

In the grip of heretics or, The Christian

**Notes and essays on religion,
faith and reason**

BRAND SMIT



In the grip of heretics or, The Christian

Notes and essays on religion,
faith and reason

BRAND SMIT

© 2018 Barend J. L. Smit

All rights reserved
First edition 2018

CONTENTS

<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	8
<u>NOTE: I'm not saying I do not believe in "God"</u>	9
<u>My lack of faith in the God of Words</u>	10
<u>To talk about God</u>	14
<u>NOTE: A place where I don't belong</u>	24
<u>NOTE: Results that stay behind in this world</u>	26
<u>Conversation with Mormon missionaries on the train</u>	28
<u>I still believe ...</u>	31
<u>Return to the conversation with the Mormon missionaries (which only partially took place – also on the train)</u>	35
<u>NOTE: Truth and vocabulary</u>	38
<u>NOTE: Never too early for heretical thoughts</u>	40
<u>I am mortal, and immortal</u>	43
<u>NOTE: Faith on a scale of probability</u>	47
<u>NOTE: Integrated view of existence – spiritual dimension</u>	48
<u>NOTE: Religious differences – understanding built on inquiry</u>	50
<u>Is a giraffe really orange, like the fruit?</u>	55
<u>In the grip of heretics, or, The Greatest Commandment</u>	58
<u>An attempt at explaining what I believe</u>	65
<u>NOTE: Why I don't call myself an atheist</u>	68
<u>NOTE: Search engine with an ideological database</u>	70
<u>Creation, evolution, intelligent design, and as usual, language and truth</u>	72
<u>Two detectives, and two doctors</u>	74
<u>NOTE: The handiwork of people</u>	76
<u>The authority of logical reasoning</u>	78
<u>NOTE: The Christian in my mind's eye</u>	81

<u>Where is the problem?</u>	83
<u>NOTE: Options for the unbeliever</u>	84
<u>A definition of Christianity</u>	85
<u>NOTE: Argument without rules</u>	86
<u>How do you know what is true?</u>	88
<u>NOTE: The attraction of religion</u>	90
<u>How would it be if religious people were more honest?</u>	91

Quotes

“Then, in my early twenties, the suspicion took root in my mind that this god had been made up by people, like the golden calf the Israelites had made while Moses was on the mountain. I became convinced that people created this God of Words over the course of centuries for the same reasons the people of ancient Israel made the golden calf ...”

“After 45 minutes I walked out and ... I was disappointed. Disappointed in the so-called sermon that consisted mainly of a pseudo-science/history lecture to ‘prove’ that Christ had really died.”

“The fact is, we cannot function without faith – that tomorrow would for example be similar to last Tuesday in terms of work schedule and other activities, is faith. We can only *believe* that Napoleon or Julius Caesar or Aristotle ever existed; they cannot convince our senses of their past existence. We believe they existed, because we read about them or we read what they have written.”

“Even though many members of the community of believers don’t seem to have the faintest idea about this, the Christian religion is in the grip of heretics. These believers recite word for word everything the heretics teach them Sunday after Sunday, sermon after sermon. More than that, many so-called Christians are doing their utmost to proclaim the heretic deviation of Christian doctrine as widely as their ability enables them.”

“Of course, many Hindus believe this to be nonsense: they can point to the personal experiences of millions of people that prove to them that Krishna really exists. Same with followers of any other religious tradition. The ability of any person with a firm intention and an established interest in a

particular view to find evidence for something that they believe can never be underestimated.”

“So I am not saying the person who is referring to religious writings when looking for an answer to the question of what to do with their lives is primitive. After all, the authors of these texts were respected in their day as authoritative figures. I simply ask: Why not consider a second opinion, especially if the opinion is reasonable and perhaps relatively logical?”

“The follower of Jesus as I think of him will also not attach much value to the identity label of ‘Christian’. He will simply say you can call him what you want. All that matters to him is to love his fellow human being as he does himself.”

“If someone claims that water boils at a certain temperature, and someone else looks at him in disbelief and asks how he knows that, the one who has made the claim can simply put a pot of water on a hot plate, stick in a thermometer and – voila! – within minutes the claim will be proven as fact. If the other person argues that it was a fluke, they can do it again, or even better – the “non-believer” can perform the experiment himself, with exactly the same result.”

INTRODUCTION

Who is the writer?

Born on 29 June 1971 in Pretoria, in the Republic of South Africa.

Went to South Korea in June 1996 to work as an English teacher.

Worked in Johannesburg for six months in 1998.

Departed for Kaohsiung, in southern Taiwan, in January 1999.

What is this collection of notes about?

Boy grows up in a Christian home.

Serious about religion as a teenager and as a young adult.

Confronted with the historical development of his religious beliefs.

Doubt in the “truths” he was raised with leads to a crisis of faith.

* * * * *

The notes and essays in this collection were written between 1999 and 2016.

NOTE: I'm not saying I do not believe in "God"

Saturday, 14 August 1999

I don't know about "God". This doesn't mean I do not believe in "God". All I'm saying is that everything I thought I knew about "God" has been given to me by people. At one stage in my life, it became clear that many of these people were either not worthy of my trust in what they had to say, or that they had simply told me what had been told to them, which they had decided to believe for their own personal reasons.

Fact is, I have never seen "God" – if "God" can be seen in the conventional understanding of the word, so I have to settle for other people's opinions or doctrines about "God". The problem? These people have also never seen "God"! They simply believe what they have been taught to believe. Or they base their belief on a combination of what they've been taught and their own experiences – which still means this person's truth is subjective.

Another thing: knowledge – or "truth" – that is carried over from one generation to the next does not even always remain the same! Cultural practices change; the world in which we live sometimes undergoes profound change; when these things happen, subtle alterations are made to doctrines and personal beliefs.

So I'm not saying I do not believe in "God", I'm just saying I do not know about "God". I know what others think they know, but I cannot believe in something just because others believe in it. I must seek the truth on my own time and in my own way.

My lack of faith in the God of Words

[Originally part of the piece, “Qwert yuio plkj!”]

Sunday, 10 September 2000

Qwert yuio plkj hgfdsa zxcv bnmn ...

I wish it could have worked like that. Unfortunately, for the umpteenth time in my life I'm forced to employ the vocabulary of an actual language to express my feelings, and to use the limbs called fingers to set down words on paper so I, and perhaps you, can see how I feel.

I do it in the language known to the world as Afrikaans. I can do it in a different language, but it would have the same effect. Someone else will look at it and say: I think I understand.

Right now, you are on the other side of this text. I hope the process works as it should.

How do I feel? Anxious and lonely. Anxious because, oddly, I still believe in the god my parents presented to me with good intentions; the god about whom I learned that he was like a good father – the best of fathers any child can ever hope to have.

Then, in my early twenties, the suspicion took root in my mind that this god had been made up by people, like the golden calf the Israelites had made while Moses was on the mountain. I became convinced that people created this God of Words over the course of centuries for the same reasons the people of ancient Israel made the golden calf: They wanted a god they could see, whom they could worship, before whom they could lay down sacrifices. The god with whom Moses went to confer in the Bible story was too far – too far, too invisible, too mysterious, too untouchable. The God of Words, like the golden calf, is not mysterious. He is called mysterious, but only because it is a characteristic that people like to ascribe to their god. How can a god be

mysterious if the people who call him mysterious also claim to know what he thinks and know what he has done and what he will do? (“But we know nothing of these things,” people will say with indignation. “We don’t know what God thinks! We don’t know what He will do! We don’t know a fraction of all He has ever done, and we can never understand His plans, or His intentions!”) This God of Words can also be felt. In the right circumstances, it must be added, which usually takes place in churches with plenty of instruments on stage, and a preacher who walks around with a microphone in his hand. (“Oh no,” people will say, “you can feel God in the privacy of your room, too.”) And, like the golden calf, this God of Words can be made content, and his favour can be curried for your cause by the magical power of a series of rituals. You can sing and fall down, and clasp your hands together, or do Bible study, or say long prayers, and so on, and so on. And the aggrieved will accuse me on every point that I distort everything, and that I clearly don’t know the first thing about their god, and may they pray for me, right now, I don’t even have to close my eyes.

What all of this boils down to is that I no longer believe in the God of Words. I have spelt out the case in my own version of an official declaration. And I felt better afterwards because words can make something look so official.

As time went by, though, I realised that you don’t get rid of youthful beliefs that easily. I don’t believe in the detail anymore – the Personal Salvation doctrine is one example. But every now and then, in a quiet moment, I have this vision of the god I don’t believe in anymore: an all-powerful king sitting on his golden throne, staring at me in pensive silence. I will know the way he looks at me is not that of a loving father figure. This figure will not utter a single word, but I’ll have a good sense of what he’s thinking: that I just have to wait – my day will come. “Then we’ll see who’s boss. Then we’ll see what you do with your well-thought out arguments. You want to criticise me? Because I didn’t do what? Because

I said I'd do what? Who do you think you are?" And I will swallow my words, and become acutely aware of the fact that it's all true. Who am I, after all, to stand before this majestic figure and throw around allegations? I'd want to turn around and sneak away, but he would lift his finger ever so slightly, say something that I wouldn't be able to decipher, and the next moment I will find myself in a terrible pool of everlasting fire.

So much for my arguments.

[...]

* * * * *

“A doctrine which places a high value on truth is always going to find it difficult to allow individuals to make their own wrong decisions.”

~ Roger Trigg, *Ideas on Human Nature*

* * *

“What I learned at university can be summarised in one sentence: People who are supposed to be right are not always right.”

~ From the Purple notebook

* * * * *

To talk about God

Sunday, 11 November 2001

Unfortunately, it cannot, for various reasons, work this way. The idea, as the title suggests, is that I should give my opinion about a certain phenomenon, namely the well-known desire to talk about God.

Let's start with the most basic question: Why do we want to talk about God (for the record, I am confining myself in this essay to the "God" of the Judeo-Christian tradition)? "We want to talk about God," many people will answer, "because God is important to us. God plays a pivotal role in our lives." ("The most important role," others will rush to correct them.) Other believers will add, "God is like a father to us, and as with our earthly fathers, we would like to have a relationship with our Heavenly Father." Is this not an inevitable result of calling God "Father"? And if you talk about a relationship, then it follows that you should know a few things about the person with whom you have this relationship, or with whom you would like to establish a relationship.

It's at this point that I want to explain the open space at the beginning of this piece. Whether you're an adherent of theism or atheism, if you talk about God, you don't talk about a building or a mountain, or your favourite type of flower. You talk about something that people believe in, not something they can physically touch, or that can be described in a manner that can easily be verified by a third party. But it goes beyond this: The words you choose when you talk about God are part of your understanding of God, or confirm your specific understanding of God. God as you write or speak about "him", becomes the god you believe in, that you expect others to believe in, even the god in which you may argue you do *not* believe in.

A historical fact: the idea of "God" (once again, as described in the Judeo-Christian tradition) is a key ingredient of a significant percentage of the world population's experience of reality, and has been a key ingredient of people's experience of reality for as long as anyone can remember, or as long as historical data has been recorded. God is not a "something" or a "someone" who made a first appearance during the past twelve months. (Although the concept of a metaphysical, cosmic entity is found in virtually all cultures, across continents and historical periods, I once

again want to point out that I deliberately limit the scope of this essay to the concept as understood in Judeo-Christian monotheism.)

But what to do when one needs to talk *about* God? Human communication consists of sounds and symbols that refer to certain things. If you form a sound in your mouth that is audible as “tomato”, all who are familiar with the set of sounds and symbols of the English language will know that you are referring to that red thing that can be eaten, and that works well in salads and on sandwiches. But how do you talk about God? Some will say it’s easy – you rely on texts written by people who came before you, who had claimed that they knew God and that they had received revelations from God. Others will add that they know God from personal experience and that they, too, have received revelations from God.

I can ask my question in a slightly differently way: How did people talk about God *before* they knew God, or *before* they had received revelations that gave them specific information about God? The problem I want to address in this piece is specifically concerned with this matter.

The French philosopher Voltaire said, “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.” A clever play on words, as many theologians have complained since the eighteenth century. What Voltaire probably wanted to confirm with this statement, is that people need God, that people need to *know* that God exists.

If this belief that God exists was sufficient, there may have been a recipe for tomato stew on this particular page. But just to believe that God exists, is not enough for many people. They want to know more *about* God. God must have a name (or at least a title). God must have a personality. God must even have a gender. The reason for these human aspects of God is that according to the book of Genesis man was created in the “image of God”. And because a human being has a name, a personality, and is either male or female, it

should also be possible to answer questions regarding these things about God, shouldn't it?

So God is a man? Or man is like God, but only able to sin? If God was a man, for what reason would this God-man not appear in this way to the migratory Israelites in the desert? Why did a cloud and fire indicate the presence of God? And why could no ordinary person see this man-God that apparently looked like any other man? Is the answer simply because this God-who-looked-like-a-human was holy and without sin, and because a face-to-face encounter between God and man-who-is-able-to-sin would have been unacceptable considering the holiness of God? Or is it because God is something else – a presence, not a flesh-and-bone human being like us?

However, the Israelites may have believed if they were able to see their God face to face they would have seen one who looked like them. Or, perhaps closer to the ethno-cultural reality of their time, they probably expected to see a face they would recognise as that of a middle aged man of Middle Eastern descent. In short, imagine Moses, and you would see the “face” the people probably expected to see had they been allowed to climb up the mountain to meet their god face to face.

Is this a coincidence, this thing that the God of Israel was supposed to look like one of them? What about Oriental people, Polynesians, the Africans? Were they not also created in the image of the same god who was supposed to look like a middle-aged Israelite?

What are the implications of an anthropomorphic description of God? The moment we describe God to ourselves as one of us – only better, stronger, more honest, merciful, and without any sin, then, figuratively speaking, we look through the thick cloud in which God had appeared to the Israelites. We imagine ourselves as one of the “selected few of the children of Israel” who can tell the less fortunate amongst us, “I know what God looks like. He did not stretch

out his hand to touch us, but we could see there were jewels under his feet ...”

What did the rest of the “Children of Israel” do while Moses was in the company of God? So much of an impression that God had made on them (Exodus 19:16, “thunders and lightning, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceedingly loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled”), they became restless when Moses lingered (Exodus 32:1: “this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we know not what has become of him”). Soon after, their primordial need for a god who “goes out before them” found manifestation in a god they could see, before whom they could kneel down, made from the best gold the people could spare.

We see from the biblical text God was furious. “He” wanted to excuse himself from Moses’ company so that his “wrath may grow hot against them” and that “he” may “consume” them.

On the one hand, the Israelites had a god they could not see, who appeared to them in a cloud and in fire, and who held discussions on a mountain top which was banned territory to all humans (except one) as long as this god was present there. On the other hand, there was a statue of a calf, which Aaron cast and chiselled out of gold. An invisible god who uses clouds, fire and deafening sound as instruments of his presence, versus a visible god that everyone can see, that even a child can describe in passing to his cousin. (Apparently the latter could not command much of an arsenal in his defence. Moses took the calf off its altar without much fear or respect, chucked it in the fire, and grounded the cremated result into a fine dust.) In other words, an invisible god versus a visible god that served the immediate god-needs of the people, who made them feel better when their leader lingered too long on a mountain top.

How does one talk about God? Through the use of sounds and symbols that are characteristic of a particular language. By speaking in a language people understand. Like the God of the Israelites communicated, according to tradition, through a spectacle of sound and light, so we talk about God in a way that we understand: God-as-human, God-as-almost-human, or then as many insist, God-as-one-of-the-men-of-our-nation.

Was the sound and light spectacle a full representation of God? Or was it simply a medium that allowed an invisible god to appear in a way that people could understand? Is the image of God we have as a Moses figure the full representation of God? Are the name, personality and history of the god we think we know the whole truth? Or is that the “cloud of God” – the means of communication by which God is clothed, so that people can have a way to communicate about this cosmic being for whom they have such a primordial need, so they can find it easier to enter into a relationship with this being – if that is what is required of them, or if that is what they need?

We are ultimately left with this question: At what point does the way-we-talk-about-God become our own version of the Golden Calf – the god that is easier to understand, before whom it is easier to bow down in worship; the clearer vision of what we have such a strong need for?

People are impatient beings. They tend to make a plan themselves if that upon which they wait, lingers somewhere, or if its form and detail aren't clear enough. And as is evident from the texts we so value for information about God, we occasionally replace the truth with a replica of hand-chiselled gold. Or as it may appear from further investigation, we replace the truth over the span of dozens of generations with something in which our own handiwork and creative genius are somewhat more obscure – a god made up of words.

Will we, if we look hard and honest enough, find something other than the “true God” we think we worship?

Shall we find that we, like Aaron, cry out with full conviction in the face of our own manufactured idol, “Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD”?

* * *

What is the alternative? What happens if we can't describe God in terms that we understand? What happens if we must accept that we cannot make God more easily understandable, or even that we're not supposed to do so. Are we not then left with a singular choice, namely to simply believe?

A belief, then, not based on so-called facts, but on pure choice. A choice to believe in a god about whom we might not be able to talk nearly as easily as we talk about a golden calf; a god we do not try to make more palpable because it would make it easier for us to believe.

Additional Note, 15 March 2011

Believe in what? Believe in whom? Is it inevitable that we must ultimately know?

The pastor tells the congregation: Just believe. Forget about knowing more about this. Don't ask unnecessary questions. Don't seek knowledge or detail regarding something that nobody *really* knows about, or about which detail can even be ungodly.

The congregation nods: Will do, Reverend.

The next morning one of the deacons is still pretty fired up about the sermon. He wants to persuade the guy next to him on the bus to join the community of believers. He tells him in broad terms what the preacher had said the previous day. “Just believe,” he concludes.

“Believe in what?” the man politely asks.

“Believe in God,” replies the deacon.

The deacon can see the man is thinking deeply. Then, after about a minute, comes the inevitable questions: “But what is God? In what do you want me to believe?”

This brings us back to square one. We cannot talk about God, or write about God, or even refer to God if we do not know what or whom we are talking or writing about. We use the word “god” and hope the other person knows what we mean. It has also become common practice to use the noun as name: God is our god. If people want to know more, we speak of Jesus. If they want to know more about the “Father” we refer them to the Old Testament, the God of Abraham and Moses and David. If people want to know even more, we pull a theology book off the shelf and hope our eyes catch something useful, something we can easily quote, something that can put an end to the uncomfortable questions.

Did the ancient Israelites talk about their god all day long, in their chats with each other, in their encouragements, in their bits of moral advice about what to do and what not? As I understand it, God was not addressed as “god” – that is, the universal noun. This entity had a name, but as I understand it further, you were in deep trouble if you used this name in everyday conversation (that’s to say if the ordinary Israelite even knew the name).

What does this mean? That means it was highly unusual, punishable even, to speak about God.

“But that all changed with Jesus,” a modern choir of believers will reply.

Precise knowledge? Clearer knowledge? Knowledge about ... God? Name? Gender? Personality? Agenda? Preferences? Dislikes? Appearance, perhaps? Are we finally certain of what God is? Man? Flesh? Spirit? How many people can really explain what “spirit” means? Is it understood in the same way in all languages and by people from all cultures? What if the understanding of the concept “spirit” is radically different from one language to another?

What about if matriarchal communities are comfortable with the idea of God as a woman? At what point should the modern believer start gathering rocks for a good stoning?

We – modern believers and the nearly 100 generations that have come before us since the beginning of the Christian era – have dug ourselves one hell of a trench. We want to know. We need to know. We want intimate details, because we desire an intimate relationship with our god.

And before we knew it, our way of talking about God, became God. Then my way of speaking about God is the right way to speak about God, and my god the “true god”. If your details differ from my details, or if it differs significantly enough from the declaration and summary of faith agreed upon by the Council of Nicaea in the year 325, then your way of speaking about God is wrong, and your god is a false god.

Can your sins be forgiven if you worship a false god? Certainly not.

Can you go to heaven if you worship a false god? How can you?

Can you expect mercy? Can you hope for comfort? Can you pray for your loved ones? Certainly not if your way of speaking about God is false! Certainly not if what you worship and believe in is a false god ...

I want to end this piece with a suggestion: Let’s stop talking about God. Let us imagine ourselves as the old Israelites who would not have dared to stretch out their hands trying to touch God through the invisibility.

Certainly there are people who will have a problem with this proposal. Because if we don’t talk about God, when we stop collecting bits of information about what we think God is and reciting this information over and over, how can we expect people to believe in God? The answer is simple and fairly obvious: We can’t. We should stop talking about God, and we must refrain from insisting that people should believe in God.

With what does that leave us? It leaves us with existing and living as a community with certain values, rather than as a community of Believe in God (as we see God) or Accept the Punishment. This ultimately leaves us, so I believe, with the challenge of a life that would be characterised by peace, and joy, and patience, kindness, faithfulness, humility, a little more restraint, but above all, love.

NOTE: A place where I don't belong

Monday, 5 April 2004

I was at the “Bread of Life Church” in Kaohsiung last night. At first I thought it would feel like it had felt Saturday night when I took a different route home and ended up on a dark, deserted road in an industrial area. That feeling was fresh on my mind on the way to the church. I thought I was again going to find myself in a place where I don't belong.

After 45 minutes I walked out and ... I was disappointed. Disappointed in the so-called sermon that consisted mainly of a pseudo-science/history lecture to “prove” that Christ had really died. The what-it-means part was finally introduced with, “Just a few final words ...” (or something similar).

I was also reminded that people “do church” on Sunday night, like other people (or the same people) “do sport” on a Saturday. It was a social event with the added benefit of religious identity confirmation.

I could not help but look at the people, at the “pastor” with his microphone and the paraphernalia of “Christianity” and come the conclusion that the Church of Christ had been hijacked by people who do not understand half of their own so-called faith.

This is a critical accusation, and I am aware of the fact that I only spent 45 minutes in the “community of the faithful”.

A question does come to mind: If this is what I think, do I have a responsibility to share my opinion – in the written word and in private conversation, or should I keep it to myself and say, “Let the people continue to do church in peace and confirm their identities”?

Responsibility to whom? As usual, I am not sure. All I know – and I am, after all, not a complete stranger to the whole church business – is that something was not right at that gathering.

* * *

The emphasis on “evidence” in the lecture last night made me think the pastor assumed he was “preaching” to a group of doubters for whom believing was not enough; as if he knew the people had to dip their fingers in the wounds of Christ before they could believe.

* * *

It may seem odd to many believers to point this out, but one does get the idea that for many “Christians” the Christian religion is about correct action and reward – do this, get this. What should be done for the reward is that the person should “believe” in God. Of course, as soon as this becomes a prerequisite for salvation, it literally becomes a matter of life and death to define correct beliefs, and equally important, to define heretical beliefs. And once you have established the borderline between correct beliefs and incorrect beliefs, it is open season on those heretics who are “led astray”, who “follow the wrong path”, who are not “true believers, like us”.

NOTE: Results that stay behind in this world

[From the piece, “The SELF is born (and other notes of a particular day)”]

Thursday, 8 April 2004

[...]

After we are born we become aware of the fact that we are *something* among other *things* and *someone* among other *someones*, and that it is expected of us to function as the *something* that we are (don't act as if you're a table or a pet) and also to function as *someone*.

Superficially, who we are is harder to define than what we are, and the process takes much longer. Ultimately we need to be a separate *somebody* just as we need to be a separate *something*, and because we cannot be a different *somebody* every day, we need fairly constant *identity*.

It is now 10:56. I can now start my day. Many of these things have been said earlier, but to have said it in this way, on this specific day, gives today a particular quality. It also gives me a little result to leave behind ...

* * *

By the way, result is tremendously important for “evangelical” Christians. They expect to be rewarded for their “faith” in the life that follows this earthly existence.

I wonder how many people will still go to church every week and say the things that they say, if they learn from a source that they regard as credible that the results of their lives stay behind in this world, that they cannot take it with them as testimonials for a world and a life that comes after this one.

“Evangelical” Christians are actually good business people. (There is, incidentally, an interesting historical relationship between capitalism and Protestantism.) They say, “I give this, believe that, and do these things, then I get those things, right?” and the ministers and pastors keenly nod their heads (more “believers”). If the potential “Christian” is then satisfied that he or she understands the matter correctly, only then will they say, “Right, count me in. Where do I sign? What should I do or say?”

It would be interesting to know how much people’s attitudes towards their religion will change if they must learn from a reliable source that they have misunderstood it all this time: that an earthly life that glorifies God is the beginning and the end; that it is simply better than an earthly existence where God was not glorified; that it gives you a more fulfilling life while you are on this cosmic speck of dust; when you physically expire, you are dead, and that no further reward awaits you.

I can’t make a definitive statement to this side or the other on what happens after you die. I am merely expressing curiosity about the motivations of some people, and what their response would be if it would appear that certain things are not the way they have always believed.

[My conversations, real or otherwise, with the Mormon missionaries go back to my first year in Taiwan when two young, well-dressed, clean-cut Americans visited my apartment every Thursday evening for a few weeks. Their visit was by invitation – I saw them one night while I was smoking a cigarette on my porch, and since there weren't that many Westerners in the area to talk to, I seized the opportunity for a little theological chit-chat. Our discussions took the form of question and answer: I asked questions, they tried to answer, I replied with fresh questions to their answers, and when they no longer wanted to answer or when they longer had an answer, I came up with possible answers on their behalf. After a few weeks, the two decided to part ways with me.

On the particular Wednesday of this piece I was heading back to Fengshan by train when two Caucasian men entered my field of vision: young, wearing black pants, white short-sleeved shirts with name badges on the one breast, cleanly shaven, short hair. I began to wonder what I would say, were they to target me for conversation. The trip lasted only about ten minutes; the discussion would therefore have been short, and to the point.]

Conversation with Mormon missionaries on the train

(That did not take place on Wednesday, 2 June 2004)

“Hi.”

I nod.

“Are you a teacher?”

“Yes.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Couple of years.”

“Have you heard of the Church of the Latter Day Saints of Jesus Christ?”

“There’s no point in me having this conversation with you.”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t know who you are.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you know your names, and you know to which religious organisation you belong. But these are mostly things that you’ve been told about yourself during the first two decades of your lives. You haven’t really made any personal choices that would indicate to me that you truly know who you are.”

“We’ve chosen to follow Jesus Christ.”

“How could you have chosen something if you’ve never had any choices? Where did you grow up? Utah? Salt Lake City? If you were an Arab who grew up in a Muslim environment, with all the environmental data that would have given you an identity in that context, and you then chose the Church of Latter Day Saints above Islam ... then you would have made a choice. So far you’re nothing but a human body carrying around a lot of data about yourself. These things – your physical appearance, your name, your language, where you come from, your nationality, and the fact that you are missionaries of a particular church – are all identifying marks that tell you and anyone else how you fit into your environment.

“You, sitting there, cannot tell me anything that you haven’t been told. Have you ever had an experience that could possibly undermine your beliefs? How can you know the truth about yourself or anything you believe in if you’ve never questioned the validity of the facts that you’ve been fed? What are your criteria for telling truth from a lie?”

“I cannot have an intelligent conversation – about religion no less! – with someone who is nothing more than an emulator of other people in order to know how he should function as a human being.”

“How do you know what we think, or what we’ve experienced? I experience God every day ...”

“Yes, you have experiences, and I’m sure you’ve been told how to interpret them. And the words you use to give expression to these experiences ... are words that you did not invent, am I right?”

“My station’s coming up. Listen, I cannot, in the final instance, judge the validity of your experiences. I do not claim to possess the powers of mind or spirit which would certainly be required to either confirm or refute the source of your experiences.

“If I made certain assumptions about you that are incorrect, please accept that I did so to make a point that might be applicable to your life, or it might not be. If my assumptions cannot in entirety be dismissed, then please consider it for a minute or so. Either way, have yourselves a good day.”

I still believe ...

Saturday, 3 July 2004

Allow me to lay some truths on the table:

1. Identity plays a vital role in the normal functioning of an individual.
2. The particular community in whose midst an individual is born and where he or she grows up plays a central role in the formation of identity.
3. It is very common that a particular religion is closely connected with a particular community; this particular religion is in many cases a crucial determinant of identity for people who were born and who grew up in this community.
4. For the adherents of various religions, it is essential to lay claim to the universal application of a particular religious “truth”.
5. It is understandable if a person who was born and who grew up in a community where a “universal application” religion is a key determinant of identity, continues to recite these claims for the sake of their own particular identity, and also that they will communicate these claims to the next generation.

A question: Can a rational person be blamed if he has a sceptical attitude towards the claim to “universal truth” by the adherents of any particular religion?

To put it differently:

- a) Communities all around the world function as sources of particular identity.

b) To question, as an outsider, the validity of a particular community as a source of identity, simply because your own identity does not come from that source, is illogical. (This would mean that someone who was born and who grew up outside your community can also question the validity of your community as a source of identity because their identity did not originate from the folds of your community.)

c) A particular religion is in many cases closely connected to a particular community, and plays a pivotal role in defining identity for people born in that community.

d) Community A is thus equal to Community B as a source of identity.

e) It can also be said that Religion A is equal to Religion B as a source of identity.

Three questions:

1. On what basis can followers of Religion A, taking into account the above points, still insist on universal application of their “truths” – across all historical, cultural, and other boundaries?

2. On what basis can the followers of Religion A – most likely followers of that particular religion because that particular religion had been a primary given factor in the process from which their identities developed – make the assertion that the value of their religion extends beyond the value of Religion B – that plays a similar role as a determinant of identity in Community B?

3. Where can the line be drawn between religion as a transmission medium of “timeless truths” (no matter how true they may be), and religion as a determinant of identity?

After thorough consideration of this subject, there remains a question that one cannot resist the temptation to ask: **WHAT IS THE TRUTH?**

It's easy to recite one of the principles of secular religion and answer, "The truth is relative."

However, I still believe that there is an **ABSOLUTE, UNIVERSAL TRUTH**. I also believe that the particularity of fate data with which everyone is confronted at birth, the givenness of instruments with which to express an awareness of individual self, and the significant role of religion as a co-determinant of identity are all pieces of the puzzle that is the **TRUTH**.

Finally, do I think it is possible for a human being – a living member of the species *Homo sapiens* – to know the absolute, universal, timeless truth?

My answer remains, without doubt, no.

* * * * *

Tuesday, 6 July 2004

The goal is not to be incapable of doing evil deeds, but not to do evil deeds.

That means looking yourself in the eyes and admitting, “I am capable of being evil and doing bad things,” and then to choose to not be evil, and to not do bad things.

This choice, as most know, is not always easy, but even that should serve as motivation, rather than as a reason to doubt yourself.

Believe that you can be good. Believe that you can do good things. Then be good, and do good deeds.

* * * * *

Return to the conversation with the Mormon missionaries (which only partially took place – also on the train)

Sunday, 1 August 2004

Me: “You are reciting words you’ve been taught in order to confirm your identity – the way in which you are part of the Bigger Picture, and to give expression to your experience of this reality. Your expression of your particular experience of reality is neither creative nor original. Why should I listen to you?”

Mormon missionary: “Because what I have to say may save your life.”

Me: “You don’t know that. You *choose* to believe that for reasons I have already mentioned. But you don’t know if any of it will work out. You choose to believe that it will.”

* * *

Am I wrong?

I will say this, if the ACTUAL, ABSOLUTE TRUTH is ever revealed to someone in a desert or a cave or in some wilderness and the person starts preaching, I’ll fire off a similar argument ... since I’ll be assuming the person has simply heard the words he or she is now “reciting” to the public from someone else.

And then I have to acknowledge, if I want to be reasonable, the possibility that the ACTUAL, ABSOLUTE TRUTH has indeed already been revealed, and that I, as we speak, am launching arguments like the above on the preacher-missionary of this Sacred Truth.

But then, say the ACTUAL TRUTH has already been revealed, would anyone really be able to ignore it? Would it

be obscure? Would mere mortals like yours truly be able to formulate arguments left and right, and spin them off at the MESSENGER OF TRUTH like I'm busy arguing with my older sister? I don't think so. (And if I could do that, what kind of truth would it be?)

* * * * *

Wednesday, 4 August 2004

For many who want to sort out their own identity, it is a prerequisite to first sort out the identity of God. God is the “head” of their religion; religion is a primary tool by which they answer who and what they are and what they need or want to do with their lives. If they are not sure about the identity of God, they cannot be sure of their own identity. Also, if they can be sure of who and what God is, they can find certainty about who and what they are or ought to be.

* * * * *

NOTE: Truth and vocabulary

Saturday, 13 November 2004

Truth and vocabulary (I)

Who are you if who you are in response to your surroundings and who you are in order to function successfully at a particular time and in a particular environment are not the full “story”? What then, in that sense of the word, is your full story? And how much better and more complete would your answer be if you were fluent in a thousand languages?

Sunday, 14 November 2004

Truth and vocabulary (II)

Fact is, 5000 years ago our ancestors possessed a vocabulary of, say, roughly 5000 words with which to express the experience of their reality, and their awareness-of-self. Their expressions of “truth” were therefore also limited to more or less 5000 words.

These days we enjoy the benefit of say, ten to roughly 60,000 words with which to express the reality or realities that we encounter, as well as our awareness-of-self – more verbs, adverbs, adjectives, phrases, and so forth. Our “truths”, including our religious beliefs can therefore also be worded in more detail and in more subtle nuances.

One does wonder, how would it have affected an individual’s experience of reality if he or she were the speaker of a language that contained a million words, and if he or she knew and could use with ease ten or 20 times more words than the average educated person who walks the streets of a present-day city?

Fact is: “god” is a word. So are “human” and “soul” and “self” and “life” and “death”. What lies behind these words, which cannot (currently) be expressed in words?

[The website, King James Bible Online indicates that there are almost 15,000 unique words in the Bible. According to Wikipedia, *The Oxford English Dictionary* lists over 250,000 unique words, excluding many technical, scientific and slang terms.]

NOTE: Never too early for heretical thoughts

Friday, 26 November 2004

08:28

The problem with religion as identity determinant is that it has to remain constant to maintain credibility in the eyes of the people to whom it grants a religious identity. But in order to remain a relevant determinant of identity, the source of religious symbols (religious texts, institutions like “church”) may have to change – in small increments, but still to such an extent that the source today will be fundamentally different from the source of 500 or 1,000 years ago.

What happens then when someone who employs a particular religion for purpose of identity acquires knowledge and a critical understanding of this fundamental shift? One possibility is that such a person would develop a condition that can be called a crisis of faith.

* * *

Since I have just gotten up and haven’t even had breakfast yet, one may be wondering whether it is a bit early for ideas such as the above. My answer is ... apparently not – not if one receives the thought, formulation and all, in your final dream before waking up!

The dream played out at a dinner table with people with whom I did urban missionary work more than a decade ago as well as other contemporaries from high school. While we were eating – in the dining room of the early twentieth-century mansion that served as the headquarters of the organisation, there was one hell of a party going on in the garden. As I was about to take another bite of one of the delicious dishes on my plate, the thought struck ...

08:39

People with whom I had had close relationships at that time may say that I have betrayed my religious identity. I am of the opinion that I have *outgrown* my religious identity.

Someone may respond with calm conviction that one cannot outgrow the truth. I will, equally serene, respond: “I am still committed to knowing the truth. And I don’t need an institutionally-defined identity to know the truth or to pursue it.”

[In many cases, leaders of religious movements claim that they are not changing their religion, they are simply reverting to an earlier, purer form. This explanation ensures that the religion retains credibility as identity determinant, and it also justifies the changes they make to the practical expression of adherence to the religion, or even to aspects of theology, for the very purpose of keeping it relevant to people with different religious needs than people 500 or 1,000 years ago.]

Sunday, 1 May 2005

Religion serves a purpose – identity, belonging to a bigger reality, and so on. Specific content of a religion – traditional beliefs and perceptions of truth, plus ritual, community, etcetera – activates the frankenstein that is religion in principle [religion, any religion, is like the body that is in theory able to do things and produce results; specific content is like the “soul” or life energy that animates the body and even gives it personality].

Monday, 9 May 2005

The “redemption plan” as preached by so-called “Evangelical Christians” rests on one principle: the identity of God and the individual “Christian” confirming this proclaimed identity.

I am mortal, and immortal

Wednesday, 25 May 2005

I reckon human beings ... or before I get stuck in definitions of what is meant by “human being”, let me be concrete: I consist of two parts. One part is mortal and in turn consists of body, consciousness, personality and identity (given and/or self-defined). The other part is immortal. Because I have command of a very limited range of vocabulary, I will call this latter part “soul”. These two parts are interwoven for the duration of my earthly existence.

What the purpose of this combination is, I do not know. How this combination came into existence, I also do not know (except for the biological part).

I am both parts and yet, if my body stops functioning and my consciousness is destroyed, I cease to exist – even if the other part of me continues to exist.

My earthly existence, the choices I make and the results I achieve in my life, have a dramatic impact on my immortal part – another illustration of how closely the two parts are connected.

The connection of the two parts is indeed something to be discovered – this discovery may even be considered a goal in itself.

What is the difference between this belief and the Christian version (influenced by the pre-Christian philosopher Plato)? The Christian believes that the body is mortal and that the spirit (or soul, self, consciousness, personality, or “inner being”) is immortal. I split the “spirit” or “inner part” in two – mortal and immortal.

I will henceforth refer to the above as the 25 May 2005 Declaration of Faith.

Thursday, 26 May 2005

What I am therefore saying is that the “inner” consists of two parts: mortal consciousness and time and place specific identity, and immortal X (sometimes called “spirit” or “soul”).

In my opinion this is a radical departure from Christian dogma.

A Christian, who has some dogmatic knowledge and understanding, may inform me: “This is not what we as Christians believe.”

To which I will reply: “Jesus was not a philosopher. If it were important to him that people got this philosophical foundation right, he would have given his disciples proper lectures on the subject. In such a case he would have preached less about love and compassion and spent more time making sure everyone has the correct understanding of all the philosophical concepts. If Jesus did not preach philosophy, who did? Why are Christians so convinced of the mortal body and the immortal soul? Has it perhaps to do with the Church Fathers, who were fortunate enough to be schooled in Greek philosophy?”

Shall my companion retort: “Maybe it was so intended. Maybe it was the predestined role of the Church Fathers with their strong philosophical background to explain what Christ – a carpenter with fisherman disciples – did not explain.”

Answer: “Perhaps. Or perhaps it has to do with the First Council of Nicaea in the fourth century during which Constantine became impatient and pressed delegates to come to a conclusion regarding doctrine that had been tabled? Maybe that was also part of the predestined plan. Or perhaps my understanding is closer to the truth? What is the real value of the difference?”

In each of Western and Eastern Christianity, four Fathers are called the Great Church Fathers, generally influential Christian theologians, some of whom were eminent teachers and important church leaders.

Western Church:

Ambrose (340–397): educated in Rome, studied literature, law, and rhetoric

Jerome (347–420): studied rhetoric, philosophy, Latin and some Greek

Augustine (354–430): developed his own approach to philosophy and theology, employing a variety of methods and perspectives; helped formulate the doctrine of original sin

Gregory the Great (540–604): like most young men of his position in Roman society, Gregory was well educated, learning grammar, rhetoric, the sciences, literature, and law

Eastern Church:

Basil (c. 329–379): an influential theologian who supported the Nicene Creed and opposed the heresies of the early Christian church. His ability to balance his theological convictions with his political connections made Basil a powerful advocate for the Nicene position.

Athanasius (c. 296–373): Athanasius's earliest work, *Against the Heathen – On the Incarnation* (written before 319), bears traces of Origenist Alexandrian thought (such as repeatedly quoting Plato and using a definition from Aristotle's *Organon*). Athanasius was also familiar with the theories of various philosophical schools, and in particular with the developments of Neo-Platonism.

Gregory of Nazianzus (329 – c. 389): As a classically trained orator and philosopher he infused Hellenism into the early church. Gregory made a significant impact on the shape of Trinitarian theology among both Greek- and Latin-speaking theologians.

John Chrysostom (347–407): John began his education under the pagan teacher Libanius, from whom he acquired the skills for a career in rhetoric, and a love of the Greek language and literature. He is known for his moral preaching and his denunciation of abuse of authority.

For more information:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_Fathers

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Council_of_Nicaea

NOTE: Faith on a scale of probability

Monday, 11 July 2005

Anything that exists or has ever existed outside of what you can experience at the present moment or that you can perceive with your senses is faith – or perhaps rather, it can be placed on a scale of probability. All historical “facts” are compiled versions of past events that we *believe* happened, and as it is told to us. We can only believe that this is true (or was true) because our consciousness and any first-hand experiences we may be storing as memories do not stretch beyond our own lives and the place or places where we have lived this life.

It is therefore not so much about faith but where we draw the boundaries of believability, and specifically *what* we believe in.

The fact is, we cannot function without faith – that tomorrow would for example be similar to last Tuesday in terms of work schedule and other activities, is faith. We can only *believe* that Napoleon or Julius Caesar or Aristotle ever existed; they cannot convince our senses of their past existence. We believe they existed, because we read about them or we read what they have written.

Finally, a useful intellectual exercise may be answering the following question: What is the difference between belief in the existence of any god, and belief that Julius Caesar existed?

[*Probability* that a person such as Julius Caesar could have existed versus probability that any particular deity could exist is probably a good start.]

NOTE: Integrated view of existence – spiritual dimension

Tuesday, 12 July 2005

14:10

What is an integrated view of existence?

For me it brings together Freud and Christ, society and blood cells, humans and animals and trees, past, present and future. It brings together what is going on in the human psyche, what takes place between two individuals in different situations, and how one community exists in harmony with another. It brings together science, chemistry, psychology, religion, philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology and biology.

It enables you to look at yourself, at everything around you, at things that are happening in other places and that have happened at other times according to credible sources, and to other people who have experiences of reality similar to your experience or who have totally different experiences, and then to state that “things” make sense – or at least that they make sense in such a way that you can function at the time and in the environment in which you find yourself.

20:18

What would I say if I had to get access to verifiable, indisputable evidence that there is a “spiritual” dimension – and that this dimension is filled with both good and bad “spirits” (or entities), and what you do with your life in the “earthly” dimension will have an effect on which side of the line you will end up after exhaling your last breath? That the Christian concept of “heaven” and “hell” is a simplistic version of what happens to your “spirit”. That it is indeed a complex process of purification, possibly even rebirth,

learning lessons, making choices, being receptive to indicators that will enable you to continue on your spiritual journey. That stuff happens for a reason. That some people come your way, or are “guided” by complex manipulation by good “spirits” to assist you – or even a case of mutually beneficial influence in something like a relationship, but also that there is no central figure who pulls strings and comes to one person’s rescue in an accident yet allows another person to be violently murdered. What would I say, or what would be my position, if I could know that this is the truth?

NOTE: Religious differences – understanding built on inquiry

Saturday, 6 August 2005

10:50

You can approach a difference of opinion on religious matters, especially with your family or the family of your significant other, in one of two ways: apologetically or unapologetically. If you are apologetic, you come across as weak, as someone who actually knows what is right but who still chooses not to live according to these principles and convictions (perhaps because you are weak and spineless). In the case of an obdurate attitude you easily come across as arrogant and even as looking down on someone because you know what that person believes, but for you it is not “that simple”.

11:35

I have a strong suspicion that I sometimes create the impression that I know things that other people do not know; that I have secret knowledge that will pull the carpet from under another person’s feet; that I do not share things with people because I feel sorry for them, and because I do not want to be the cause of their existential angst.

The truth is that where many people’s beliefs and general worldview consist of statements, mine consist of a few statements, and many more questions.

Many people will respond to this by saying that it must be awful to walk around with so many questions to which you do not have answers. (And in their own minds they think how awful it would be for *them* to live with so much uncertainty.)

My response is that my mind is much more at ease with questions and honest inquiry and with saying, “I don’t know”

than with statements about which I am uncertain but which I feel I need to defend for the sake of membership to a specific group or community. I also know by now that I do not need answers to all my questions to be able to function on a daily basis, or to be who I want to be, or to contribute constructively to the community in whose midst I live out my existence, or to pursue good values.

My understanding of life is sustainable, because it is built on critical inquiry rather than on statements that one is expected to simply accept but that have changed over the centuries. A steady understanding, rather than one built on sand now blowing this way and tomorrow or in 500 years blowing in a completely different direction.

* * * * *

Monday, 22 August 2005

Epistemology: How do you know anything?

Debate, experiment, “For it is said ...”

How do you know what is being said is true?

“Because ...”

* * * * *

Saturday, 15 October 2005

The possibility of life after death always comes down to arguments and reasoning on the one hand, and stories on the other. Nobody can say, “Let me go and show you!”

* * * * *

Tuesday, 28 March 2006

Why is it that in many Christian churches it is preached that members should move away from an emphasis on the “I”, and instead should focus on “Christ”? What is the psychological effect on the “I” – which is always there, no matter how hard you try to move away from it? Does it have to do with a mostly unspoken ideology of contempt for the “I” – that is human, fallible, flawed, with a perpetual tendency to “sin” and that is involuntarily tied to the mortal body of the unique “you”? Does it have to do with a desire for the timeless and immortal? Is this healthy for the “I” you inevitably have to be until your body perishes?

* * * * *

Wednesday, 14 June 2006

“How on earth can we know the whole truth if we do not have all the information? How on earth can we make absolute statements? We sometimes accept things in faith, but how can we *expect* others to accept the same articles of faith?” (From a discussion about the moon)

* * * * *

Friday, 4 August 2006

True faith is not knowing.

Knowing and believing are two different things. Many religious people conflate the two – with very significant consequences.

* * *

“I don’t know, but I believe.”

* * * * *

Saturday, 28 November 2009

The Christian church is a socio-cultural institution that helps facilitate the development and maintenance of personal identity. The church’s theology [religious beliefs and theory] and ideology [system of ideas and ideals] provide many people with purpose and meaning to life, and it provides a moral framework to distinguish right from wrong.

* * * * *

Tuesday, 10 August 2010

This has been coming on for several months. A week or two ago I wanted to make a note of it: The Truth.

The Truth is vibrating subatomic particles. This – this is the real, end-result-after-you-have-stripped-away-all-the-rest, as-real-as-real-can-be truth.

What we think and what we do within this “Uber” Reality become *our* reality, *our* lives.

* * * * *

Is a giraffe really orange, like the fruit?

Wednesday, 19 October 2011

This morning around five o'clock I woke up for about five seconds, had a thought about a handful of crayons, a child, and a picture, and the meaning that can be extracted from that on the limitation of language when it comes to religion and "absolute truth", and then I fell asleep again.

The point was this: You give someone a palette with ten or fifteen colours of paint. Then you pull open the curtains on a beautiful, colourful scene – let's say grassland in Africa after good rains, with more than a dozen species of animals standing, walking, or lying around. After the person has taken in the scene, you tell him to paint what he has seen. And he has to do it with the colours you have made available to him.

Perhaps this person is really talented, and his painting is rich in detail and full of colour.

Question is, is this image a 100% accurate representation of the actual scene – of the grass and the trees and the animals and the sky and the clouds and the birds and all the minute details that fill reality?

How can it be? He only had a dozen or so colours to work with! And then there's his personality, even his state of mind when he painted the picture. To pick one example, was his omission of the ominous clouds on the horizon deliberate? How much detail did he leave out simply because he lacked the necessary talent?

Let's now take the analogy further. The person who had painted the landscape is later seen as an authority figure in some religious tradition. Besides the landscape representation, he also produced hundreds of other paintings and sketches and pieces of text, all of which became increasingly precious items after his death. Eventually, these documents and art works were turned into prescriptions for how people should behave, and for how things ought to be

described. Within a few generations, the landscape painting, for example, provided guidance to the community about how one ought to talk about animals as found on an African grassland after good rains.

Initially it would have been acceptable if someone had said: “This is clearly a giraffe, although a giraffe isn’t really orange – like the fruit, it’s more of a dark mustard colour.”

A few generations later this painting, like hundreds of other sketches and paintings and pieces of text produced by this authority figure, had been elevated to the status of sacred artefacts. At this time it would have been orthodox to refer to a giraffe as orange like the fruit, even that it had never been anything but orange. Why? The picture indicates it as such – clearly, to all who had eyes to see. “How can anyone deny it?” it would have been asked. “Even a child can see it. Indeed, you have to believe like a child.” To confirm this understanding, hundreds of volumes of material would have been written that explained the correct and only acceptable way the artefact should have been interpreted.

Let’s say in the course of a few centuries this religious community became the dominant group in society. By this time you could get in serious trouble with the authorities of the day if you even thought of a giraffe as anything other than Orange – Like the Fruit. Individuals who dared mumble something that sounded like “mustard” in reference to the giraffe could have been summoned before a court, thrown in a dungeon, tortured, and where it was suspected that such a person might have contaminated other innocent minds with the heretical mustard colour business, be sent to the stake.

“You are wrong,” people would say centuries later in more civilised times. “A giraffe is orange, a lion is brown, grass is bright green, the sky is blue, antelopes are brown, and their eyes are yellow. This is how it is. It must be so. It cannot be otherwise, because the Holy Painting says so.” And anyone who wants to talk about an ancient palette with only ten or fifteen colours, and the original painting just being

a sincere and honest attempt at producing a representation of a reality much too rich in colour, taste, sound and feeling for any human being with limited resources and capabilities to ever reproduce 100% accurately is simply too smart for their own good.

In the grip of heretics, or, The Greatest Commandment

Friday, 6 April 2012

Even though many members of the community of believers don't seem to have the faintest idea about this, the Christian religion is in the grip of heretics. These believers recite word for word everything the heretics teach them Sunday after Sunday, sermon after sermon. More than that, many so-called Christians are doing their utmost to proclaim the heretic deviation of Christian doctrine as widely as their ability enables them. The greatest deviation of the Christian message is, in my opinion, the emphasis on believing correctly at the expense of the Gospel of Love.

Preachers like to focus on love for God in their lectures, but "love for God", in this disappointing heresy, is understood as *correct faith*, to "acknowledge" God. Lost in all these lectures on how to believe correctly is the mention of a radical, transformational love for your fellow human being.

In the heresy that is so widespread nowadays, "love" furthermore means believing in a complex mythology of guilt – of "sin" that a mythical couple had committed at the beginning of time, and that had immersed all of their descendants in debt, without them having had any part of it. "Love" also means believing in the rules regarding the management of this debt – which includes the brutal treatment that Jesus had to endure at the hands of the Roman authorities in order to "pay" for this debt.

The path to salvation according to this Christian dogma should confuse even the most seasoned church-goer. According to modern Christian dogma, Jesus died on the cross to free humanity from its sin debt. There is a useful analogy to explain this part of predicament. What happens next is truly miraculous Christian doctrine. Say you have accrued millions of dollars of debt. You're obviously in quite

a. Someone who loves you sells his house, his car, his possessions, all his shares, to accumulate enough cash to cover your debt. Because he loves you. Then he physically goes into some office to hand over the money. You are notified by post that your debt has been paid. Great! You swear from now on you're going to live a better life. No more debt! You're free! But wait a second ... someone didn't read the fine print. For your debt to be paid, you must internalise and sincerely accept a complex set of beliefs. Question one thing, and the debt will be reset – you will still have to endure the punishment. Wonder about another thing, and the same thing happens: The debt payment is cancelled – except of course that the person who loved you so much that he sold everything to settle your debt, who practically gave up his own life, won't get anything back. That part of his personal history is over. The pain has been suffered; the torture already endured.

Let's return to mainstream Christian theology. Because all humans are born in sin, our souls belong to Satan, which means regardless of the good choices we make or the good lives we try to lead, we must by right all end up in a pool of everlasting fire. Fortunately for us humans, there is a technical loophole: If God sacrifices his son in the place of sinful humanity, the price is paid, the debt settled, and humanity is freed from the chains to which we were bound from before we were born. God then sends his son to Earth, where he is tortured and executed by the political authorities of the day. On another level of existence, though, this death means that human sin debt has been paid. It's over. The job is done. But then, brothers and sisters, members of the congregation and the broader community, comes the farce, the terrible blood-curdling heresy: It is not enough! The debt has been paid, but only in theory! You, sinful person, must first internalise and confess to believing a panoply of dogma and doctrine; otherwise, Jesus' torture would have been in vain! Otherwise he would have died for nothing!

What is it that you have to believe – and seeing that the eternal comfort of your soul depends on it, preferably also fully understand, according to this heretic takeover of the Christian message?

- You have to believe that God has a son, but that God is also the son.

- You have to believe that God is one, and has always been one, but is also the father of a son.

- You have to believe that God is spirit, but that he was also 100% flesh during his time on earth.

- You have to believe that God is a man – he is after all not called “Mother”.

- You have to believe that God had to obey the rules to which he and Satan had agreed, instead of just vanquishing Satan.

- You have to believe that although Jesus proclaimed on the cross that the salvation plan had been fulfilled (“It is finished!” he cried out according to scripture), the plan is, in fact, not fulfilled. Humanity will continue for thousands of years with their sinful lives, and then there will be a final battle. Then *all who did not believe correctly* will go to hell.

Bad news if you thought these things were all you had to believe in to escape the torture of everlasting hellfire. After all the “big” items on the list, we get to all the other things that are thrown in, in which you also have to believe 100%, or else.

- You have to believe that the scientific explanation of the natural development of life forms, known as evolution, is a collection of blatant lies.

- You have to believe that the cosmos with all the stars and planets and other heavenly bodies were “created”, with the understanding that this means there was nothing, and within a few days the entire universe, as we know it today, had come into existence.

- You have to believe that the collection of literary material known as the Bible was divinely dictated to about 40

people (different versions of the same events were apparently also dictated as such to the “writers”).

- You have to believe that people have absolute free will, which means everyone can be judged by the same standards for their actions. Genetic composition, socio-economic background, personal trauma and mental illness are not relevant, and should not make a difference in the final judgement.

More directives:

- You may not question how Jesus can be born of a virgin and yet also appear in the blood line of his mother’s spouse (a descendant of King David).

- You may not question the claim that Jesus went up on a cloud toward what is supposed to be the locality of the dimension to which people go after physical death.

- According to the Apostolic Creed, people must confess that Jesus is sitting at the right hand of God the Father. (*Literally?* Should people believe it *literally*? And if this does not have to be *literally* believed, what other items of faith do not have to be taken literally?)

- You have to believe that human beings have a separate non-physical quality called a “soul” that goes to another dimension after death to either receive reward for believing correctly during the physical period of your existence, or to endure punishment for you not believing correctly. (Odd as it may sound, there is disagreement on this matter, seeing that there are people who believe the physical body also appears after physical death.)

* * *

Christian theology teaches us that God loved humanity so much that he had his own son tortured and executed to save humanity. A few things could be said about this, but it does serve as testimony to the importance of love in the foundation of the Christian religion. No surprise here: People are

expressly ordered to love one another. “What is the greatest commandment?” an expert in religious law asked Jesus. Jesus answered: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” And in case people failed to completely comprehend the meaning, Jesus gave a few handy examples: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. [...] Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

Unfortunately, even if you did these things, even if you gave the hungry person something to eat and to the one who was thirsty something to drink, even if you housed a stranger, gave clothes to a man in rags, nursed the sick, visited someone in prison, but you believe none of the above doctrines, you would still burn in the hell of your master, Satan.

Love is the greatest commandment? Apparently only in theory. According to thousands of heretical leaders in charge of institutions of the Christian religion, the greatest commandment is something else: *Believe correctly, or go to hell.*

* * *

Like many other people, I believe the world is in a worse condition than it should be. People ought to treat one another better. We should all take better care of the environment. I do not believe we need religion to be better people. I believe an atheist can be as good a neighbour as a church-goer any day, and in many cases a better neighbour. But I also believe the Gospel of Love as proclaimed by Jesus is a radical approach to life. This approach has the potential to transform

individuals, transform communities, and at the end of the day enable people to not be such disappointments as we sometimes are.

To love God by loving your neighbour. To love your neighbour by giving him something to eat when he is hungry, to give her something to drink when she is thirsty, to house him if he needs housing, give her something to wear when her clothes are falling apart, care for her when she is ill, and to visit him in prison if it comes to that.

Is this not what it's all about? Am I missing the point? Or is the world dragged closer and closer to hell by church leaders who insist that everything is really about *believing in the right way*?

Many church-goers and other members of the religious community may question the validity of my criticism of what they are supposed to believe. "Were you there?" they might ask. "Do you know Jesus was not born of a virgin? Are you sure he did not come back to life three days after he had died on the cross? Are you sure he did not walk around, appearing to people for weeks after his death and resurrection? Are you sure he didn't go up to heaven on a cloud?"

My answer to this is simple: I was not there, so for all I know, everything did happen exactly like the Biblical texts indicate, regardless of my confidence in what science says about these matters. The insistence on believing in each and every one of these doctrines, and all the related doctrines that make up Christian dogma (such as the six-day creation myth), show the unmistakable fingerprints of human beings, though – a characteristic tendency to produce fantastically complex ideologies, and then to require that everyone who wants to participate in their group first believe in their ideology. The image that comes to mind is that of a kitchen where the rubbish bag has been torn apart and the rubbish scattered all over the kitchen floor. You have a strong suspicion whose work it is. The dog is lying in the corner, trying its best to look innocent. If it could talk, it would try to convince you that the

kitchen has always looked like this; that he had absolutely nothing to do with it. “Of course,” you would mumble, and start cleaning up the mess.

My own beliefs may be an unusual blend of Christian theology and humanism and common sense, but I am not blind. I see a massive waste of human potential. I see a flagrant denial of a radical message which, I agree, may be asking too much of most people.

Eventually these three remain: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is most certainly not correct faith.

An attempt at explaining what I believe

Friday, 6 April 2012

What do I believe in? Let me try to explain:

- I do not believe a photographic representation of an urban landscape can be sketched with a blunt pencil. Similarly, I do not believe people can expect to know the absolute, all-encompassing truth without having access to all relevant information, and without breaking through the limitations of the sounds in which we communicate.

- I believe that many people have a deeply emotional need for a strong cosmic figure with whom a close connection can be maintained, and who can be relied on for help in times of need. This need can be seen in the mythology of primitive communities, and it manifests, amongst many other examples, in the institutionalised religion of the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Churches.

- I do not believe the historical Jesus ever cherished any ambitions to start a new religion. Most serious research confirms that he regarded himself as a member of the Jewish faith community.

- I believe that what we know today as the Christian religion is to a significant extent the work of a talented, intelligent, and competent first-century community leader and organiser called Saul of Tarsus – better known as Paul the Apostle. To claim that he was inspired by God is, in my opinion, to uncritically accept a traditional version of a story because it legitimises the religious ideology that you accept as an explanation of life on earth, without which you may not be sure your life has any meaning.

- I believe that the Christian religion, as we know it today, has gone through an interesting development – from its roots as a Jewish sect, to comfort-and-hope movement popular among the lower classes of the Roman world, to a more sophisticated religion with the incorporation of more

advanced Greek concepts to make it more palatable among the wealthier and better-educated classes of the later Roman world. I find it furthermore interesting that many people who profess to be members of the Christian religious community are not only ignorant of this history, they even proclaim that it does not matter.

- I accept verifiable and credible historical information that points to several groups during the first few centuries after Christ that had different views of the person Jesus of Nazareth, of his nature, and of his relationship with the other figures in the Trinity. I further accept as historically accurate that for the sake of political benefits the emperor of the Roman Empire in the early fourth century invited the leaders of diverse Christian communities to assemble in one place in order to decide what the correct dogma would be about Christ, and what not; also to decide which religious texts should be given official recognition as guidelines of the Christian religion, and which not. To claim that the emperor and bishops present at the Council of Nicaea in the year 325 were inspired by God is, as I have already mentioned, to uncritically accept a traditional version of a story because it legitimises the religious ideology which you accept as an explanation of life on earth, without which you may not be convinced your life has any meaning.

- I believe that the Gospel of Love contained in the Christian tradition is a radical and potentially transforming guideline of personal morality. I believe that the world would be a better place if the Gospel of Love were taken seriously by more people – confessing members of the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Churches, or not. I further believe that – with some exceptions – the Gospel of Love was pushed aside at an early stage of the development of the religion and replaced with an institutionalised movement with an accompanying worldview that bears little resemblance to the original teachings of Jesus Christ.

Lastly, I believe I have the right to express my view of Jesus Christ, the “Christian” religion as well as “Christian” dogma, and to spread this opinion as widely as possible. I believe that it is my right as a citizen of this world, as a friend, brother, son and relative of people who regard themselves as Christians, and as someone who grew up with the Christian religion, and up to his early adult years regarded himself as a confessing member of the Christian faith community. I further believe it is my responsibility to point out to people that I am of the opinion that they are being deceived. I do so, not because I believe anyone will go to hell if they do not see the light, but because I see it as a massive waste of human potential. Finally, I see this deception, this false theology, as a daily renunciation of the spirit of Christ.

NOTE: Why I don't call myself an atheist

Friday, 27 April 2012

I do not call myself an atheist, for the simple reason that the onus will be on me to define what I do not believe in.

If I were to call myself an atheist, I would be arguing that I do not believe in something, that I reject the existence of all gods, including "God". The question is then: What exactly do I reject? What exactly do I not believe in?

Seeing that I will have to rely on other people's descriptions of their gods, other people's definitions of "God", I would only be able to say that I do not believe in one specific person's god.

Will that make me an atheist? Then a Christian is an atheist from the perspective of the Hindu or Muslim! Then one Christian can even call another Christian whose concept of God differs slightly from his own an atheist!

Fact of the matter is, people only *think* everyone in their group believes in the same god because they recite the same confessions. But if one person refers to God as "my dear heavenly Daddy", I can almost guarantee you that their god is not really, deep in their subconscious, the same as the god many of their fellow believers profess to believe in.

So if I say I am an atheist, in whose god do I not believe? Whose god do I reject?

* * *

What is the alternative, if I have to categorise myself for the sake of identification?

According to Wikipedia, agnosticism is the view that the truth of certain claims is unknown or by nature impossible to prove. These claims include metaphysical claims relating to theology, the afterlife or existence of gods, spirits, or even ultimate reality.

This, by definition, does not mean I do not believe in gods, spirits or a specific ultimate reality. It does mean that I do not believe I nor anyone else can prove the definitive truth of these statements.

Of course, many Hindus believe this to be nonsense: they can point to the personal experiences of millions of people that prove to them that Krishna really exists. Same with followers of any other religious tradition. The ability of any person with a firm intention and an established interest in a particular view to find evidence for something that they believe can never be underestimated.

As for my own position, I can say without thinking twice that I find value in doubt. I find value in asking questions. I consider it worthwhile to wonder rather than to claim that I know, and to declare the discussion over when I've said my piece. Lastly, I place too much value on intelligent discourse between reasonable people to reject outright what anyone says.

NOTE: Search engine with an ideological database

Monday, 14 May 2012

Earlier tonight I wondered how it would be if everyone thought out loud about the big questions: Who am I? Where do I come from? What happens when I die? How did the earth and everything come about?

After thinking that I had answers to most of these questions up to a point in my early twenties, I realised that religion is like having access to a search engine loaded with a particular ideological database. You type in a question, and within seconds you have an answer.

Each religion, of course, has its own database with different answers. There are similarities between the databases of all mainstream Christian denominations, and some more obscure sects have databases with completely different answers.

The point is, it's fantastic! Can you imagine it? You type a question – and boom! – there's your answer! Another question ... another answer.

The problem kicks in when the search engine breaks down, when it becomes increasingly clear that the database is corrupted, or that the answers are not credible.

This is when the real work begins: to build a database from the ground up.

* * * * *

Wednesday, 11 July 2012

That I stopped believing in traditional Christian doctrines was a direct consequence of the seriousness with which I had previously regarded traditional Christian doctrines. One can even go so far as to say that my eventual “faithlessness” was the result of my former “faith”. I believed in traditional Christian doctrines because I had been taught the value of Truth. I believed in the traditional Christian doctrines because I believed it *was* the Truth. When I learned how the “truths” had evolved and changed over the ages to serve human agendas, I took the only option that allowed me to maintain my integrity: abandon the path of traditional Christian doctrines, and continue following the Truth.

* * * * *

Creation, evolution, intelligent design, and as usual, language and truth

Saturday, 6 October 2012

Here is my cursory opinion on “creation”, evolution, and “intelligent design”. Like any reasonable opinion, it is open to debate and counter-arguments.

I don’t believe the development of life on Earth was a series of random events. I believe there was some form of intelligence behind the earliest forms of life.

I further believe the creation mythology propagated by institutionalised religions serves the same purpose as it did two and three and four thousand years ago. Something that can form part of people’s integrated world views must explain the origin of life. The creation story provides followers of these religions with exactly that.

Nevertheless, I believe it is highly unlikely that life forms developed without ... some form of intelligence.

Finally, I believe even the efforts of learned people to explain the development of early life forms is comparable to the type of conversation that Org the Cave Man might have had with his cousin about the sun and the stars 10,000 years ago. Even if Org and his cousin had command of adequate vocabulary, the data available to them was incomplete – to put it academically.

Of course, as it is with more things than many people are willing to admit, language plays a crucial role in this matter. What exactly do people mean when they say “intelligence” or “intelligent”? What do people mean by “design”? And what exactly is meant by “random event”?

The good news? There is a strong possibility that we’ll develop a better understanding of things in the next couple hundred years – as long as our minds remain open, and the conversation is kept going.

Read more on this topic:

“Intelligent Design Creationism: Fraudulent Science, Bad Philosophy”

<http://www.lhup.edu/~dsimanek/philosop/creation.htm>

“Evolution vs. Intelligent Design: 6 Bones of Contention”

<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2009/11/photogalleries/091123-origin-species-darwin-150-intelligent-design/>

Two detectives, and two doctors

Tuesday, 21 May 2013

Situation one:

Imagine a crime scene. A detective arrives, flashes a light here and there, and pulls a booklet from his jacket's inner pocket. He reads for a few minutes then declares that it is logical that "the man" did it – according to the book he tightly clutches in his one hand.

"The man?" a few bystanders inquire.

"Yes," replies the detective. "Don't act like you don't understand. You know exactly what I'm talking about." Shortly afterwards, he leaves.

Subsequently a second detective arrives at the scene. He also flashes his light in a few places, but he also lifts fingerprints, he takes dozens of pictures, seals items in plastic bags, and he talks to several potential witnesses.

After a few days someone asks him who he thinks perpetrated the crime. "I don't know yet," the second detective answers. "I'm still seeing where the clues take me."

Situation two:

A man goes to a doctor. He explains that his heart is no longer working as well as it should, that it sometimes flutters a bit, and so on.

"What's wrong with me?" he asks the doctor.

The doctor leans over, looks in the general direction of the man's chest, and pulls out a book from his drawer. The sick guy notices that it is a very old book.

"It's logical," the doctor announces. "You're not keeping time with the seasons." Then he informs his assistant that he is ready for the next patient.

The next day the sick guy goes to another doctor. The doctor asks him questions – what he eats, if he smokes, whether he gets any exercise, and whether he has a stressful job. The man is weighed, his blood pressure is taken, and the nurse draws blood for some tests. Then the doctor asks him to take his shirt off. He knocks here, listens there.

At the end of the consultation, the doctor informs the man that he should return in a few days. He will then be able to tell him what the tests results are.

Which detective will you trust – the one who follows the clues with an open mind to see where they lead him, or the one who looks at a few things and interprets them in a way that corresponds to what his book says? Which doctor are you going to trust?

Like any reasonable person, most religious people will also prefer the detective who looks at where the clues take him, and insist on the doctor who considers various possibilities and does tests and asks questions before concluding that the cause of the problem is likely X, Y or Z.

What surprises me, though, is that when it comes to questions about the origin of the universe and life on earth, many people refer to religious mythology and dismiss all doubts and speculations as disrespectful and offensive and demand that such behaviour immediately cease.

“Put away your so-called science books,” these people will say. “We already know what the truth is.”

NOTE: The handiwork of people

Wednesday, 22 May 2013

It is indeed intimidating to stand in front of the majestic edifice that is the Christian religion, to clear your throat and to declare that this religion is, in your humble opinion, the handiwork of humans, developed and refined over more than two thousand years by thousands of thinkers and theologians, priests and popes, monks and pastors, and by regular believers.

It is also very difficult when your own parents believe the Christian religion to hold the universal truth of the One and Only God Almighty. It is difficult if you have come to believe the exact opposite, but you do not want to upset your parents. What makes it an especially sensitive subject is that they find great solace and comfort in this system of beliefs.

Thursday, 23 May 2013

An important question to ask regarding the Christian religion is this: Why did Jesus have to die?

The answer you get will mostly be about a blood payment culture prevalent in the Middle East two to three thousand years ago.

What will usually not make much of an impression is if you point out that it is somewhat strange that a god that is supposed to be universal, who according to church doctrines had existed for billions of years before any human being came up with the first sparkle of culture, custom or civilisation, would allow his own son – according to some theological viewpoints, himself – to be tortured and murdered, because a *custom* prevalent at a particular time and place dictated so.

If too few confessing believers ask such questions, it may be because questions of this kind are actively discouraged. Religious people are often reminded of the painful and

everlasting punishment that will befall them if they fail to believe in the *right way* – that they will certainly not escape the “wrath of God” if they ask questions that insult him.

Another question that will not be appreciated: Where does culture of particular time and place end, and where begins what is supposed to be timeless truth?

The authority of logical reasoning

Saturday, 24 August 2013

This morning I thought of how an acquaintance of mine responded to something I had posted on Facebook a year ago. His response can be more or less summarised as, “Who does this guy think he is?”

For a minute or so I reflected on who and what I was in high school: that I did not make much of an impression on people; that my peers probably didn't expect me of all people to have one or two interesting thoughts that I would write down and feel the need to share with other people.

As one's brain crackles and groans to turn one thought into another, I wondered about this thing that some people become personal if they don't like your argument. I always want to say: Don't look at me; look at the argument. My person doesn't matter here. The argument must stand or fall on its own value.

I realised that the response of my acquaintance probably wasn't just about me. Some people simply believe that advice and insights and opinions about matters existential must emanate from the mouths of authority figures. If these people cherish a religious identity, it is to be expected that the figures whose word matters will have religious authority.

What this acquaintance probably meant was: “What authority do you have to say what you are saying? Are you God? Are you Jesus? Are you a writer of a Bible book?”

My response to such a position: Does my argument not make sense? Or: I think my opinion deserves to at least be considered because it is relatively well-laid out, and it makes more or less sense.

But I would imagine the man quivering his hand in a gesture that says: “Silence! Logical arguments are cheap! Every second man or woman on the street can come up with a logical argument! I am talking about authority!”

Then I thought, if something was wrong with my stomach or with my head, or if I got a rash somewhere on my skin, I would want to see a medical professional. I may ask my mother's advice, or my wife's or a colleague's, but it is the person with authority whose opinion will really bear weight.

Is it not the same with matters about what one should do with your life? Does it not make sense that this acquaintance of mine would shake his head, shrug, and ask, "Who are you?"

The difference is science versus opinion; more specifically, if science provides me with an answer to a question or a problem, I will give more weight to that than to someone's opinion. For example, if I had a virus, my blood can be tested a hundred times, and the tests would give almost exactly the same result every time. On the other hand, when it comes to the question of what to do with my life, science, as far as I know, cannot help me that much. If I turn to someone with religious authority and ask him what to do with my life, what will he do? He will consult writings written more than a thousand years ago in the case of Islam, and almost two thousand years ago or more than two thousand years ago in the cases of Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism. The writers of these texts certainly had authority in the communities to which they belonged two thousand years ago, but is it reasonable to accept their opinion in today's world without thinking critically about it or considering one or two alternatives?

To go back to my example: If something is wrong with my stomach or if I get a rash somewhere, will I consult a medical tractate that dates from Julius Caesar's time, or even further back to the time of Plato or Socrates? Suppose I discover exactly such a piece of literature somewhere in a dusty corner of my bookshelves, I may browse through it if I

am desperate or curious enough. There is certainly a chance that there may be a few bits of useful advice. But before I apply coagulated ostrich blood to my eyes, or smear the fresh intestines of a baby crocodile on my sore knee, I would definitely get a second opinion.

So I am not saying the person who is referring to religious writings when looking for an answer to the question of what to do with their lives is primitive. After all, the authors of these texts were respected in their day as authoritative figures. I simply ask: Why not consider a second opinion, especially if the opinion is reasonable and perhaps relatively logical?

NOTE: The Christian in my mind's eye

Tuesday, 15 October 2013

Christian: Follower of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

This Christian thinks it is ridiculous that anything has to be confessed, that there should be displays of faith with ritualistic recitations of doctrines, that recognition should be given to God in public and in private, to “his” name, what “he” is, and so on.

He will ask: “Do you mean I have to gather with other people and confess that I believe I must love my neighbour? Why would I want to do that? No, I’ll just love my neighbour. That’s what Jesus taught.” This person will also agree with the idea that Jesus is not an insecure teenager whose identity should be confirmed as often as possible by people who “love” him.

The Jesus whose teachings are followed by the Christian in my mind's eye will most probably not think much of ritualistic congregations filled with emotional displays. Chances are he will only be impressed if you actually love your fellow human beings, give them a blanket when they are cold, give them shelter when they are homeless, and so on.

The follower of Jesus as I think of him will also not attach much value to the identity label of “Christian”. He will simply say you can call him what you want. All that matters to him is to love his fellow human being as he does himself.

* * *

What is the Christian religion? Is there something like a true Christian? What were Jesus’ true intentions, and what were the intentions of early church leaders like Peter and Paul?

I don’t think there is any doubt that church leaders in the decades after Jesus’ death were aware that they had a *religion* to administer and lead.

Monday, 2 December 2013

I was thinking of something tonight – giving people the space to be as human as you allow yourself to be, and the next moment I was testing and trying words and phrases to explain my position regarding religion.

It came down to this: In my early twenties I got the overwhelming impression that the Christian religion with which I grew up and to which I had become increasingly attached in the first two decades of my life was man-made. To put it differently, in my opinion the Christian religion is steeped to the bone in teachings that show a human hand – or, in the words of a renowned German philosopher: “[It is] human, all too human.”

Important to explain what I mean by *steeped to the bone*: Once you start cutting away doctrines of the Christian religion that seem, after careful consideration, to be just too human to be “divine”, there will not be enough left of the patient for it to survive.

Where is the problem?

Saturday, 8 November 2014

I noticed a meme in my Twitter feed today of a young girl clutching a Bible. The overlaid text said:

GOD LOVES YOU SO MUCH ... THAT HE
CREATED HELL ... JUST IN CASE YOU DON'T LOVE
HIM BACK

It made me think: I know what my opinion is on the matter, but how do people who self-identify as Christian respond when they see something like this?

Suppose a person who doesn't know much more of the Christian religion other than that it is one of the Big Three says to a person who identifies as Christian: "Tell me about your faith. Explain the basics to me – the story, if you want."

I believe if this scene is repeated with ten, or 20, or 100 people, it's simply a matter of time before someone would say: "Hold on! What you're saying is that God loves me, but He created hell to punish me just in case I don't love Him back?" And this person would be most sincere in asking this. He or she won't be trying to be funny or difficult! For this person it will be a logical conclusion to the story they were told and to the principles that were explained to them.

What would be the reaction of the person who lives and thinks and talks as a "Christian", and who sees him- or herself as a member of that particular religious community? Would they say that something was explained incorrectly? Would they say the other person misunderstood the whole story, or that they were not listening properly? Would they apologise and give the person a name and phone number of a different Christian who is known for being good with explaining things that others easily misunderstand?

NOTE: Options for the unbeliever

Thursday, 25 December 2014

Isn't calling yourself an atheist somewhat silly? Is it not similar to calling yourself "not a Yankees supporter"? Why not identify yourself as what you are – a Red Sox fan, a Giants supporter, and so forth?

The other problem with identifying yourself as an atheist is that the onus then rests on you to define what you do not believe in. What or who is the god in which you do not have any faith?

* * *

A few minutes of research have taught me that there is *strong* atheism and *weak* atheism. The Strong Atheist (also Positive Atheist) takes the view that *there is reason to believe that there is no god*, that it is even logically impossible that a god or gods exist. The so-called Weak Atheist (or Negative Atheist) believes that there is *no reason to believe* that there is any god.

Then there are the agnostics – people who take the position that every religious conviction assumes too much about the concept of "God". The agnostic therefore says that both the "believer" and the "unbeliever" make too many assumptions about what they believe or do not believe.

Another alternative is to join the ranks of people who are *opposed to any belief in the existence of a god*, namely the anti-theist. Christopher Hitchens wrote in his book, *Letters to a Young Contrarian* that he not only believed that all religions are versions of the same untruth, but also that the influence of churches and the effect of religious beliefs do more harm to humans and to society than any good.

A definition of Christianity

Thursday, 19 February 2015

I want a definition of Christianity so that I know what I mean when I talk about it.

This is how I see it: Christianity refers to a cultural and religious community that provides a philosophical and moral framework from which people who call themselves “Christians” derive a core part of their identity.

The following terms are from oxforddictionaries.com.

religion = the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods; a particular system of faith and worship; a pursuit or interest followed with great devotion

philosophy = the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, especially when considered as an academic discipline; a theory or attitude that acts as a guiding principle for behaviour

culture = the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively; the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society

community = a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common; the condition of sharing or having certain attitudes and interests in common

NOTE: Argument without rules

Thursday, 5 November 2015

My position since at least “To talk about God” (written in November 2001) has been as follows: You cannot believe in “God” without defining “God”. And when you have defined “God”, you have created an idol – like Moses’ brother Aaron created an idol of gold and jewellery, so people do it with words.

Friday, 6 November 2015

Many people will be ready with a counter-argument: “I don’t define God. I believe what God has revealed about Himself.”

Okay, I’ll say, let me try again: You cannot believe in “God” without first defining “God”. And when you have defined “God” ...

“Nobody defines God. He has revealed himself.”

How do you know? I will ask.

And so the back and forth will continue until you realise you are knee-deep in an argument with absolutely no rules. Because how do you argue with “I believe so because I feel so”? How do you argue with, “I believe what I believe because a book that was written by God Himself who moved the authors’ hands in a certain way says that is how it is. And the book must be right because the book says it is right. And my feeling confirms it. And feelings I have had in the past also confirm it. And almost everyone I know agrees with me.”

How do you argue a point if the other person is saying whatever he wants with no reference to independent research and no confirmation other than other people who also have a strong personal stake in the matter?

“This is the shell of a dragon egg,” says someone with an ostrich egg shell in her hand.

“How do you know it’s a dragon egg shell?” another person asks.

“Because I feel it’s true, and you can’t say anything that would convince me that what I feel isn’t true.”

How do you know what is true?

Sunday, 20 December 2015

How can you believe anything if you cannot verify for yourself whether something is true or not?

Fact is, I have to believe other people when they say or write that Napoleon lived, and had lost his final battle at a place called Waterloo. I have to believe other people when they say or write of a monster who went by the name of Adolf Hitler. I have to believe other people when they say or write that there was a conservative old geezer called Paul Kruger, and other men called George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and Henry VIII. I have to accept other people's arguments or proofs that the earth is round and not flat, that the earth revolves around the sun, that there is an ever-expanding universe, that humans descended from earlier creatures that looked more like chimpanzees than modern humans, and even that I consist of tiny particles called atoms – which in turn consist of even smaller particles.

So, how do you believe anything if you cannot collect data yourself, scrutinise historical sources, and do your own sophisticated laboratory experiments?

You listen to two or more explanations for something that differ on all the main points. You listen to people who represent different viewpoints, and you look carefully at what they submit as evidence. Then you listen to how they insult each other, how they deconstruct each other's arguments, and how they construct counterarguments layer by layer.

Then you decide: Which version sounds more reasonable? How thoroughly has evidence been examined and on what grounds were evidence rejected and arguments refuted? Which version has a higher probability of being true?

Finally, when you have decided on A, or B or however many options there are, you have to ask yourself why you think that specific version sounds more reasonable, and has a

higher probability of being true. Very important: Is it possible that you have a deep-seated *need* for that version to be the truth? Also, do you choose one version over another because your membership in some or other group is at risk, especially where membership is something that gives value and meaning to your life?

Someone who accepts a particular explanation because they *need* it to be the truth is like a judge who convicts a man of theft because another man had stolen something from him a long time ago, and ever since he has been carrying around this desire for revenge. *What this person needs is one thing; evidence that the guy is guilty is something completely different.*

NOTE: The attraction of religion

Saturday, 9 July 2016

A few reasons why religion attracts so many people:

1. “Ultimate Reality” – “This is the real truth. The rest is either a lie, or just parts of the truth.”
2. Membership – “You’re not alone anymore.”
3. Identity – “I finally know who I really am and how I fit into the Greater Scheme of Things.”
4. Community – “We’re all brothers and sisters in spirit.”
5. The promise of, and potential for, self-improvement

Any one of these reasons is good enough to attract people to a group or an organisation or a movement. Combine all the above and more, and you have yourself a powerful people magnet.

How would it be if religious people were more honest?

Friday, 15 July 2016

I was addicted to smoking cigarettes for about 14 years. I had no illusions about the effects it had on my health. And, like other smokers, I was regularly confronted by people who regarded it as their duty to tell me that smoking was bad for me.

“Don’t you know that you can get lung cancer or emphysema?” these people would ask.

I know, I would say. Spare me the speech. I won’t even try to argue with you.

“If you know,” my well-meaning friend or relative would retort, “why on earth do you keep smoking then?”

Because, I would answer, I need it.

I believe there is a parallel between the conversation that smokers have with non-smokers and the conversation between atheists and theists over the latter’s faith.

Many so-called believers spare no effort trying to convince agnostics and atheists that there is more than enough proof for the existence of God (can be any divine figure, but let’s confine ourselves for the moment to the god of monotheists, and more specifically the Christian religion – hence the term “God” with a capital G). They will use science. They will quote famous scientists like Albert Einstein. They will refer to incidents and experiences in their own lives. They will try to catch opponents off guard. “What do you say now?” they will ask after some or other anecdote.

In fact, in the intellectual wrestling match between people who believe in the existence of God and people who do not believe in the existence of God, the former has the uphill battle. The only question the non-believer has to ask is “How do you know?”

If someone claims that water boils at a certain temperature, and someone else looks at him in disbelief and asks how he knows that, the one who has made the claim can simply put a pot of water on a hot plate, stick in a thermometer and – voila! – within minutes the claim will be proven as fact. If the other person argues that it was a fluke, they can do it again, or even better – the “non-believer” can perform the experiment himself, with exactly the same result.

“How do you know God exists?” is a problem question for believers because they cannot prove the existence of God. They say they can prove it, but not with the same certainty that it can be proven that water boils at a certain temperature. The existence of God can simply not be proven. Not that the challenge deters many believers.

It is at this point where I want to return to the smoker who says: I know. You can't tell me anything.

Rather than getting hot under the collar and quoting everyone from Plato to Einstein and talking about the complexity of the fly's eye and the heat of the sun to try to prove that God exists, I wonder how it will work out if a believer simply stands back and says: “I know. You can't tell me anything. I've read Sam Harris' *End of Faith*. I've read Richard Dawkins' *God Delusion*. I've read Hawking. I've seen plenty of Christopher Hitchens videos on YouTube. I know exactly what you're going to tell me. And I can't really say much to counter it. I can't prove the existence of God like I can prove that water boils at a certain temperature. I mean, I can tell you about times when I've prayed, and that certain things happened that I saw as proof that God had heard my prayer and decided to intervene. But again, I know you're going to talk about confirmation bias and so on. I have to be honest: I see your point. The onus is definitely on me to say why I believe in the existence of God, and I can't say anything that will satisfy you. I completely understand your arguments.”

Why do you believe then, if you cannot prove that what you believe in is true, the non-believer will ask.

“Because, I need to believe,” the believer will reply. “I want to believe. I really hope with all my heart that God exists, and that there is life after death.”

Okay, the non-believer will say, but if what you say is true, if the God of Moses and Jesus and Paul really exists, and there is life after death, what do you think will happen to agnostics and atheists and other people who base their beliefs on reason and science and logic? What will happen to people like me?

“To be honest with you,” the person of faith will start, “I don’t know. I believe in a merciful god, a god who does not need for people to confirm his existence. The god that I believe in is not an insecure god. So for all I know, in 100 years’ time you and I will both be in paradise chatting away about something else.”

Why not? Why is the above such an impossible position for so many followers of the Christian religion to take?

Is it because it requires modesty? Is modesty not a Fruit of the Spirit? And if a person who self-identifies as Christian has such a big problem being modest, can he or she really assert that they are Christian – or is it not that simple?

Is it because many Christians believe in a god who is angry? Is it because they believe in a god who wants to punish, in a god who created people to test them? And that he punishes people when they fail? Believe, or I will punish you? Believe in the *right* way or face the consequences?

Is that why believers get so angry with atheists – because the latter dare to not believe in the right way?

How would it be if Christians were more honest, to other people and to themselves? If they do not harbour an unholy fear of the malicious atheist, but see him or her as just another vulnerable human being who tries to make sense of their life and the world around them? How will it work for the Christian if he or she replies to questions from non-believers

with an honest, “I don’t know”? If they admit that they believe because they want to believe? If they have to admit that they believe because they *need* to believe? If they have to admit that an impersonal cosmos without God is just too lonely, and without purpose and meaning? If they have to admit that they believe because they hope that what they believe is true, even if they cannot prove a single thing?

Is it not true that the believer and the atheist and all grades of believers and non-believers in between are all human beings who just try to make it through another day and night?

What good does it do to be unreasonable? Who benefits from it?

* * * * *

If you enjoyed this collection or found it educational,
please consider purchasing a printed copy, or an electronic
copy for your reading device.

Remember: the writer also has to eat and pay rent!

ASSORTEDNOTES.COM/BOOKSTORE

* * * * *



* * * * *

Available titles by Brand Smit – in both digital and printed formats:

In the grip of heretics – or, The Christian
Not a table, a dog or a pencil
The real, or non-real purpose of our existence
As long as you remain standing
The necessary unpleasantness
The adult life
On writing and the writer
Exile

Thirteen minutes on a Saturday night
Time doesn't really fly

More information is available from the writer's website:

ASSORTEDNOTES.COM

* * * * *