

Do I Miss Being a Christian?

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DO I MISS BEING A CHRISTIAN? Yes. Do I miss the promise that it offers, that I will live forever in heaven one day? Definitely! It's comforting to be assured that there exists a long-term afterlife of bliss, given me freely, albeit conditionally. Unfortunately, I find it difficult to believe in something which has such wide philosophical sweep, yet comes with so little supporting evidence, and is not compellingly unique. The appeal of heaven cannot on its own be enough to instill belief, no matter how much I may wish for it.

Religions' revelations. This reward-driven wishfulness is a problem not only for Christianity, but also for Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and others. Each religion has its own foundational texts, some of which overlap. And each religion's followers assume by faith that their texts have been revealed to us by their God, and must therefore be the correct texts. So each religion has its set of followers who passionately believe in their version of revelations trumping evidence.

A young boy growing up in Pakistan will almost certainly be trained on the Islamic revelations, and the Sunni Islamic ones in particular. A boy growing up in Brazil will be trained on the Christian revelations, and the Catholic ones in particular. The Pakistani boy will be taught that the Brazilian is an infidel, and will face harsh and eternal judgement by Allah. The Catholic boy will (I think) be taught that the Pakistani may go to hell, provided he doesn't fare well in purgatory. I once believed that both were going to hell because they were not "born again" by "accepting Jesus" (whatever that means).

I cannot ignore the terrible tragedy of the sheer contingency of a person's eternal fate on where they happen to be born, and on what they were taught before they could think objectively for themselves. How possibly could an average Pakistani boy (or even worse, girl) get to heaven by accepting Jesus as Personal Saviour, when all around him (or her) there are no clues. Or how could the Brazilian boy learn that Jesus was just a mere other prophet, lesser than Mohammed, and that he'd better start following the Messenger's instruction to pray five times a day in fatuous facile submission.

Each religion essentially says:

Believe this teaching, follow that path, behave in this way, and you may live a fulfilled life now. You may even from time to time experience moments of fervent ecstasy. But you will live in a heaven or a paradise later. And if you don't, you may still live a good life now, but hell or annihilation awaits you later. Forever and ever.

Thankfully, as the arc of modern ethics bends towards fairness, it is not surprising that Christians and Muslims find it increasingly difficult to forebode this hell and torment for anyone, skirting it with, "It's not for us to judge," and "Only God can decide who gets in," and "Hell does not really exist." I surmise with some optimism that this reticence simply reflects rising levels of tolerance and passivity in an increasingly secular

and cosmopolitan society¹. Nevertheless, the monsters remain, lurking in the dark, waiting, there where the deep undercurrents of fear, favouritism and failure still flow.²

Which grace? I recently read how a Christian writer describes her/himself as a weak sinner, and as someone who is humbled by this weakness; but also as someone who somehow is made stronger through grace, and who is “guided by Christ.” I’m very familiar with this Protestant Christian position. Over the last two years or so, I have studied the origins of Christianity and Judaism, and I now know that this implied view of sin and grace in the passage is but one amongst many possible views.

The Protestantism in which I was immersed derives from Roman Catholicism which spread through the Western Empire, initially under the leadership of Peter and Paul. As it spread, it embraced many of the moral norms and values of local people. Less so the other way round. Likewise, the Eastern Orthodox Church spread through the Byzantine Empire in the East, probably starting with James the brother of Jesus. While Christianity in the West reflected a more judgemental, rational and dualistic temperament (as exemplified in scholasticism), Christianity in the East reflected a more intuitive, mystical and contemplative one (theoria). But in both the East and the West, good behaviour offered a prize of entry into heaven.

Luther introduced another ideological standpoint. He argued that no matter how good we are, we just cannot “make the grade”. We remain fallen and sinful. Which is why we need grace. And so by rebelling against Roman Catholicism, he introduced Protestantism.

These historical developments have spawned three extant variants of mainstream Christianity, namely, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. Given their obvious distinctions and incompatibilities, we must ask: which one is correct? Are the Catholics doomed because they haven’t been born again? I’m ashamed to admit that I was taught and believed for a time, that that was the Catholic’s fate, along with all other non-Christian Christians. Or will the Protestants feel the heat of eternal fire because they are the apostates and because they absolve themselves of any personal responsibility and moral accountability? This is an embarrassing soteriological³ impasse residing at the epicentre of Christian ideology. It cannot simply be ignored.

Moreover, outside Christianity, Islam seems to emphasise harsh judgement and its avoidance through rote and ritualised submission. Islam does this much more than does Christianity. And so a Muslim’s view of sin, grace and salvation is very different than the views of an Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant Christian. Furthermore, within Islam, the Wahhabis consider most other Muslims unbelievers. And let’s not even begin to bemoan the inimical⁴ vituperation⁵ between Sunnis and Shiites.

Who is wrong and who is right? We are thus compelled to confront the gnawing question: who is wrong and who is right? Which moral and ethical standpoints are the correct ones upon which to construct our dogmatic and doctrinal edifices? If we are to embrace and indeed promulgate the cultural and individual gains offered through the Enlightenment, and if we are to retain our individual intellectual integrity, then we must better understand the blend of contexts in which our beliefs, morals and ethics are immersed.

Therefore, as a starting point, I think that the best moral and ethical standpoints are those which offer the greatest collective good at the time. A sort of moral contextual sensitivity. Christianity and the two main monotheisms, namely, Islam and Judaism, mostly decry any such moral contextualism because it threatens their respective import and supremacy. And as to how to construct the dogmatic and doctrinal edifices themselves, the best and fairest we can do is to avoid those for which the evidence is scant, tentative or contradictory.

Which account of Jesus? Which would you say is a more likely summary account of Jesus?

¹Pinker S. (2011). *The Better Angels Of Our Nature*, Penguin Books.

²Romans 6:23, Matthew 25:46, John 3:16.

³*Soteriology*—the branch of theology dealing with salvation especially as effected by Jesus Christ.

⁴*Inimical*—1. Adverse in tendency or effect; unfavorable; harmful. 2. Unfriendly; hostile.

⁵*Vituperation*—abusive language or venomous censure.

1. A miracle took place at the conception of Jesus. Mary became pregnant without sexual relations. Jesus was conceived without a haploid chromosome complement obtained from a human father.

During his ministry, Jesus miraculously walked on water near Bethsaida on the Sea of Galilee, as is recorded in Mark 6:45–52, Matthew 14:22–34 and John 6:15–21. To walk on the water, Jesus magically displayed temporary weightlessness in defiance of gravity, and he summoned supernatural command over the flow dynamics and mass conservation of water in the Sea.

Near the end of his ministry, he walked from Caesarea to Jerusalem. He annoyed the Temple leaders there. He was placed on a cross, suffered terribly, and physically died. After three days, another miracle happened: he rose from the dead. Thereafter, he appeared on and off clandestinely to his followers. And then yet another miracle happened: he ascended into the air (heaven) on Mt Olivet, floating up and away.

2. Or, Mary became pregnant in the usual way, probably out of wedlock during the obligatory prenuptial betrothal (the *erusin*) according to Jewish custom. Her unscripted pregnancy resulted in her becoming ostracised. Jesus was therefore conceived naturally and was born of his mother by a natural birth. Jesus had a normal diploid chromosome complement, half obtained from Mary and half from a human father.

During Jesus' ministry, Jesus did not miraculously walk on water. Combined archaeological and geophysical findings suggest this.^[1, 2, 3] Bethsaida was located near the mouth of the Jordan River probably on an ancient mound known today as Et-Tell. The present day dry Beteiha Plain on which Et-Tell is located was covered with shallow swampy water 2000 years ago.

It is plausible that Jesus' disciples were caught in the rising and rapidly flowing waters of the Jordan River during a flash flood at night. The storm, the waters, and the dark of the night must have left the disciples disorientated. They then heard and vaguely saw Jesus approaching them, walking in shallower waters on a sandbank towards their boat in what is now the Beteiha Plain. Jesus might have been calling out to them to jump out the boat because where he was standing the waters were shallow. But they were afraid to do so. In sheer frustration Jesus might also have been shouting at the waters, just like I am inclined to shout at a strong headwind while on my bicycle. And inevitably, the rapidly flowing flood waters calmed and subsided, exactly as do the waters from all flash floods.

Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus annoyed the Temple leaders. He was placed on a cross, suffered terribly, was near death, but did not physically die. There are many clues which hint at his remaining alive,^[4] but the role of Pilate and the executioners is crucial here. Either Jesus' followers negotiated with the Roman executioners, or Pilate himself instructed the executioners to *not* break his legs, as was customary. This allowed Jesus to breathe, albeit barely. He was taken down from the cross early and placed in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb, where he recuperated.

Thereafter, he appeared on and off to his followers. But he had to be surreptitious, even with them, in order to avoid detection by the Roman prefecture and the Jewish Sanhedrin. This is because the Sanhedrin would have been unhappy about the botched crucifixion. So he chose to meet with his followers on Mt Olivet, about 5 km east of Jerusalem. Mt Olivet is part of a mountain ridge. He chose that location because it was a Jewish cemetery, as it has been for over 3000 years. So not many people would go there.

But after a few days, possibly 40 days, the authorities started to get wind of his presence. So fearing re-capture, he gave one last sermon to his followers, and then walked further up into the mountains, up into the low-hanging mist, and disappeared out of view, all while his followers were watching.

Jesus did not ascend into any heaven, but lived a quiet life with his family, including his wife Mary Magdalene, in relative seclusion somewhere near Jerusalem. And Jesus entrusted one of his biological brothers, James, with the auspicious task of spreading a socially inclusive form of Judaism to the Gentiles.

It is possible that he and his family were laid to rest in a family tomb in Jerusalem in what is now the suburb of East Talpiot (or Talpyot). Ossuaries⁶ have been discovered which may attest to this, bearing fascinating inscriptions and chemical signatures in the surface patina⁷ layers on the ossuaries.^[5, 6]

⁶Ossuary—a chest or box or site made to store human skeletal remains as their final resting place.

⁷Patina—a green or brown surface layer film produced by oxidation over a long period.

Suppressing for a moment any predilections you may have for Christian mythology and its allure, which of these two accounts is more likely?

Exegesis vs evidence? The implausibility of many religious mythological storylines is disquieting. The account of the virgin birth. Jesus rising from the dead. Graves opening and other dead people striding forth (Matthew 27:51-53). Jesus ascending (upwards) into heaven (the air). Mohammed's magical Night Journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, riding on a Buraq (a winged horse-like creature). Mohammed visiting Allah in heaven and arguing with him. The angel Jibril (Gabriel) regularly discoursing with Mohammed.

There are many historical accounts of virgin births, of dead people returning to life, and of people considered divine. The virgin Isis gave birth to Horus. The virgin Mautmes gave birth to Amenhetep. Coatlicue miraculously birthed Huitzilopochtli. Erechtheus was born miraculously of Athena. Jiang Yuan conceived Qi. Kausalya was the virgin mother of Rama, an avatar of Vishnu. Genghis Khan was born to a virgin. Quetzalcoatl was born by a virgin named Chimalman. The Greek writer Plutarch wrote of Alexander the Great's birth by his virgin mother Olympias. The Roman god Mithras was born from a rock.

Of particular interest is the deification in 41 CE of Livia Julia, the wife of Ceasar Augustus. Archaeological evidence exists of two sets of coins minted by Philip Herod in 41 CE.^[2, p194] The first set bears an image of Livia's hands holding ears of grain, a symbol of the goddess Abundantia. The second shows Livia and Augustus together, with an inscription indicating their divine royalty. What's significant about this evidence is that around the time of Jesus, at least one person other than Jesus was deified.

The naïvety of holy texts. The Torah, Bible, Talmud, Khoran, Hadiths, Vedas, and Bhagavad Gita were all written over a period 1600 BCE to 700 CE. During that period nothing was known about the atomic foundations of matter. Water was water, rock was rock. Nothing was known about the connectedness of all life through DNA and its evolution. Animals were animals, and people were people, ostensibly not animals too. Nobody knew why the sun and moon were there. Were they gods too? Nobody knew what the earth was, let alone a spherical planet immersed in a sea of space of size utterly beyond the beginnings of comprehension. Nobody knew about the abundance of extra-solar planetary systems, let alone the tantalising growing possibility of there being cultured life elsewhere in the galaxy. No mathematics was available to enable a cogent and rational contemplation of the metaphysical. Nothing was known about geology, weather, climate, and the geochemical carbon cycle! Nothing was known about computers and the forthcoming revolution in artificial consciousness. The world was compartmentalised, disparate, and unintegrated. Like drawers in a cupboard.

These hallowed holy texts were written and redacted in obvious ignorance of what we now know about reality. I am grateful that today, we know better because we know more. Today, we see and experience not only the myriad of drawers, but also the cupboard for the drawers.

Do I miss being a Christian? In some ways, yes. But I cannot simply create a new compartment for it. I cannot succumb to the reward-driven wishfulness.

References

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