



Why I am still a Christian...

Why I am still involved in the Church

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Why am I a Christian?

There's a simple answer. John Stuart Mill said it a century ago; because I was born into a Christian family in a Christian country in a Christian century. Had I been born in Thailand and it been a Buddhist family I would be a Buddhist.

Which is why this seminar hosts a more pertinent question: why am I *still* a Christian? People have a habit of leaving the faith shortly after Sunday school and not coming back except for weddings, funerals and Christmas carols. Others join the Buddhists or the Muslims or one of a hundred other faiths. Those of us who stay must have a reason.

Indeed, my heritage displays a smattering of Salvation Army, Methodist, Congregationalist, and even some milliennialist Midwest American Latter Day Saint-ism. While I journey today with a worldwide fellowship known as the Community of Christ, headquartered in Missouri, my own theology is poised somewhere between the Quakers and the Unitarians. The academics would classify me as religious existentialist. But I once worked for the Jesuits, while sharing an apartment with a Vietnamese animist, I attend an evangelical group when I am working in Hong Kong, I am a co-pastor of a small pastoral Christian group in Magill, I recently took communion with a congregation of Eastern Orthodox Slovenians and a week later Eucharist with the Anglicans. I am nothing if not diverse.

So, to the reasons.

Why am I still a Christian. While do I attend church?

The first response is that there is nothing in Christianity that offends my core values. In other words, there are no negative influences. Indeed, in

Christian writings of the actions and words of Jesus one finds all of the values that I hold dear: honouring the individual, holding up the worth of persons, displaying grace, exercising generosity of spirit, carrying out forgiveness, displaying tolerance and compassion, striving to alleviate poverty, and promoting justice and peace.

One has to admit that there are some pretty horrendous scriptures that portray God, rather, as a vengeful creature happy to kill off those who disobey him. I am happy to pick and choose the scriptures I like. Let me go to the Hebrew testament.

I ignore

Elisha responded to those who had made fun of him by cursing them in the name of the Lord whereupon two she-bears came out of the woods and tore 42 boys to pieces (2 Kings)

I prefer

The Lord requires of you only to do right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6)

I ignore Matthew when he writes in the New Testament

“The Son of Man will send out his angels to gather up out of his Kingdom all those who cause people to sin and all others who do evil things and they will throw them into the fiery furnace...”

I prefer Paul’s admonition to the Romans:

“If someone has done you wrong, do not repay him with a wrong ... do not let evil defeat you; instead, conquer evil with good.”

Of course, one can be a humanist and espouse grace, forgiveness and tolerance. In the words of the Secretary of State for communities and local government in the UK addressing an ecumenical gathering in London last month “it is not necessary to have faith to be deeply, morally and profoundly altruistic”.

So there must be something else...let me keep looking for an answer.

Why am I still a Christian?

It could be the traditional music.

There is nothing that stirs the soul more than a Bach Chorale, a Handel chorus, a Russian orthodox choir or a Wesleyan hymn sung by the Welsh.

But there is a lot of sacred music out there I don't like, so I need to keep looking for an answer.

Why am I still a Christian?

It could be the call to humility.

Micah says ... "Walk humbly with your God"...I like the humility of Christendom. It has a strong underpinning in Hebrew scriptures too. Read again the story of Naaman, who was only healed after he had washed in the waters of his enemies.

But I accept that humility is common amongst non Christians...so I will need to keep looking to answer my question.

Why am I still a Christian?

It could be to be part of the religious debate from an informed viewpoint of membership

One has far more authority in shaping the Christian ethic and ethos when one is within the organisation, warts and all, not some outside observer poking in from time to time to make some gratuitous offering.

While Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens wax eloquently about the failings of the church, their arguments are usually founded upon poking fun at certain beliefs and, often, the ones they poke fun at deserve the ridicule. There's a church in North Carolina that on 31 October this year burnt dozens of versions of the Bible except the early 17th century King James Version, as it is, they say, the only true word of God.

There's a story, probably apocryphal, that a woman was once heard to say "If the King James Version was good enough for Jesus, then it's good enough for me."

And when other 'Christians' put forward some nonsense about the inferiority of some ethnicity or sexuality or gender, or the rightness of the death penalty, or the celebration of AIDS as a means of reducing the gay population or to justify the invasion of a Muslim country, or to explain why a couple lose their only child to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome because God needed the child in heaven, then I want to be standing up to these misguided if not dangerous ideas, from a position of faith, and not being intimidated by their throwing some scriptural admonition at me that I know is being taken wildly out of context. If I were to leave the fellowship, I would have less credibility on matters such as these.

But I accept that I belong for reasons stronger than just a membership ticket or a place at the debating table...so I will need to keep looking.

Why am I still a Christian?

It could be because the Christian journey is liberating.

I was 22 when I headed off the USA to continue a liberal arts education to supplement the rather sterile education I had received in law school. I remember the liberation I felt when tackling my first theological subjects, which began with John Robinson's *Honest to God*. No longer did I have to choose between faiths and creeds all of which purported to guarantee me salvation. Suddenly no one permutation was any better than another at predicting my life's journey, or preventing catastrophe. I was freed up to begin my own quest. At last I could explain to myself how it could be that God was on the side of all the Lutherans, the Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, the Anglicans, the Jews and the Muslims and protecting them from harm in the trenches of the Somme, and the escarpments of Gallipoli, the gas chambers of Auschwitz and the beaches of Normandy.

But liberation is not just a religious concept...so I will need to keep looking.

Why am I still a Christian?

It could be because it reminds me constantly of the requirement that one must live one's life in the service of others.

It is no coincidence that the story most known in the New Testament is the parable of the Good Samaritan ...the man who attended to and bound the wounds of a total stranger indeed a man who was not of his own kind. Jesus said this is the calling that I ask of my followers.

But many non-Christians devote their lives in service to others. There are many atheists I am sure in the Meals on Wheels kitchens...there must be something more. Let me keep looking.

Why am I still a Christian?

It could be the constant call to ask the ultimate question of our existence.

A Christian, certainly a religious existentialist, likes to think about ultimate questions, not just getting through the day, but why we are here to get through the day at all in a universe so vast that it would take a million light years just to exist our galaxy. So my meditations lead me to ponder the imponderables; marvel at the mysteries (and for those enjoying the alliteration) to investigate the invisible and observe the

obscure. And doing so in the company of others who are moving along the same journey, sometimes having an epiphanic experience, sometimes a 'road to Damascus' turn of faith, and sometimes hearing a still small voice; or no voice at all, just the rushing of the wind.

I accept that this journey of uncertainty is not common to all Christians (especially those that can give you chapter and verse on your salvation prospects,) and I accept that many humanists regularly reflect on the meaning of their lives (either meaningless or meaningful). I also accept that church life is often so distracting and personalities so infuriating that I sometimes wish that my fellow travellers were in Slovenia or somewhere far beyond. But the search for ultimate purpose is the aim of the exercise.

To paraphrase the theologian Paul Tillich, the exercise of delving into the mystery of our existence and to have the courage to be despite life's irreconcilable contradictions and caprice is the quest that each one of us is encouraged to undertake. Some do it most successfully with a concept of God (however defined) in the forefront of their minds. That is where faith enters the jigsaw.

So why am I still a Christian? It is a combination of all of these things. It is constant in calling me to humility, to service for others, and because it has been liberating, informing and challenging.

It means I am not your mainstream Christian, if there is such a thing. I struggle with a great deal of mainstream theology; I struggle with the very nature of the deity. I struggle with a creed. But to borrow loosely from the Jewish writer Viktor Frankl, in the struggle lies the meaning. Here was a man who had every reason to hate God, as he watched thousands exterminated in the Nazi concentration camps where he was imprisoned, staying alive only because he was a strong worker. He found meaning in the struggle for human dignity in the face of one of the greatest evils that we have known.

The theological quest is thus important to me. It allows me to develop a passion for justice, to pursue peace and to explore the human condition. If (as the religious writer Bob Mesle writes of God) there is an inexhaustible well of gracious love from which we may all drink and be renewed, if there is a power outside of ourselves from whom all love and life emanates, then I want to be part of it, or at least have the courage to continue to pursue it even if I cannot discern it easily. If there is no ultimate 'otherness' and the world is actually as the non-religious existentialists say just an accidental lump of uncaring matter, where hunger, need and suffering are the norm, then I am still content to be part

of a religious quest in a church setting that allows me to exalt in the moments of love and justice that regularly emerge in people's interactions with each other.

Outside of my heritage, both of those journeys would be much more difficult, lonely, and less enjoyable. And I would miss the music as well.

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