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Religious Essay 1: Jesus as God or Not God, and What That Means

Originally most of this essay was Part 6 of Chapter 1 of my book "Religious Stances". I separated and gathered this material here because I was surprised at how touchy Christians are about this issue. I added a few sections in the beginning when extracting it from the book.

Why Christians are so Unhappy about my Beliefs.

Traditional orthodox Trinitarian Christians seem unhappy about my beliefs for three reasons:

(1) Like everybody, Christians want you to be like them, one of their group, and-or under their control. All religions and political parties want the same, even atheists and people who try to be good without God. Although assimilation and control likely is the biggest reason that Christians are unhappy with me, and it causes the biggest problem in personal meetings, I am not concerned with it here.

(2) Some Christians truly worry that I am so wrong that I endanger my soul. I like these people when they are not too pushy. All I can say are: (1) "Thank you" and (2) I believe my quest is acceptable to God. Some Christians pretend they are concerned with my soul when they really want to control me as in (1) above but I also ignore that here.

(3) Some Christians are simply offended by my ideas, especially by my idea that Jesus is not God. They are offended for various doctrinal reasons but mostly they seem annoyed that my ideas might shake their system. I do not force my ideas on anyone, and I don't mind if people think otherwise, as long as they all act decently and they do not try to force me into their mold.

Of my beliefs, below are those that seem to annoy Christians the most. All Christian conceptions about my ideas are mistakes. I go into more detail below.

(A) Christians think I don't believe in God although I say I do.

(B) Christians think I can't believe in God (the Father) if I don't firmly believe that Jesus is God.

(C) Christians think I have to either believe completely that (1) Jesus is God or believe completely that (2) Jesus is not God and therefore Jesus is a (2a) crazy person or a (2b) bad person. Either I believe Jesus is God or I don't take him seriously at all.

(D) Christians think each and-or all of the following automatically solves all problems: (a) the person of God, (b) the person of Jesus, (c) a personal relation with God, or (d) a personal relation with the Christ. "Christ is the answer". I think it helps if we believe in God and-or follow Jesus. I am sure the presence of God would awe and astound me. But, after we are awed and we believe, we still have issues to deal with, such as "Do we have to give people welfare?" and "How do we stop Kim Jong Un from using nuclear ballistic weapons?" "What is the right thing?" "What are the right reasons?" "How do I know?" After I know, how do I get myself to do it?" "How do I get enough other people to do the right things for the right

reasons?" "How do I promote decency without stultifying human life with religious tyranny?" The simple presence of any person, even a divine person, does not of itself solve many questions. Messages from that person can help.

(E) I seek answers to issues by thinking through issues by using ideas that I inherited from the entire Western tradition and that I borrowed from other traditions. Christians think they can find all answers in dogma and-or in their church. When I go beyond those sources, they think I don't believe in God or Jesus, and that I hate their particular church and all Christian churches.

(F) Christians think, if I deny that Jesus was God, then I deny the power of God and thus deny God.

The Power of God.

I believe in God, I trust God, and I think God could do what he wishes. I don't care about puzzles such as "Can God make a rock so big that he can't lift it?" or "Good because God says so or good because it is good?"

I believe God loves me and everyone and he wishes well for me and everyone.

You can love, respect, and follow Jesus, and you can even have a personal relation with Jesus, without thinking Jesus was God.

I think Jesus did not claim to be God. I think Jesus would be uneasy at best with that claim and likely he would be appalled by it. The New Testament was wrong when it had people accept Jesus as God. I doubt that ever happened to Jesus' face.

Likely Jesus did think he was the Messiah or something like that. Whether he was the Messiah or was not the Messiah is not relevant to following his message. It is an issue for Jews, Christians, and Muslims to argue. While you argue, don't forget to follow his message.

If God wished, God could come to Earth as a dog or a mushroom. If God wished, God could die as a dog or a mushroom, and then come back to life again. I have no idea why God would want to do any of that.

If God wished, God could come to Earth as a human. If God wished, God could die as a human and rise again from the dead. Whether he could or could not is not the question. The question is not that God could do this, could not do this, did do this, or did not do this.

The question is why God does anything or does not do that thing. I think God did not come to Earth as Jesus because it was best that he did not. For more why I think this, see religious essay 2.

God used Jesus to plant an important message into many people so the world would have a chance of changing for the better. God used Jesus to get us to do the right things for the right reasons. God did not use Jesus to make us do right.

God knew Jesus was going to die and was going to be deified. God used the deification of Jesus to spread the message of Jesus. This does not mean Jesus was God.

There is a fifty-fifty chance that Jesus was really resurrected. Likely, people had to think Jesus was resurrected – whether he was or not – for them to deeply accept Jesus' message and to make a way of life based on his message. If God had to resurrect Jesus to make sure Jesus' message was accepted, then God likely did resurrect Jesus. The fact that God resurrected Jesus does not make Jesus God.

Even if God did come to Earth as a person, die, and rise again, we still have to know what that means. To say simply that it "saves us" is not enough of an answer. I want to know how it saves us any more than simply hearing the message and believing in God saves us. I want to know what else the coming to Earth as a person, dying, and rising again might mean. I want to know why we have to believe that in addition to accepting God and Jesus, and following the message. I have not gotten good answers to these questions. The only answer I can see is that God used the events of Jesus to plant the message of Jesus and to encourage belief in God.

Even if God did come to Earth as a person, die, and rise again, we still have to deal with issues such as "Should we give tax breaks to rich people?" and "Should we change human genes?" We do not find answers in dogma or even in the assumed fact that God came to Earth as a person, died, and rose from the dead.

If God had to come to Earth as a human, die, and rise, to get people to believe and follow the message, then I am sorry for God and sorry for people who need that to believe in God and follow the message. I am glad people do believe in God now, even as a result of thinking that he came to Earth, died, and rose; but I am still sorry that is the only way they could do it. I don't need that to believe in God and to follow the message of Jesus.

If (a) God had to send Jesus to make people believe that God came to Earth as a human, died, and rose again, so (b) people would believe in God by believing Jesus is God ((c) even if Jesus is not God), so (d) people would follow the message, then (e) I am sorry for God, Jesus, and people. I am glad people do believe in God now but I am still sorry that is the only way they could do it.

If (a) God had to come to Earth as a person, die, and rise from the dead, (b) to get people to believe in him, then (c) God also caused some problems in doing so.

Ironically, the biggest problem he caused is that people don't believe in him as he is but believe in him as in some fantasy that they project on to the person (they think that) he came as. Fantasy Jesus obscures real God and obscures real Jesus. When people use Jesus-as-person-God to get to God, usually they do not get to God but to a badly mistaken fantasy they have about God. Usually they project some super version of themselves and believe in that. The body of religion that grew up around Jesus-as-God often gets in the way of real God. So, in using Jesus-as-person-God to get to God, people actually stay farther from God than if they went to God directly. Yes, you can do that. People use Jesus-as-person-God as a screen on which to project their fantasies and so miss real God while thinking they find fantasy God. The teachings and mission of real Jesus – whether God or mere human - lead us to God but the fantasy Jesus-as-person-God gets in the way of God. This is sad.

Nobody has a clear full accurate idea of God. We all settle for fantasy God. But some fantasies are better than others, and some are worse. Too often the fantasy God that people get from their fantasies of Jesus is worse than the fantasy God they would get by (a) talking directly to God and Jesus, (b) using the sense God gave them, (c) accepting science, (d) reading both parts of the Bible, (e) and reading other religions. Using Jesus-as-a-person-God to get to God too often leads people farther away even than the fuzzy inaccurate images we have of God. The fantasy God that people get from most Judaism and Islam is as bad as the fantasy God of Christianity. The fantasy ideas that people have of Moses, David, and Mohammad are as bad as the fantasy ideas they have of Jesus.

At least in state societies, people seem to need a divine-human mediator between us and God, and they cannot accept a direct relation with God. If most people must have this, then maybe God came here as Jesus so that, when people grab a divine mediator, at least they can grab the right one. They don't have to grab a mere fantasy that is often a harmful lie. God came as Jesus so that when we seize a fantasy of God, a fantasy that otherwise is usually bad, God made sure it would be as good as can be. God came as Jesus so that when we delude ourselves about Jesus as God at least we delude ourselves as little as possible. This might be so, but, if it is, then again I feel sorry for us, Jesus, and God. We still manage to screw up the message of Jesus even if Jesus really was God and we believe that Jesus was God. We manage to screw up the message because we believe Jesus is God even if Jesus really is God. God did what he could to make our need for delusion as close to the truth as possible and we still manage to get that wrong and we still cause damage. Even if God came to Earth as Jesus so that, when we seize on someone as divine mediator, we seize on something true, still, we are better off not to focus on God as Jesus but to focus on the message that God conveyed on Earth as Jesus.

Again, focus on the message and you honor Jesus as God more than if you try to honor Jesus as God directly.

We get closer to God if we focus on the teaching of Jesus than if we use Jesus-as-person-God even if Jesus was God.

God wants me to search for answers. God wants me to use my mind, and to think beyond incarnation, death, and resurrection if I need to.

I trust God to guide me as much as is consistent with his plan for this world.

Christians seem to get angry when I do not simply "accept Christ" as the answer but I insist on thinking about his message and assessing that. Christians offer a simple person as the answer to questions that need other kinds of answers. They get angry when I don't go along.

Traditionally religious people think a semi-divine or divine person is answer enough to all questions and that we don't need further answers, not even answers such as the Golden Rule. C.S. Lewis wrote the book "Till We Have Faces" to show this. Religions that do have God think the person of God, a divine version of God, a semi-divine version of God, or a person who stands for God (Moses or Mohammad) are answer enough. Religions that try to go beyond a traditional God, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, think a bodhisattva or avatar is enough, such as Maitreya, Kwan Yim, Krishna, or Kali. I disagree. No

person alone is answer enough. No matter how much we are awed by a person alone, questions remain.

“Christ alone” is answer enough only when he points to the message, to God, and to our relation with God. “Christ alone” is not answer enough without the message. We do not need to think of Jesus as God-on-Earth-as-human-person to get the message and to believe in God.

To me, people who say “Christ-the-person is the answer” without also seeing that the answer lies in his message rather than his person alone are like people who say Allah, Mohammad, the Buddha, Krishna, a bodhisattva, or avatar are answer enough. It is not the proper following of Yahweh-El-Allah-God but is another kind of religion.

It seems to me that people who insist that any simple person is answer enough do not trust God enough. People who insist “the person of Christ is the answer” or “Mohammad is the answer” do not trust God enough. Even people who insist “the Law is enough” do not trust God. They do not believe God loves them. They do not believe in his gifts. Instead, they substitute something else for simple plain God and his gifts. They think God did not already give us the tools, our minds and traditions, along with all his prophets, to find most answers.

When people want me to accept Jesus as they do (or Mohammad or another religious leader), then they do not trust God enough. They do not feel secure enough about God to forge a relation with him. They do not feel secure enough about God to use his gifts. In effect, they worship an idol, even if Jesus was God, even if Mohammad condemned idols; and they want me to worship the same idol. I feel unhappy doing that, and I wish they would stop pushing me.

Seeing the answer in God, Jesus, Mohammad, Allah, Buddha, a bodhisattva, Krishna, or some avatar alone, without also using our minds and principles, is how we get into many of the messes that atheists blame religions for.

In another essay, I go into more detail on this question of using a person as an answer without also considering the message apart from the person.

Here begins the material that was originally in the book “Religious Stances”.

PART 6: Jesus as God or Not God.

Four Views.

(1) The dismissive atheistic or agnostic view: Naturally created (evolved) people simply indulge in irrational emotional religions. Human religions are natural phenomena like forests or ice caps. They are like the Red Spot on Jupiter, a storm that has lasted hundreds of years. They make about as much sense as a mud slide. We might learn from them but we are more likely to learn from the arts, science, business, and practical life, and we are better off to use our lives making money so our old age is happy. Christianity is just another religion. There is nothing special about Jesus. Everything he said, other

people said. He was another of the charismatic people who start religions, like the Buddha, Lao Tzu, or Mohammad.

What role morality plays in the dismissive view varies and is not usually clear.

(2) The respectful atheistic or agnostic view: People indulge in religions but some good can come of religions as long as we don't get caught up in them and we don't believe their fantasies about the supernatural. Religions foster moral teaching. Morality is good. We need it. Jesus is among several adept moral teachers who started great religions. We can learn from him just as we learn from the Buddha, Mohammad, Chuang Tzu, Confucius, and the Upanishads. We need give Jesus no more weight than we give to anybody else.

Morality is important but it is not clear where morality gets its importance and it is not clear what the importance of morality implies for other issues such as the existence of God.

In the politically correct versions of (1) and (2), people pay public lip service to all religions except Christianity; people publicly make a point of being open-minded to non-Christian religions; people publicly scoff at Christianity; and they privately scoff at all religious people. This is a case where the hypocrisy is worth pointing. Honest disdain would be better.

(3) My view: God sent prophets to start the great religions. Jesus modified Jewish ideas to make a new vision of the Kingdom of God and the role of people in the Kingdom. Jesus' ideas mixed with ideas from Classical Greece and Europe, mostly from Northwest Europe. The mix of Jewish ideas, Jesus' modifications, and Western ideas, created the best view, and changed the world for the better. No other view changed the world nearly as much and nearly as well. We should learn from all religions but we have to pay special attention to Jesus and the view that comes of mixing Jesus with the West. Jesus was not God. Jesus could change the world as no other person did without being God. You can follow Jesus, participate in God, and in God's work, without thinking that Jesus is God.

(4) The standard orthodox Christian view: Jesus is God. Jesus could only have changed the world as he did, much for the better, if he were God. To fully appreciate Jesus and God, and to fully participate in God and his work, you have to accept Jesus as God. You have to accept that the Church represents Jesus and God on Earth, the Church is the Kingdom of God, at least for now. The goals of seeing Jesus as God are: Justification through Faith, Salvation, and Heaven. Jesus saved believers through his birth, death, and Resurrection. Justification, Salvation, and Heaven can be reached only through the Church. Other religions have good points but cannot bring people into a close relation with Jesus and God, cannot teach the correct full message as does standard orthodox Christianity and its Church, and cannot save people.

Christians seem to think I offer views (1) and-or (2) when I offer view (3). They seem to think I attack view (4) when I hold to view (3). They are wrong.

Jesus as God or Not God.

Briefly, to repeat, I say: "Follow the message of Jesus. If you do that, you needn't worry much about Jesus as God. If you don't do that, worshipping Jesus as God won't help you". I was surprised by how

much Christians are offended. Christians seize on the fact that I don't embrace Jesus as God while I seek to follow his message yet many Christians overlook his message while they worship him as God. I focus on his message. You can love Jesus and still not think he is God. You can love Jesus and think he is God while still not demanding other people do too. To threaten a person with hell is to demand he/she think as you do.

My full ideas are more complicated than "Jesus is not God. We can still follow his message fully and properly if he is not God". Because of where I lived, I was raised with the idea that Jesus is God; this idea is the most important thing in the world; and, if you don't say Jesus is God, you will go to hell. When I thought Jesus might not be God, I was afraid. I could mask the fear but still it lingered in my guts. The ideas are easy. Beliefs and feelings are hard. It is easy to reject Jesus-as-God as part of glamorized rebellion against authority but I never got much satisfaction from that stance. I wanted to think things out more, find what I really believed, and try to stick to what I believe regardless of fear. It took me a long time to get to the bottom of how I thought and felt and to trust what God said.

More fully, what I think is: "Jesus might be God or might not. You don't have to decide firmly either way. If you follow his message, you will be alright even if you don't decide firmly. It might be easier if I planted a flag in one camp only but that is not how I feel. My feelings might be left over from either youthful indoctrination (Jesus is God) or youthful rebellion (Jesus is not God) but that doesn't matter because this is how I feel now. It is what I am now. Likely Jesus was a human prophet; but he was the most amazing human prophet of all. All religious people are merely human. Only God is God. If I do as Jesus taught, he will not be angry by my feeling this way even if he is God. I can follow Jesus' message properly even if I don't feel he is God. Other people can do the same. I dislike when people make me feel guilty and fearful and make me think as they do. I don't like when non-Christians make me deny that Jesus is God. All I want from anybody is to act well and allow me to think. They have enough to do acting well without wasting energy trying to force me into their mold through fear and guilt."

Part of the reason I am unhappy with the idea of Jesus as God is because I read the Tanakh (Old Testament) before the New Testament, and internalized the ideas that there is only one God and that no human can be God. God was clear about this. Jesus could do what he did without being God. The idea that Jesus is God is appealing but makes me uneasy. Jesus himself would not be easy with the idea that he is God. The opinions of God and Jesus are the biggest reason I dislike the idea that Jesus is God. If we must err, better to err on the side of God's clarity about his own identity and with Jesus' own ideas. When I want a solid base to think about these issues, I ask, "What does God think? What did Jesus likely think?" It helps to ask question such as: "What does Jesus want me to do despite what I believe or fear? Was Jesus born of a virgin? How do Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection save people if people don't also do what he asked? What changes did Jesus make in history?"

Part of the reason I am unhappy with the idea of Jesus as God is because of the image of Jesus as God that nearly all Christians have (next paragraph below). I don't like that image of Jesus as God. Even if Jesus is God, he is not like that. God the Father is not like that. I doubt Jesus and God want me to see them that way. It is better to reject the idea of Jesus as God than to see him that wrong way. It is better to painfully forge my own ideas of God and Jesus, poor as they might be, than to see them through the wrong image that most Christians see Jesus.

“Church” means not “Roman Catholic Church” but the Christian Church in general with orthodox Trinitarian dogma. The early Church originally insisted on the humanity of Jesus so as to avoid worse mistakes such as Gnosticism. While the Church position is well-thought-out, it is not what most Christians believe, not how they really see Jesus. Even on Christian TV, among educated Christians, thoughtful Christians, and clergy, most Christians see Jesus otherwise. Jesus is the shiny huge ball-of-light mediator demigod that is common in large state societies. Christians see Jesus as Mahayana Buddhists see bodhisattvas and Buddhas, Hindus see avatars, Muslims see Mohammad but know they should not, Taoists see their Immortals, and Theravada Buddhists see Siddhartha Gautama. Jesus and all these other figures are a cosmic principle made incarnate. It is how Romantics glamorize anti-hero bad boys and bad girls with petty endearing faults. When Christians see Jesus, they see Gandalf, Frodo, Aragorn, Aslan, Neo, Luke Skywalker, Yoda, and the Gladiator mixed with every hero from every epic. They see “THE ONE” and see him as a big shiny ball. Even when Christians want Jesus human so he is soft, warm, forgiving, bridges us to God, loves us, and makes us secure, it is not human softness and warmth. Christians see Jesus as a King and as the counterpart of Satan the enemy in a cosmic system. Priests can debate whether Christians are mired in some heresy. What matters is that I dislike this idea of Jesus, as a cosmic principle incarnate, as the Word made Flesh. When I do not accept the false ideas of Christians, Christians think I reject everything and must reject everything. They are wrong. Even when I think of Jesus as God, I can’t think of him this way.

When we think of Jesus this way, it is hard to have a correct good relation with him and with God. I reject this idea of Jesus as much for the damage it does to a correct good relation with God as because this idea is wrong. I suggest we try to have a direct relation with God as Jesus did. To have a correct direct relation with God does not block a good relation with Jesus and does not block seeing Jesus as God if that is what we believe.

Christians use Jesus like other religions use their semi-divine mediators, and so Christians can hinder a direct relation with God. When a direct relation with God is blocked, people feel they need a close relation with a mediator demigod, that is, Jesus. So the wrong idea of Jesus (as 01: Basic Beliefs mediator demigod) reinforces a wrong general idea (we need a mediator demigod) that reinforces the wrong idea of Jesus (mediator demigod), and so on. We must jump out of this bind. When we do not jump out, we start never-ending echoes of a false need for false mediation. We set up dependence on the church, clergy, Mary, saints, and the heroes of our particular church such as Paul, Luther, and Calvin. Those can all be good people in their limited way but when taken the wrong way they are bad.

I know nobody has a full and correct understanding of God, especially through dogma. I know that we don’t need that to have a good relation with God. People who have imperfect ideas of Jesus-as-divine-mediator, of saints, and of heroes, can still have a good relation with God, and can still follow the message. Some do a much better job than I do. I do not ask people to accept my dogma in place of their dogma or my wrong ideas in place of theirs. I only ask that they do not condemn me because I can’t accept their wrong ideas of Jesus and God, that they be open minded, and they act well.

When I cannot accept Jesus as God as Christians do, they are further offended for reasons that have to do partly with dogma but mostly with groups. Christians think: “To worship Jesus as God is more important than his message. You cannot follow the message properly if you do not also worship Jesus as God. Even if you seem to follow the message, you cannot follow it properly if you do not worship

Jesus as God. Jesus as God is integral to the message without which the message is not the message. Without Jesus as God, the message is not enabled.” Christians also think this: “So, if we have to worship Jesus to follow the message properly, and can’t really follow the message perfectly, then we can just get along with worship and not worry about the message.” Even Christians who did not say this felt it and secretly condemned me. I doubt God feels this way. Some good Christians do not feel this way.

I think Christians were not really saying “‘Jesus is God’ is the only key that enables the message and allows us to properly follow it”. Instead they were saying “‘Jesus is God’ is the one and only dogma key that allows you to properly join a church, that is, allows anyone to fully be one of us, the only good guys”. They put “us the church” ahead of Jesus and his message. Most religions and stances really do this in the background when they publicly stress a point of dogma. Muslims do it when they stress Mohammad as the last and greatest of prophets. Buddhists do it when they say “THE LORD Buddha”, Taoists with “THE Tao”. I do it too in my ways. I hope we all can get past this strategy to the real message, the teachings of Jesus.

These are all mistaken reasons for me to reject Jesus as God: merely to reject the false Christian idea of him; to reject the Christian rejection of me; continued rebellion against authority; as a youth, I decided Jesus was not God, and now will stick to it no matter what; to go along with wise people like Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson; to feel it makes me an adept rational scientific superior thinker; chic atheism, agnosticism, or skepticism; it is easy to accept Jesus as God and to join with Christians, and hard to deny Christians, so I want to do the hard false-heroic thing; defending my ideas makes me seem like a clever person and writer; and as a way to make a distinct identity for myself, to make me somewhat special. I know my faults and try to correct for them. I search for the best ideas and try to accept them.

These are all mistaken reasons for anyone to accept Jesus as God: you fear going to hell if you don’t; you want to be saved and that is the only way you can think of to have a relation with God so as to be saved; you want eternal bliss in heaven; you were born with the idea and you can’t shake it off; you have been absorbed into a group of people who demand that you do; you think God will love you only if you do; you think God will hate you if you don’t; it gives you a sense of power, entitlement, or relief; you desperately need comfort and think Jesus will comfort you only if you worship him as God; you, or a loved one, has a problem such as alcoholism or cancer, and you think you have to accept Jesus as God so he (God) will help you; you desperately need a great shiny ball-of-light all-powerful mediator god and Jesus is the only candidate in your milieu; a person you respect or fear told you to; and a priest told you to.

You certainly can accept Jesus as God if you really believe that way.

If you believe Jesus is God for the reasons above, that stance can be alright as long as you don’t force your belief on other people or make them feel bad about their belief. If your belief leads you to act on the message of Jesus and do good things then that is fine even if your belief came from childhood indoctrination or out of a bargain with God to save a loved one.

Suppose you decide to talk with God and, along the way, you start talking with Jesus too. During your friendship with God and Jesus, you decide Jesus is God. This is a valid reason to accept Jesus as God. Suppose you decide to go to church, and the same happens not out of fear or the desire for heaven. This too is valid. Remember not to hurt other people or to force your belief on other people. Feel free to

talk about your experiences, feelings, and thoughts. You might want to learn about other religions to understand other people better.

You can also decide to talk with God and Jesus and not conclude that Jesus is God. The same suggestions apply.

God and Jesus will help you even if you don't believe Jesus is God. All you need do is ask.

As to whether Jesus said he is God, see Part 7 below.

For people like me who have thought about Jesus as God, and might have feared as I did, I wish I could be definite and could give you more to work with. I wish I could make you less uneasy. I have done what I could. Rest on God's love and mercy, and on Jesus' love and mercy. Do what he taught. Follow your heart. That should be more than enough.

Miracles and the Resurrection.

Christians are also surprised a person could believe Jesus performed miracles and was really resurrected but not believe that Jesus is God. Miracles, including the Resurrection, are irrelevant. If the message is bad, we should not believe it because Jesus did miracles and was resurrected. If the message is good, we should not need miracles and the Resurrection to believe it. What if a dog came back from the dead and told you to worship Satan? Do you need a human to come back from the dead to know that God loves you?

If the miracles and the Resurrection help you to believe the message then I am glad you believe the message but I wish you could believe it for its content. If you believe it because of miracles and the Resurrection, you are less likely really to follow it.

Miracles are a non-issue. Every religion claims its heroes performed miracles, and it is boring and pointless to argue if the miracles were real, or to argue which hero did the greatest miracles and so his-her religion is the one true belief. Other figures in the Tanakh performed miracles; they did not claim they were God; and miracles did not make them God. Christian saints perform miracles; they do not claim to be God; and miracles do not make the God. The same is true of the heroes in other religions.

After reading the New Testament many times, I too feel what impresses many Christian writers: the people who believed in Jesus after he died were simple folk who had little to gain by saying Jesus rose from the dead and so likely was God; they had a lot to lose; they were not good liars; and they probably told the truth. There is about a fifty-fifty chance Jesus did rise from the dead. This still does not make Jesus God, and still does not change the fact that we should look at the content of his message first. Someone rising from the dead does not shock me although it does not happen often. Rising from the dead alone proves little apart from what the risen person says. God could bring back a dead dog and could make the dog talk but that would not make the dog God and would not mean we have to believe what the dog says if the dog does not say the right things. God could raise Jesus from the dead even if Jesus were not God. Rising from the dead does not make Jesus God. If God did raise Jesus from the

dead, we have to think why God did that. But this topic is apart from whether Jesus is God. This topic bears on how Jesus' message spread among mere humans.

Trusting God.

The fuss about miracles, resurrection, and Jesus as God, is a bad distraction, and shows that people likely don't trust God enough. If you trust God, then you do as God taught and you follow his message. You don't need miracles, a resurrection, or God coming to Earth as a human, to believe God loves you, and to try to do as he teaches. If you need all that, then you are merely human like the rest of us, God understands, and maybe God did it so you would follow him. If you don't need miracles, a resurrection, or a human-as-God to hear the message and trust God, then simply hear the message and trust God without worry. If you can trust God in this simple direct way, then you are lucky. I feel good when I trust God this way.

Jesus as Amazing Prophet.

I think Jesus is the most important prophet with the best message or I would not say to follow his message. He still fills me with awe. He strikes me as no other prophet from other religions, such as Mohammad, the Buddha, or Chuang Tzu. Even when other religions state clearly that their leaders were only human, and were not divine, as with Mohammad, the Buddha, or Chuang Tzu, still their followers treat them as divine. They make of their leaders the demigod that I dislike in Christian views of Jesus. Is my attitude like the attitude of people in other religions toward their prophet? By holding Jesus above everyone else and correct in his message, do I not effectively deify Jesus as people in other religions deify their leaders even when they know they should not? Is this my way of making Jesus God without making him God? Is this my way of straddling the line? I hope not. I try not to. I can work not to do this because I have seen what happened in other religions, and what happened in Christianity.

If Jesus was above everybody else, then what do I make of Jesus? How could Jesus be above everybody else and still not be God? This question does bother me. I don't have a good answer. It is a question that other religions have to answer about their leaders too. The best answer I can give is that God had to choose somebody to carry the message, and to live it, in Jesus' time and place, and God chose well. God chose a good man for a good job. Simply giving the message and living it would make the teacher seem like God, and that is what happened with Jesus. Just because Jesus gave and lived the superior message of God does not automatically make him into God. The people who save the world in adventure movies are not necessarily God, and we should not take them that way. Giving and living the message does make Jesus the awesome superior prophet that he is.

For more on a similar version of this issue, see Part 7 below.

Avoiding a Bad "Either Or".

God is uneasy with the idea of another god or with a human sharing his self. Jesus himself would be uneasy with the idea that he is God, Yahweh, Eloi, or Allah. I doubt that Jesus ever claimed to be God even though the New Testaments says he did. That God and Jesus would not like the idea of a human as God is the biggest reason not to worry whether Jesus is God. The idea is not acceptable to a Jew or

Muslim. To repeat: the second biggest reason not to worry about Jesus as God is that what matters is not Jesus' divinity but his message. It is more important that we follow his teachings than that we worship him as God. The message enables itself. You don't need to worship Jesus as God to properly follow his message. You can follow his message properly without worshipping him as God. Jesus himself said it is better to do the right thing than be correct about dogma.

If Christians see Jesus as God, I have no problem as long as they also follow his message and do not condemn other people out of hand. If Jesus is God, I have no problem with that either. It is comforting. Jesus will not condemn me as long as I follow him. Jesus is kinder, wiser, smarter, and a better leader, than Christians. When I die, if God feels like explaining, God will explain; and I will be happy either way as long as I did work hard to follow Jesus' ideas.

It is natural to force questions into "either or" dichotomies: either Jesus is God or not. It can be annoying to take a middle "wishy washy" position such as "I am not sure but I think Jesus might be God" or "I don't want to force my mind but I think Jesus was only human". I dislike this forced dichotomy but go to the second option: "EITHER we believe Jesus is God, have a right idea of Jesus, and push our idea on other people; OR we would rather follow the message, won't decide if Jesus is God, especially if we have to accept a wrong idea of God, and would rather go with the idea that Jesus is not God." So, when I say "Jesus is not God", take it to mean "I don't want to madly believe Jesus is God in the wrong way, and I don't want to go against what God and Jesus said about only one God, so I prefer to say that he is merely a prophet and not God".

In dogma, either Jesus is God, or he is not. Either you accept Jesus as God, or not. Either you follow his teachings, or not. That breakdown makes eight possibilities. Among the eight, the only ones that matter to me are those in which we follow his teachings, but I go through the whole list for the sake of completeness.

(1) Jesus is God, you accept him as God, and you follow his teachings. Jesus would be proud of you but mostly for following his teachings.

(2) Jesus is God, you accept him as God, and don't follow his teachings. In Christianity, demons know Jesus is God, more surely than devout Christians know, but demons don't follow him. Christians who act like this are demons too. People of this type are like the son, from the Gospel of Matthew, who told his father he would do as the father ordered but then did not. God will be quite annoyed with you, more annoyed than if you did not accept Jesus as God but still followed his message. Some Christians worship Jesus as God, and worship him fervently, as a way to get out of following his teachings. God dislikes that quite a bit. Don't do it.

(3) Jesus is God, you do not accept him as God, and do follow his teachings. Jesus might be a bit amused by your weak intellect but he will be overall delighted. His delight will more than make up for any annoyance at overlooking the fact that he is God. People in this type are like the son in the New Testament who grumbled at the father's orders but did them anyway. This son is much better than the "kiss ass" son who said he would follow the Father's orders did not.

(4) Jesus is God, you do not accept him as God, and do not follow his teachings. Jesus and God will be angry at you, but much more for not following the teachings than for not accepting Jesus as God. Other people who did not accept Jesus as God still followed his teachings well, so why didn't you?

(5) Jesus is not God, you accept him as God, and you follow his teachings. God will be happy with you, and likely will overlook your mild polytheism and mild idolatry. This is how I see most Christians when they really do try to follow Jesus' message.

(6) Jesus is not God, you accept him as God, and you do not follow his teachings. God will be angry with you, more for not following the teachings than for your polytheism and idolatry. God might think confusion about Jesus' identity, and "kissing up" by treating Jesus as God, really was a hidden attempt to get around doing the hard true work.

(7) Jesus is not God, you do not accept him as God, and you do follow his teachings. God will be happy with you, more for following the teachings than for accidentally guessing rightly about strict God-Father-alone monotheism. This is what I hope for.

(8) Jesus is not God, you do not accept him as God, and you do not follow his teachings. In this case, not accepting Jesus as God is irrelevant. God will be annoyed quite enough at you for not following Jesus' teachings.

You should not insist that people accept Jesus as God. You should not threaten people with hell if they do not accept Jesus as God. Only God can decide. God will be quite unhappy with you if you insist people accept Jesus as God yet you do not follow his message. You should not insist that people deny Jesus is God. You should not threaten them in any way for that. God will be unhappy with you if you do that. To do that is not to follow the message. Follow his message, and let the business about divinity sort itself out.

Not as Correct Dogma.

Nobody knows the absolute full correct dogma about: the Trinity, how Jesus saves, heaven, and when God will end the world. Not even Jesus knows the last item. Must you know all dogma of your religion, absolutely correctly, so as to go to Heaven? Christians should hope the answer is "no" because, if "yes", then they don't know the items above, and so they are all going to hell. If you do not know exactly the relation between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then you are going to hell. Yet most Christians don't even know items of dogma that their Church stresses such as about the Eucharist (body and blood, bread and wine). Few Christians know the official dogma of the Resurrection. Nobody knows the full mystery. Despite 2000 years of dogma, most Christians are still Gnostics and Aryans, and cannot change. If you don't need to know all dogma absolutely correctly to go to heaven and avoid hell, then how much do you need to know and how much do you need to know absolutely correctly? This is a bad question. Even churches insist that the root issue is not about dogma in this way.

The answer is not in dogma. The answer is: you can know the basic teachings of Jesus about how to act well and think well, and can follow them. You can mix them with practicality without perverting them. That is enough. If you do that, you don't have to worry about knowing enough dogma absolutely correctly.

This is the real stance of most Christians, including priests, though they would not say so. In their stance, Christians include a provision that you must also confess Jesus as God publicly even if you are not sure what that means and even if your idea of Jesus as God is incorrect. But, in my view, the idea of Jesus as God remains among the dogmas that we can't be sure about, and that we don't need to be sure about, to work hard to do the right thing, and to feel good about God's grace.

If you follow Jesus but are not a standard orthodox Christian, or you are a Muslim or Jew, you can think about it in terms of a traditional argument about Justification and the Law. How much, and how well, do you have to follow the Law to be Justified? Traditionally, simply put, no matter how much you follow the Law, and how well, you cannot justify yourself that way alone. You can be justified only through the grace of God. You can try hard to follow the spirit of the Law, and hope for the best. Questions about the divinity of Jesus are like trying to follow every letter of the Law in a vain hope of justifying yourself that way alone. You cannot justify yourself and thus go to heaven by believing in Jesus alone if you do not also do as he taught. If you do as he taught, you do not have to believe in him as God anymore than you have to follow the exact strict letter of all the Law. If you don't have to follow the exact strict letter of all the Law, and, even if you did, it would not save you, then what do you have to do? You have to follow the teachings of Jesus, mixed with practicality, as best you can. Early Christians correctly lifted the burden of full perfect law from themselves but then substituted items of mysterious and difficult dogma. Both are errors that we can overcome. (If you are Hindu, Buddhist, or Taoist, you can think in terms of knowing other bits of dogma, what I call "aids" in later chapters.)

If You Think Jesus is God.

If Jesus is God, that is fine with me, and God will let me know how I did when I die. I trust God to be generous.

If you think Jesus is God, your stance is fine with me too. I don't want to argue you out of belief. I do want you to act well. If your belief spurs you to act well, that is wonderful. While acting well, I want only this from you: Don't condemn others. Act on the message of Jesus. If you don't also act on Jesus' message, then you might as well believe nothing. Feel free to discuss your ideas. Feel free to try to convince other people. Don't browbeat, harangue, make people feel guilty, or frighten. Follow Saint Francis of Assisi and teach by example. Before you talk with others, have your ideas as clear as possible. You don't have to be Thomas Aquinas but you do have to be clearer than "Oh, I just know it's true". Listen to people. Take seriously their ideas and feelings. Know in advance why people dislike formal religion, Christianity in particular, and your version of Christianity. Know your own brand of Christianity. Know about the differences between brands of Christianity and be ready to explain. Be ready to meet ideas with ideas of equal value. This is not "point counter point", a debate where a judge keeps score. But reasons matter. Help people not to be afraid. Help them to act well even if they are not clear and not decided. Call on God for help not to convince them but to get you both to see the truth as well as you both can and to act as well as you both can.

If You are More Sure than Me that Jesus is Not God.

See the chapter on atheism.

Don't assume that, because people believe Jesus is God, or because they are not sure, that they are total idiots and cause everybody else a lot of grief. Most people who believe in Jesus as God are fairly decent people, they don't force their belief on others, don't condemn others to hell, and are just as good as citizens and as people as you. Some are really good decent people who can serve as examples to everyone, and their faith makes them that way.

Don't assume you can think better than people who believe Jesus is God or are not sure. A big wall arises between me and standard pseudo-skeptic academics when they find out I believe in God. They don't bother to find out what I think, and assume I am an idiot. Usually their ideas are not due to thinking out but to absorbing chic academic skepticism. Plenty of people who believe in God, and believe in Jesus as, God think well. Most smart people before about 1850 did both. Plenty of people who don't believe in Jesus as God think quite badly. Spend time practicing how to think well and learning how to listen to other people.

If you are in another religion, don't assume all Christians are idiots and cannot understand your religion. Too many Christians do make the parallel mistake, so don't you make it too. Extend the same tolerance to Christians and to people like me that you wish they would give you, that is, follow the Golden Rule. Don't reduce Christianity to your religion. Be patient with Christians who try to reduce your religion to Christianity. Read the New Testament. Actually learn about Jesus from unbiased sources, not just from what your religion superficially tells you about Jesus. Apply the best ideals of your religion to Jesus and to people who believe in Jesus as God.