

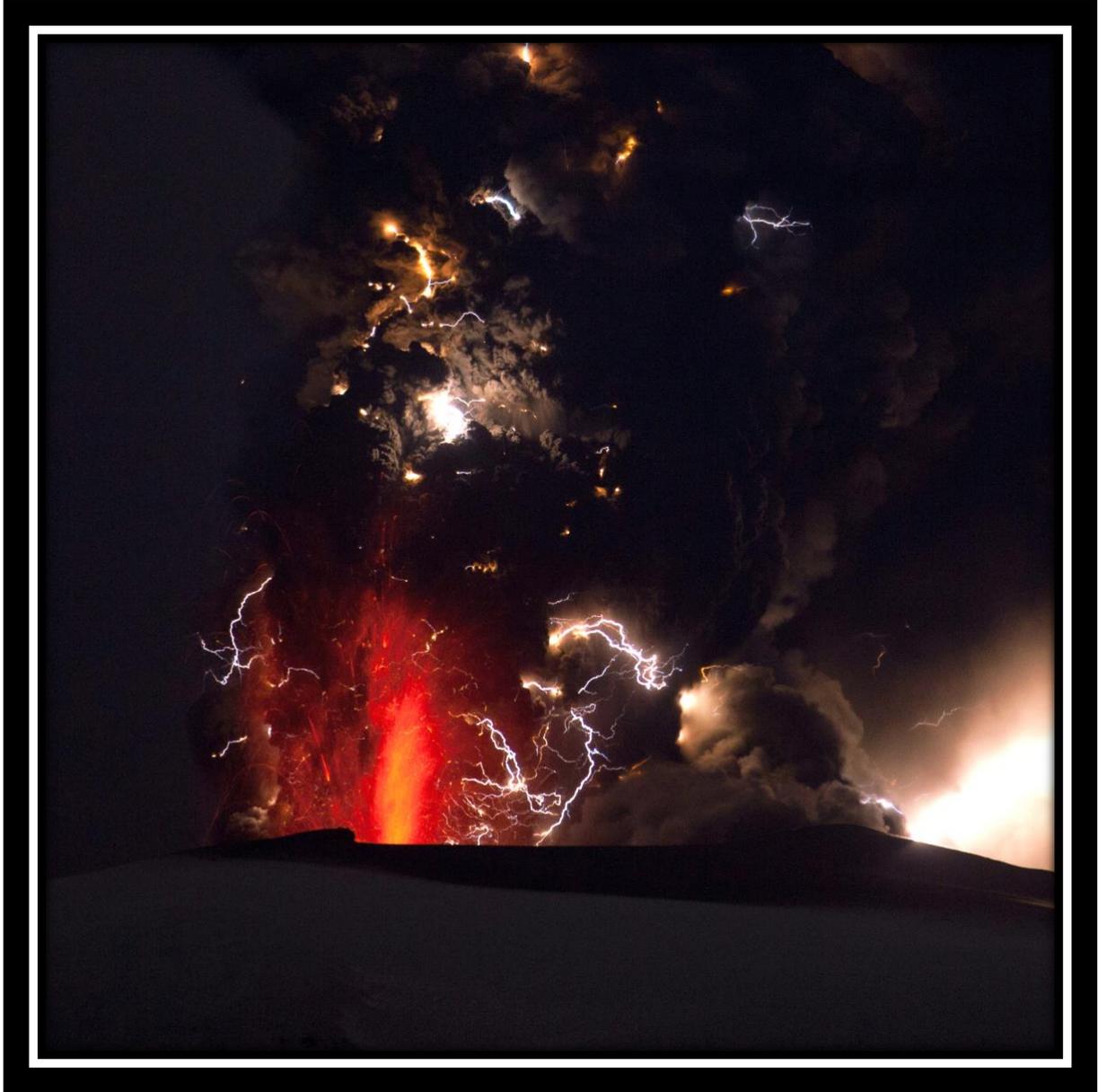
AGNOSTIC, NOT GODLESS

EMBRACING CHRISTIAN TRUTH IN A SECULAR WORLD

Version 1.0

Zachary Strong

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“On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with יהוה, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because יהוה descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of יהוה answered him.”¹

¹ Exodus 19:16-19

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A CHALLENGED CHURCH

“The fact that churches representing different ecclesial structures and theological positions are encountering the same challenges at the same time indicates that there are deep-level and widespread issues that need to be identified and addressed.”²

Christianity stands at perhaps the most important juncture of its history. Beset on all sides by critics and competitors, the once-dominant faith – although still the world’s largest religion – is failing in modern countries, and rapidly so. For example, only sixty-five percent of Americans identify as Christian today, down from seventy-eight percent in 2007³. It is estimated that one-third of Canadian churches will close due to a lack of membership over the next decade⁴, and statistics suggest that thousands of American churches close their doors for similar reasons every year⁵. In many European countries, young people are now overwhelmingly nonreligious⁶, which spells imminent doom for the churches there as well.

The inconvenient truth is that there are many good reasons for leaving the Christian faith. Scandals like the pedophilia ring in the Catholic Church (where up to *one in twenty* priests have been involved in sexual abuse)⁷ and the Canadian residential school system⁸ have obliterated public faith in Christian institutions. The positions of many preachers on LGBTQ+ rights, abortion, and science are wildly out of step with modern norms. Many church environments are political and even toxic, putting the lie to Christian teachings, burning believers out, and driving people away from organized worship.

Aside from the many internal issues Christian churches are facing, the social landscape that the faith resides in has changed dramatically over the past couple of decades. The times when the Lord’s Prayer was recited in school are long over, and pluralism is now the order of the day (at least in urban areas). In most modern countries, everyone has the right to believe what they want, which makes evangelical activity difficult – even arrogant and offensive.

To make matters worse, Christianity has found itself at loggerheads with science for several hundred years, which has eroded its credibility in the public eye. For example, in 1642 a scholar named John Lightfoot used the genealogies in the Bible to definitively calculate that the Earth was created around 4000 BC⁹, which we now know to be erroneous. People also used to believe that all the species were created as-is by God, and that the sun revolved around the Earth. Since then, scientists like Galileo and Darwin developed and employed rigorous methods for observing the mysteries of the universe, inadvertently stumbling on evidence that some “truths” in the Bible do not line up with reality.

² From “ChurchMorph: How megatrends are reshaping Christian communities” (Eddie Gibbs, 2009)

³ <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

⁴ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/losing-churches-canada-1.5046812>

⁵ <https://lifewayresearch.com/2015/12/08/new-churches-draw-those-who-previously-didnt-attend/>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/21/christianity-non-christian-europe-young-people-survey-religion>

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church_sexual_abuse_cases_by_country

⁸ https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_residential_school_system/

⁹ http://apps.usd.edu/esci/creation/age/content/creationism_and_young_earth/bible_chronology.html

Christianity is now beginning to stumble under the weight of two thousand years of baggage. The Dark Ages, the Crusades, the Westboro Baptist Church, the image of Donald Trump holding up a Bible in front of a church (after having protestors tear-gassed to make room for the photo op)¹⁰, the condemnation of homosexuals, refusing to let women lead worship, the insistence on outlawing abortion... it all adds up. And it's driving people away from the faith, even causing them to resent it.

THE PERSECUTION OF YOUNG CHRISTIANS

In many respects, these challenges are most acutely felt by young Christians. They are the ones who have grown up in a pluralistic society where men and women have equal rights, science is a mandatory subject, LGBTQ+ issues are taught in school¹¹, and access to anti-Christian material is readily accessible on the internet. Many of them have inherited their faith from their parents and are developing their own relationship with Christianity during their adolescence.

However, to identify as a Christian during these formative years is an invitation to scorn, suspicion, and ostracism: when asked about their perceptions of the faith, young non-Christians overwhelmingly believe that Christianity is anti-homosexual (91%), judgemental (87%), and hypocritical (85%)¹².

"I am a member of a big Discord server of a game, and we talked about things in real life. Last week I witnessed when two guys "tried" to mock the Bible and Christian belief. I maintained my posture and talked to them with respect and did not curse. But today, I was humiliated by the whole server. We were talking about racism, xenophobia, homophobia, etc. It was a healthy discussion with different opinions. In the moment I said that Christians were persecuted (and still are in some places), they laughed at me and ridiculed me. They said the only thing we do is hate people and oppress minorities." ¹³

Even young Christians have these perceptions when it comes to their own faith! Thousands of LGBTQ+ youth who grew up in Christian homes are terrified of coming out to their parents and peers – or, worse yet, are punished when they do¹⁴. Many of them report feeling unworthy, flawed, or sinful as a result of the dissonance between their sexuality and their religion.

Given their exposure to science, pluralistic perspectives, and atheist talking points, it's no wonder that almost one in four young Christians report having serious intellectual doubts about their faith¹⁵. How could they not?

¹⁰ <https://www.macleans.ca/opinion/donald-trump-a-bible-and-blasphemy/>

¹¹ <https://wordpress.oise.utoronto.ca/diversityinteaching/lgbtq-learners/>

¹² From "ChurchMorph: How megatrends are reshaping Christian communities" (Eddie Gibbs, 2009)

¹³ From Reddit, u/TheThunder11

¹⁴ Read some of the questions on this site: https://www.thetrevorproject.org/trvr_support_center/lgbtq-religion/

¹⁵ <https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/>

“I feel like I may have lost my faith after watching the Ben Shapiro and Sam Harris debate... I know this may sound silly, but I’ve been doing a lot of reading and thinking the past few months. I’ve had several difficult questions that I’ve pondered, and thought I was in a good place. But I believe Same Harris articulately stated my doubts, and I don’t think there are any compelling or logically sound ways to combat them. I didn’t want this to happen, but I cannot betray logic.”¹⁶

If Christianity is going to survive, it is going to have to become a viable spiritual option for younger generations. Church leaders must find ways to help young Christians develop a relationship with the faith (and therefore, with God), despite the intellectual challenges and moral quandaries they will face along the way.

PROGRESSIVISM VERSUS FUNDAMENTALISM

In its current form, Christianity will likely continue to falter in western countries. And, although Christianity is growing in South America, Africa, and Asia¹⁷, these are areas of the world that have not yet fully modernized: it is not unreasonable to expect that Christianity in these countries will experience similar challenges as access to information improves and their young people become better-educated.

Faced with so many challenges to the faith, there seem to be two possible options for church leaders. The first option is to accept the criticism, to modernize, and to adapt. The second option is to ignore the criticism, bury one’s head in the sand, and preach from a fundamentalist understanding of the Bible despite all evidence to the contrary. By and large, these seem to have been the approaches taken by church leaders over the past two hundred years.

To the bewilderment of many church leaders, however, the fundamentalist approach is proving to be the more successful one. For example, the United Church of Canada embarked upon a mission to become more progressive back in the 1960’s. Back in 1965, the denomination had 1.1 million members; by 2012, that number had dropped by sixty percent¹⁸. By contrast, evangelical and charismatic denominations of Christianity, which emphasize the importance of being “born again”, believe that the Holy Spirit is active and present in our world, and affirm the full authority of the Bible, are the fastest-growing denominations worldwide¹⁹.

Why has the progressive experiment failed?

For one, progressive Christians either can’t take the Bible literally, or have to make relatively large leaps of logic in order to justify their faith to themselves, friends, and family members. This has resulted in an

¹⁶ https://www.reddit.com/r/Christianity/comments/g8u4av/i_feel_like_i_may_have_lost_my_faith_after/

¹⁷ <https://factsandtrends.net/2019/06/11/7-surprising-trends-in-global-christianity-in-2019/>

¹⁸ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/the-collapse-of-the-liberal-church/article4443228/>

¹⁹ <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2019/04/StatusofGlobalChristianity20191.pdf>

emphasis on an intellectual and metaphorical understanding of the Bible, which critics say takes the fire out of the religion. Progressive Christians also have to make exceptions and construct workarounds for the less palatable aspects of the Bible, especially the exhortations against homosexuals in the Pauline epistles. In the eyes of more conservative church leaders, this puts them at odds with the faith:

“The distortion of God’s Word is the root of all unfaithfulness, says R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. It’s a sin that began in the Garden of Eden and continues as a temptation for all believers, Mohler notes.

At the CNN Town Hall where Buttigieg described Pence’s beliefs as a “kind of social extremism” focused on “sexuality and rectitude,” he also served notice to faithful evangelicals about the choice the political and social left has forced upon them: either affirm the new sexuality embodied in the LGBTQ movement, or affirm the full authority of Scripture and be anathema in the postmodern culture.

Mohler told Decision that as tempting as it is for otherwise Biblically faithful Christians to seek “middle ground” with the prevailing culture’s moral positions—most notably on sexual ethics—such a notion is incongruent with a faithful reading of Scripture.”²⁰

It is important to note that even a hundred years ago, the notion that one could read the Bible with a critical eye was a controversial one. This is because once the Bible is no longer accepted as the infallible word of God, it’s just another book. It is then left to compete with *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, YouTube, TikTok, and homework for attention and interest, and occupies a similar (if not lesser) level of relevance in a young Christian’s life. It should come as no surprise, then, that sixty-three percent of evangelical Protestants read their Bible once a week, as opposed to thirty percent of mainline Protestants²¹.

This is a big problem for more progressive Christian denominations: Christian scholars have shown that reading the Bible regularly is one of the best ways to ensure that children grow up to be faithful Christian adults²². However, in our modern society, reading the Bible often generates more questions than answers, making it an intimidating activity – not an edifying one. This troubled relationship with the Bible is one reason that progressive Christianity has not lived up to expectations, suggesting that a different relationship with Scripture is necessary in order to maintain a vibrant faith.

Another reason that progressive Christianity has struggled is competition: without powerful claims about salvation, being born again, and the truth of the Bible, progressive Christians don’t have a lot of ways to compete against other world religions like Buddhism or with scientific-rational atheism. It’s important to note that people are no less spiritual than they were before – they’re just less religious. A 2017 study by

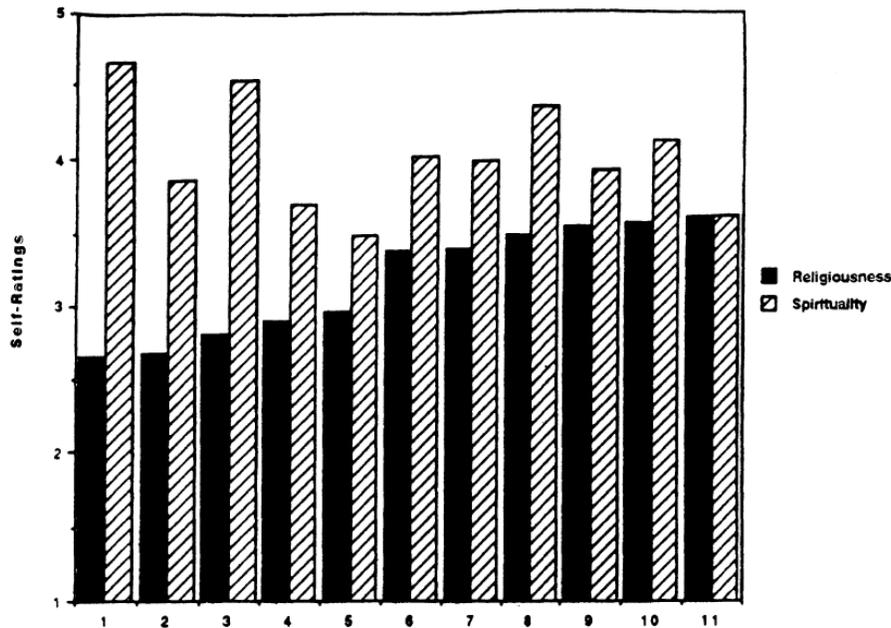
²⁰ <https://decisionmagazine.com/lie-progressive-christianity/>

²¹ <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/frequency-of-reading-scripture/>

²² <https://lifewayresearch.com/2017/10/17/young-bible-readers-more-likely-to-be-faithful-adults-study-finds/>

Pew Research Center found that twenty-seven percent of Americans identify as “spiritual but not religious”, up from nineteen percent in 2012²³. In real terms, this is now a population of 88,600,000 people!

Also, a 1997 study led by Brian J Zinnbauer²⁴ found that in several denominations of Christian worship (with the exception of Roman Catholics), people rated themselves as being more spiritual than religious:



- | | |
|--|---|
| 1 = New Age Groups (n = 17) | 7 = Rural Presbyterians (n = 37) |
| 2 = Mental Health Workers (n = 27) | 8 = Faculty at a College of Nursing (n = 36) |
| 3 = Nontraditional Episcopalians (n = 15) | 9 = Conservative Christian College Students (n = 79) |
| 4 = Unitarians (n = 40) | 10 = Nursing Home Residents (n = 20) |
| 5 = Mainstream College Students (n = 38) | 11 = Roman Catholics (n = 26) |
| 6 = Rural Lutherans (n = 11) | |

Zinnbauer’s team also found that spirituality and religion are unique concepts. In people’s minds, “spirituality” refers to a sense of connection with God or the divine/transcendent, as well as their personal beliefs, such as faith in a higher power. On the other hand, “religion” may refer to someone’s faith in a higher power, but is just as likely to refer to organizational practices or institutionalized forms of worship.

Translated into Christian terms, spirituality refers to someone’s relationship with God, and religion refers to the Church. When people say they are spiritual but not religious, as twenty-seven percent of Americans do, this should actually be good news for Christian leaders, as it means they are still open to having a relationship with something – or someone – beyond themselves. The problem is how Christianity should go about capturing the attention and interest of this large and growing demographic.

²³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>

²⁴ http://www.psychology.hku.hk/ftbcstudies/refbase/docs/zinnbauer/1997/34_Zinnbauer_etal1997.pdf

However, in our pluralistic society, spiritual seekers are now given to picking and choosing from the best the world has to offer in order to satisfy this need, often blending aspects of Eastern traditions like Buddhism or Daoism with mainstream scientific beliefs²⁵. Christianity, with its all-or-nothing attitude, calls people to live a life devoted to a single deity; this is a somewhat archaic message in a world where pluralism is an expectation. As a result, it struggles to “compete” with more cosmopolitan religions like Buddhism... or no religion at all, seen by many as the ultimate cosmopolitanism:

“Imagine there's no countries / It isn't hard to do / Nothing to kill or die for / And no religion, too / Imagine all the people / Living life in peace” ²⁶

A FALSE DICHOTOMY

It would seem that church leaders have an unfortunate choice to make between an anemic progressivism and an unenlightened – even bigoted – fundamentalism. However, I believe that this dichotomy is a false one. This book is an attempt to illustrate a middle way, where a fierce commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ properly contextualized within history, the Law, the Prophets, and our body of scientific knowledge can serve as the foundation for a vibrant personal and collective Christian life.

Why should Christianity take this middle way?

First, it is struggling to position itself as a solution-provider against the rest of the world’s religions, and against science. For decades, Buddhism has been presented to the West as a scientific, rational religion, which has allowed Buddhist thought to gain ground in many areas of society, especially psychotherapy. It should not be lost on church leaders that the Judeo-Christian ethos of “spare the rod, spoil the child” has not stood the test of time; indeed, the discipline that many God-fearing Christian parents inflicted on their children over the decades has been proven to be psychologically harmful²⁷.

In many respects, Buddhist-informed psychotherapists are left cleaning up the mess made by the Christian ethos, providing insight and advice on family life that was once the purview of Christian spiritual leaders. When people are facing marital difficulties or personal problems, they are more likely to seek out help from a “professional” rather than a member of the clergy. This distinction is an important one – sociologist Christopher Lasch wrote extensively about how the professional class of teachers, therapists, and other experts has eroded the influence of family, faith, and tradition:

“The contemporary climate is therapeutic, not religious. People today hunger not for personal salvation, let alone for the restoration of an earlier golden age, but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security.” ²⁸

²⁵ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/295434461_Eclectic_spirituality

²⁶ From “Imagine” (John Lennon, 1971)

²⁷ See “The Drama of the Gifted Child” (Alice Miller, 1979) for a nuanced look at unintentional child abuse.

²⁸ From “The Culture of Narcissism: American life in an age of diminishing expectations” (Christopher Lasch, 1979)

In order to remain a viable religion, Christianity is going to have to begin to help people – especially young people – navigate the trials and tribulations of modern life *without sacrificing their intellectual integrity or social/political beliefs*. It will have to do so by clarifying and articulating its truth claims in language that people can understand and relate to. This is no easy task.

Second, many young Christians are desperate for a new take on the faith. Thirty-six percent of young Christians report not being able to ask their most pressing life questions in church, and twenty-nine percent of young Christians believe that Christians are afraid of other faiths²⁹. People cannot progress in their faith if they do not have their questions answered, and right now the questions aren't even being asked. The value of a fresh Christian narrative that creates discussion regarding contemporary issues (while staying true to the vital essence of the religion) cannot be understated.

Third, Christianity has not yet been properly reconciled with science, or with history. This isn't to say that scholars and church leaders haven't thought deeply about these issues – they certainly have. However, this thinking has yet to make its way into the pulpit. In denominations that do have sermons, clergy members often pick a single passage from the Bible and expound on its meaning, clarifying the meanings of the original words in Greek or Hebrew, and apply it to a contemporary issue. What they do not do is demonstrate, through *consilience*³⁰, why that particular passage is *true* and why it *matters*. This is something that young people crave, as I will discuss later on.

This brings me to my fourth and final reason for taking a “middle way”: to reclaim the vital essence of the religion itself. For two thousand years, Christianity has been a religion characterized by intolerance, violence, and control, which is the exact opposite of the core teachings of the faith. It should go without saying that Jesus preached nonviolence, nonresistance to evil, love, and forgiveness. Somehow, church tradition has corrupted this original message, almost beyond any recognition. Understanding how and why this happened (and continues to happen) is key to understanding what to do about it.

A TRUE WORLD RELIGION

An added benefit of adopting such a middle way is that Christianity will become infinitely more palatable to millions of spiritual explorers once its truth claims are clarified and contextualized. People who are curious about Christianity often find it difficult to penetrate the layers of tradition and dogma that surround the religion. Converting takes *effort*. Concepts like the Trinity are confusing, and God's jealous nature can be off-putting, even scary. People get lost in the controversial and confusing aspects of the religion, often missing how simple it really is:

²⁹ <https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/>

³⁰ noun: *agreement between the approaches to a topic of different academic subjects, especially science and the humanities.*

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*³¹

Therefore, finding new ways to express the religion will open it up to new audiences who might never have taken the time to hear the Gospel otherwise. As an “agnostic Christian” myself, I believe that the truth claims of Christianity are highly relevant – if not paramount – in today’s world, and simply need to be properly communicated and contextualized. It is time for Christians around the world to think about what their religion stands for. What is truly important? What can be left behind? Why does Christianity matter? What makes the Gospel *true*?

A BRIEF OUTLINE

In *The World Keeps Turning*, I will delve a little deeper into the challenges that Christianity has faced over the past several hundred years as a result of shifting cultural paradigms, with a mind towards evaluating where it stands today. Specifically, I will explain what “modernism” and “postmodernism” are in context of the Christian faith and how they have impacted the various expressions of Christianity over time.

The Foundations of Christian Faith investigates the definition and nature of Christian faith. The idea of an “agnostic Christian” is introduced. I suggest that an agnostic perspective is consistent with the core requirements of the Christian religion as taught by Jesus to the laity of Galilee.

Is anything in the Bible really true? *Promise Made, Promise Kept* takes a look at some of the truth claims of the Bible, and shows how science and history have vindicated some of the Bible’s teachings in unexpected ways. I suggest that the covenants humanity has made with the Judeo-Christian God are nothing to take lightly.

Finally, in *Living the Law*, I share some final thoughts on how a Christian lifestyle is compatible with an agnostic outlook.

³¹ Matthew 11:28-30

THE WORLD KEEPS TURNING

“The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. ‘Whither is God?’ he cried; ‘I will tell you. We have killed him---you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.’”³²

As I have previously mentioned, Christianity faces many challenges, both internal and external. I believe that it is important to understand the larger forces that have shaped the faith over the last several hundred years, since the predicaments that Christianity faces today are a result of these forces.

In this chapter, I plan to focus on three mindsets, time periods, or paradigms: pre-modern, modern, and postmodern. The “pre-modern” period of Christianity stretches from its formation to the Protestant Reformation and Enlightenment, which began in the 1500’s and 1600’s respectively. During this period of time, the Catholic Church held vast power in Western Europe, and the Orthodox Church held sway in the East. Both denominations emphasized the importance of tradition, which is one of the defining elements of pre-modernity.

Modernism, with its focus on rationality and individual liberty, began to threaten the dominance of the Church by way of scientific discovery in the early 1600’s. Although many early scientists were devout Christians, the things they observed in the natural world often contradicted official doctrine. Galileo Galilei and Charles Darwin are particularly famous for making discoveries that antagonized Christianity by threatening its traditions. This period lasted from the dawn of the Enlightenment up until the 1960’s.

Postmodernism is the cultural paradigm that we live in today. This mindset rejects the modernist assertion that “objective truth” can be found by way of reason, logic, and science, and instead promotes an egalitarian and cosmopolitan approach to life that resists judgement and emphasizes open-minded pluralism. Beginning in the 1960’s with the hippie movement and continuing to this day with the rise of fourth-wave feminism and social justice movements, postmodernism presents unique challenges for Christianity, particularly when it comes to evangelical activity and the exclusive nature of the faith.

³² From “The Gay Science” (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1882)

IN THE BEGINNING...

As far as world religions go, Christianity has pretty humble beginnings: Jesus of Nazareth was a child conceived out of wedlock and raised by a carpenter who became a peasant preacher in the Galilean region of Israel. After running afoul of the local authorities, he was nailed unceremoniously to a cross, where he died in despair.

The earliest Christians didn't fare much better. According to church tradition, Saint Stephen became the first Christian martyr when he was sentenced to death by the Sanhedrin³³, a form of Jewish tribunal. The refusal of early Christians to observe Roman gods, feasts, and festival days caused them to be sporadically targeted by Roman citizens and authorities, and this persecution intensified in the second and third centuries.

However, in 312 AD, the Roman emperor Constantine saw a cross in the sky before winning a decisive battle and converted to Christianity soon after³⁴. The Edict of Milan in 313 AD saw Christianity become an accepted religion in the Roman Empire, and in 380 AD it became the state religion by decree of Theodosius I. After the fall of the Empire in 476 AD, the Roman Catholic Church oversaw what is now commonly known as the "Dark Ages" in Western Europe, where power, wealth, and influence were concentrated amongst the clergy. Innovation was discouraged during this time, as was intellectual activity and secular scholarship. By many accounts, dogmatism and tradition reigned supreme.

This all changed when Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to a church door in 1517, beginning what would become the Protestant Reformation. Although the theses were targeting the practice of indulgences (tithes made to the Catholic Church with the intent of securing a better afterlife), the Reformation would go on to instantiate three core beliefs that occupy the centre of the Protestant faith:

- ✝ *Sola Scriptura*: Instead of looking to Scripture *and tradition* as the Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians do, Protestants consider "Scripture alone" to be the authority on theological matters.
- ✝ *Sola Fide*: Christians are saved not by works or merit, but by "faith alone". This is a complicated matter related to the concept of "justification by faith", which I will discuss later in the book.
- ✝ *Sola Gratia*: Salvation is an unearned gift given "by grace alone". Church tradition and Scripture hold that this salvation was earned for humankind through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

Luther's ninety-five theses marked the beginning of the modernization of the Christian religion, which continued with the invention of the printing press. Gutenberg's press, and the King James Bible that resulted from his innovation, made the Bible available to the laity for the first time. Up until 1611, Bibles were hand-copied, usually in an ancient language. Once King James' Bibles became more accessible in English, people were able to read – and think – for themselves. Thus began Christianity's relationship with modernity.

³³ Acts 7

³⁴ <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-worldhistory/chapter/constantine/>

CHRISTIANITY AND MODERNISM

As a result of the intellectual activity sparked by the Reformation and increased interest in the physical sciences, independently-thinking Christians began to emerge in the 1500's and 1600's. The ranks of "Christian scientists" during this time period includes such figures as Isaac Newton and René Descartes.

Galileo Galilei, considered by some to be the father of modern science, ran afoul of church authorities in 1616 when he discovered that the universe did not, in fact, revolve around the Earth as the Catholic Church claimed³⁵. Although Galileo was forced to recant his discovery and spent his final years under house arrest, many other scholars would follow in his footsteps and find fault with Church teachings.

One of the greatest modernist challenges to Church doctrine was made by Charles Darwin, who published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 advancing his theory of evolution. The impact that Darwin's scientific revelations had on the intellectual community at the time cannot be understated: the idea that species could have independently evolved (as opposed to being created) was world-shaking. The creation stories in Genesis, many realized, may not be "true" in a literal sense. At best, this reduced God's role from active creator to passive clockmaker. At worst, this removed God from the equation altogether.

The controversies that these discoveries provoked highlights the clash of perspectives that took place between a pre-modern Christian paradigm and a modern paradigm. A pre-modern paradigm believes wholeheartedly in the divinity of God the creator, believes faith is a virtue, and encourages adherence to tradition to prevent or alleviate hardship and promote social cohesion. On the other hand, a modern paradigm takes nothing for granted, as everything must be scientifically tested and verified. Faith is seen as foolish in a modernist paradigm, whereas logic is held to be the ultimate authority. By and large, people are expected to "figure things out for themselves" instead of being told what to think. Traditions are observed when they seem to be beneficial, and discarded when they do not.

*"Tradition' is often seen as a condition characterized by hierarchical social differentiation, cultural homogeneity, tacit acceptance of a mythological worldview, unquestioning acquiescence to religious authority, thoroughgoing capitulation to social norms, and little individual freedom... 'Modernity', in contrast, is seen as a condition of liberation from the bonds of tradition and the collective."*³⁶

The expression "baby with the bathwater" is perhaps the best descriptor for what happened as Christianity encountered modernity, especially in the 1800's and 1900's. As rational investigation of the universe continued to flourish under the scientific method, what were once thought to be core Christian traditions either had to be abandoned or rationalized. This created a series of crises for the Christian church, where they either had to revise or abandon what was once held to be sacred. Once that process was started, it didn't end: many began to question the validity of the Bible altogether, including the utility

³⁵ <https://www.history.com/topics/inventions/galileo-galilei>

³⁶ From "The Making of Modern Buddhism" (David L. McMahan, 2008)

of its teachings. As I mentioned before, the idea that one could read the Bible with a critical eye is a relatively new concept and is a consequence of Christianity's encounter with modernity.

Also, one of the other consequences of the de-Christianization of society was that people's religious tendencies were directed elsewhere: towards science, politics, business, and other secular pursuits. The resulting "age of the -ism" that developed was partially what Nietzsche was getting at when he observed that God was dead. Communism, Nazism, and other -isms, no longer subject to a higher divine authority, began to style themselves and their leaders as the ultimate power on Earth. Destruction and chaos quickly followed.

CHRISTIAN CHAUVINISM AND THE POSTMODERNIST RESPONSE

Despite the challenges Christianity has faced over the last two hundred years, it still has a powerful legacy. Even today, it is the world's largest religion, and is responsible for shaping much of world history by way of its association with world powers like London, Constantinople, Moscow, and Rome.

This legacy, however, is marred by countless missteps. As I mentioned previously, the Canadian residential school system, the Crusades, the Dark Ages, and other violent aspects of church history cannot be ignored. Missionary activity stemming from the European colonies decimated indigenous populations and ways of life in many parts of the world in their bid to spread the "good news".

In a curious twist of fate, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was a catalyst for some of this activity. In the 1870's, the concept of "social Darwinism" emerged, suggesting that the theory's "only the strong survive" mentality applied to social and political aspects of human life³⁷. The more prosperous nations, primarily located in Western Europe, reasoned that the "savage" and "uncivilized" indigenous populations of the colonies were practicing inferior ways of life, and thus would benefit from being taught European ways:

*"A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man."*³⁸

Such was the sentiment that drove the forced assimilation of indigenous youth into foreign ways of life. In my home country of Canada, this was done through a church-run boarding school system that took indigenous children from their homes, forbade them from speaking their native tongues, and forced them to learn European customs and subjects. Physical and sexual abuse were rampant in these institutions, despite being run by nuns and priests³⁹.

³⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Darwinism

³⁸ Captain Richard H. Pratt, Union Army

³⁹ http://www.trc.ca/assets/pdf/Survivors_Speak_English_Web.pdf

I call this type of “evangelical” activity – and the sentiments that drive it – Christian chauvinism. Although one of the primary callings of any Christian is to spread the Good News, it should go without question that this news should not – and cannot – be forced onto groups of people. These crimes against humanity, and the chauvinist thinking that led to them, is one of the major failings of Christian modernism.

In the mid-1900’s, a new type of thinking emerged that began to be known as “postmodernism”. Whereas modernism asserts that truth could be found through the application of logic and science, postmodernism points out that “science” has often been used as a weapon to advance the interests of the powerful at the expense of the less powerful, as it was in the case of social Darwinism.

Postmodernism also observes that “science” is constantly in a state of flux, and truth is often shifting and incomplete. It has certainly been the case that landmark discoveries such as the research on (female) human sexuality conducted by Bill Masters and Virginia Johnson⁴⁰ or the revelation that Philip Zimbardo’s famous Stanford Prison Experiment was deeply flawed⁴¹, can throw entire fields into disarray.

Thus, postmodernists say, perhaps “truth” is a little more subjective than modernists make it out to be. Every human being develops narratives to explain the world they inhabit. None of these narratives can ever truly reflect reality, as language and reason have limitations. As a result, postmodernists see human “reality” as a set of narratives, collaborating and competing with each other to form subjective, “good enough” social truths. People often advance their own narratives to the exclusion of others, which leads to social conflict and can sometimes cause harm.

Currently, most scholars would agree that we exist in the postmodern age, which poses new and unique problems for Christianity on top of the problems already posed by modernity. For example, Christianity is now reviled in contemporary culture because it spent centuries, if not millennia, imposing its particular narrative on everyone else in a rude and brutal fashion. Similarly, the various prohibitions and taboos in the Judeo-Christian tradition seem old-fashioned and backwards to pluralist postmodernists, who sample freely from the best the world has to offer: as a result, the Christian lifestyle is not an attractive one.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE THREE PARADIGMS: A SUMMARY

For the most part, Christianity has struggled to respond to modernity, let alone postmodernity. The pre-modern denominations such as the fundamentalists, Orthodox, and Catholics do not compromise on their traditions and seem to attract members more easily because of it. The Protestant denominations, on the other hand, emphasize an intellectual understanding of the faith in true modern fashion, yet became lost in a sea of other “self-help” options. Progressive Christians and Unitarians, who are decidedly more pluralistic and open-minded than other denominations, are examples of postmodern Christianity.

⁴⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masters_and_Johnson

⁴¹ <https://www.livescience.com/62832-stanford-prison-experiment-flawed.html>

	PRE-MODERN	MODERN	POST-MODERN
SOURCE OF TRUTH	Divinely inspired	Logic & rational inquiry	Socially constructed
SOCIETAL STRUCTURE	Tribal or feudal, rule by divine right	National, rule by consent of the governed	Global, rule by consensus and affiliation
ETHICS⁴²	Collectivism; altruism	Individualism	Collectivism; egalitarianism
WHEN AND WHERE⁴³	Medieval	The Enlightenment, 20 th -century sciences, business, and technical fields	Late 20 th -century humanities and related professions
WEAKNESSES	Tribal mindsets & ethnic conflict	Chauvinism, dismissal of “illogical” viewpoints or anomalous evidence	Nice theories, but difficult to put into practice
DENOMINATIONS	Fundamentalism, Catholicism, Orthodoxy	Protestant Reformation	Progressivism, Unitarianism, ??? ⁴⁴
ROLE OF FAITH	Virtue	Not a virtue	No position (to each their own)
PRIMARY FOCUS	Group cohesion & survival	Efficiency of systems, individual success	Egalitarianism, amity, personal expression

To complicate matters somewhat, nothing is clear-cut. Although modernism discourages faith, modernist expressions of Christianity such as mainline Protestantism place an extraordinary emphasis on it – just in an intellectualized sort of way. I believe that most expressions of the faith are a mixture of each of these paradigms to some degree, as they all have had to respond to the same set of challenges over the years.

⁴² From “Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault” (Stephen Hicks, 2004)

⁴³ From “Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault” (Stephen Hicks, 2004)

⁴⁴ An expression of Christianity suited for the postmodern age is what I attempt to illustrate later on.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

“I’m not sure what I believe about Jesus anymore, and it scares me.” A friend whispered this in a corner of my kitchen while grownups and kids whirled around us, eating and laughing during a weekly potluck at our house. A once deeply dedicated evangelical Christian, Jessica looked at me with watery, pleading eyes, and I knew how much courage it took to say those words. She added, “I’m not sure how much longer I can keep some of these thoughts to myself without going crazy.”⁴⁵

Today, more than ever, it’s difficult for Christians to “have faith”. Modern scientific inquiry has stripped the Bible of its intellectual credibility, especially the creation myths in the Torah and the miracles in the New Testament. Postmodernism, on the other hand, has relieved Christianity of its moral credibility, pointing out that Christian institutions often fail to live up to their own ideals. Other religions and belief systems now beckon seductively in the marketplace of ideas, claiming that Christianity is only one piece of a much larger puzzle.

In western society, especially in urbanized and modernized areas, these challenges are pervasive and are impossible to ignore. It is unsurprising, then, that twenty-six percent of Christians are currently facing doubts about their religion and forty percent of Christians have faced doubt in the past⁴⁶. Although church leaders are surely willing to speak with members of the laity about their questions, the truth is that the most common responses to doubt are to disengage from church or to seek feedback from friends and family members, leaving clergy out of the picture almost entirely⁴⁷.

To compound matters further, faith in the Christian tradition is a complex and often deeply personal topic. Given this complexity, it should come as no surprise that the types of doubts that modern-day Christians encounter during their lifetimes are nuanced and varied, and involve difficult intellectual quandaries. Whereas most Christians throughout history might have had doubts in response to personal catastrophes that could be resolved by consultation with their local priest, Christians today have the privilege of reading Scripture, science, and history for themselves and making up their own minds about matters of faith. This is difficult, because it is a process of *deciding what to think*.

Consider the concept of gravity. Scientifically, we call it the “theory of gravity”, but in practice we all know it’s much more than a theory⁴⁸. People don’t go jumping off of tall buildings unless they plan to kill themselves or open a parachute on the way down. Gravity works every time, and every time scientists measure the strength of gravity, the numbers come out the same. It’s difficult to “believe” or “not believe” in gravity because it’s so obvious – it’s one of the closest things we have to a fact. Even if Isaac Newton never developed his universal law of gravity and the mathematics surrounding it, people would

⁴⁵ From “Faith Shift: Finding your way forward when everything you believe is coming apart” (Kathy Escobar, 2014)

⁴⁶ <https://www.barna.com/research/two-thirds-christians-face-doubt/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.barna.com/research/two-thirds-christians-face-doubt/>

⁴⁸ See Luke 4:9-12 for an example of Jesus paying his respects to gravity.

still know that falling from heights is physically damaging in virtually all situations, extreme luck notwithstanding.

Now, compare this to a quandary that many Christians face: did the Resurrection happen? Church tradition holds that the Gospels were transcribed from eyewitness accounts and are therefore valid enough to be taken as fact.

However, eyewitnesses aren't always truthful or accurate, and the testimony in question is now almost two thousand years old. Furthermore, other parts of the Bible have proven to be inaccurate or embellished: for example, the story of the Exodus is not corroborated in any Egyptian sources, leaving scholars to wonder if it actually happened as written:

*"There is virtually no evidence, as the Torah says, that 600,000 Jewish males, with their wives and children and elders, left Egypt in the Exodus," said Rabbi Burt Visotzky, a professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. 'Those are big numbers. You'd think someone would notice.'"*⁴⁹

The same can be said for any story in the Bible, say modern skeptics, especially the incredible story of Jesus' resurrection. My point is that when modern-day Christians are called to "have faith", they are being asked to make a decision about whether certain historical events actually happened or not. Without definitive evidence one way or the other⁵⁰, which does not and will never exist, people who have been raised in a modern or postmodern paradigm will have an extraordinarily difficult time "deciding" that the miracles described in the Bible actually occurred.

"IS SOMETHING WRONG WITH ME?"

Sadly, Christians who have doubts often feel that they are somehow practicing the faith incorrectly, not praying often or hard enough, or not reading the Bible enough:

*"Over the past few months I have become terrified of death, I feel as though when I die I won't go to heaven or hell I'll just be dead. I feel like God doesn't even exist no matter how much I pray, read the Bible or try to convince myself otherwise. I was raised a Christian but over the past three years I've strayed away from God. I am trying to get closer to him but no matter what I can't shake these thoughts. I'm worried I'll have these doubts forever, I'm trying my best to trust that God exists but for some reason I can't."*⁵¹

⁴⁹ From <https://abcnews.go.com/International/exodus-moses-people-happen/story?id=18068905>

⁵⁰ The obsession with the Shroud of Turin is one manifestation of the lack of hard evidence I am describing.

⁵¹ https://www.reddit.com/r/Christianity/comments/gp02fv/im_having_doubts/

It is my suspicion that thousands, if not millions of Christians – especially children – are haunted by the possibility that they could suffer eternal punishment for having insufficient faith:

*“I grew up being terrified of going to hell for having committed the ‘unforgiveable sin’, as it was known in our circles. What is the unforgiveable sin? Only one, and that is not to believe. I knew by the time I was ten or so that I didn’t really believe. I was haunted about going to Hell though because I guess I still believed in a punitive God, but not a compassionate God.”*⁵²

*“I remember very clearly as a six-year-old girl, I was playing outside just as it was getting dark. It was a Wednesday night. My mother came to me and told me it was time to go to church. ‘I don’t want to go.’ I told her. [She said] ‘If you don’t go, God might come back tonight, and you won’t go.’ So, I went. At six-years-old, I already knew what it meant to ‘not go.’ To six-year-old me, ‘not going’ when God came back meant being stuck on Earth that would be overcome with bad people, natural disasters, and demons being unleashed from hell; which meant torture, losing my loved ones, and death. It scared me.”*⁵³

What makes these stories of suffering especially tragic is that questioning Christians aren’t trying to have doubts: many of them earnestly seek a closer relationship with God, or at least something beyond themselves! However, people only have limited control over their thoughts, and almost no control over the messages they receive from friends, family, and the world. A chance conversation with an atheist, for example, could plant a seed of doubt that ends up undoing a lifetime of spiritual work.

The shift from pre-modernity (where people accepted things on faith and questions were scarce) to modernity (where people were brought up to ask questions) seems to have forced Christians into making a difficult choice: either ignore or suppress certain thoughts and questions, hoping that this is sufficiently pious to earn salvation, or begin to entertain those questions and risk losing the faith altogether. What’s worse, contemporary spiritual seekers – the eighty-eight million people who identify as “spiritual but not religious” – tend to be critical thinkers who are unwilling to “turn their brains off” for any reason.

As it currently stands, the things a Christian has to “believe” in order to be “saved” is extraordinarily long, and puts them at odds with both science and history. However, a closer examination of church history and Scripture suggests, at least to me, that Christians may have placed a heavier burden on themselves than is necessary.

⁵² From an interview.

⁵³ https://www.reddit.com/r/Christianity/comments/fdplyv/my_story_of_growing_up_pentecostal/

GOSPEL VERSUS TRADITION

Christians are called to believe in many things, several of them supernatural or miraculous in nature:

- ✝ The existence of a triune Godhead, one essence with three expressions
- ✝ The authority and infallibility of the Bible
- ✝ The story of Adam, Eve, and the fall from grace
- ✝ The Immaculate Conception and virgin birth of Jesus
- ✝ The divinity of Jesus, God's only begotten son and the Messiah of Israel
- ✝ The miracles performed by Jesus in the New Testament
- ✝ The Resurrection of Jesus
- ✝ The reality of the "end times", when Jesus will come again to judge everyone, living and dead

Aside from the stories in Genesis and the small sections of the Old Testament that (somewhat vaguely) predict the future coming of a Messiah, it's clear that most of Christianity's belief structure is Jesus-centered and comes from the New Testament. As the story goes, Jesus was born of a virgin, filled by the Holy Spirit when baptized as an adult, was tempted by Satan, performed many miracles, taught many crowds of people, and was crucified, dead, and buried, eventually rising again on the third day.

But, how much of this belief system did Jesus actually teach, and how much of it is a product of apostolic and church tradition?

One of the most important distinctions I would like to make in this chapter – perhaps this entire book – is the difference between what Jesus actually preached to the laity in Galilee and the matters he kept in confidence with his disciples that emerged posthumously. For example, in his most famous public address, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus discusses strict observation of Mosaic law, love for one's enemies, charity, prayer, renunciation of wealth, non-judgement, and false prophets. Nowhere in his iconic sermon does he discuss the circumstances of his birth, his coming resurrection, or his status as the Messiah. In true prophetic tradition, he is simply the mouthpiece for God's word.

In fact, throughout his ministry, Jesus takes care to publicly downplay his own importance in favour of putting God's word and plan front-and-centre. After healing people or driving out demons, he asks them not to tell anyone about what he has done or tells them to glorify God instead of himself⁵⁴. He avoids crowds, especially after becoming well-known throughout the region. The Lord's Prayer he prescribes is set up to enable the laity to address God directly, with no human intermediary⁵⁵. When one of his disciples comes to the conclusion that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus forbids him from discussing it publicly⁵⁶. These are not the actions of someone looking to be venerated by large groups of people, which is clearly the case today.

So what changed?

⁵⁴ As in Mark 1:43 or Luke 8:39.

⁵⁵ Ironically, some congregations will add "In Jesus' name we pray" after the Lord's Prayer.

⁵⁶ Mark 8:27-30

Whereas many early Christians, including Jesus, were Jews who attended synagogue⁵⁷ and observed traditions like Passover⁵⁸, later Christians included Gentile (non-Jewish) converts; this required the early Church to make its own decisions regarding the various covenants and traditions the Jews had established with God. One of the most notable departures that Christianity made from Jewish orthodoxy was regarding the issue of circumcision, a covenant that God made with the forefather of Israel, Abraham. As non-Jewish followers began to convert, it was unclear as to whether or not they had to follow all Jewish customs in addition to Christian ones.

As a result, the early Church famously decided that Jewish (Mosaic) law was a covenant that applied only to the Jewish people, therefore freeing Christians from the obligation of circumcision:

“Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”⁵⁹

The underlying premise here is that Christians, through faith in Christ, entered into a new covenant with God that encompassed and superseded the previous ones. Thus, faith in Jesus – and his saving power – was placed at the centre of the Christian spiritual life from almost the very beginning of the religion, despite Jesus’ best efforts to emphasize observance of Jewish law.

In his book *Christianity Without God*, theologian Lloyd Geering examines the development of the Gospels and makes an interesting observation: the amount to which the Gospels mythologize or divinize Jesus corresponds to the chronological order in which they were written. Mark, the first of the Gospels to be written around 70 AD, does not include the birth story of Jesus, nor does it speak at length about his resurrection: it instead focuses on the miracles he worked and the parables he taught.

Matthew and Luke, written about twenty years after Mark, discuss the circumstances of Jesus’ miraculous birth and embellish upon the story of the Resurrection, including the “Great Commission”, where Jesus appears to his disciples after his resurrection and commands them to preach repentance and forgiveness in his name:

“Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey

⁵⁷ Jesus’ famous recitation of Isaiah 61 as depicted in Luke 4 comes to mind.

⁵⁸ <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/jesus-historical-jesus/was-jesus-last-supper-a-seder/>

⁵⁹ Galatians 5:2-6

*everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*⁶⁰

John, the last gospel to be written, embellishes even further on these themes, stating outright that Jesus is the embodiment of God’s Word and is, in fact, God. The Gospel of John is notably different from the other three “synoptic” Gospels, in that it outlines some very complex theological concepts such as the Trinity. It is also in this Gospel that Jesus is quoted as saying “I am the way and the truth and the life”⁶¹, which is the type of self-promotion that he markedly avoids in the other Gospels. It is also *only* in the Gospel of John where we find the story of Jesus revealing himself to a Samaritan woman as the Messiah:

*“The woman said, ‘I know that [the] Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.’ Then Jesus declared, ‘I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”*⁶²

In fact, the Gospel of John spends a significant amount of time charting the debates over Jesus’ true nature, and even explicitly states that it was written to convince people of the divinity of Jesus⁶³. It omits many of Jesus’ parables, as well as the Sermon on the Mount.

In his book, Lloyd Geering suggests that the Gospel of John, and the construction of the Gospels more broadly, points to a progression of Christian thought in the first century that became part of Church tradition. The mythologizing of Jesus that this process entailed, in my opinion, serves as a distraction from what Jesus was preaching about all along: Israel’s covenant with God.

COVENANTS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Jewish law is famously complex, spanning multiple books of the Bible and countless other books of rabbinic commentary. It includes a number of prohibitions and taboos – against eating pork, for example⁶⁴ – as well as prescriptions for divine rituals, a multi-year calendar of festivals like the Jubilee, rules regarding sexual and ritual purity, circumcision, and so on. As we are told in Exodus, this Law was presented to the nation of Israel in the form of a divine covenant which ensured their prosperity as a nation:

“The Lord called to [Moses] out of the mountain, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.

⁶⁰ Matthew 28:16-20

⁶¹ John 14:6

⁶² John 4:25-26

⁶³ John 20:30-31

⁶⁴ Leviticus 11:7, for example.

*Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples...”*⁶⁵

Within the Jewish tradition, there are lots of things you can't do and many things you should do, and maintaining a healthy relationship with God and the community required adherence to these rules. For many years (up until the 2nd century BC, in fact), the concept of an afterlife and personal salvation was completely alien to Jewish thought⁶⁶.

*“As the Jewish scholar Moshe Goshen-Gottstein put it, where Christians see the Bible as a story about God, humanity and salvation, Jews read it as being about God, people and land. The story of Adam and Eve is a minor theme. Much more central is God’s call of Abraham to be the father of a great nation and a blessing to the whole world through his obedient following of God’s way.”*⁶⁷

A great deal of time in the Law and Prophets is spent discussing the importance of the covenant. In fact, the word “covenant” appears 295 times in the Old Testament⁶⁸, compared to only thirty-seven times in the New Testament. The Jewish people of yesteryear – and today – are continually reminded to faithfully observe the covenant that their ancestors had made with God:

*“This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ‘Listen to the terms of this covenant and tell them to the people of Judah and to those who live in Jerusalem. Tell them that this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Cursed is the one who does not obey the terms of this covenant— the terms I commanded your ancestors when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the iron-smelting furnace.’ I said, ‘Obey me and do everything I command you, and you will be my people, and I will be your God. Then I will fulfill the oath I swore to your ancestors, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey’—the land you possess today.”*⁶⁹

The assumption here, of course, is that careful observation of the rules set before them will lead to prosperity and harmony. However, this covenant proves difficult to observe, and is continually broken. The hardships that befell the Jewish people two thousand years ago, like the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of their most holy temple, were seen as divine punishment for these transgressions.

⁶⁵ From Exodus 19

⁶⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/salvation-religion/Judaism>

⁶⁷ <https://time.com/5606942/jewish-christian-bible/>

⁶⁸ Using the New International Version

⁶⁹ Jeremiah 11:1-5

THE “NEW” COVENANT

“When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, ‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.’ After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, ‘Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.’ And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.’”⁷⁰

It is important to remember that Jesus’ ministry arose out of, and within the context of, Judaism. He spent time in the temple courts as a child impressing the crowds with his wisdom⁷¹, and regularly grappled with challenges from the prominent Jewish leaders of the day. He was famous for devising ingenious theological reasons to ignore certain Jewish laws and customs, including the prohibition against doing work on the Sabbath⁷² which was a crime punishable by death under Jewish law.

Jesus also forgave people for their sins, which was a revolutionary thing to do at the time. According to Jewish law, forgiveness often required sacrifices of first-fruits or animals, and was mediated by a priest. To hand out forgiveness “for free” disrupted the religious hierarchy set up by Moses:

“Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, ‘Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.’ At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, ‘This fellow is blaspheming!’ Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, ‘Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk?’”⁷³

Not only did Jesus himself forgive people for their sins on behalf of God, he emphasized interpersonal forgiveness as part of his ministry⁷⁴, which was a gentle subversion of the court system that existed in Jewish law⁷⁵. This created a “direct line” of sorts between people, God, and each other, something that had not existed in the Jewish religion up until that point.

In my opinion, the main innovation of Jesus’ ministry was to distinguish between the *spirit* of God’s law and the *letter* of God’s law. According to Jesus, the intent of Mosaic law was not to bury people under a

⁷⁰ Luke 22:14-20

⁷¹ Luke 2:41-52

⁷² Mark 3:1-6

⁷³ Matthew 9:1-5

⁷⁴ Matthew 18:21-22

⁷⁵ Matthew 5:23-26

load of technicalities and interpretations, as he felt the Sadducees and Pharisees were doing⁷⁶, but to help them flourish, uphold justice, and therefore be free to love each other (and God).

Jewish scholars will note that Jesus' theological approach is not without precedent, as some of the prophets in the Old Testament, such as Jeremiah and Zechariah, called upon God's people to abandon empty traditions in favour of administering true justice and mercy:

*“Do not trust in deceptive words and say, ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!’ If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless... Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves! For when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you.”*⁷⁷

*“Then the word of the Lord Almighty came to me: ‘Ask all the people of the land and the priests, ‘When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted? And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves?’... And the word of the Lord came again to Zechariah: ‘This is what the Lord Almighty said: Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.’”*⁷⁸

Furthermore, when Jesus was asked what the most important commandment was, his famous reply was to love God and to love your neighbour as yourself. Even here, he was paraphrasing two under-appreciated passages in the Torah, Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. It should be obvious at this point that the Christian tradition as taught by Jesus is deeply rooted in Jewish law and tradition.

However, the idea that one could be instantly forgiven (provided there is genuine repentance) was new and highly subversive: Jesus famously frustrated a vengeful crowd when he prevented them from stoning an adulterous woman, instead telling her afterwards to “go and sin no more”⁷⁹. The instantaneous – almost magical – nature of forgiveness that Jesus so elegantly develops throughout his ministry is one element of the “new covenant” that I believe resonates most with Christians around the world. The idea

⁷⁶ Luke 11:39-42

⁷⁷ From Jeremiah 7

⁷⁸ From Zechariah 7

⁷⁹ From John 8:11

that one can simply repent and be free of their sin – at least before God – is a very powerful one and subverts a number of Jewish traditions.

But this, too, has precedent in the Old Testament. Consider this excerpt from the Psalms:

*“The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever, he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”*⁸⁰

What Jesus called the multitudes to do is forgive each other freely, as God forgives them freely. He also discussed repentance, the necessary counterpart to forgiveness. Together, they represent the two vital components of *love*, the magical force that heals divides between people:

*“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.”*⁸¹

When viewed holistically, it’s easy to see that Jesus’ ministry was a blend of old and new concepts, intended to show people how to live more closely with God and each other within the bounds of Jewish theology.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO “BELIEVE”?

Although they share common theological roots, the Jewish and Christian attitudes towards “salvation” are somehow very different. For Jews in the traditional sense, “salvation” is not contingent on belief in the story of Adam and Eve, the virgin birth, or in the resurrection of the body: it is sufficient to believe in the strength (and truth) of the covenants, or at least enough to follow them obediently. Salvation may be gained depending on personal beliefs, but the continued prosperity of the nation of Israel is one of the primary concerns of the Law and Prophets.

On the other hand, Christians, according to church tradition, must believe that Genesis actually happened, that Jesus was born of a virgin, rose again, and so on in order to be “saved”. However, when Jesus told the crowds of Galilean Jews to “believe in me”, it was not within the context of his Davidic and divine lineage, which was not an aspect of his public ministry, nor was it within the context of his impending Resurrection, which was a private matter he kept amongst his disciples towards the end of his ministry. Rather, he was asking people trust in him and believe in his teachings. The Greek word used in these passages is *pisteuō*, which means “to think to be true, to be persuaded of, to credit, to place

⁸⁰ Psalm 103:8-12

⁸¹ Matthew 18:15

confidence in”⁸². The emphasis here is on trust in someone’s authority to teach or in a set of teachings, not blind belief in stories.

*“Then Jesus cried out, ‘Whoever believes in me does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me. I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. If anyone hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge that person. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.’”*⁸³

Properly read and understood, it seems to me that Jesus primarily called people to “believe” in the truth of his message. That message, itself an elegant and simple summary of Mosaic law, derived its power and authority from an innovative interpretation of that law, not from Jesus’ parents.

Perhaps faith, in the context of Christianity, is not supposed to be a belief in a set of supposedly factual events, but rather trusting that a prescribed way of life will generally lead to prosperity and harmony. This certainly seems to be the case for the people to whom Jesus preached!

Furthermore, if we look to Abraham and the covenants that God established with him, Abraham was not required to believe in one story or another. Instead, he was simply called to trust that God’s promises were true:

*“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’”*⁸⁴

THE AGNOSTIC CHRISTIAN

When I went to university, one of the more popular elective courses for first years was the “Big Questions” course. Among other topics, it investigated the arguments for and against the existence of God. Although these conversations are interesting and necessary, I think the arguments have been exhausted on both sides with no resolution in sight.

Indeed, I find that many Christians get caught up in justifying the unjustifiable: whether or not God exists is simply not for humans to know, at least in this life. Belief in God, especially in the (post)modern era, seems to be a personal choice best left to each individual to make.

But for modern-day Christians who are torn between belief in an old book full of incredible stories and the scientific world they see in front of their eyes every day, it may be a relief to learn that Christianity, as Jesus taught it, is primarily a moral code and a way of relating to God (or the transcendent) and other

⁸² <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?t=kjv&strongs=g4100>

⁸³ John 12:44-47

⁸⁴ Romans 4:1-3

people that elaborates on themes expressed in the Law and the Prophets. It emphasizes love, nonviolence, and forgiveness, which were – and are – powerful social innovations.

Many Christians have already come to these conclusions themselves, in one way or another. In the Netherlands, a survey found that forty-two percent of Protestants and seventy-three percent of Catholics are agnostic or atheist in some form⁸⁵. Perhaps even more surprisingly, one-in-six Dutch Protestant ministers are non-theists, and between five and twenty percent of clergy members in the Canadian United Church identify as agnostic⁸⁶.

As of yet, nobody has been defrocked or accused of heresy, which indicates that the churches assent, at the very least, to agnostics and atheists leading worship services. This opens the door to the concept of an “agnostic Christian”, an idea proposed in 1965 by theologian Leslie Weatherhead. He uses the term to describe people who find deep meaning in The Bible’s teachings, and may even identify as Christian, but hesitate to profess belief in supernatural or miraculous matters:

*“[A] person who is immensely attracted by Christ and who seeks to show his spirit, to meet the challenges, hardships and sorrows of life in the light of that spirit, but who, though he is sure of many Christian truths, feels that he cannot honestly and conscientiously “sign on the dotted line” that he believes certain theological ideas about which some branches of the church dogmatize ... His intellectual integrity makes him say about many things, “It may be so. I do not know.”*⁸⁷

The interest in agnosticism in some parts of the Christian church is not a threat, as many clergy members might perceive it to be. Instead, it represents an *opportunity* to clarify the core teachings of the faith and express them in terms that modern-day people can relate to. It is also an opportunity to bring potentially large numbers of lapsed and questioning Christians back into the arms of the Church, where they can be productive and contributing members of the body of Christ.

Generally speaking, I believe that a covenant-focused Christianity is a viable expression of the faith that is compatible with an agnostic worldview. Instead of deriving spiritual and moral authority from the ultimately unprovable claim that God exists and had a direct hand in writing the therefore-infallible Bible, a covenant-focused faith observes the natural world and sees that the covenants and commandments are largely self-evident and to be ignored at one’s own peril.

If agnostic Christians and theist Christians cannot agree on the existence of God or the resurrection of Jesus, perhaps they can at least agree on the principles and values expressed in the Bible. If such a consensus can be reached, I believe that the other differences will fade away, thereby leaving the Church larger, more unified, and effective.

⁸⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_atheism

⁸⁶ <https://areomagazine.com/2020/05/07/the-case-for-agnostic-christianity/>

⁸⁷ From “The Agnostic Christian” (Leslie D. Weatherhead, 1965)

PROMISE MADE, PROMISE KEPT

“The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. But those who hate him he will repay to their face by destruction; he will not be slow to repay to their face those who hate him. Therefore, take care to follow the commands, decrees and laws I give you today.”⁸⁸

In order for a covenant-focused Christianity to become a viable spiritual option for current, former, and questioning Christians, it is necessary to “prove”, in some sense, that God’s covenant with Israel is “real”. But what does “real” mean, and why is it important to provide proof of the covenant?

In a scientific sense, it would mean that we would have to be able to *reliably and repeatedly* observe this covenant at work in the world. People who violate the covenant would, more often than not, have to suffer tangible consequences for their actions, *in the manner described by the Bible*. However, many members of the clergy, who are primarily trained in theology, lack the fluency in both the “hard” and “social” sciences that is required in order to draw comparisons between the wisdom contained in the Bible and the “real world”. Instead, they often default to an expository style of preaching that focuses on the relevance of certain Biblical passages to today’s world.

However, relevance is not enough: an interdisciplinary style of preaching that builds *intellectual conviction* in the faith is what today’s Christians, especially young Christians, are seeking:

“I am a Christian and also come from a family of scientists (who are also Christian). I believe in science - in evolution and the early history of our planet. I believe modern medicine is the answer to prayers. But I see so many scientists I hold in high regard expressing their disbelief in a higher power. It makes me feel that because they are so smart (much smarter than I could ever be) that they must be understanding things clearly. It makes me question if these people are so much smarter than me don’t believe, am I wrong to believe?”⁸⁹

When faced with intellectual challenges to the faith, young Christians no longer have the option of pointing to the Bible and claiming that it is God’s infallible word. They have to respond with intellectual arguments of their own, otherwise they’ll be labeled as ignorant Bible-thumpers and excluded by their peers. They’ll even feel ignorant themselves, and their faith will suffer for it! Unfortunately, intellectual

⁸⁸ Deuteronomy 7:7-11

⁸⁹ https://www.reddit.com/r/Christianity/comments/het0nk/christianity_and_science/

arguments in favor of Christianity are few and far between, which I believe is a direct result of the unnecessary dichotomy between religion and science as well as a style of expository preaching that provides insufficient intellectual edification for the modern Christian.

Whereas I have spent the previous three chapters deconstructing Christianity, this chapter will focus on what the faith “gets right” by highlighting some powerful teachings that have been vindicated by modern inquiry. I have decided to focus on three key areas where the Bible’s teachings are both theologically and scientifically sound:

- ✚ The concept of economic justice
- ✚ The effectiveness of nonviolent resistance
- ✚ The Golden Rule

JUSTICE AS A LAW OF NATURE

“When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers.”⁹⁰

One of the hallmarks of a well-developed country is a reasonably well-functioning justice system, with all its checks, balances, regulations, and requirements. Modern countries have bodies of politicians who enact legislation, police officers and courts who enforce that legislation, and lawyers who advocate on behalf of individuals who have to navigate that legislation for whatever reason.

Although many living organisms are social in nature, no other plant or animal in the known universe has a social system anywhere nearly as complex as ours, which would make it appear as though the concept and process of “justice” is a uniquely human invention. Indeed, an historical analysis of law will find that codified laws only began to appear in ancient Egypt around 3000 BC, and in Sumer several hundred years later⁹¹.

The stories of ancient Israel, preserved from oral history in the Old Testament, document the process by which the assembled Hebrew tribes became a nation under God’s law. After escaping from slavery in Egypt, they wandered in the desert for years, sustained by quail, manna, and water drawn from rocks⁹². Moses, at first the only judge for the entire group, was quickly advised by his father-in-law to appoint judges for the people⁹³, and received the Law on Mount Sinai shortly after.

One thing that is remarkable about Jewish law is its focus on justice, both economic and otherwise. The Hebrew tribes are continuously reminded that they were once slaves in Egypt, and that they must

⁹⁰ Proverbs 21:15

⁹¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law>

⁹² From Exodus 16 and 17

⁹³ From Exodus 18

therefore ensure that foreigners, widows, orphans, and the poor – all classes of people who are disadvantaged economically – are taken care of:

“Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this. When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.”⁹⁴

Furthermore, at certain points throughout the Old Testament, God is characterized as merciful and compassionate towards the oppressed: certainly this was the case for the ancient Israelites, who were liberated from captivity in Egypt by a series of divine miracles. Consider this passage from the Psalms:

“He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—he remains faithful forever. He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.”⁹⁵

It would seem as though justice is something that was conceived by God and passed down to humanity by way of the Torah. But what if the concept of justice has roots that run deeper than even the Old Testament?

In a remarkably insightful TED Talk called “The Surprising Science of Alpha Males”, primatologist Frans de Waal discusses how male chimpanzees compete for the coveted position of alpha male. Some of the behavior they display is surprisingly humanlike (emphasis mine):

“Now, how do you become an alpha male? First of all, you need to be impressive and intimidating and demonstrate your vigor on occasion and show that you are very strong, and there's all sorts of ways of doing that. But another thing that you need to do is you need to be generous. So, for example, males who go on a campaign to dethrone the leader, which may take two or three months where they're testing all the coalitions in the group, they also become extremely

⁹⁴ Deuteronomy 24:17-22

⁹⁵ Psalms 146:6-9

generous. They share food very easily with everyone. Or they start to tickle the babies of the females."⁹⁶

The trope of political candidates holding and kissing babies makes a lot more sense when viewed in an evolutionary light! Indeed, a political candidate that hates children would certainly have a difficult time gaining enough trust to get elected.

However, the humanlike behaviour doesn't stop there:



*"This is a male who stops a fight between two females. Two females on the left and the right have been screaming and yelling at each other over food, because food is very important for the females, and so he stops the fight between them and stands between them like this. And it's very interesting to me that alpha males, when they do this, they become impartial. They don't support their mom or their best buddy. No, no, they stop fights, and they come up for the underdog in general. And this makes them extremely popular in the group, because they provide security for the lowest-ranking members of the group. And so they become impartial, which is an unusual condition for a chimpanzee to be in, because they're usually very fond of their friends and so on, and these alpha males who are good at this, they can be very effective at keeping the peace in the group."*⁹⁷

⁹⁶ TED Talk: "The Surprising Science of Alpha Males" (Frans de Waal, 2017)

⁹⁷ TED Talk: "The Surprising Science of Alpha Males" (Frans de Waal, 2017)

It is estimated that human beings split from chimps, evolutionarily speaking, between thirteen million and four million years ago⁹⁸. This means that the rudimentary concepts of justice and fairness are older than legal systems, writing, language, and even humans themselves!

In both chimpanzee and human societies, existing hierarchies become unstable when justice is not upheld. An alpha male (or human leader) who does not look out for the vulnerable and disadvantaged becomes a tyrant, prone to being taken down by rivals – or the rest of the group. This is precisely what happened to Foudouko, a Senegalese chimpanzee who was ostracized and eventually murdered by members of his own tribe. By all accounts, Foudouko had tended towards tyranny during his reign, eventually meeting his end at the hands of the younger male chimpanzees who had chafed under his rule⁹⁹.

This violent fate is shared by many human tyrants like the Romanov family, executed during the February Revolution in Russia¹⁰⁰, Marie Antoinette, famous for her disregard for the French peasantry as well as her eventual beheading during the French Revolution¹⁰¹, Saddam Hussein, hung in 2005 for murdering his own people, and Muammar Gadhafi, shot in the head by revolutionary forces during the Arab Spring.

Although many dictators have lived to old age and died of natural causes, the overall trend of history is towards justice and equality. Dictators and tyrants have to spend vast amounts of time and energy on maintaining their (unjust) rule, often suppressing dissidents, punishing political rivals, and perverting justice in their own favour:

“To show partiality in judging is not good: Whoever says to the guilty, ‘You are innocent,’ will be cursed by peoples and denounced by nations. But it will go well with those who convict the guilty, and rich blessing will come on them.”¹⁰²

Time and time again, tyrannical arrangements have proven to be unstable. People do not tolerate injustice, and any leader who takes advantage of others is living on borrowed time. This is a natural law that may as well be a decree from God; to ignore this part of the covenant is to invite ruin.

THE CREATIVE LOGIC OF NONVIOLENCE

“The early Christian Church had the slogan ‘resist not evil’ (Matthew 5:39), and indeed, their idea of Burning The Fucking System To The Ground was to go unprotestingly to martyrdom while publicly forgiving their executioners. They were up against the Roman Empire, possibly the most effective military machine in history, ruled by some of the cruelest men who have ever lived... this should

⁹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chimpanzee%E2%80%93human_last_common_ancestor

⁹⁹ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/01/chimpanzees-murder-cannibalism-senegal/>

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.history.com/topics/russia/russian-revolution>

¹⁰¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie_Antoinette

¹⁰² Proverbs 24:23-25

*have been the biggest smackdown in the entire history of smackdowns. And it kind of was. Just not the way most people expected.”*¹⁰³

In the garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was apprehended, one of his followers drew a sword and attempted to resist the crowd that had gathered to arrest him. Famously, Jesus commands the man not to resist, saying that “all those who draw the sword will die by the sword”¹⁰⁴. Although it is certainly true that Christianity has had a rather violent history, it is also true that the faith has no shortage of martyrs – people who have sought no conflict, yet went to their graves peacefully because of their faith. This includes both prominent individuals like Saint Stephen, as well as the unnamed multitudes of people, like the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste¹⁰⁵, who were executed by the authorities of the day¹⁰⁶.

Most people would probably agree that when one’s life is threatened, they have a right to defend themselves. Nobody wants to die, and certainly nobody wants to be murdered! But why would so many Christians forgo this right? To what end?

Several years ago, I came across a remarkable book called *Why Civil Resistance Works* that opened my eyes to the brilliant truth of one of the core elements of the Christian faith – nonresistance to evil. In that book, authors Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan found that between the years of 1900 and 2006, nonviolent resistance campaigns were *twice as likely to succeed* as their violent counterparts¹⁰⁷, including situations where profound systemic changes – even regime changes – were the primary goal.

One of Chenoweth and Stephan’s main findings were that nonviolent campaigns made participation easier, and were able to employ a wider range of tactics in order to destabilize existing power structures:

*“When large numbers of people in key sectors of society stop obeying and engage in prolonged acts of social, political, and economic disruption, they may fundamentally alter the relationship between ruler and ruled.”*¹⁰⁸

Consider, for example, the civil rights movement in mid-1900’s America, led by such peaceful figures as Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. The example of Rosa Parks is a remarkable one – as most people now know, she was arrested for the simple crime of sitting at the front of a bus in a whites-only section. As the story goes, she had worked a long shift and her feet were tired. However, what many people don’t know is that Rosa Parks was a committed activist, often hosting gatherings of other activists at her home¹⁰⁹. Her calculated act of defiance that day provoked a tyrannical response from the authorities and highlighted the injustice prevalent in the system:

¹⁰³ From <https://slatestarcodex.com/2014/02/23/in-favor-of-niceness-community-and-civilization/>

¹⁰⁴ From Matthew 26:52

¹⁰⁵ <https://orthochristian.com/78069.html>

¹⁰⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Christian_martyrs

¹⁰⁷ *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2012)

¹⁰⁸ From *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2012)

¹⁰⁹

https://www.ted.com/talks/david_ikard_the_real_story_of_rosa_parks_and_why_we_need_to_confront_myths_about_black_history/transcript?language=en

“What really happened that day on the bus?” I ventured of Ms. Parks, curiosity spiked by the conversation’s implication that it had been orchestrated in some way, which was not what I had learned in school. ‘Were you really just tired and didn’t want to get up?’ Rosa Parks turned to me with a good-natured chuckle, and said, ‘Oh, it was planned, child. I’d never have done it if I didn’t know that Mr. Durr and Mr. [E.D.] Nixon were there to bail me out.’”¹¹⁰

Although this act of civil resistance was planned, what drew people’s attention to the cause was that Rosa Parks didn’t do anything “wrong”. She didn’t assault the bus driver, she didn’t physically defend herself when arrested, she wasn’t armed, she wasn’t screaming profanities at the men who arrested her, and at age 42 she certainly wasn’t a physical threat. She was also seen as an upstanding member of the community! Thus, the only “crime” she could be charged with was being black in a whites-only section.

The response that Rosa Parks’ arrest generated from the black community in the area was similarly nonviolent, entailing a 382-day boycott of the Montgomery bus system. This action, along with several court challenges, eventually led to the desegregation of the public transit system in the city by order of the United States Supreme Court. A clear victory, achieved entirely by nonviolent means.

However, Rosa Parks, and the black community in Alabama at the time, had every right to take up arms against their oppressors. Their homes were being bombed, as was the case in 1957 when four black churches and the houses of prominent black leaders in the area were targeted¹¹¹. Black people were still being lynched, physically assaulted, and otherwise threatened. However, had the civil rights movement in Alabama become violent in response to these provocations, it is difficult to say what would have happened instead.

Similarly, consider the powerful legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.: he was a Christian pastor who preached nonviolence and equality who was assassinated by a violent racist. The circumstances of his death made him a legend and eventually served to embolden the activists in the civil rights movement. Even today, he is remembered as one of the most effective activists of all time. He also observes that nonviolent action is more accessible, as in this famous quote:

“In the nonviolent army, there is room for everyone who wants to join up. There is no color distinction. There is no examination, no pledge, except that, as a soldier in the armies of violence is expected to inspect his carbine and keep it clean, nonviolent soldiers are called upon to examine their greatest weapons: their heart, their conscience, their courage and sense of justice.”¹¹²

I believe that by adopting a “God’s eye view” of the world, a view that involves the whole of humanity across all of time, the strange logic of nonviolent resistance makes a lot more sense. For example, it is certainly true that the actions we take in this life affect other people, both before and after our deaths.

¹¹⁰ <https://tkthorne.com/2015/12/01/rosa-parks-corn-creek/>

¹¹¹ <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/montgomery-bus-boycott>

¹¹² <https://borgenproject.org/martin-luther-kings-quotes-about-nonviolence/>

People who live violent and foolish lives leave a legacy of injustice in their wakes, and tend to be remembered poorly by those that knew them. On the other hand, those who live righteous lives are remembered generously and have a positive impact on the world that stretches beyond their lifespans. In this way, the sum total of one's life is either a testament to the power of love, or to the folly of something else.

Jesus certainly was aware of this, given that the example he decided to set was so compelling that it created the foundation for what is now the world's largest and most influential religion. His death on the cross and the symbolism it entailed became the primary focal point of a brand-new religion:

“Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”¹¹³

Furthermore, consider the violent legacy that today's church has inherited, filled with crimes against humanity like the sacking of Jerusalem in 1099, the Canadian residential school system, and so on. If church leaders back then could have conceived of the future impacts of their actions, it is likely they would have chosen a very different path. Unfortunately, humanity was focused almost entirely on survival from the beginning of the species to the 1960's or so, and (save for the few prophets and visionaries who could conceive of such things) didn't have the luxury of thinking profoundly deeply about their actions.

It is worth reiterating that people are naturally inclined to resent – even hate – injustice. Nonviolent resistance, although dangerous and even fatal, is the best mechanism available to oppressed people and communities. This aspect of the “new” covenant that Jesus taught is profoundly and demonstrably true.

THE GOLDEN RULE

“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.”¹¹⁴

In almost every belief system, there is some form of the “golden rule”. Many of us learn it as children: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Also known as the maxim of reciprocity, most of the earliest known versions of this rule date to around 500 BC, with Leviticus 19:18 obviously being quite a bit older than that.

Reciprocity is found in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and even in new-age religions like Wicca and Scientology¹¹⁵. Theologians and

¹¹³ 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

¹¹⁴ Leviticus 19:18

¹¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule

religious experts around the world have spent decades comparing and contrasting the different expressions of this concept in the world's religions and wisdom literature. How this concept rose to the top in almost every culture and circumstance is still a bit of a mystery.

The golden rule has fascinated scientists as well as theologians: collaboration and altruism seem to be counterintuitive concepts in the kinds of "only the strong survive" environments that our distant ancestors faced. Altruism especially often comes at a material cost to the "giver", making it a curious psychological drive for humans to have.

Yet, we are commanded by the world's greatest prophets, seers, visionaries, and mystics to be kind to one another. Why?

On some level, the scientists that study evolution believe it's all about gene reproduction:

"... natural selection has apparently been maximizing the survival by reproduction of genes, as they have been defined by evolutionists, and that, with respect to the activities of individuals, includes effects of copies of their genes, even copies located in other individuals. In other words, we are evidently evolved not only to aid the genetic materials in our own bodies, by creating and assisting descendants, but also to assist, by nepotism, copies of our genes that reside in collateral (nondescendant) relatives." ¹¹⁶

Although this view explains why we help immediate and distant relatives (which is called "kin selection"), the maxim of reciprocity along with the parable of the Good Samaritan suggest that we have to treat *everyone* with this sort of kindness, even those genetically distant from us.

in a 1971 issue of *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, Robert L. Trivers from Harvard University investigated the evolution of reciprocal altruism, particularly between people who are genetically distant. He noted that altruism, when reciprocated in the future, is of net benefit to both participants in costly or life-threatening situations:

"... if the drowning man reciprocates at some future time, and if the survival chances are then exactly reversed, it will have been to the benefit of each participant to have risked his life for the other. Each participant will have traded a one-half chance of dying for about a one-tenth chance. If we assume that the entire population is sooner or later exposed to the same risk of drowning, the two individuals who risk their lives to save each other will be selected over those who face drowning on their own." ¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ From "The Biology of Moral Systems" (Alexander R.D Aldine de Gruyter, 1987)

¹¹⁷ From "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism" (Trivers, 1971)

In this case, “drowning” can refer to any type of survival-related activity. Food sharing, intervening in a violent situation, forgiving a debt, and adopting a child could all be examples of (potentially) costly altruism that one would very much like to have reciprocated in the future.

Researchers have found that individuals who help others tend to be helped in return, both by those whom they help and by others who know about the helping¹¹⁸. When altruistic acts and reciprocity develop amongst groups of individuals, this forms a community. Even though it doesn’t initially make sense from a “selfish” evolutionary standpoint, the fact is that groups of individuals that manage to band together experience greater collective success than the individuals would have attained on their own, and individuals who make a habit of giving to others will often receive in return.

In this way, the Golden Rule can be seen as a valuable – and evolutionarily valid – teaching, much in the same vein as the logic of economic justice.

¹¹⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2596181/>

LIVING THE LAW

“Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the Law, tested him with this question: ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’”¹¹⁹

Can an agnostic person live an authentically Christian lifestyle? Many believers might reply with an emphatic “no”, but this is a complicated matter. Above all else, Christians are called to love God and love their neighbour, and as I have shown throughout this book, they have often fallen short of this goal. How “Christian” were the Crusades? How “Christian” were the Canadian residential schools?

As I have attempted to show, the heart of Jesus’ ministry wasn’t centered around the circumstances of his birth or his impending resurrection: this was a secret matter kept in confidence with his disciples. Instead, the laity of Galilee were called by Jesus to uphold the highest ideals in the Torah, and go beyond the letter of the Law to gain righteousness through fulfilling the spirit and intent of the Law.

This, I believe, is what we are called to do as Christians. All else, as the Hebrew sage Hillel said, is commentary.

Of course, questions remain: who or what is the Lord, and how are we to love Him? What are we to do with quarrelsome or malicious neighbours?

People much wiser than I have already written books on both topics: I would recommend *Making Sense of God* by Timothy Keller and *The Anatomy of Peace* from the Arbinger Institute when it comes to the greatest and second-greatest commandments, respectively.

However, from an agnostic perspective, who – or what – God is becomes a most salient question. To whom should one be devoting our worship, if one is an agnostic Christian? How is worship performed agnostically?

Although I haven’t mentioned it previously in this book, I have an engineering degree, and specialized in quantum physics during my studies. I spent a lot of time learning about and replicating experiments, and became intimately familiar with the scientific method and how it can be used to build intricate gadgets. The thing about physics is that it works. The system just works perfectly every time, even when things become random when you get small enough.

Many scientists have observed that there is a profound order to our universe. In fact, many of the early “Christian scientists” believed that humanity was meant, at some level, to discover God’s creation in all its complexity and beauty. Despite working in a non-technical field after my graduation, I had the rare

¹¹⁹ Matthew 22:34-40

chance to experience this order for myself. I've grown a solar cell from scratch. I've been inside a nuclear reactor's control room and watched the dials jump as it powered on for the day.

What does this mean, theologically? When Moses asked for the name of the Lord, he was given the reply "I AM"¹²⁰. This is, perhaps, one of the most fundamental concepts in both Judaism and Christianity: the Lord *is*. Although scientists have developed theories and models to explain reality – condensation, erosion, evolution, thermodynamics, quantum physics – the person, or entity, behind all of these phenomena remains unknown. What caused the Big Bang? We can only speculate. Why do the laws of physics work the way they do? Nobody has any idea. They just work. The rest is a matter of faith.

In some ways, God can be understood as the entity or force that gives our wild universe its apparent order and structure, and in others can be considered a personification of the "ground of all existence" concepts found in Eastern religions. Some contemporary Christians even take a new-Eastern perspective towards the concept of God, seeing Him as simply a metaphor for ultimate reality.

Regardless of who or what you believe God to be, it is clear that there are larger forces existing in the universe that are sovereign over us. We are, essentially, intelligent apes with moderately-long lifespans that have been at the mercy of the elements for most of our existence. With how difficult the world is, it's a miracle and a blessing that anything moderately civilized exists at all.

A Christian response to existence, it seems to me, should be a mixture of boundless gratitude balanced with a mindfulness of sin. In many ways, each of us has inherited a birthright that we are expected to do our best with. We all have a certain set of aptitudes, traits, and circumstances that encourage us along some paths (people might say one's "true path" or "calling") and away from others. Whatever universe-level forces that conspired to create us, in this particular moment, are deserving of deep veneration and gratitude, and we ought not to mess things up for ourselves or others by acting against the second-greatest commandment. At this level of analysis, the identity of God becomes a secondary issue, as the cultivation of an ever-present sense of gratitude and beneficence is the real goal. Living up to our potential is one of the best things we can do: we are called to do so by both Scripture and evolution.

POSTLUDE

Where does one go from here, now that the book is over? Probably to church. Although it may be difficult to find a church that fits your aesthetic sensibilities and preaching preferences, "plugging in" to a faith community comes with several benefits: churchgoers typically enjoy better social outcomes¹²¹ as well as improved health outcomes¹²². Beyond the benefits to you, most churches are in dire need of young membership and many may be willing to listen to your thoughts, and perhaps even help you grapple with questions of faith. At the very least, they'll let you worship alongside them relatively unmolested. Churches are also hubs of charitable work, which means you'll likely find opportunities to give back to

¹²⁰ Exodus 3:14

¹²¹ <https://www.livingwellspendingless.com/the-surprising-benefits-of-going-to-church/>

¹²² https://www.healthstatus.com/health_blog/wellness/the-top-health-benefits-of-church-attendance/

your local neighbourhood. In an age where many social media users feel lonely, church might be just the thing you need, agnostic or not.

As the Apostle Paul might say, we are all part of the body of Christ. The more of us that gather in one place, the stronger we become. It is my hope that the Church can mend the divide between it and the millions of agnostic, questioning, and former Christians just waiting to contribute to something big.