

WHAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN?

Part I

[Note: Due to the sheer enormity of this topic, we'll explore these ideas over the course of more than one hefty commentary.]

PREFACE

Shortly before his deadly rampage in Norway on July 22nd, Anders Behring Breivik posted a 1,516-page farewell message on his Facebook page. Among other things, the document contained a rambling manifesto by a Christian jihadist, who envisioned the emergence of a secret society akin to the Knights Templar. The Knights Templar was an elite corps of Christian warriors during the bloody crusades of the Middle Ages, who once wielded formative political and economic influence in Europe.

In a world where radical religious extremism can manifest itself in acts of terror in one of the most peaceful places on earth, such grossly distorted views of some form of Christian fundamentalism now appears to be a part of the mix, knowing no bounds.

No wonder then that within days, a self-professed Christian fundamentalist, named Chuck Missler, would disavow on his online Bible Prophecy blog any resemblance to the actions of a deranged mass murderer. "The Norway shooter is no fundamentalist Christian," argued Missler. Why? Because, Missler wrote, in that same manifesto the madman "supports Darwinism and human logic, demonstrating a rationalist worldview rather than a Christian one." Uh-oh.

Like these two characters, I would also identify myself as some *kind* of "Christian." But at the same time, I couldn't resemble either of them less. So what kinds of beliefs and behaviors do I accept and refute to describe my own "Christian" identity?

I. WHAT DOES IT MATTER?

Wrestling with this question is more than just a mental exercise, distinguishing ourselves from those others we might perceive as religious

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So, why is it important to ask what "kind" of a Christian we are? Simply put, how we identify ourselves shapes who we are, and shapes our sense of reality, what is real, what is of value and ultimate importance.

If I ask who you really are, you might begin by talking about the roles you've assumed in life: spouse, parent, your occupation, your interests, your family background, etc. Then it might extend to your affiliations: where you live, who you know, who knows you, and how you fit into the mix.

Then – if you're secure enough with your own convictions and think it's safe and appropriate for you to do so -- you might venture into sharing your political persuasion and opinion about the world we live in, and maybe even a few of your religious beliefs. Proper identification is important. It provides a framework for how we understand how we engage the world we live in.

Now, while there are many components to what makes me who I am, I'm keenly aware there are two pervasive ones that seem to speak to the question why it matters to ask what *kind* of Christian I am. The relationship between these two aspects of my identity is

both informative and telling. It's about my religious identity as a Christian of some kind, and what is nowadays touted by the term American "exceptionalism."

II. CHRISTIANITY TODAY AND AMERICAN "EXCEPTIONALISM"

I'm a Christian, and I'm an American. I fly the American flag outside my front door on national holidays, pay my taxes, and follow our political process. And, I study the Bible because it contains Christianity's sacred texts; which help me shape the way I try to live my life.

But I have lived most of my adult life with a discernible tension between these two aspects of who I am as an American Christian. Each informs the other. As a Christian, how I understand and practice the way I live out my religious faith challenges my citizenship in the larger world, and vice versa. I cannot isolate my religious life from the rest of my life. If I could, it would be of no earthly use to me.

I live in a time when some of the predominant American cultural attitudes and collective social and political policies seem to stand more than ever in sharp contrast to a biblical view of life; especially the central message of the gospels, derived from the wisdom teachings of Jesus, and a biblical vision of how we might one day achieve a just and peaceful world.

While this is an assertion from my own perspective that should hardly require debate or further inquiry as far as I'm concerned, I am equally aware there are a number of other Americans who also consider themselves to be Christians, who would not see things the way I do. So I offer just a few examples, without necessarily feeling the need to argue or defend my viewpoint further.

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For one thing, we remain indisputably the one dominant imperial power in the world today; with a military force that dwarfs the collective military might of all other nations of the world combined. We wage wars we cannot win, in order to suppress the violence of extremists we cannot win over; with a ready willingness to inflict collateral damage on the civilian populations of other countries in our own self-interest.

Sometimes we do so in the name of liberation; but our attempts to secure for other nations such an exodus from tyranny bears little resemblance to the "crooked ways made straight" in the wilderness the ancient prophets envisioned. Our wars drag on so long now they have become a habituated routine; often reported only in terms of the public's weariness and fatigue over hearing about them and paying for them.

The Bible is certainly full of similar examples of human conflict. But to put it bluntly, then as now, nothing could be more antithetical to either the Old Testament prophet's visions, or the message in those gospel parables Jesus sketches for us about another kingdom that isn't that far off, if only we had eyes to see and ears to hear. It's about a different kind of world God envisions; where swords are beaten into plowshares, we study war no more, and those who make for peace without sword in hand are esteemed as the most blessed, and worthy to be called God's children.

Here at home, as a society we also either tolerate or perpetuate the widening gulf of disparity between the top 2% in our society who luxuriate in excessive wealth, at the expense of the vanishing middle class who have steadily descended into the swelling ranks of our nation's poor. Increasingly for the overwhelming majority of inhabitants in our land, the odds of getting ahead, rather than falling further behind in what we've always boasted to be the "land of opportunity," have become about as good as winning the lottery.

But the mere suggestion of further taxing the excessively affluent among us always precipitates this sober threat to our tenuous

economic recovery; that those who might create lower wage jobs for the growing ranks of the unemployed might be otherwise “dis-incentivized” to do so if they have to pay a dime more in taxes.

Again, nothing could be more antithetical to the gospel message of the kind of world God envisions; where everyone would dwell in the shade of their own fig tree (that is, everyone would simply have *enough*), with a divine economy which realigns itself with the wise stewardship of creation, as the injustices of gross inequity are redressed, the weak and poor are lifted up, and the haughty and mighty brought low.

If a historical perspective is any guide, we all know that great empires rise and fall on their own, under the weight of their own hubris. As such, American “exceptionalism” appears to be not just a matter of our striving for greatness in our efforts to “form a more perfect union,” but the twin risks of blinding arrogance and willful avarice; that is, if we misuse the undeniable capacity our nation has with its unilateral power and domination to shape the planet’s future. How shall we then act?

Asking an honest question about what makes America *exceptional*, is not unlike asking what makes Christianity *of any kind* unique or special. Just as true patriotism is not defined by “loving America, right or wrong,” so too simply accepting a populist view of what passes for much of modern Christianity appears to have become an unfortunate and misguided appropriation of the biblical vision and early tradition of a richly transformative and empowering faith. American “exceptionalism” runs the same risk as a kind of Christian religiosity that has hijacked and distorted a different kind of Christianity that – I would argue – is more authentic and biblically based.

To summarize up to this point, as a nation that still overwhelmingly identifies itself as Christian, it is difficult to read and reflect on, say, the Pentateuch or prophetic tradition found in the Jewish scriptures (my Old Testament), or the “kingdom” parables with

which Jesus describes God’s vision for the world, without coming to the unavoidable conclusion that we have still missed the mark by a mile.

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The same tension is felt even more strongly within the broad diversity of those 80% of all (surveyed) Americans who all claim the same basic religious identity I do as being a “Christian.”

So, when I read where the Texas governor’s response to the devastation in his state caused by the worst drought in modern history was to use his vested authority to declare “Three Days of Prayer for Rain,” it causes me to wonder exactly what kind of influence he thinks his heavenly Father has over Mother Nature?

Or, when I hear another political candidate on the campaign trail first share her transformative experience of being “born again” in Christ, and then proceed to rail against the alien and the stranger in our midst, or castigate our gay brothers and sisters as “evil” and “pitiful,” I fail to see how she has been changed for the better; or anything resembling the likeness of her Lord, who identified himself with such outcasts.

When I see grinning televangelists still peddling a “prosperity gospel” about personal self-actualization that’s measured by material excess, or a “fire and brimstone” apocalyptic preacher foretelling of the world’s imminent demise so you needn’t worry about trying to redeem the Creation entrusted to us, but rather just look out for your own personal salvation, it’s no wonder popular Christianity is regarded by its skeptics, critics and disillusioned former believers as nothing more than the elixir of slick-tongued charlatans and misguided buffoons.

I myself shake my head and wonder where, in heaven's name, do they come up with this stuff? On the one hand, I want to believe one's religious convictions are the most powerful and persuasive things which guides and informs how one should live out one's life; that is, until I encounter those who use their own religious beliefs – beliefs that presumably derive from the same source tradition as mine – to end up standing in such sharp juxtaposition to my own religious world view.

Asking what *kind* of Christian I am may not simply be the most important *religious* question to ask; but the most important, all-encompassing question of all. So, how would *you* go about describing kind of Christian *you* are?

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III. "SPEAKING CHRISTIAN"

Speaking Christian is the name of the latest book by the biblical scholar and Christian commentator, Marcus Borg. This easily accessible work almost reads like a little catechism of the progressive movement within contemporary Christianity. Much of what follows is set within the framework of a regurgitation and response to his book, with my own comments and examples.

In his book, Borg suggests Christian language has been usurped and misinterpreted by one predominant view of Christianity today; namely, a two-fold misappropriation of the Bible by a majority of Americans surveyed who claim the Christian scriptures to be both *inerrant*, and to be taken *literally*.

According to this viewpoint, the Bible is not just the *Word* of God, as experienced and expressed in human life and language, but the actual *words* of God, without exception or equivocation. And furthermore, the truths

revealed in scripture are only to be understood as *factually true*.

But that pervasive assumption about what people automatically think of when they hear many of the terms used to describe Christianity, in fact, expresses only one of at least two *different kinds* of Christianity.

The first kind is the more familiar "heaven and hell" form of Christianity that emphasizes believing the right things in order to ensure eternal life for yourself, rather than the alternative negative consequence, eternal damnation.

This includes believing Jesus somehow set things right for us with God by dying for our sins; and obeying a set of rules in this life, in order to inherit our reward in the next. Those rules are understood within the context of a set of scriptures that are not only regarded as sacred and revered; but, again, to be taken literally (factually) and accepted as inerrant.

Perhaps a good example of this kind of Christianity was the story of the transgender resident in San Francisco who went to the California Department of Motor Vehicles earlier this year to change her gender status on her driver's license. The clerk who processed the request later subsequently took it upon himself to send her a personal letter, allegedly warning her that her sex change was a "very evil decision," and that "the homosexual act is an abomination that leads to hell."

The woman sued, the clerk subsequently resigned and the government awarded the plaintiff \$-thousands in compensatory damages.

But in the end – and here's the more important point -- no hearts or minds were converted or transformed as a result of the actions of this kind of Christian's beliefs or actions. Whether anyone in this sad tale ends up in some future hell remains to be seen. But everyone may have gotten a foretaste of it already in this story.

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In fact, within the context of this kind of Christianity has developed an often historically recent and rather peculiar understanding for much of the language with which Christians speak about their faith.

This is contrasted with the second general understanding of Christian identity with the Bible that Borg (among others) calls a “historical-metaphorical” approach; where biblical stories are not only understood within the context of the lives of the people experiencing them in a particular culture and community’s time and place; but also conveyed with a language in which universal, divine truths are conveyed that run far deeper than mere transitory facts that only skim the surface.

I’ve always referred to it as the *mytho-poetic* power of biblical language as something universal and timeless. Take, for example, Jesus’ agrarian parables from the ancient world that are clearly to be taken symbolically, and understood figuratively, as relevant and applicable messages for our own very different time.

Here are some examples of how the same religious terms are used to express these two different kinds of Christianity. First, take the term “salvation,” what it means to be “saved,” by a “savior.”

In a heaven-and-hell kind of Christianity, *salvation* is about being forgiven for personal sins and being *saved* for a place in an afterlife. Even more so, not only is heaven a place reserved exclusively for those who claim to be a Christian; but for the right kind of Christian who has accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and *savior* as well; following a certain prescribed formula or set of beliefs.

This typically includes the belief that God once loved us so much that *He* (God is always referred to in anthropomorphic terms and male) somehow persuaded the imperial authorities of Rome and the ecclesiastical authorities of Jerusalem to execute in the most hideous way his “only begotten Son” as a political insurrectionist and religious rabble-rouser; in order to not only somehow make up for my personal sinfulness, but also then perform a death-defying feat by resuscitating a corpse, so it could then ascend to a place from which he will one day return, after a “rapture” (a strange 19th century invention, in and of itself) and retrieve the select few (namely, the true believers). Whew!

But in the Bible, *salvation* seldom refers to an afterlife. The ancient Israelites did not concern themselves with it. For them, salvation was instead about *liberation*, as experienced in the story of their exodus from domination and bondage in Egypt. This included the economic bondage of slavery, the political bondage of powerlessness, and religious bondage, where they were forced to worship Pharaoh as divine, instead of their God.

As such, salvation essentially had nothing to do with another world, another time, another place. Instead, salvation in the Bible was a story about transformation; about being brought into a new way of living, here and now, with the assurance of God’s abiding presence.

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This is what makes what would otherwise appear to be a desert wasteland instead be a place flowing with “milk and honey.” Once “saved” (that is liberated and delivered), it may outwardly be the same place, but there’s a whole different way of being – and relating – in that time and place.

Similarly, in the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel, salvation was again understood as the *return* from exile; following their captivity in Babylon, and the restoration of life again in their homeland. And finally, in the psalmist tradition especially, salvation was experienced as *rescue* from peril; sometimes it was individual peril, but primarily collective, communal peril.

However, as Borg emphasizes, “salvation is about more than deliverance and rescue: to be saved was to enter into a new kind of life, a covenanted life with God. Salvation is about both deliverance and transformation.”

In the New Testament’s canonical gospels, this kind of tangible transformation is expressed with such stories as the blind receiving their sight, the dead being raised, the sick being restored to health, and the fearful learning to trust again; and all in a new way. The greater miracle in each case was not some inexplicable reversal of some natural affliction; but the transformative consequence of the experience.

In this sense, salvation in the Bible may be personal; but it is about more than just transformation of the individual. It is also corporate and “political,” in the broadest sense of that term. It has to do with how we live together, and how the world we live in might be transformed.

For example, where economic inequity was rampant and extreme, the Israelites were liberated from bondage under Pharaoh, only to eventually suffer economic oppression under their own ruling elite. The radical economic laws found in the Torah emerged to become part of their sacred texts; in order to combat such inequities that had resurfaced.

Among these “sacred” laws: no interest was to be charged on loans, all debts were forgiven every seven years, those debtors who had become indentured slaves were freed, and every fifty years all land was returned to the original owners without compensation.

One might ask how the recent debt ceiling debate, the battles of further regulating the banking and credit card industries, or the mortgage foreclosure debacle would play out in such a scenario? Or, how many Bible-thumping politicians today would embrace such economic policies to save us from the economic mess we’re in? Were things all that different back then?

The first century world in which Jesus lived was one of stark economic hardship as well. He lived and died amongst a peasant class that knew nothing but subsistence living under the imperial domination of Rome through violence, and a *kind* of Judaism he himself evidently experienced that was more concerned with believing the right things, than doing good (e.g. the story of the Good Samaritan).

And Jesus’ teachings, his healing miracles and most especially his pithy sayings and earthy parables could be summed up within this general framework. If Jesus *was* a savior, perhaps it was this from just these *kinds* of power, politics, economics and religion that he came to save us.

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Now, something that is common to *all kinds* of Christians is the affirmation that Jesus is (to use Borg’s language) the “decisive revelation of the character and passion of God.”

What *that* means, however, differs depending on what kind of Christian you might consider yourself to be; starting with whether or not Jesus, as the decisive revelation for *me*, means he’s the *only* way to go.

Contrary to another kind of Christian, I am the kind of Christian who’d say Jesus’ *way* may be the only way to God, but Jesus is not necessarily the only way. For one thing, Jesus himself never made any such an exclusive

claim. Rather, Jesus' way of living and what he taught were revelatory of God's ways.

Further, the Jesus I have come to know is one who stands on one particular pathway among several equally valid ones; and beckons "follow me, come and see" as an invitation, not a command or ultimatum. I've followed this one particular path long enough now that I find little reason to turn back; and every reason to continue this journey, because I continue to encounter something of the divine in new and transforming ways around every corner.

Now, at the risk of stereotypical oversimplification, there are generally two different and divergent paths one can take from this point of departure, to further explore what kind of Christian you might be. Here are some examples:

+ Down one path is the belief that God is humanlike, and typically male; who lives in heaven, where we might one day take up residence ourselves.

Or down another path, God is a persistent, pervading presence that is in all things and above all things, including our *incapacity* to relegate or domesticate the divine to any one place, time or entity.

+ Down one path is a God that is more *punitive*, threatening eternal damnation for those who sin and stray from God's rules; the interpretation and selective application of which has changed over time.

Down the other path is a God who is more *passionate* about this world as it still might be.

+ Down one path, our relationship with God is more about sin and *conditional* forgiveness, so we can be saved (for eternal life).

Or down another path, our relationship with God is more about *unconditional* forgiveness (or it isn't grace), reconciliation and transformation of the life we're already living.

Down the first path, the "kingdom of heaven" is about another time and place; down the second path, the kingdom is forever "at hand,"

in the transforming experience of a heaven on earth and eternal life already begun.

+ Down one path, the historical Jesus is really God, who's merely disguised as a human, and therefore sinless and perfect.

Down the other, the Jesus of history was as human as the rest of us. Speaking of "exceptionalism," he was truly an exceptional human being, who lived and died like everyone else.

+ Down one path of Christianity, the pre-Easter Jesus was born primarily so he could die for us.

Down the other way, the pre-Easter Jesus was a spirit sage who taught amongst his kinfolk, healed those in need with unfettered compassion, defied all earthly authority -- including the stultified religious hierarchy of his own Jewish faith -- and was obsessed with what the world would be like if God was in charge, and the domination system that oppressed us was not.

+ Down one path, the post-Easter Jesus is the flesh-and-blood Jesus brought back to mortal life, to assuage our fear of death with the idea that we, like him, can escape it in the end.

Down the other path, there is more of a suspension of belief about those things no one can know; as the post-Easter Jesus simultaneously appears and disappears, walks through locked doors and dines with the downhearted, before setting the scriptures ablaze in their hearts, and vanishing when he breaks bread with them. Down this other path, the post-Easter Jesus offers so much more, that resurrection becomes more than mere resuscitation; in the transformative experiences of those early followers.

With what were they left? When Jesus "ascended," and the Spirit "descended" with tongues of fire and endowed them with words to speak, what became of this new language they were given to describe what would become the newborn faith we call Christianity? Like Christianity itself, our language to describe it has obviously taken divergent paths.

+ Down one path, Christianity is more often viewed as *believing* a set of statements about God, Jesus, life and death; like a creed or set of doctrines or laundry list of “family values” that developed, changed and adapted over time to try to define and delineate what came to be considered “orthodox” (meaning accepted right thinking).

However, as Borg points out, the term as it was used in the English language prior to the 17th century, was not so much a matter of believing *that* something was true, but rather believing *in* something or someone. The word came from the Old English *be loef*, which meant “to hold dear.” In this sense, *believing* was more a matter of *loving*.

Thus, when Jesus recites the great commandment (as passed down to him in his own religious tradition), it was a matter of *loving* God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. It wasn’t about believing whether a set of statements about God were true or not. As Borg puts it, “*Believing* that a set of statements are true has little transforming power. But *loving* God as shown in Jesus has great transforming power.”

+ Nowadays, people often use the terms *belief* and *faith* as if they are the same thing. They are not. But like belief, faith also means something different depending on which kind of Christianity you’re talking about.

From the Latin (and Greek equivalent), *fiducia* means “trust.” It speaks to our allegiance, loyalty, commitment and attentiveness to our *relationship with* God, not a set of immutable “right” beliefs *about* God. The latter places a condition on faithfulness that if one falls short and misses the mark, the consequence is anxiety, fear and mistrust. Then all the worry about a final judgment when we end up counted among the goats instead of the sheep is right around the corner.

Instead, down a road apparently less travelled is that more ancient notion of faith, once described by the 19th century theologian and philosopher Soren Keirkegaard as the “buoyancy of God.” In Matthew’s gospel,

Jesus walks on water. When Peter tries it, he begins to sink like a stone with fear, until the buoyancy of faith once again keeps him afloat. Such a leap of faith, as trust, has nothing to do with whether Peter himself is good enough to make the swim team.

There is also that component to faith, as *loyalty* and *allegiance*, that has a corporate, even political, meaning. To place one’s *ultimate* faith in God means *not* placing one’s ultimate trust in anything, or anyone else. Remember, lordship is not relegated exclusively to religion; and one can make a religion out of anything. In whom, or what, do you ultimately place your trust, as if your life depended on it?

+ The most common meaning of the terms *mercy* and *merciful* in heaven-and-hell Christianity these days usually presupposes a God that spares the rod, even though we deserve his wrath. Sin and forgiveness become a brokered deal, where the question of worthiness and plea for God’s mercy is always a backdrop, requiring doing the right thing to receive a reward.

But the fuller meaning of the biblical word for mercy is often better conveyed with the English word *compassion*. There’s a difference in the way we understand these terms, because they have to do with the way we view the character of God, and our relationship with God and one another.

Compassion (from the Latin) means, “to feel with” the way another feels. The Hebrew word comes from a word that is akin to “womb” or being “womb-like.” As such, compassion does not suggest wrongdoing, where mercy can be a required response. Instead, compassion is about having empathy for another; to the extent one is able and willing to abide and even suffer along with another in an empathic, consoling, nurturing and embracing way. It is about caring for another, and bearing one another’s burdens, joys and sorrows.

Hence, when Jesus enjoins us in one of the beatitudes to “be merciful, as God is merciful,” or, “blessed are the merciful, mercy will be shown them,” it is about something far more than a command to forgive others who have

done us wrong. Instead, it is about entering into a compassionate relationship with those in need; just as God shows God's compassion in God's entering into relationship with us.

Thus, the beatitude Jesus gives us might best be translated and extrapolated to read, "Blessed are those who are compassionate, for in doing so, they will experience what living in a relationship with what a compassionate (and not just merciful) God is like."

There are a number of other familiar words used to describe one kind of Christianity or another, and we'll take up several of them in the next commentary; along with reconsidering a foundational question that may lay at the heart of this entire exploration of these ideas. But for now, let's take a look at a few more often-heard term, and suggest where we might venture from here.

+ The words *righteous* and *righteousness* can be loaded religious words that often have negative connotations; especially for those who suffer the oppressive piety of those zealous religious types who're convinced of their own *self-righteousness*.

But in the Bible, *righteousness* is simply understood as "doing what is *right*, for the common good." Those who are righteous are juxtaposed (as in the Psalms and Proverbs, for example) with "the wicked," and the harsh reality the biblical narrative acknowledges is that, in fact, the wicked often prosper and the righteous suffer.

But in addition, the other aspect of this word has a communal, even political component to it. In the Bible, it has to do with the way the social order gets put right. In this sense, the two words used almost synonymously in the Bible are righteousness and justice.

When it came to a matter of the huge inequity between the rich and poor mentioned earlier, for example, these two words were used interchangeably; as with the familiar lines from the prophet Amos, recently carved in a granite memorial; as it was quoted by another prophet for our time, Martin Luther King, "But let justice

roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:24)

Nowadays, when we think of the word *justice*, we relegate the term to the notion of *retributive* or *punitive* justice. As such, it is about the penalties paid for those who disobey the law.

But the Bible uses the word for something more. Righteousness – that is, doing what is right -- is about *distributive* justice. It is about the fair distribution of something that does not belong to any of us. It is rather how we share the entirety of all there is, which ultimately all belongs to God.

The indictment against injustice is found throughout the biblical narrative. The Old Testament prophets and the figures of Jesus and Paul in the New Testament with their passionate message for this kind of distributive justice (righteousness) were all clearly viewed as a threat by those in positions of economic and political power.

Translation of the text in the Sermon on the Mount is not distorted one whit to substitutes the word *justice* in the familiar line from Matthew, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness." Similarly, the beatitudes can equally read,

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled." *And*, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for justice's sake."

Jesus is talking about distributive justice, what is right and *fair*, as a reflection of the world as God has created it, and Jesus envisions it. Such "fairness" is not about total equity, but sufficiency.

IV. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

SERIOUSLY, WHAT DOES JESUS HAVE TO DO WITH CHRISTIANITY?

In the next commentary, "What Kind of Christian" we'll look at several more familiar terms associated with how Christians describe their faith with two contrasting understandings, including: sin, repentance and forgiveness.

Inevitably, however, looking at these two different paths I've sketched out leads to one over-arching question, namely this: If Jesus, in any understanding of what it means to be a Christian of any kind, is the fullest manifestation of God for us, how does he come to be accorded the title "Christ?"

Or, as it has been similarly phrased, how does the person and character of the Jesus of history become the Christ of faith; and a kind of faith on which you would stake your life and call Christianity?

After all, it's hard enough to peel back the layers of early Church experiences with their "risen Lord" and try to discern what are most likely the authentic sayings of the historical Jesus; and not just what was later attributed to him in the gospels and beyond.

But how do those who have continued down one of those paths I've tried to describe come to understand which kind of Christianity still speaks to our relationship with God in this world? If it were simply a matter of following the most authentic Jesus we can find, wouldn't we call ourselves a *Jesus-ite*, not a *Christian*?

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But again, if we are instead a follower of someone we call Christ, what *kind* of Christianity is that?

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