

The Christian Middle Way: The Case *against* Christian Belief but *for* Christian faith, by Robert M Ellis: Christian Alternative, July 2018.

Introduction

Despite a Christian family background, I have never managed to be a Christian in the way defined by most churches. I am not a 'believer', and could recite no creed without a sense of hypocrisy and conflict. But after many years of engagement with other traditions – Buddhist, philosophical and psychological – it has become increasingly clear to me that 'belief' is not what Christianity is most importantly about. It is quite possible to drink deeply of what Christianity has to offer, indeed to be 'Christian' in all the ways that matter – morally, spiritually and intellectually – without 'believing' such absolute propositions as that God exists, or that Jesus is the Son of God, or that Jesus saves believers from sin. Indeed, I will go further. Such beliefs have no positive practical effects on the lives of Christians, beyond being shortcuts to group conformity which may also have many negative effects. That is the conclusion of an argument that will be unpacked as this book progresses.

But this book is not merely about the disavowal of Christian 'belief'. It is also about something much more positive: the value of the meaning and faith that people find in their experience of the Christian tradition. Later I will go into the question of exactly what I mean by terms like 'meaning' and 'faith', but for the moment let us just mark them out as the bearers of all that is good in Christianity. It is God, or Christ, who inspires Christians to campaigns of justice and acts of love: not because they have committed themselves to abstract propositions about God, but because they experience the inspiration of God, who fills them with positivity and confidence. Belief is in no way necessary to inspiration and faith. In the meantime, the 'belief in' God and his revelations tends to inspire only inner repression, narrow partisan defensiveness, and even holy war.

For myself, I am at least culturally Christian, and I find the symbols and insights of Christianity much more deeply etched into my psyche than those of any other religion, despite an early rejection of my Christian heritage and about twenty years of engagement with Buddhism. Recently I found this reinforced for me by the words of Jung's *Red Book*:

*You can certainly leave Christianity but it does not leave you. Your liberation from it is delusion. Christ is the way. You can certainly run away, but then you are no longer on the way.*¹

What I take Jung to mean by this is that Christ, as an archetype, fulfils a certain function in the psyche, and for those who are culturally Christian, that function is not easily fulfilled in any other way. 'The way' for each individual leads from their starting point to their destination, and if one denies the full conditioning effect of one's starting point, one's way may be lost.

I have dedicated this book to my late father (a Baptist minister) – not because I would expect him to necessarily agree with everything in it, but because he provided me with an

¹ Jung (2009) p.331

early experiential sense of the potential value of Christianity which I am only now beginning to recognise has sustained me throughout my life. My father observed the Christian conventions: but it was always clear, when you asked him about what was most valuable to him, that in his experience God is love. Love is an experience, not a belief.

I have returned to the re-engagement with Christianity marked by this book after the development of a practical philosophy that I believe to be applicable in the context of any tradition: Middle Way Philosophy. Despite its name, Middle Way Philosophy only owes some aspects of its inspiration to the Buddhist tradition, and is not dependent on that tradition. Instead, it understands the Middle Way universally, as a principle of human navigation. Given our embodied nature and our uncertainty, we can have no justification for choosing absolute beliefs that lie beyond that experience. However, what is distinctive about the Middle Way approach is the equal recognition that we have no justification for *denying* absolute beliefs. This creates a radical agnostic alternative that also steers us well clear of relativism, postmodernism, atheism or any other positions that are widely interpreted as being based (explicitly or implicitly) on such denials. If we don't know, we need to follow through the implications of *not knowing* even-handedly.

Agnosticism has been very unfairly treated by a popular tradition – both religious and atheist – that has failed to understand its potential. There is nothing wishy-washy, indecisive or necessarily vague about the agnosticism I will be recommending in this book. Indeed, it takes considerable resolve to avoid the magnetic pull of absolute affirmation or denial, together with the social institutions that entrench that duality. These opposed social institutions could most obviously be the institutions of the church versus secular humanist movements, but might just as easily be illustrated by the entrenched opposed sides arguing about abortion, or about whether Islam is or is not an intrinsic threat to liberal democracy. Nor is agnosticism only about God: wherever there are absolute beliefs on either side (for example, about freewill and determinism, mind and body, or any kind of absolute categorisation or boundary) agnosticism offers a challenge, in the form of a brave flag of peaceful resistance raised in between the lines of the warring armies.

It has taken me a long time to realise what a profound part agnosticism plays in Christianity, and helps to explain all that is best and most inspiring about it. No, 'Christian agnostic' is not a contradiction in terms, and I will be exploring some of the many ways that Christianity is and can be agnostic in this book. These begin with the basic recognition that we, as humans, are not God: that God is infinite and beyond us, an object of holiness and awe. They can continue with the responsibility for our own lives indicated in the story of the expulsion from Eden. Since we live in a post-Eden world, we live in an experience of uncertainty in which meaning is not written on the heavens – rather it is found in our bodies and brains. The intense pain and conflict created by that state is symbolised by Christ's crucifixion: an event that could hardly have the same sting for us if it was merely the unfolding of a set of pre-determined events, part of a story staged by a heavenly father. It is perhaps only if we feel the abandonment that Christ himself expressed on the cross, being prepared to let go of all reassuring 'belief', that we can find the resurging hope symbolised by the resurrection.

The Middle Way in Buddhism and in Christianity takes an apparently very different form, but an underlying similarity can also be found. In Buddhism the Middle Way is exemplified by the investigatory process that the Buddha (a man who lived in India about 500 BCE) went through: first going forth from a privileged life of merely conventional morality to a homeless life of spiritual searching. He is there said to have encountered spiritual teachers and ascetic practitioners from whom he learnt much, but whose absolute beliefs he eventually found inadequate and moved beyond. It was only after experiencing these two extremes that the Buddha is said to have discovered the Middle Way, relying instead on his own experience to find a more balanced and adequate path of spiritual progress that avoids both absolute and relative assumptions.

Christianity, on the other hand, does not primarily represent the Middle Way through a quest, apart from Jesus' more limited withdrawal to the wilderness, which does have some resemblances to the Buddha's quest that I will be discussing. The main way Christianity represents the Middle Way, instead, is through the symbolism of the incarnation. Instead of *finding* the Middle Way, *Christ is* the Middle Way. In the Nicene Creed he is described as both wholly divine and wholly human, a categorisation that shows the Early Church apparently struggling to confine a living experience into the box of a conceptual certainty. Instead of going through a process of discovery, what Jesus does is to constantly challenge our pretended certainties and their associated positions of power. He challenges the rich and powerful, challenges the complacent, challenges legalism and challenges our failures of love. Instead of a long career of carefully balancing different interests, such as the Buddha seems to have had, Jesus had a short and explosive career culminating in dramatic demonstrations of his ambiguous nature.

Christianity is primarily a faith. 'Faith' has often come to be a euphemism for absolute belief, but on the contrary, I want to suggest, faith can involve the positive avoidance of absolute belief and the positive embrace of uncertainty. One does not have faith because one expects certainty in the future, but rather because one recognises that the human state is one of uncertainty. Faith by its very nature needs to be provisional: a recognition of aspirations whose meaning may be infinite and vastly significant for us, but nevertheless cannot result in absolute belief, because any such belief is recognised to undermine rather than to support that faith. In a state of faith, we are orientated towards a meaningful God whom we experience: a God who offers an archetypal foretaste of an integrated self and an integrated world. But such a God could only be meaningful to us in such a way if we remain uncertain even about his very existence, let alone about such claims as that he created the world or sent Jesus as his son.

Such faith, then, I want to argue, excludes belief in revelation. To believe that God sends us messages requires an absolute presupposition that God exists and is of a particular nature: a presupposition that in our uncertain and embodied state we are not entitled to make. In a post-Eden existence, we are also required to take responsibility for our own interpretation of whatever texts or other sources of information we encounter, and the granting of absolute authority to any such text, or even to a believed-in historical figure, involves an avoidance of that responsibility. It is us that give authority to the Bible or to any other

source through the values we attribute to it. Scriptures may offer us inspiration, but do not, above all, licence us to give absolute authority to words that have actually been interpreted by us, and thus by stealthy bad faith claim absolute authority for ourselves. It is that kind of bad faith that, above all, has led me to keep my distance from Christianity for many years, and I do not think any better of it now. But I do not think such bad faith is essential to Christianity.

There are thus no arguments from the authority of scripture, or from the authority of historical events, in this book. Rather, there is acknowledgement of *inspiration* from scripture or historical events, and of our responsibility for interpreting them and justifying our view of them. To *appeal to* a source of this kind, we assume that claims that we interpret them as making must be true because of that source, rather than subjecting any such claims to critical investigation. In the process, we probably confuse the meaning and inspiration of the source for us with an appeal to its authority: but it can be deeply meaningful to us without being appealed to. There will be much discussion, for example, of the gospels in this book, but not an *appeal to* them. There can be no justified authority that is not earned, directly or indirectly, through the experience of those who heed it. No matter how reliable a source is, it also never becomes absolute.

This book, not being based on them, is thus also not amenable to criticism on the grounds of the authority of scripture or of historical events. If a scholar or cleric tells you that Jesus did not actually say this or that, or that a particular stance is not 'Biblical' or not 'Christian' (according to his or her definition of 'Christian'), then I do not care, and I suggest that you should not care either. The importance of Jesus in our lives does not depend on who he actually was, whether he actually existed, whether he was actually the son of God, or whether the stories told about him are true – rather, it depends on how we choose to interpret those stories, interpret his advice, and interpret his traditional status as the son of God. It depends on the way Jesus' teachings and example actually affect our lives.

My sole justificatory criterion in this book is the Middle Way: that is, based on what moves people helpfully towards positions that can be recognised, justified, applied and practised in experience – and thus what avoids the dogmas that interfere with that process. If you need more detail on that approach than I can provide in this book, then I must refer you to my 'Middle Way Philosophy' series, in which it is presented in considerable detail with reference to philosophy, ethics, psychology, neuroscience, and spiritual practice. The approaches here are genuinely open to criticism, but in relation to that framework. If, rather than appealing to authority, you can show me that I am not helping people to engage with what is most meaningful and genuinely helpful to them, once it has been understood in that wider context, then I hope I will reconsider.

The Christian tradition of the last two hundred years or so has proved to be a remarkably fragile tradition. So naïve was the faith of many Christians that it has been decimated by scientific progress in astronomy, geology, biology and psychology, with this damage then compounded by the even more profound effects of consumerism in distracting people from the religious life itself. But the fragility that made that damage possible is caused by absolute belief: belief that must discontinuously either be held fast or broken. In many cases

belief in Christian 'truths' has been broken. In others it has been retrenched into a fundamentalist version that is no less fragile, but maintains itself by actively ignoring and repressing alternatives: relying on the vacuum left by a religious education that, where it exists at all, often either inculcates or impotently compares absolute beliefs. That the 'new atheists' can often get away with their assumptions that Christianity as a whole must be rejected because it must be defined by absolute beliefs, is a further indication of this fragility.

But Christianity offers a lot more than these fragile 'beliefs'. The more I consider and re-read the most inspiring Christian figures from the past, the more it seems that they offer. Of course, much of what is written by or about them makes regular reference to Christian belief. Amongst those who stress it most, one is more likely to find those who are often labelled as narrow-minded oppressors, inquisitors, crusaders and bigots. But alongside this there is a whole culture of Christian meaning. That culture is one in which loving, creative and courageous action is inspired by the integrative spirit of God and of Christ, engaged in the resolution of conflicts both within and beyond ourselves. I see it especially in the mystical saints of the medieval period, in the artistic tradition that peaked in the Renaissance, and in the more mystical but socially active tradition of the Quakers. But there are countless other Christians in whom one can find it to varying degrees: saints, churchmen, social reformers, missionaries, and lay people in every walk of life.

One of the major thinkers to point out and develop an alternative to fragile Christian belief has been psychologist Carl Jung. Jung famously said that he *knew* God but did not believe in him: which I take to be his way of saying that he found God overwhelmingly meaningful but this meaning did not imply belief. The recent and long-delayed publication of Jung's 'Red Book', in which Jung recorded his visionary experiences around the time of the First World War, offers an extraordinary resource for those who want to support a more robust, more adequate, agnostic Christianity. Jung offers us an approach to God as an archetype representing aspects of our own experience. However, most importantly in the Red Book, he makes it clear how the archetypal explanation is not just an intellectualisation or 'explaining away' of God. On the contrary, it is the gateway to a fuller and more awe-inspiring experience of him. In the Red Book, Jung constantly wrestles with God and his nature much as the earlier Christian mystics did, not despite but because of his recognition that God is an expression of his own inner experience. In experiential terms, an archetypal God is not an inch 'unreal', but rather 'more real' than any projected external version.

There have been many attempts to reform and renew Christianity, from Martin Luther to the Iona Community. These all in some way protest, as Jesus did, against rigidity, formalism and the abuse of power – offering instead a community of the living God or living Christ as they experience it, often linked to ecclesiastical, social or political reform. If these reforming movements wish to succeed in the longer term, however, my argument is that they need to find the Middle Way. It is by consciously avoiding the negative absolute (where absolute beliefs are taken to be false) as well as the positive absolute (where they're taken to be true) that cycles of reaction, rigidification, and polarisation can be avoided.

Another important reason why Christians need the Middle Way depends on its universality. Christianity as mere belief, as appeal to revelation, is as divisive as any other absolute belief. It does not matter if that absolute belief is a belief to which the idea of 'peace' is attached: the result will nevertheless in some respect be conflict, if there is no possible way for experience to intercede between those who hold those beliefs and those who deny them. As long as Christians cling to absolutes, their message of peace and love will also transmit the virus of absolutism which will directly undermine that message. Whatever denials are made, the Crusades, the Inquisition, the division of communities in Northern Ireland, the Catholic clerical abuse scandals, and many other abuses will remain on the Christian conscience, because the underlying cause of them in narrow-minded over-confidence will still be harboured in the Christian tradition. But on the other hand, an interpretation of Christianity in harmony with the Middle Way will allow them to join with those of many other traditions, each of which can also be interpreted in terms of the Middle Way, for a shared and genuine engagement with the roots of conflict. It is not that all religions are already one, but rather that the unnecessary barriers between them can indeed be removed, if they are prepared to go through a balanced process of experiential self-scrutiny.

Christianity is above all a religion of divine love. As St Paul wrote, "I may have faith enough to move mountains, but if I have no love, I am nothing." (1 Cor 13:2) But love is also seemingly the quality that most quickly becomes forgotten or formalised in Christian practice. I want to argue that love is inextricable from wisdom, just as emotion is inextricable from reason. We genuinely love others, not when we merely aspire to feel goodwill towards them, but when our beliefs about them are open and provisional enough to recognise good qualities alongside bad, a friend in every enemy. The avoidance of absolute belief is not just about doctrine, but about people too. All those who want to practise the religion of divine love, I would argue, should practise the Middle Way in the way they interpret that religion.