

Why You're Christian

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Becoming an educated citizen starts with understanding the lineage of your beliefs. For example, look at this iconic line from one of America's founding documents:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal."

This is the most famous sentence in America's Declaration of Independence. It's the driving intellectual force behind the nation's constitutional belief in legal equality. Educated citizens base their commitment to American ideals on it. This commitment shows up in our theories of democracy, in which each citizen has an equal vote, and our justice system, in which all humans are supposedly equal under the law.

But there's a problem: human equality isn't self-evident at all.

John Locke, whose intellectual ink is tattooed all over the Declaration of Independence, knew this. His theory of natural rights is based on the idea that God owns us as property. Human equality is self-evident only if you assume, as Locke did, that God has given us the natural

rights that modern Americans take for granted. The original Constitution says that our “unalienable rights” are a result not of secular rationalism, but rather an omnipotent God who endows us with those rights. To that end, the pillars of American law rest as much on the Bible as on the writings of Enlightenment thinkers. Even our most “rational” beliefs are downstream of religious thinking.

This creates cognitive dissonance for secular people who advocate for human rights. While they might not realize it, nine times out of ten, they’ve unconsciously inherited a belief in human rights and are unaware of the foundational ideas which underpin that belief. So now, they’re faced with a head-scratching dilemma: one of their central beliefs — human rights — is self-evident only if God says so.

In other words: If you believe in human rights but don’t believe in God, you need a logical explanation for why they’re self-evident.

Human Rights: A Relatively New Idea

History teaches us that until recently, people operated under a very different moral code. In the barbarian world, the weak were exploited by the strong and enslaved by the powerful. Ancient Rome provides an example. Citizens believed that neither the poor nor the weak had intrinsic value, which is why Caesar was able to kill one million Gauls and enslave a million more. It’s also why Roman infants were routinely abandoned like Moses in the baby basket. To the modern mind, these actions are repugnant.

For that, we have to credit Christianity. The historian Tom Holland has called it the “most enduring and influential legacy of the ancient world, and its emergence the single most transformative development in Western history.” Religious or not, every Westerner bathes in the waters of Christian ideology. Those droplets are born from Christ’s insistence that every human is a child of God and the way St. Paul urged people to “welcome one another” across all social and ethnic barriers. Until recently, in Europe, to be human was to be a believer and to be a believer was to be Christian. Yes, we credit the Greeks for shaping our view of the good life. But even they were interpreted through a Christian lens. Aristotle through Aquinas, Plato through St. Augustine.

We are desensitized to Christianity’s influence on Western thought not because it’s irrelevant, but because it’s so all-consuming. Consider this: the coordinates of time and space are both measured in reference to Christ. The year at the top of every calendar denotes the number of years since Christ was born. When it comes to space, “The West” is any place to the West of where Christ was crucified.

Our mainstream notion of human rights is also a byproduct of Christianity. Human rights exist in their modern form because the Bible says that every person is made in the image of God—*imago dei*. In turn, each person is granted unalienable rights, and those rights can’t be

taken away. But the contract breaks down if human beings aren't special. If humans are in the same category of every other animal, there is no intellectual scaffolding to uphold either human rights or the legal equality of man. Appealing to human rights just because we say so is as baseless as appealing to astrology or the will of Zeus. Even if a group of people can agree on how to treat people in the moment, consensus can change at any moment. Today's virtues can become tomorrow's vices. Like a sand castle, the tenets of morality can be destroyed by the tide of public opinion.

Without the word of God, all we have are opinions. Morality and justice are downgraded from indisputable truths to mere preferences and shared fictions. Both of those can change on a whim. In a world of one person's word against another, the most powerful person will control the moral landscape. This problem is one of the central themes of Dostoyevsky's writing: in an 1878 letter, he asked why he should live righteously in a world without a god. Assuming that there is no afterlife and that the police wouldn't catch him after a wrongdoing, he asks: "Why shouldn't I cut another man's throat, rob, and steal?"

Today, our answer boils down to human rights. To Dostoevsky's point, without the hand of God to shape human morality, many people will conclude that the benefits of a righteous life aren't worth the costs. In theory, we could base our belief in human rights on rationality and the mutual agreement that some actions are better than others. Maybe one day, people will worship the United Nations' Human Rights charter like they worship the Bible today. Doing so would take us away from the woo-woo of religion and towards the rigor of secular reason, where we can logically discern the differences between good and evil. But in practice, no matter how much we'd like it to be otherwise, an objective and unchanging belief in human rights can be justified by faith and faith alone.

Though the intrinsic worth of every person is a keystone of Western morality, Christianity's influence has been stripped out of the narrative. At the time of this writing, the Wikipedia page about human rights doesn't even mention Christianity.

Maybe it's because, as a post-Enlightenment society, we crave scientific explanations for our beliefs. But neither the laws of physics nor the principles of chemistry can serve as a foundation for human rights. In the language of David Hume, science can tell us how the world *is*, but not how it *ought* to be. Philosophy can't save human rights either. Immanuel Kant argued that humans deserve special respect because they are rational creatures, and therefore, ends in themselves. But that argument has problems too. Why should we only respect rational beings? And as individuals, are humans only as worthy as they are rational?

One reason we underestimate how much Christianity has influenced our thinking is that we've removed religious education from our schools. The same people who tout the virtues of being well-read skip right past the Bible, the most popular book in human history. To my amazement, I made it through 16 years of schooling without ever reading the Gospels. That

thinking continues into adulthood, where we'll binge-read biographies about some hot new tech CEO while skipping the one about the most important figure in Western history: Jesus Christ.

Recognizing the Influence of Religion

I'm not saying that we should force people to be religious. After all, I'm a tepid non-believer myself. But being secular doesn't give you a hall pass to ignore your Christian influences. We should study religion not to dogmatically accept faith, but to understand the foundations of our worldview. As we do, we should ask ourselves: "Is Christianity true?" And if you think it's bogus, then: "Why do I let these ideas influence my worldview so strongly?"

Even humanism, which prides itself on a kind of rationality that can only be achieved without the dogmas of religion, was seeded inside the soil of Christian ideas. Given that, it's no coincidence that all the biggest international humanist conferences (except one) take place in cities inside of Christian countries: Oxford, London, Oslo, Washington D.C., Brussels, Hannover, London, Mumbai, Boston, Paris, and Amsterdam. If you investigate the intellectual lineage of humanism, you'll see how it grew out of the seeds of Christ and how they were nurtured with the teachings of the Bible.

Ever since the Enlightenment, the march of intellectual progress has followed the compass of empiricism. Intellectuals in particular have tried to silence religious explanations for the creation of the world, and the decline of religious affiliation shows that their ideas are catching on. Look, I get it. The "Man in the Sky" idea of God seems ancient. Comical, even. Centering your life around a book written 2,000 years ago seems like the antithesis of progress. Even if old ideas tend to stick around because they're true or useful, embracing all those old Biblical philosophies is lunacy in our fast-changing world. But something about this argument is unsatisfying.

Cafeteria Christianity

Some intellectuals have tried to navigate this conundrum by becoming Cafeteria Christians. It's like they're at a hotel buffet, where they can take the foods that look appetizing and reject the rest. Cafeteria Christians want to adopt the most useful parts of the tradition and reject everything else.

This a-la-carte philosophy isn't new. It's what Thomas Jefferson did two centuries ago when he wrote the Jefferson Bible. Specifically, he reduced the Bible into a self-help book by removing all the miracles but keeping the sound life advice. The problem is that you can't pick and choose theology without becoming a slave to intellectual fashions or destroying the integrity of those ideas in the first place.

Knowing that, some intellectuals have kept the New Testament intact but embraced a metaphorical interpretation of it. When this “spiritual, but not religious” crowd compliments religion, they do it backhandedly. Religion is a “useful lie,” they say. The argument goes like this: Even if religious ideas aren’t literally true, the world is a safer and more prosperous place when we buy into them. Thus, we should deceive ourselves and become religious even though — wink, wink — it’s false.

They justify this worldview with empirical data. For example, one study found that attending weekly religious services raises people’s happiness as much as moving from the bottom quartile of income to the top. Moreover, doubling their rate of religious attendance raises their income by nine percent. Another study found that the percentage of Americans who rated their mental health as “excellent” fell for everybody except those who attended a religious service in the past week. Under this belief system, religious ideas are worthy not because they’re true, but because they make us happier and more successful. If so, religion is, indeed, the opiate of the masses.

The problem is that you can’t just pick certain ideas from the buffet if you want to be intellectually honest.

Intellectual Honesty

The atheist scholar Christopher Hitchens was once interviewed by a unitarian minister who called herself a “Liberal Christian.” Though she identifies as a Christian, she doesn’t believe Jesus died for her sins. Instead, she reads the scripture metaphorically. Hitchens, who was one of Christianity’s fiercest critics, responded by saying: “I would say that if you don’t believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ and Messiah, and that he rose again from the dead and by his sacrifice our sins are forgiven, you’re really not in any meaningful sense a Christian.”

Echoing Hitchens’ point, Christianity is unique among religions because it has a self-destruct mechanism. The book of I Corinthians says that the truth of Christianity hinges upon the resurrection’s historical reality — meaning that the story of Christ dying on the cross and coming back to life must be literally true. So if you discover that Christ was not raised, you should stop being Christian. End of story. Specifically, the text says: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile... Those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

Others say that Christ was a brilliant teacher, but not the son of God. Appealing as that argument sounds, C.S. Lewis critiqued this perspective half a century ago. He argued that you can’t accept him as a great moral teacher without also accepting his claim to be God. Since Jesus’ claims were so outlandish, he couldn’t have been just a great moral teacher. You must take a stand. Christ was either the Son of God or a madman. Lewis writes: “You can shut him

up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher.”

Though I find myself doing it all the time, thinking of religion metaphorically instead of literally is problematic. Christianity, and therefore the moral underpinnings of the West, is long-term stable to the extent that enough people believe in all that Christ claimed to be and the literal truth of his story. Ultimately, a religious affiliation built upon metaphors instead of hard truths is a worldview that’ll crumble under the weight of scrutiny.

The Many Buckets of Faith

I have a confession to make: I’ve spent my entire life in this metaphorical camp. Growing up, I attended a Jewish school where I took 40 minutes of both Hebrew and Biblical studies every day. But as early as elementary school, I thought I was above religious thinking. I “knew” that Moses didn’t actually part the Red Sea and didn’t ascend Mount Sinai to have an actual conversation with God. All that sounded as counterfeit as the tooth fairy. Even as I sang the Torah portion during my Bar Mitzvah to a crowd of a couple hundred friends and family members, I rejected the teachings I was chanting. Only after college did I discover that the ideas I passionately rejected, particularly the Old Testament and the Ten Commandments, were the bedrock of my moral philosophy.

Not just mine, all my friends too — and we didn’t even know it. In retrospect, that’s why we strive to treat disabled people with dignity and it’s why sentences like this one from a government official inspire head-nodding agreement: “A city is measured by how it treats the least of its brothers and sisters. That’s what we all believe, that’s what we’ve grown up believing, and it’s who we are.” We agree with these ideas because Christianity is the invisible frame around modern thought. These moral conclusions are shaped by the Beatitudes where Christ instructs us to bless the poor, the meek, and the persecuted. Until Christ, those blessings were reserved for the rich and powerful.

In what came as an even bigger surprise, I realized that society’s most passionate critics, most of whom claim to be secular, usually have the most Christian values of all. They’ve studied in elite universities, they live in major cities, and they’re proud members of the intelligentsia. Human rights, a centerpiece of their moral outlook, is inconsistent with the rest of their worldview. Though they pride themselves on evidence-based thinking, they’re intellectually bankrupt on the topic of human rights. They look down on people who inherit religion from their parents, but unquestioningly inherit ideas from the culture in which they swim and the media they consume. Though they explicitly reject the Cross, they are de facto mouthpieces for the itinerant preacher who lost his life on it. And of course, their “self-evident” commitment to human rights is self-evident only because of the heavy, but unseen, hand of Christianity.

I call people in this group “Religious Atheists.”

As a member of this tribe, I don’t have a problem with the conclusions. I have a problem with the ignorance caused by the blind dismissal of religion, and the way they mock the assumptions that underpin their worldview. This group of Religious Atheists is the fastest-growing religious group in America. In 2000, almost 70% of Americans considered themselves to be a member of a church, synagogue, or mosque. In just two decades, that number has fallen to below 50%. It’s a group of people who want Christianity without Christ. They want community without communion, the kingdom without the king, and like Thomas Jefferson, morals without miracles.

Again—I’m a member of this group. My worldview rests on two contradictory axioms: I don’t believe in the resurrection of Christ, but I passionately believe in human rights. I’m pulled towards agnosticism because I don’t have enough evidence to be a believer. Deep down, I’ve chosen to remain an agnostic because the existence of God is beyond my comprehension. Asking me about God’s presence is like asking an ant what I should order at In-N-Out Burger. The sentence doesn’t compute. Further, the idea that the son of God was born of a virgin, traveled through contemporary Israel performing miracles, died on a cross, and came back to life seems as bizarre to me today as it did to the Romans two millennia ago. And yet, the intellectual history of Western civilization orbits around this story.

But because of my commitment to human rights, I’m implicitly committed to Christian ideas—or at the very least, a moral philosophy that’s propped up by the Bible. And it’s not just me. American law and culture are thoroughly Christian too. Though I’m closer to an atheist than a believer, I shiver at the nihilistic conclusions of a world without God. One where morality follows intellectual fashion and leaders rule by the cold calculus of Excel spreadsheets. That, in turn, has opened my ears to the truth of Judeo-Christian teachings.

As for my religious odyssey, I’m still not sure where I’ll end up. I know I want to live critically, which starts with an examination of my worldview. I don’t want to follow in the footsteps of my friends, who’ve ignored the influence of religious ideas on the making of the Western Mind, not to mention my teachers, who didn’t stop to investigate the words “self-evident” when they taught the Declaration of Independence.

Their actions don’t square up with their beliefs. They don’t believe in God because there’s no empirical reason to believe in him. But at the same time, they believe in human rights, which can be justified only by the very God they don’t believe in. They also can’t explain what makes human beings special or why the value of a human life should transcend cultural boundaries. Ultimately, there are two ways to justify a belief in human rights: you can either construct a bottom-up, rational argument, or you can surrender to the supreme word of God.

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