

## 1070. Why I am a Christian

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### Defining my religion

At age 79 it is time, I think, to give an account of why I am a Christian. Being a Christian is not nearly so self-evident for me as it seems. My children would not call themselves Christian, even though they live what I would consider to be a Christian life style. They love their spouses, children, parents and friends and have a deep sense of service to the community. But they do not pray to Jesus, attend church or daily read the bible like I do.

I have friends, colleagues, relatives and neighbours who are not “religious”. Some of them are atheists, who consider practicing a religion a bad thing. I am a retired psychologist and have taught and practiced all forms of psychology constructed mostly by non-Christian professionals. Much of the therapy I practice as a professional counselor is identical to what non-Christian therapists practice, even if, perhaps, I do so from a different motivation or source of inspiration.

Furthermore, there are many forms of Christianity to which I do not subscribe. Even though I believe that the central message of the bible is infallible in the sense that it does not fool me or fails me in my life, I do not believe that the bible is inerrant. I do not believe that the world was created in six 24-hour days. I do not believe in the rapture, and I have a hard time calling people on the religious right my sisters and brothers because their Christianity is so different from mine. In fact, I some times refrain from calling myself a Christian at all for fear of being mistaken for a social conservative. If pushed I call myself a Jimmy Carter Christian, or a left wing or progressive Christian.

Finally, to the best of my knowledge I have never been born again, because I cannot remember a time when I was not a Christian. So, perhaps I am a Christian today because I was born that way? My family has been Protestant, and before that Catholic Christians for many generations. The Dutch village in which I spent my childhood was predominantly Protestant Christian, with only two Catholic families and no non-Christians. In my family during my childhood we read the bible out loud with each meal and prayed before and after we ate. The town council members of my village were all Christians. Public affairs were regularly opened and closed with prayer. Everybody attended church twice on Sunday. All of the children and young people in my village attended Sunday school and catechism and we all went to a Christian day school.

When I was 13 my family immigrated to Canada. There this pattern of living continued. As Christian Dutch immigrants we soon came together on Sunday in a church imported from the Netherlands. In addition to churches we also established our own Christian day schools like we were used to in Holland, and, over the years, we started Christian High Schools, universities, a labour union, counseling organizations and a political consultation organization. In short, in Canada I continued to live within an institutionally

complete Christian community, which sheltered me from contact with non-Christian neighbours. We foolishly talked about “Christians and Canadians”, foolishly, because we did not realize until later that our Christianity within Canada was as much motivated by ethnic preservation needs as by religion.

Lastly, I obtained my BA degree from Calvin College, a post-secondary institution owned and operated by our denomination, and I got a PhD degree in clinical psychology from The Free University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands, which, at the time I attended was no longer a Christian university, but was started more than a century ago as a Christian institution for advanced learning by our denomination. Following graduation I returned to Canada where I started the Cascade Christian Counseling Centre in British Columbia and served as its founding therapist for five years. Following that I taught psychology at two Canadian Christian universities until my retirement in 2000.

So there is ample reason to argue that I am a Christian for historical reasons, especially when you add that my outlook on life is decidedly influenced by the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. Personally I have no desire to inflict my brand of Christianity on anyone, recognizing that others may not have experienced the same personal-historical development as I have. But I do want to argue that the religious and ideological choices I have made within my historical context were viable choices that are worthy of consideration. So, there is more to be said than this.

Let me begin by defining religion as I see it. To me religion has to be lived to be real. A religion that consists of church attendance on Sunday morning and no more is only a hobby. So, I define lived religion as characterized by what or whom we live our lives *out of* and by what or whom we live our lives *unto*. From this vantage point religion is on par with ideology. It is what or whom we trust with our lives and what or whom we serve with our lives. It is based on what we have experienced in the past and what we hope for in the future. Viewed from this perspective everyone’s life is faith or trust based. The difference between a religion and an ideology is not that religious people’s lives are faith based whereas the lives of those who adhere to an ideology is not. Rather, the distinction is that the former has something to do with God and the latter with something other than God.

### **A brief history of Christianity in the Western world**

Historically speaking, within the Western world, which roughly comprises Europe and North America, being a Christian is as respectful a choice as being a non-Christian. Christianity is one of the two major sources of inspiration within the history of this thought-feeling-and-life world. Over the centuries it has had a profound influence on the lives of millions of people living in this cultural landscape regardless of whether they are professing Christians or not. So, being a Christian in that context is not as strange as some people make it out to be.

When it comes to our relationship to the Divine a quick survey of the Western thought world is needed first of all. Specifically, of first interest for my purposes is the

grandchild of the Classical Greek thought systems of Plato and Aristotle, the so-called neo-Platonism of Plotinus. Well before the birth of Christ and for some time thereafter it was the dominant way people framed their understanding of their lives. Important for our topic is the fact that Plotinus's world-and-life view held that the relationship between human beings and the Divine is characterized by *thought or reason*.

Several centuries after Christ lived on earth the other source of inspiration, Christianity, came on to the scene as well. It held that the relationship between humankind and the Divine is one of *feeling or love*.

This article is not the place to give a detailed description of the historical development of these two sources of inspiration in Western thought. I have done that already in my *History of Psychology, persisting themata and changing paradigms* (2013). The reason I write about this development here is to explain why I am an atheist and a romanticist Christian.

Theism was a brand of Christianity, which arose during the middle ages. It was heavily influenced by the neo Platonism of Plotinus. Believing that the relationship of mankind to the Divine was one of thought, theists spend an enormous amount of time and effort attempting to logically prove the existence of God, whom they defined as "a being to whom no greater being can be thought". Ultimately, their efforts landed them into a logical quagmire with the question "whether almighty God could create a stone so big that He himself could not lift it", and other logical antinomies.

I am not a theist. To me the question of the existence of God is an existential, rather than a logical question. It is a question born out of despair when we are faced with a tragedy, like, for example, the holocaust. Tragedies are events that should not happen but they do anyway. At such times we ask: "Where is God? Does He exist?" I am more inclined to say that most people have no trouble believing that God exists. But they wonder whether He cares.

The question of God's concern for human beings points us to the fact that the reality of God's existence is mostly determined by the role He plays in our every day lives. There we often wonder whether or not the God we trust and serve is a loving God.

### **The incarnation**

For millions of people in Western culture today God no longer plays a significant role. They have given up expecting anything from God. In that sense one could call them discouraged Christians. Ethics rather than religion occupies the central place in the way they frame their lives. What am I to do rather than what do I think or believe, is the predominating question. In contrast to this secular mind set I continue experience and to believe that God is intensely relevant to the way I live my life. The reason is that I believe in the historical fact of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The God whom I attempt to trust and serve is a down-to-earth God.

Something happened roughly 2000 years ago in an insignificant little town in an out of the way part of the Roman Empire. A baby was born, grew up and became a man of about 30 years. For a short time (less than 3 years) he enjoyed some fame or notoriety as an itinerant rabbi and collected a sizable number of followers. But in the end he was put to death by the powers that be of the Roman occupation forces.

That was a long time ago, but in theory these events could be verified by historical research. However, this man also claimed to be the Son of God, sent by his Father, the Boss of the universe to bring a message of hope to the people living on earth. And, according to stories in the Christian sacred scriptures, he backed up his words by the way he lived and with some pretty spectacular miracles of healing. By his words and actions he showed his audience the reality that they were not left to muddle through on their own, but that God was with them. Some believed his message; others did not, or even opposed it.

You can read about the life, the suffering and the death of Jesus and his coming to life again in a 100 page biblical account, known as “the gospels”, written by four of his followers. This good news story was written in the language that was spoken by people living at that time and in that place. To have the same impact on us living in 2016 North America it would require some historical translation. But the basic message of the gospels speaks clearly to us as it did then. It states that

God so loved the world that He gave the only son He has, so that whoever trusts in Him, will not die but have a life that lasts and lasts forever.

### **The implications of the incarnation**

OK, that is quite a lot to swallow. I mean, really!?? A way to beat death and to live forever??? But I ask myself: “What if it is true? What are the implications for the way I then live my life today? “

The answer that I have come to is neither obvious nor trivial, because it has implications, for every person living in the Western world. So, what, in my view, is the historical import of the incarnation for my life and the lives of my neighbours?

One frequently stated answer is that it serves as an ideal for how we ought to live. This never struck me as particularly insightful. There is no law that I know of that says that since Jesus decided to sacrifice himself we should follow his example. Many saintly people lived a life of sacrifice, Ghandi, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, to mention only a few. Well, bully for them!

But, according to the Christian scriptures the sacrifice of Jesus involved much more than that. It was billed as a necessary act of atonement for human misdeeds to repair the broken relationship between human beings and God. Some people may find one thing implied in this statement most objectionable, the admission that human beings are capable of misdeeds, or worse “sins”, because this violates a rather prevalent belief in the

inherent goodness of all human beings. In the meantime, there is ample evidence that there is evil about in our world, what with human beings systematically killing other human beings, including innocent, vulnerable children.

### **The reality of evil and the importance of justice**

I do not wish to involve myself in a debate about whether human beings are basically good or basically evil. This thought piece is aimed at explaining why I personally am a Christian and the fact that I find both good and evil intentions in my own heart is evidence enough for me of the reality of human evil.

A further implication of the incarnation is that the presence of human evil demands some form of justice. Human misdeeds require, if not some form of punishment, then certainly some form of restitution and repentance if they are to be forgiven. There is a need for justice to be done if interpersonal healing is to take place, and broken interpersonal relations are to be repaired and restored.

My belief in the importance of justice requires further elaboration. I have a PhD degree in clinical psychology and am a psychotherapist by profession. This implies for me that I have unconditional positive regard for my clients, which in turn entails that for the duration and success of therapy I do not view my clients to act with evil intent. For the last two decades of my career I have specialized in trauma counseling. I specifically focused on helping adult victims of childhood sexual abuse heal from symptoms related to their trauma, which typically can last for a lifetime if not treated in therapy.

The healing process for trauma victims is long and arduous. It involves having the clients emotionally relive the traumatic events in the now safe environment of the therapy hour. Most often these clients initially feel totally responsible for instigating the abuse perpetrated on them and in consequence they labour under a lot of misplaced guilt feelings

One of the central elements of the therapeutic process is to help the victims come to accept the fact that they are allowed to want the perpetrator to be brought to justice. Without this awareness it is extremely difficult for the victim to experience closure in the healing process. They remain stuck in a state of mind in which they blame themselves for the abuse and in which they absolve the perpetrator from guilt. Somehow, justice needs to be seen to be done by them for closure to occur. This becomes a reality when the punishment for the perpetrator matches the crime in the eyes of the victim. All this appears to be the case for victims of other crimes as well.

So, the incarnation story is based on the reality of human evil and the need for justice.

### **Paying the supreme sacrifice**

I am now in a position to discuss why I think the incarnation of Jesus Christ as God's son, if it happened, is such a unique historical event. For in this narrative human beings

are said to be the perpetrators of evil and God is identified as the victim. What is unique, of course, in this process is that God is brought to justice and the people are forgiven and set free. God, in the Person of Jesus Christ takes upon himself the sin of the world and allows Himself to be punished for it to the point of death.

Whatever objections we may have about this Christian narrative, (How can a father do this to his son? Does not this play God for a sucker, etc., etc.) it is undeniable that it paints a picture in which God, if He exists at all, cares enough to suffer and die for the human race. It is also billed as a last ditch attempt on the part of God to save the world, including the human race. According to the biblical account initially God tried to combat evil by wiping out humanity with a flood except for one family, (it is interesting to me that he saved the animals too), then later by choosing one nation to save humanity and by punishing them when they refused to do his work on earth. With Jesus God as it were said: “ Well, apparently, if I want to get something done I will have to do it myself” So, if the Christian narrative is to be believed, the incarnation, including the crucifixion and death of Jesus was a unique historical event, signifying the justice, the mercy and the sacrifice of God for the salvation of the world! For that God had to pay the supreme sacrifice.

I have to tell a true story to make clear why this historical fact has had such a major impact on my life. From 1940- 1945 Nazi Germany occupied my country of birth, Holland. I experienced the happenings of these five years as a child. I was 3 years old when the war started and 8 when we were liberated by Canadian soldiers. These Canadians came just in the nick of time. For at that moment my family was running out of food. If they had delayed as little as six months we would have died of starvation together with many other Dutch citizens. In 1951 our family was fortunate enough to immigrate to Canada, the land of our liberators.

It was only later in my life that I realized more fully what an enormous sacrifice these young Canadians were making for us. They did not have to come. They could have stayed safe in Canada. They could have said, “ It is not our problem. It is a European problem.” But they came, voluntarily, and died, some of them. In liberating us they paid the supreme sacrifice. They died so that I might live. And for this I owe Canada a special debt with my life.

Jesus Christ/God paid the supreme sacrifice for human beings, for me. The way we keep time and count the years testifies to this fact in our Western culture. We count them as the years of our Lord before and after Christ (BC/AD).

### **Individual, social and cultural effects of the incarnation: AD vs. BC**

Is there any evidence that life AD is different/better from life BC? I think there is. There are numerous testimonies by Roman Catholic, Evangelical and Charismatic Christians, including myself of personal and psychological and even physical renewal in their lives related to this historical event. Whole Christian worship cults exist which seek to foster and to celebrate the “born again” experience, which is the result of making a “decision

for Christ”, which in turn amounts to the acceptance of the historical reality of the incarnation. “Giving your life to Jesus” represents for millions of individual Christians a constant inner reality of heart and attitude, even if it is not always evident in their behaviour.

In addition to these personal effects, the more Reformed/Calvinistic Christians have traditionally stressed the social, cultural and even cosmic, transformative significance of the incarnation. This means that, in their view, and I count myself as one of them, the impact of the incarnation is not restricted to changes in the inner life of individuals but extends to people collectively, to the church, as the agency of testimony to the reality of the incarnation first of all. But it extends to the broader realm of society and culture as well. In the final analysis life *in the world* is better AD than it was BC, or so I would argue.

Others would argue the opposite. They view the historically formed institution of the church as a source of evil in the world. They would point to such ecclesiastical actions past and present as the inquisition, the crusades, colonization, the suppression of women, the denial of information, the obstruction of renewal, and more recently the scourge of clergy abuse. I think it is fair to say that all of these accusations are sadly true. I think it is also fair to say that all of these are perversions of the message and the life of Jesus.

That said, it is also fair to say that the church is and has been a source of much goodness in the world when it in fact imitated the message and the life of Jesus. It administers this goodness in the form of acts of charity directed at the poor, the homeless and the marginalized locally, nation wide and internationally. It has built and operated hospitals and universities, and has promoted and supported socially progressive actions toward the down and out of the world.

Since the time of the incarnation there have been many actions of goodness *beyond* the walls of the church as well. If there is one thing I would fault contemporary Christians with, it is that they by and large ignore these worldwide signs of renewal and healing. They seem to lack insight into the tremendous positive impact, which the incarnation has had and is having on our Western culture and society as a whole. The world AD is not as good as it should be, but it is also not as bad as it could be. In our Western world there is respect for individual human rights, for freedom of religion, for justice, and for democracy. There is protection for the disabled, and there are attempts at the liberation of the oppressed and the poor, to mention only a few. All of these, Jesus would support, promote and practice if He were living among us today,

### **There is nothing common about common grace**

In the (Reformed- Christian) religious circles in which I move, these effects of the incarnation have been pejoratively described as the effects of mere *common* or *restraining* grace, to distinguish them from the effects of *special* or *saving* grace. Common grace is seen as a temporary measure by God to curb the evil rampant in the world and in people’s hearts today. These effects are aimed at preserving the world and

human life in it until the time at the end of history, when Christ returns and when the things in our present world will be destroyed and radically renewed. Such grace, it is said, does nothing to save individuals from this final destruction, nor helps them to enter the kingdom of heaven at that time. For that, one needs a special or saving grace, which leads a person to make a “decision for Christ” in one’s heart, causes one to be “born again” and to “give one’s life to Jesus”.

This formulation of the effects of the incarnation tears apart what in the clear intent of the Christian gospel is meant to be joined together. There is nothing common or insignificant about the healing that the incarnation offers to all human endeavors of good will, and it is no different from what it offers to the people of the church. All human beings are given the opportunity to participate in what the Christian scriptures call “the kingdom of heaven”, by doing good with their lives in spite of, and in opposition to the evil that is about in the world.

For me as a Christian, this good news makes it meaningful to show solidarity with the suffering of those whose lives are burdened by the effects of evil regardless of who they are, where they live and what they believe. It also allows me to support all actions of justice aimed at combating the effects of evil wherever they occur in the world. The denial of the worldwide effects of the incarnation and of a self-centered focus on church life only results in a neglect of the Kingdom of God and a reduction of the full power of the gospel for the world.

### **The resurrection of Jesus: comfort for the dying**

I need to add one more most important aspect of why I am a Christian related to the incarnation. That is the fact, according to the Christian gospels, that Jesus not only lived, suffered and died here on earth, but that He also came to life again, and even returned to heaven, the place of power, next to God, his father. If one thing is completely unbelievable about the Christian religion, for some, even many, it is that Jesus came to life again after dying and that this is somehow a sign of His divinity. After all, none of us has ever had the experience of someone returning from the dead, not really. We all die some day and that’s it. No exceptions. Moreover, the resurrection and ascension doctrine celebrated by Christians is not only unbelievable. It is also most objectionable for some. Because when Christians shout and sing about it, especially at Easter time, they become so triumphantistic that it is hard not to accuse them of over the top hyperbole. And especially, when viewed against the dearth of accomplishments of the church compared to what is happening outside its walls, what they shout about can easily become the object of derision and scorn. I mean, a do-gooder Jesus, a suffering Jesus, a saintly but dead Jesus, well, OK. But a living-after-dying triumphant Jesus, who beat death? Come on! Give me a break!

But again I ask myself, “What if it is true?” Truth is that in the historical Jesus we find the sublime and the ridiculous combined into one person. We find meekness *and* majesty. It is the majesty part of the incarnation that gives me hope for the future, including for life after I die. Almost thirteen years ago I was told I had fatal form of

cancer and that chances were I had about six months to live. Never mind now that after surgery and radiation I regained my health and have been cancer free since that time. At the time I knew no better than that my time was up. As a Christian I struggled with a major issue related to my faith: I knew from experience how my bond to Jesus helped me to live my life. But what good was that bond when facing death? What is the meaning of the Christian gospel for a dying person? The answer I came to was my conviction that Jesus, as the only person I knew who beat death, would accompany me and carry me like His child on either side of the grave. That conviction gave me enormous comfort and peace at the time.

Like myself, every old person has to face the fact of his/her imminent demise. By all accounts dying is a lonely experience. It is a time of saying goodbye to loved ones. None of them can come with you. I continue to struggle with that eventual reality. The possible comfort of Jesus' company not only helps me to face my eventual passing, but also gives me contentment, and joy even, to live the last days of my life.