jesus was God; but thinking about the issue does help clarify our minds and it puts us in the right framework to think about other issues. This is one dilemma that I hope God will explain to me when I die.

At the time of Jesus, God had spent almost two thousand years training Jews to believe strictly in one good God and only one. To think any way other than strict ethical monotheism is horrible to a Jew. God

had taught Jews strictly for the sake of Jews and so the idea of one good God would go around the world. People need the idea. Whether God directly training Jews is getting people to believe the right thing for the right reasons is up to you.

Whether God came himself as Jesus or God sent a prophet that would be deified, either way, God had to go against what he spent almost two thousand years doing. Whether God came himself or sent a prophet, God had to go against himself.

In Christian dogma, Jesus-God has existed all along, before the Jews, waiting in the background to come into the world (read the opening to the Gospel of John). Contrary to Christian dogma, even though God made it clear he is the one and only God, God did not make his pre-existence as Jesus clear to Jews. The Tanakh (Old Testament) prophets did not forewarn about Jesus in this way. The fact that God did not make Jesus' pre-existence clear to Jews meant the coming of Jesus-God on Earth must seem like a contradiction within God. It is not what God spent almost two thousand years teaching Jews, and it is what God spent almost two thousand years warning them against. If Jesus is an integral part of God, I don't know why God did not explain in advance to Jews – I am sure they could have understood. If God intended to send a prophet who would be deified, I don't know why God did not forewarn Jews. God blind-sided the Jews by not telling them clearly about coming to this world himself or about the deification of a prophet.

God's action might have been necessary if it was the only way that the message of "one good God", "do unto others", and "make the Kingdom of God" could have been sent strongly enough to make a difference for everybody.

Even so, it is a strange situation. It sets the Jews up for a big fall. Not only did they not deserve the fall, they deserved better. They deserved praise for being the vehicle that gave the world the idea of one good God. With the coming of Jesus, whether Jesus is God or only a deified prophet, either (1) Jews have to continue the tradition that God spent two thousand hard years forcing them to learn and so risk losing God's message from Jesus or (2) they have to abandon the old tradition for the sake of a message they mostly knew already and so risk the wrath of God. God used the Jews to get across ideas. It seems God used Jews for the greater good at the expense of Jews. This seems like betrayal. If we take seriously what God forced the Jews to learn, then we face their dilemma too.

Maybe if God had forewarned Jews, the warning would have given all people too much and taken away too much free will. Maybe God had to do it without giving Jews much forewarning, so God did not send obelisks sprouting all over, so people everywhere still would have enough space to make up their own minds. This logic would apply whether Jesus was God or a deified prophet. I don't like this train of thinking. It still seems too cruel to Jews.

I don't know if God could have done it any better way, and that is all I can say here.

Orthodox Christianity gets almost the Last Word: Jesus saying He is God.

In "The Everlasting Man" (1925), G.K. Chesterton gave most of the arguments below for Jesus as God. C.S. Lewis restated them in his books. Lewis is less wordy and much clearer. I add a bit to their

arguments. The argument here does not depend on the big change in the world, the quality of Jesus' message, or on Jesus' message causing the big change. This argument is a separate independent argument given to bolster Jesus' identity as God even if his message is not unique and even if he did not cause the big change. Chesterton and Lewis do rely on the big change as another separate argument for Jesus as God. They do not seem to rely on the idea that Jesus' message was unique and was unique in causing the big change. Instead, they say his identity as God caused the big change. I do not explain why they think like this.

The New Testament writers have Jesus say he was God. Usually he said it indirectly and to a small group of disciples, but clearly enough. Chesterton and Lewis reject that Jesus would say he is God if he is not God. No explanation that is consistent with Jesus' character can be offered for why Jesus would say he is God if he is not God. Any person like Jesus would always tell the truth, including about himself, no matter how odd his claim. Jesus must have told the truth about himself when he said he is God, and Jesus is God.

(1) Jesus was not silly or stupid. He could not simply make a mistake and think he is God when he is not God. He had something in mind by saying he is God, and the most likely things he had in mind were that (a) he is God and (b) he wants people to know he is God.

(2) Jesus did not say he was God in the way a mystic does. Jesus did not say he participated in God or merged with God sometimes. He said he is God.

(3) Jesus was not the typical crazy person who says he is God. He was not a megalomaniac. Jesus was the opposite. He was terrifically smart, useful, and sane.

(4) Jesus did not say he is God as a Mahayana bodhisattva or Hindu avatar might say he-she is God, as a representative of the Dharma system (God system), who sustains the system, makes the system better, makes it more accessible, saves everybody, and is one such representative among many. Jesus said he is God in a religion where there is only one God and no one may represent God as an avatar or bodhisattva represents the Dharma system. Jesus meant he was the one-and-only God in human form and there are no such others. (This view does not prevent Jesus from appearing in other times and places including on other planets.)

(5) Jesus did not say he represents God as a prophet represents God. Jesus did not present himself as Moses, Elijah, or John the Baptist. The gospels make the distinction between John and Jesus quite clear. Jesus said he was God, not a prophet of God.

(6) No other historically real great religious person ever said he-she was God, not Moses, the Buddha, Mohammad, Confucius, or Chuang Tzu. Thus Jesus is unique among religious leaders, and is unique, among other ways, in his claim that he is God.

(7) Jesus had little motive for saying he is God. It adds little to his message. As a Jew, in his time and place, to claim to be God would detract from his credibility, influence, and movement severely.

(8) If Jesus said he is God, and he is not God, then Jesus lied, and knew he lied. Jesus lied in the way a criminal lies or the way a religious con man lies. He is not.

If Jesus said he was God and lied, Jesus would be a criminal, religious con man, compulsive liar, immoral, insane, or all of them. Jesus is none of them.

If Jesus said he is God, and none of the alternative explanations apply, then Jesus told the truth, and he is God. If someone of the quality of Jesus says he is God, gets no gain for saying so, and has good reasons not to say so, then likely he is telling the truth, likely he is really God.

If Jesus did say he is God, all the points above make a powerful argument. I wrote above that I don't think Jesus said he is God. The arguments of Chesterton and Lewis depend on taking all the New Testament as literally true, and I don't think so. Their arguments require that writers of the New Testament did not put words in Jesus' mouth to support their own views, and I think they did. They put words in Jesus' mouth to support his deification and to bolster the Church.

If the New Testament writers did accurately report that Jesus clearly said he is God, equal to God the Father, then the above arguments must be taken seriously. I am not sure the arguments are conclusive but they are strong. I leave it to you.

What gives Jesus the quality that makes him the kind of person who always tells the truth? I think it is his message. I find it hard to think Jesus would be the kind of person he is without the ideas he taught both by direct word and by example. Can we imagine Jesus without his parables such as "cast the first stone" and apart from the way he treated people such as the woman at the well or the Roman commander? So, the argument of Chesterton and Lewis depends on the message of Jesus. If we see his message at the root of his personal quality, we can stop there without going on to further conclusions, including the conclusions of Chesterton and Lewis.

If we accept Jesus' message as the basis for his quality as a person it is possible to go on to the conclusions of Chesterton and Lewis, and it is possible to offer their arguments without using the message as the basis for the quality of Jesus, but I don't veer that far off into theological dispute. If you want to take their argument as it stands without asking more what gives Jesus his quality as a person, go ahead. (You cannot say Jesus' identity as God gives him his character, and his character makes him credible when he says he is God. Even if true, it is a circular argument. This is one reason I don't like theological bickering.)

In considering this issue, we have to think again what difference it makes either way, as long as you follow Jesus' message and trust God. Conversely, what difference does it make if you don't follow Jesus message? On these topics, I have written enough already.

I do not do the following just because I want to deny Jesus is God: deny Jesus said he was God in the New Testament, and assert the writers put words in Jesus' mouth. I say so because I think both ideas are true and because that is how I read the New Testament. Giving words to a god-hero to serve your needs was common practice at the time of Jesus and would not seem lying as it seems now. I might be wrong. Christian writers would say I am wrong. They say all the New Testament was inspired by the Holy

Spirit; and, where the New Testament writers give the words of Jesus, Jesus actually said exactly those words. All the important words of Jesus found their way into the New Testament. The Church was inspired by the Holy Spirit when it assembled the New Testament (for use in liturgy) after about 350 CE. Christian writers would say I throw out the baby (Jesus) and the bathwater too (New Testament). We are at an impasse. I don't know what to do now except to go through specific passages to assess them as inspired, factually true, and useful. I am not a scholar. Although not a scholar, I do have to decide. Adept scholars have gone through the passages. I follow some of those scholars. You can find works giving various opinions cited in my book on Jesus or in the Bibliography here.

I dislike seeing Jesus, or any prophet, as an avatar or bodhisattva. Jesus was real while avatars are always imaginary and bodhisattvas are almost always imaginary. Avatars, bodhisattvas, and theologians, support a system while Jesus and prophets usually don't. I want a distinction between prophets versus avatars and bodhisattvas. I go into this topic again in the chapter on Hinduism.

Back to the Big Qualitative Change.

The fact that Jesus did make a big qualitative difference is enough for Christian writers to argue against atheists and agnostics without Christian writers having to make all the other points. It is enough to argue for the existence of God and for his concern with our world without also having to bolster Jesus and the Church. The fact that Jesus made a big difference does not prove Jesus was God come into his own creation. It is enough to start us thinking, and for reasonable people enough to accept God; but not enough to prove God exists. It is enough to make people think about Jesus as God but not enough to prove Jesus was God. Christian writers do not need to say: God coming into his creation as a human made a big qualitative difference, God coming into his creation as a human was the only thing that could have made such a big difference, so God must exist, God coming into his own creation must have been Jesus, Jesus must have been God coming into his own creation, God coming into his own creation only could have been as Jesus, and Jesus could only be God coming into his own creation.

God sent Jesus as a prophet. We can take the big qualitative change that was made by Jesus as the start for some serious thinking; that is what I did; that is enough.

All this is why I have little problem with Christian churches, I rather like them, and often I love the good decent people in them, but I do not feel right about joining. I hope churches do help us find the right thing to do in this hard world, help members do the right thing, and help people who are not members. Overall, they have a good record.

I advise Christians who are in a church to think about this: Jesus came to found the Kingdom of God, not a particular church. Jesus already had a Church in the Jewish religion. If he wanted a Church above all else, he would have modified the Jewish Church. The Kingdom of God is much bigger than any church. The church is not the Kingdom of God. Your Church might help you to find the Kingdom of God but it is not exactly the same as the Kingdom. You need not belong to a church to be in the Kingdom. People who are devoted to their church come perilously close to worshipping their church, its traditions, heroes, and theology rather than Jesus or God. To be in the Kingdom of God as well as in a church, it helps to accept God above your church. It is vital to accept the message of Jesus. You must try to do the right thing for the right reasons. You have to try to make the world better and-or more interesting. You will not

succeed fully but that is fine. Pray to God directly. Talk to Jesus. Follow the ideas of your church as much as you can. You may not condemn people who are not in your church and who do nothing bad – not believing as you believe is not bad itself. In the end, God, and only God, will judge.

If you are not in a Christian church, much the same advice goes with some changes. It helps to believe in God but I am not sure you have to. I am quite sure it helps. You still have to accept the importance of Jesus' message and you have to try hard. You still cannot condemn people who do not think like you do. The Kingdom of God is bigger than you and bigger than what you think. God is still the only judge.

It seems God did what he had to do through his prophets, including Jesus. We can go with that explanation. If thinking of Jesus as God or not God confuses us and distracts from the important message of Jesus, then we should focus on the message instead. If you want to think of Jesus as God, then go ahead, as long as you also do what Jesus taught and don't hurt people. If you come up with your own good reasons why God would come into his own creation yet be coy by hinting but not telling everybody clearly, especially not forewarning the Jews clearly, then please tell us.