

Christianity for Agnostics

or

Why I Am a Christian: An *Apologia* for Modern Skeptics

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Introduction

One way of expressing the thesis presented here is this: if one were to design an ideal spiritual-philosophical system for Americans and Europeans, I believe it would contain everything that traditional Christianity has, except for some problematic and potentially dispensable doctrinal elements (e.g., the idea that religious authority can replace personal free inquiry in religious matters). One may participate in the psychological experience of Christianity, in my personal opinion, while at the same time reserving judgment on certain specific doctrines of this kind. Doctrine can never be perfect, because ultimate realities cannot be expressed in words; any attempt to do so must inevitably produce contradiction. Or to simply look at the matter historically, the Christian authorities were wrong about Galileo, and it is certain that some doctrines of today will follow the route of the earth-centered universe.

But such limitations are no cause to 'throw the baby out with the bathwater'. The Christian tradition already exists. It is the product of centuries of continual refinement, a consummate work, polished and refined by the wise, loving, and inspired hands of countless individuals – each potentially the image of God, but in any case a human being with angelic abilities and aspirations, unimaginable creative potential, and loving instincts. Moreover, this tradition is an organic cultural whole, which operates according to principles yet unknown to science. The suggestion that one might begin from scratch, constructing a new, personal religion, spirituality, or psychological system of equal or comparable quality, by selectively borrowing pieces here and there is unlikely at best. Such a view is *hubris* of a very high order, and elevates to personal godhood that meager sliver of consciousness denoted by the word 'ego'. One may as well try to equal Beethoven in writing a symphony, or Raphael in painting.

Although I am a Christian myself, for this article I wear my hat as psychologist. My interest in that capacity is to assist others, as best I can, to achieve psychological integrity and self-actualization. Nothing asserted is contrary to reason. To a significant extent I follow the theories of Carl Jung here (but disagree with Jung on several important points, and would hesitate to call myself a 'Jungian'). More fundamentally, I follow the basic trend of intelligently-based rejection of radical empiricism that began with the Romantic movement and is associated, for example, with writers like Coleridge and Wordsworth. The leading principle of the Romantic argument – which has tragically been lost in the 20th and 21st centuries (yet is more urgently important now than ever) – is that Enlightenment rationalism allows no place for the experience of the sublime, or those things which give deepest meaning to our lives.

While written from a Roman Catholic perspective, the points below apply with similar force to other liturgical Christian denominations, such as the Anglican, Orthodox, and Eastern Catholic Churches. Many of the same arguments might also apply to traditional Judaism.

This, then, is sufficient introduction. What follows is a brief listing of specific points, organized around the categories of (1) Psychology, Anthropology and Ethics; (2) Cultus; and (3) Metaphysics.

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1. Psychology, Anthropology and Ethics

1.1 Ethics

Christianity is an advanced ethical system that promotes the abandonment of personal egoism.

The pronounced emphasis in Christianity on acts of charity follows from and supports the abandonment of egoism. In the West, Christian saints and charitable institutions set the standard for egolessness.

The abandonment of egoism, or *humility*, also manifests itself in a surrender to God's will. Here we encounter a constellation of concepts – Providence, Grace, the Logos, etc. – associated with an orderly plan for all Creation, and man's role therein. These all point to the potential attainment of a state of harmony between thought, action, and Nature. While Christianity is often criticized as being dualistic (e.g., denigrating the natural world, and tolerating, or even supporting its exploitation), true Christianity aims for a condition of non-duality.

If one investigates the matter attentively and honestly, one will readily observe within oneself a definite capacity (1) to act in ways that harm oneself; (2) to act in ways that harm others; and (3) to have negative thoughts (i.e., thoughts which disrupt, rather than serve to integrate the mind). The honest person will also recognize a tendency to self-deceit, and lack of objectivity in evaluating ones thoughts and actions. Lacking a better term, we may lump all of the preceding under the provisional term, "sin."

Sin, therefore, is a useful concept, because it denotes a range of important related phenomena, for which no other term is available. We could as easily name it "what traditional religions call sin", but that would be awkward. Various associations to guilt, punishment, penance, etc., or the idea that "sin" may be defined unconditionally by an ecclesiastic authority we may exclude from our operational definition.

This thing, "sin", then, exists, and is to our detriment. Unless one is courageous and honest enough to accept ones capacity for "sin" in some sense, it is difficult to see how one will find happiness, achieve personality integration, or improve ethically.

1.2 Soteriology

Salvation. It is similarly apparent to the honest observer that one exists in a state of need and deprivation. Most of us live day to day in various degrees (often severe) of unhappiness and lack of fulfillment. (Recall Thoreau's remark: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.") All too infrequently, we live in states of anxiety, depression, aimlessness, confusion, wasted energy, etc. For this reason, each person, then, instinctively seeks what we may call psychological salvation. Christianity is not necessarily the only means of achieving psychological salvation; but it is an established means, tested by time, designed for this purpose, and especially adapted to the personality structure of Westerners. It would be difficult to demonstrate that any other means is more effective.

1.3 The Christ Principle

Many psychologists speak of a "self-actualizing" principle in the human psyche: a force, drive, principle, or *telos* which directs one to levels of greater integration, completion and happiness. For Christians, this self-actualizing principle can be understood as an inner Christ. We may call it by other names, but that does not change the significance of this salvific principle.

Inasmuch as this principle is present in all people, it is reasonable to think of there being a universal Archetype – an original principle of which all individual instances are images. This Archetype would correspond to Jesus Christ as a cosmic principle. However, it must be admitted that this latter part is more speculative, and more a matter of personal faith and intuition. The main point here is that modern psychology affirms the existence of an

individual self-actualizing principle, and this principle is both acknowledged by and central to Christianity.

1.4 Forgiveness

The principle of forgiveness is central to Christian ethics. The earnest Christian affirms, "as I forgive those who trespass against me" with each recitation of the Lord's Prayer. The Apostle's Creed also affirms as a basic Christian belief "the forgiveness of sins." Christ died, Christians are taught, for the forgiveness of sins. Nearly his last words on the cross were, "Father, forgive them." St. Paul, who became one of the greatest Apostles, was previously a great sinner, as though this was intended to demonstrate to us the availability of forgiveness.

If one probes deeply into human nature, one may observe that issues of guilt and forgiveness are of immense concern. Almost all of our difficulties, personal and social, relate, in some way or another, to an inability or failure to forgive. Yet there is never anything gained by not forgiving. Holding onto anger and resentment is a deep-seated and pervasive flaw in human character.

In no other religion is an emphasis on forgiveness so pronounced. Christianity might well be called a religion of forgiveness. That this is an ideal many find themselves unable to live up to completely is incidental for our purposes. What matters is that it is an ideal.

1.5 The God-image

A central tenet of Christianity is that the human being is made in God's image. This has profound implications for how we view ourselves and other people.

2. Cultus

The eminent psychologist Carl Jung once wrote that, if one of his patients reported that he or she had returned to participation in the Catholic Church, he considered that patient cured, or in any case advanced beyond the point that psychotherapy would be of further use. By this he meant that within the human psyche are archetypal principles and forces that are largely beyond our ability to scientifically understand, but are effectively dealt with by religion. Religion, properly practiced, in Jung's view, is a primary means by which our culture has evolved for grappling with these archetypes, and achieving integration of the personality.

This brings us to the important subject of *cultus*, which we may define here as all the non-doctrinal practices and traditions of Christianity.

Opponents of religion and Christianity typically level their accusations against specific Christian doctrines. This mistakenly equates Christianity exclusively with doctrine.

But much of Christianity's value comes from its *cultus*. This *cultus* is the result of a millennia-long process of cumulative development and improvement.

Just as our material culture – how to mix cement or build bridges – has improved through the centuries inexorably, regardless of regimes or wars, the culture of Christianity, its *cultus*, has been gradually improved and refined. Any time an innovation in *cultus* emerges, it is compared with the present counterpart and the better chosen. A successful innovation introduced one place can be immediately imitated elsewhere.

So Christianity has grown gradually to satisfy the aesthetic, intellectual, emotional and spiritual needs of its flock. When a process like this continues for a long time it produces considerable refinement. Christian *cultus* continually improves to accommodate the deepest needs and propensities of the human psyche.

Three important divisions of Christian *cultus* are Art, Literature, and Practices.

2.1 Art

Fine art. Christianity has inspired many of the finest works of art that Western culture has produced, including paintings, sculptures, illuminated manuscripts, stained glass windows, and so on.

Music. Similarly, Christianity has inspired great productions of music from composers such as Bach, Handel, Vivaldi, Schubert, Vaughan-Williams, and innumerable others. This superlative music evokes feelings and intuitions of the highest order, which no words adequately describe, although terms like joy, beauty, wonder, and mystery are related to it. But who has ever composed a sublime Atheist Oratorio or Skeptic's Symphony?

Architecture. What has been said above can also be said of the magnificent churches of Christianity, the basilicas and, especially, the Gothic cathedrals of Europe. To enter one of these buildings is to enter the realm of the sublime – or, as some would have it, heaven itself.

2.2 Literature

Scripture. Even were it not religious, the Bible would command our utmost attention as an unsurpassed work of literature and psychology. Every aspect, problem, difficulty and puzzle of human life is somewhere addressed therein. It has grown organically, reflecting

the judgment of erudite and lofty-minded collators and translators. It passes to us a gem of human wisdom and insight.

I do not believe the Bible is literally true in every detail. In fact, I find such an assertion contrary both to reason and Christian teaching itself! But I do consider the Bible as something sacred, numinous – as exemplifying or manifesting a reality higher than the material one. Whatever you seek from ancient lore, from mysterious writings of great import, however you honor that sacred human urge – seek it first in the Bible and you will not be disappointed. The Bible is your book. Approach it as if it were written for you alone.

Patristic literature. Along with the Bible, we also possess an immense literature by the so-called [Fathers \(and Mothers\) of the Church](#), both West and East. Luminaries in this constellation of geniuses include Origen of Alexandria, St. Augustine of Hippo, the Cappadocian Fathers (St. Basil, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Gregory of Nazianzus), St. John Chrysostom, St. Ambrose of Milan, and St. Maximus the Confessor, among others.

These great authors have produced profoundly beautiful and deeply insightful works. Nobody who reads them is disappointed. No modern writer of today approaches them degree of knowledge and skill.

One might ask: if these writers are so profound, why are they not better known? The answer is largely that, in many cases, it has only been recently that their works have appeared in modern languages. Even the works of St. Augustine have not yet been fully translated.

Doctors of the Church. Another category of traditional Christian writers is that of the [Church Doctors](#). Examples include St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, St. Catherine of Siena, and St. Francis of Sales. Again, these writers show remarkable humanism and insight into psychology. It is most unfortunate that their works, sources of deep insight and inspiration, are neglected solely because they are Christian or Roman Catholic.

Christian mysticism. The Christian contemplative and mystical tradition is a living one. Today there are still many monastic centers, carrying on a tradition of mystical practices that originated in ancient times – perhaps even before Christianity. The works of mystics like, say, St. John Ruysbroeck, command our attention if for no other reason than their sheer beauty.

Asceticism. Many Westerners and many psychologists recognize the benefits of practices like mindfulness meditation and the watching and analyzing of thoughts. There is no doubt that these practices have evolved to a very high degree in Eastern traditions such as Buddhism. Yet no less impressive is the ascetical psychological tradition of the West,

found in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. The collection of ascetical writings known as the [Philokalia](#) is an outstanding example of this tradition. The Western ascetical tradition is in no way inferior to the Eastern tradition, yet is better suited to the culture, moirés, and temperament of Americans and Europeans.

2.3 Practices

The Mass. Even were it viewed only as a form of ritual art, the Mass's value would be more than sufficiently demonstrated. Cross-cultural evidence reveals a universal human interest in ritual. Ritual appears to satisfy needs that cannot be met any other way. Ritual is a language of the unconscious, and, as such, needs no rational defense. Many rituals, the Mass included, are connected with personal transformation. Because Carl Jung's essay, 'Transformation Symbolism in the Mass' (*Collected Works*, Vol. 11, *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, 1975, pp. 201-98) has treated of this subject admirably well, we need say no more here in this regard.

Other rituals. The ancient rituals, rites and ceremonies associated with special occasions – baptisms, marriages, the Easter and Christmas seasons, and so on – must also be mentioned. It is difficult to convey the aesthetic and deeply satisfying quality of these to any who have not seen them first-hand. They are a living connection with our ancient past.

In the tradition of Greek pagan religion, one sometimes encounters the idea of theurgy – or ritual practices aimed to promote spiritual growth, in connection with various gods or goddesses. Some people today find such ancient pagan religions attractive because of such theurgic practices. Within Christianity there is the same sort of thing – namely the liturgies, rituals, and sacramental practices – developed to a much higher degree. Further, in the case of Christianity, this is a *living tradition*, not one that modern people have tried to reconstruct based on scanty past evidence and conjecture.

Prayer. What good person has never felt the deep and spontaneous urge to pray for another, whether it be a relative, friend or the victim of unfortunate circumstance? The urge to pray is so universal that we can little imagine it not having a positive effect – even if only in the mind of the one who prays. If we are to pray, if we are pray-ers by disposition, may we not conceive of a technology of prayer? Should prayer be the only aspect of human life in which tradition and the cumulative experience of others is of no benefit? Christianity teaches us how to pray. Moreover, it contains a rich store of formulas and prayers suitable for every circumstance in life.

Christian prayer is supported by traditional practices. Consider, for example, the folding of hands by a Christian in devout prayer. In the terminology of yoga, this is called a *mudra* – a ritual position of the hands, thought to have psychological or spiritual value. It is good to study yoga, with its various *mudras*, *asanas* (postures) and *kriyas*

(movements); yet one should not, in the process, neglect the store of comparable postures and actions in the Christian tradition – the kneeling, the crossing of oneself, the bowing of the head, the raising of hands in characteristic ways. The ritual positions and actions of a priest saying Mass are exceptionally interesting in this regard, yet are typically taken for granted.

Liturgical calendar. Over the centuries, the Christian Church has evolved an elaborate and rich calendar, associating festivals and commemorations with various days and seasons. These no doubt reflect very ancient traditions. They connect us with the changing seasons, and promote a harmonization of our lives and souls with the natural world.

Veneration of saints. What is remarkable is not so much that there are saints, but that there are so many. Each saint is the expression of some virtue or excellence of which the human being is capable. Each saint, it may be said, corresponds to some archetype of the individual soul. Each constitutes an ideal whose example we are naturally inclined to imitate. By studying the lives of the saints, we learn about our own deepest aspirations and potentialities.

3. Metaphysics

The Holy Trinity. To some, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity may seem a strange and arbitrary one. But, in fact, the doctrine partly derives from the speculation and theories of non-Christian, Platonic philosophers. The Trinity solves certain meaningful theological and metaphysical problems.

Divine Mother. Christianity also makes ample room for and pays due homage to a Divine Feminine principle. Admittedly, the written doctrine on this point is somewhat unclear and perhaps even a little contradictory. But at the level of *cultus* considerable attention is paid to the Divine Feminine. Among other things, this promotes integration of the more masculine (e.g. rationalistic and action-oriented) and more feminine (e.g., intuitive and feeling) elements of our personality.

Angels. This subject is a broad one, but one aspect of particular interest is the idea of a guardian angel. This Christian concept corresponds to very ancient notions of an individual companion spirit associated with each person. I hope to write more on this at another time; for now let it suffice simply to suggest a possible connection between this concept and a Higher Self.

Communion of Saints. One of the most extraordinary innovations of Christianity is the concept of a communion of saints – a spiritual community of Christians, both living and dead, constituting a kind of super-personal organism or institution. This makes good sense. If our souls are eternal, and if we may, as many suppose, communicate and help

each other at a spiritual level, then would it not be in our interests to form some kind of spiritual organization for mutual benefit and to effect God's work together?

Look at the challenges of the world today, the great social needs, the injustice, the terrible deprivation of so many. If you are reading this, it presupposes that you are the kind of person who is moved to concern and action by such things. Can you solve them by yourself? Perhaps you have tried, and, if so, likely have not gotten very far. Would it not make sense to at least explore the possibility of working within a spiritual communion of similarly inclined souls? If God wants these problems solved, would isn't it possible that He would employ such a means as this?

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In the interests of the reader, this list has been kept short and minimal. Many more items could be included and elaborated on at length. Let these suffice, however, to supply an honest view of how one Christian views his faith. Hopefully even the most inveterate skeptic will discern that there is a much firmer foundation here than mere superstition, or failure to exercise disciplined reasoning – two of the objections raised most commonly today against Christianity.

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