

AN INVITATION TO SHARE MY JOURNEY

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I am in search of a Jesus, and of how to live in his 'Way' that is fit for the 21st. Every generation and culture has had to apply the Jesus story to its own time, right from the beginning. What we think of as the required meaning of his life and death is the creation of past generations, mostly from the 1st to the 4thCE. We no longer live in the same intellectual or social climate as they did. As traditionally formulated, and as perpetuated in the ancient Creeds and the usual statements of belief, Christianity is based on a set of assumptions that modern thinking people simply do not share and on claims which they know are not true. So are Jesus and his God relics from the past that we no longer need - as most people now think - or can we find a new way of believing that makes sense today?

I am not a complete amateur in this rather boggy field, but I make no claim to be an 'expert'. I have a first-class postgraduate degree in Theology and used to preach most Sundays in a previous life, but hadn't bothered with it much for several years until the last few. But this Jesus story is my heritage and, if we start from somewhere else, it may still have something to offer. However, we will need another Reformation first. I am by no means the first to suggest that we will need to lose our attachment to any 'religion' in order to find an authentic modern alternative that can still help us to live well.

That potentially life-changing adventure requires us to question everything we have assumed to be essential before, including our idea of 'God'. I am not optimistic that most current believers will be willing to change that radically. But perhaps some 'non-believers' will come to see that there are still things here that they *can* believe in.

My approach is based on six principles:

- All religious concepts and ideas, including those about 'God' are made up of human language and metaphorical comparisons, not 'literal' descriptions. So we can, and must, change them as new understandings arise.
- Following 'The Way' of Jesus is my priority: seeking the 'kingdom/realm of God' or the 'God-ness' in, between and around us, is all about how to live, now.
- The Bible was written by particular groups and individuals in particular times and places over hundreds of years. It is interesting, often thought-provoking, worth studying because of its influence, but I don't always have to agree with it.
- All things 'religious' come from inside each of us using our human faculties and intellectual powers, not from a supernatural 'Other'. Any 'faith' must be rational and fit with what else we know to be true.

- No question cannot be asked; no Creed can go unchallenged, no doctrine is beyond dispute. We need a wholly new C21st vocabulary if anyone is going to take any notice, not the repetition of now outdated ideas.
- The Jesus community must be inclusive, outward-looking and experimental as he was. Everyone has an equal place whatever their gender, sexuality, race, ability, class or status. Beliefs do not all have to be the same to belong, so I will not give it up entirely even if I decline the label 'Christian'.

I appreciate that these principles will challenge many of those who do currently call themselves 'Christians' and that change is always difficult. But I'd like them to try before literalism virtually destroys what little hope of survival is left. Not that this is a particularly new agenda. Issues much like these have been around for centuries. But up until about 100 years ago, the Church managed to ignore them - perhaps it still tries to do so - largely because of its overwhelming power and influence. We were expected to be deferential and unquestioning. But with the coming of mass education and the internet, all that has gone. We have 'come of age' and can draw our own conclusions now.

What do we know now that the ancient founders of Christianity did not know? That human beings, along with everything else, gradually evolved; they were not 'created' from scratch. In the C4thCE when the classic doctrines were formulated they thought the earth was at the centre of the whole Universe - and it took till 1991 for the Roman Catholic Church to officially recognise that it was wrong. There are billions of other planets that were formed over hundreds of billions of years, but talk of a God 'up above', who 'came down' to earth and knows us each individually, carries on regardless. 'Sin' is a human construct not a divine judgement. Like illness, death is just part of the deal, not a punishment from which we need to be 'saved'. Science makes things happen, not prayer, and it has rules that do not get broken on request.

If we are still to talk of 'God' at all we now need new ways to express the inexpressible, not an idol that we have made in our own image and whom we claim to know so confidently because 'He' is pretty much like us! Many of those within the Christian bubble do not seem to realise that their world view of a personal God who watches over us and a 'creation' that operates under 'His' control, are now unbelievable.

Religious language and its aesthetic expression can still create a framework within which we can live and make choices, though some of its moral values are now deeply questionable. Poetry, music, art etc. still have a place. But the idea that any religion can tell us what will happen after death, for example, is going way beyond our area of knowledge. We created *all* our religious systems, so it's worth still studying, exploring and reflecting on them, but I cannot put my faith in any of them as a source of unchanging eternal truth.

The focus of 'Christian' faith needs to begin with the story of the human person of Jesus as a healer, teacher and self-giving prophet, even if it cannot stay there. The gospels are not fly-on-the-wall documentaries or factual biographies. His life and teaching only come to us mediated through the later writers and they slanted it according to their context at the time. That's annoying but it is as close as we can get and sometimes it is at least

possible to spot the joins! What was said *about* him rather than *by* him took us in an entirely different direction. But I still think we can catch a sense of the real person behind the tradition. According to 1 Corinthians 13, love trumps both faith and hope so let's at least make sure that it is the focus as I believe it was for him.

Then, if it still to mean anything, we have to make this Jesus story work for us in our time as others did in theirs. Open-minded discussion is never unwelcome as long as no-one is condemned, ridiculed or excluded. Being accepted as we are, not made to conform to what others think we should be, might just be enough to stop the whole human enterprise of Christianity virtually disappearing, at least here. I genuinely believe it's touch and go but, just, still worth a try.

If you'd like to share in my human journey and a determination to make the most of the ever-changing view while it lasts, please share your own thoughts in response. If you'd like to receive copies of my books, with no expectation of any payment, just let me know via my website.

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