

My Search for the Truth by Scott Pfitzinger

TL;DR version:

If you don't want to read the whole thing, here's a summary.

My personal religious journey has been long and convoluted. I have tried to keep an open mind and search honestly for answers. I grew up conservative Baptist, spent a few years Lutheran before becoming Catholic. Was Catholic for about 15 years, but now I don't claim any religion.

The latest step began with realizing how much of Christianity is about wanting everyone to be bound by the same rules as Christians. Regular prayers, even from the Sunday pulpit, include the passing of laws (or ruling of the Supreme Court) that make Christian doctrines the law of the land, forcing everyone, including non-Christians, to live by Christian rules. Which is especially problematic when those rules are not objectively held as right by non-Christians. Beliefs are not a basis for a secular government and Christianity is not to be the basis of U.S. laws. That's in the Constitution.

Everything in religion is about control. From the original roots to today, organized religion has been about controlling the populace and making sure they do what the people in power want. And the basis is fear. Fear of eternal torment if you stray at all from the given instructions. And if you require fear or threats of punishment to be a good person, you're not really a good person.

I began reading, researching, and learning, as I do and did throughout my journey, and became more and more convinced that the Bible is not the inerrant Word of God. Too many errors, contradictions, and changes throughout history. Half of the New Testament was not even written by who we supposed it was. The books are mostly anonymous and written in the name of an apostle. And they have changed so much over time, due to scribal errors and purposeful changes, that we don't even have the original words anymore, even if they WERE inspired. Overall, it's mostly fiction. "History is written by the victors" and this is also true of the books included in the Bible and the versions of those books. Christianity is ultimately based on the Bible, and if the Bible is just a human book, then Christianity is just a human religion.

As I looked for proof of truth in Christianity, I found more and more conflicts, disagreements, exclusivities, and illogical reasonings. If I had been born in other parts of the world, I would have grown up believing Islam or Shintoism or Buddhism or different versions of Christianity to be the actual truth. And each religion says they're the right one. So if you pick the right one, you avoid an eternity of torture.

Ultimately for me, it has come down to evidence. There is a plethora of evidence for biological evolution, but none for creationism. The same is true for most of Genesis, Exodus, the historical books of the Old Testament, and most of the New Testament. Even the resurrection of Jesus has no evidence. Just a story about a story about there being witnesses. That's not proof. There is just a huge lack of evidence and sometimes blatant contradictions with historical manuscripts that have been verified or scientific discoveries. "The Bible says it" doesn't provide any proof. As Christopher Hitchens said, "That which can be asserted without evidence, can be dismissed without evidence."

So I no longer believe the Bible is anything more than a human book. Christianity is one of many religions that man has created to explain the natural world and give man a sense of importance within it. I won't tell people what they should believe, but I can say I no longer believe in Christianity or the Bible like I used to.

Full Narrative:

I decided to write this narrative partly to organize my thoughts and partly to explain to family or friends why I now consider myself religiously unaffiliated. Not really a Christian anymore and not part of any organized religion. I'm still open to the possibility of God and the supernatural, but having thought about it for a long time and having looked at all the arguments for and against religion, I've come to the point where I am no longer swayed by the arguments for religion, so I am deconverting. This is not intended to be a treatise with cited sources, but more like an explanation of the questions I raised and the answers I discovered.

First a little background. I grew up in a conservative Baptist home that emphasized going to church "whenever the doors are open." We memorized Scripture in a Bible club and avoided anything that could be construed as "evil," including modern popular music, dancing, drinking, etc. I grew up thinking that if you believed differently from what we were being taught, you were wrong. Everything was black and white and anyone who disagreed with our church and pastor were likely going to hell. I went to a college that was similarly affiliated and came out of it still thinking that Church History was less than 200 years old and people needed to believe what we did or they were wrong.

About 15 years after graduating, I began my search for truth by looking into the origins of the Christian Church and ended up becoming Catholic. I wrote a separate essay back then to document my thought processes and the answers to my questions. Similar to this one but about why I was becoming Catholic. I was Catholic for about 15 years and I still feel like the Catholic Church is the best representation of Christianity and is most true to the way the Church developed almost 2,000 years ago. If I were to stay Christian, I would have to be Catholic. But lately I've been wrestling with thoughts and questions that make me question whether I can stay Christian.

Beginning to Question

I think it began with the issue of abortion. Different religious groups have different views on when life begins. Jews believe it's after the baby takes three breaths. Catholics believe life begins at conception. The scientific/medical definition of pregnancy doesn't start until the egg embeds itself in the uterus wall, but some U.S. states use conception as the start because it fits their agenda and the laws they're trying to pass. When adults are brain-dead but the heart is still beating, do we take them off life support? Is a heartbeat what determines life? Or brain activity? Or ability to live outside the mother? There is still much debate about when the fetus or child attains independent moral status. Philosophy, theology, psychology, sociology, law, and politics each address this topic from a different point of view and a combination is needed to create any reasonable worldview. Most Christian denominations lean toward conception or heartbeat of the fetus. But then they want to force their belief on the rest of the world and make it the law, and that started to seem more and more inappropriate to me. More on this topic later.

Then I began to realize how much of religion is focused on controlling the believers. Eventually the questions grew to pondering the origins of religious teachings, contradictions and historicity of the Bible, incompatibility with science, inadequacy of theological arguments; and the "problem of evil".

First I had a growing realization that organized religion is, at its core, about control. Religion arose from two primary needs: the need to explain the unexplainable and the need to bring people together and make them stay together. Many Christian denominations, especially Baptists, cultivate a feeling of being persecuted by the rest of the world. Between that and the

emphasis on the imminent return of Jesus, they build the sense of “us vs them,” which keeps the sense of unity and helps keep them together. Christian apologists often write not to engage their opponents in dialogue, but to assure their base that they have good reason to disregard any alternative to their way of seeing things. Beliefs that “we are right and everyone else is wrong” work both to build this bond within churches and to keep believers from looking outside the church for information. This also explains why the Christian Church as a whole is so splintered and fragmented.

Another way that religions control their followers is the threat of eternal punishment if you leave. When you think of it that way, they all sound like cults. Even Christian denominations that teach “once saved, always saved” will say that if you leave you become a non-Christian and probably were never “saved” to begin with. The feeling of guilt if you miss services is another aspect of this. The Catholic Church teaches that it is a mortal sin for you to miss Sunday mass if you don’t have a good reason or could have been there. Mortal sin means if you die without going to confession about it, you’re bound for hell, to endure torture and punishment for all eternity. There are explanations and justifications for this teaching, such as that God is holy and perfect and cannot have anything non-holy in his heaven. I don’t want to get into the deep dogma of any church in this essay, so I won’t get into defense or arguments about certain doctrines.

Hundreds of years ago, the Church was the primary organization holding society together, and it was necessary to emphasize the importance of regularly attending the services to hear proper teaching. This helped maintain the collaborative feeling of the community and provided the opportunity to teach the way that everyone should behave. It also set up the Church as the main authority in society, even to the point of approving national leaders.

In modern times, it is much easier to investigate and learn because of our greater access to information. Questioning doctrines or beliefs is much more acceptable in today’s society and no longer brings the automatic judgment of the Church. When the teachings are unquestionable, people stop thinking for themselves. They are supposed to have unwavering belief without any substantive evidence, and they are promised eternal happiness after death, which is impossible to confirm, along with the threat of eternal punishment and damnation if they leave or sin. This firmly establishes that church as the ultimate authority, which comes back to better controlling the people.

Need for Religion

Religion was humanity’s first attempt to explain the origin of the world, natural disasters, etc. In ancient times, people did not understand the causes of phenomena around them, like eclipses, famines, floods, and plagues. Religion was the one source they could turn to, and was generally viewed as an unquestionable authority, so the answers from local religious leaders were accepted as truth. As humanity learned more and became better able to explain things, religion evolved and new religions were created, leading to philosophy and science. Gaps in our scientific knowledge were filled with supernatural solutions by religions. As science was better able to explain the world, religion became less relevant. Certainly religions have led to science, as practitioners sought for answers in the world around them, just as religions have led to some of the most beautiful art in the world, but as humanity has made scientific leaps forward in understanding the world, religion has become less necessary for people to relate to the world around them and understand it.

Occam’s Razor is a principle that says when there are competing hypotheses about the same problem, we should select the one that is the simplest and has the fewest required assumptions. Since natural theories adequately explain the development of religion and belief in gods, the

actual existence of supernatural agents is superfluous and may be dismissed unless proven to be required to explain things.

Scientific evidence has shown that mutations can randomly occur without being created or tampered with, which means that the human species could have evolved to be as complex as it is without a creator. Quantum mechanics, which describes action on a subatomic scale, shows that random fluctuations can produce matter and energy out of nothingness. Yes, that could lead to producing a cosmos.

The Bible

As I began to question whether Christianity – or religion in general – was something I could still believe in, I started asking about the authority and origin of the Bible. That is rather central to the Christian faith. Ultimately for me, the decision to be Christian has to rest on whether the Bible is truly the Word of God. You can't really call yourself a Christian if you don't believe the Bible. If you can't take the Bible as the inspired and inerrant Word of God, the entire basis of Christianity is questionable.

For the most part, whether or not you accept the Bible as the Word of God depends on who you listen to and whether you choose to believe it. If you listen to Christian scholars, there are many reasons to believe that it truly is the Word of God, and if you listen to secular scholars, there are many reasons why you should believe it's just a book written by different people. "Mainstream" scholars are ones that apply standard scholarly historical methods, are open to whatever results may come from that, and are not committed to a dogmatic faith position, as opposed to scholars who have, for example, signed required doctrinal statements as part of accepting their positions teaching in a fundamentalist university or organization.

If the Bible is supposed to be the inerrant word of God, that must be referring to the original texts. But scribes have made changes over the years, both accidental and purposeful, so much so that we don't have access to the originals anymore. Textual criticism and exegesis are taught in Christian seminaries to try to recreate the original texts or to try to figure out what they meant. Basically, for centuries the Christian Church has worked off copies of copies of copies, some of which even contradict each other, but are not the original words anymore. Which really means that the Bible is a human book.

The Orthodox and Catholic Churches teach that the Bible uses the words of men to convey a divinely inspired message and is inerrant as it relates to doctrine and the relationship between God and the world. Other Christian denominations take the text more literally or less literally, depending on their world views. If you take the Bible as an authority, even the Bible doesn't say that it alone is to be your source of teaching and doctrine. Early Christians did not even have a New Testament; their Scriptures were the law and the prophets (the Old Testament). Many of Paul's letters in the New Testament ask his readers to hold fast to what he verbally taught them when he was there. Verbal teachings were held on par with written teachings and it wasn't until the late 4th century (Council of Hippo in 393 C.E. and the Council of Carthage in 397 C.E.) that church councils were held to determine which books would be included in the canon of Scripture, since there were so many different gospels and other books floating around. And to accept that, you must have faith that God led those councils to their decisions. Modern Christian denominations have their own spin on this, since they do not want to rely on the Catholic Church for establishing their Bible. This is why the Protestants came up with their own versions of the Bible in the 16th Century, taking out books that talked about topics they disagreed with. And at the same time, there are scholars who can point out how different books of the Bible have changed over the years. Textual analysis of competing documents have also led modern scholars to question the authorship of the gospels, half of Paul's letters, and most of the general

epistles near the end of the New Testament. They weren't written by eyewitnesses or even by the named authors, but were written later in the 1st Century by other people, with increasing evidence of personal agendas. An example is Paul's "pastoral epistles" (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus) which contradict some of Paul's other letters and which scholars from the last 200 years have increasingly agreed were written after Paul's death. The final canon of the New Testament and the final "accepted" (often selectively edited) versions of some of the books within it were determined by the winners of the doctrinal debates of the first several centuries, the ones that came to call themselves "orthodox," meaning "right belief."

Ultimately, it's a matter of faith, since there is plenty of "evidence" on both sides. From my perspective, if it requires having faith in the councils and having faith in the consistent integrity of the written word, that is directly related to whether you believe the teaching of that church or their religion in general. Which means the Bible doesn't stand on its own as the self-evident Word of God. It relies on acceptance of the teachings of the church that defined it and interprets it. And edits it, at least until the printing press and the internet standardized it more.

▪ **Interpretation and Versions**

Interpretation of the Bible is another issue. That was part of what led me to Catholicism. The Catholic Church has a historical set of teachings that is basically consistent for over a thousand years. It teaches that the Bible should not be studied in isolation but should be interpreted within the Scriptural context and the context of Church teachings. The "me and my Bible" idea is a primary reason for the fracturing of the modern Christian church. Everyone reads the Bible through the lens of their beliefs or those of their pastor. If you don't agree with it, you can just go to another church down the street that teaches the way you believe. 21st-Century Christianity is essentially a huge collection of echo chambers. The Bible cannot be viewed as empirical evidence for believing in anything. That requires faith in God and believing the Bible is true, which is circular reasoning.

We have a great deal of evidence to show that the text of the Bible has changed over time. Scribes sometimes made mistakes and sometimes purposely changed the words to fit their agendas. Some, like the Gospel of John, were rewritten over time and have material that scholars from the last 200 years have generally agreed were not historical. When there were competing copies of manuscripts that were endorsed by one religious group or the other, most of the time, one group would win the debate or social dominance and their version was the one that was kept and copied into future manuscripts. Even if the words of the original manuscripts were inspired by God, we don't have access to those anymore. All the centuries of copying and translating up to the invention of the printing press created many disparate versions of the same texts.

▪ **History**

Archaeological discoveries in the last 20-30 years show that much of what the Old Testament describes about the Kingdom of Israel is wrong. The Israelites most likely arose out of the Canaanites, separating from them by going into the highlands when the climate was changing and the desert areas were becoming drier. The earliest Israelite religious texts actually describe more than one god, including a female deity, with female carved figures just like the Canaanites had. There is no evidence of Hebrews living in Egypt before "The Exodus." If two million Hebrews were living in the Nile delta region of Egypt, there should be documentation from that time about it. Two million people do not go unmentioned. Especially if they all leave at the same time. There are plenty of Egyptian records from the time, but no mention of such a huge group of what would become Jews. There is little evidence of a united kingdom of Israel under David, although David most likely existed. Scholars of the texts of that region are reluctant to call the

ancient Israelite religion “Judaism” until after the time of King Josiah around the 7th century BCE.

Going back farther, Noah’s Flood happened between 2300 and 1300 BCE, depending on if you take the Bible literally. Since we have evidence of other world cultures from that time (e.g., Mesopotamian, Chinese Neolithic Dynasty, Ancient Egyptian, Sumerian, Peruvians), who kept good records and had a continuous line of culture, construction, art, and historical records, it is clear that the flood could not have been more than regional. Then there are the other problems, such as 1) how 8 people could have repopulated and spread all over the earth to create all the world cultures that we have evidence for during that millennium, 2) how there wasn’t room for two of every kind of animal, and if you limit to 2 canines, 2 felines, etc., they couldn’t have evolved into all the various species we see today, and 3) how in the 19th century architects and shipbuilders discovered that 300 feet was the absolute longest a wooden ship could actually function, sagging and leaking the whole time, and that was with diagonal iron braces, rather than the 510 feet they say the Ark was.

▪ **Inconsistencies**

There are many examples of inconsistencies within the Bible. Some of these are called contradictory because the reader did not understand the context of the seemingly contradictory passages. Sometimes the contradictions are within the same passage and sometimes within different versions of the story, such as in the Gospels, or conflict with what we know of history. In general, explanations or excuses have been provided by church teachings, enough to appease the believers.

While there are many contradictions and inconsistencies in the Bible, most do not affect essential doctrines. They just demonstrate the lack of divine authorship. Here are a few:

- The women at the tomb fled and didn’t tell anyone (Mark 16:8) or ran back and told the disciples (Matt. 28:8 & Luke 24:9).
- Two genealogies of Jesus (both through Joseph)
- Jesus’ crucifixion was after Passover (Matt. 26) or before Passover (John 19)
- “This generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” Jesus was an apocalyptic Jew, which was popular at the time, and the early Christians believed Jesus when he said that he would return during their lifetime. Any explanation other than the literal one is just trying to spin it because it didn’t happen.
- Two versions of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20 & 34)
- Contradicting creation stories in Genesis 1 & 2.
- “Do not envy” but “I the Lord your God and a jealous God.”
- Jesus rode into Jerusalem on two donkeys or one donkey (evidence that the writer of Matthew mistranslated an OT passage that he was using to try to fulfill a prophecy).
- Peter denied Jesus to different people (Matt. says a girl, a girl, and a group, but Luke says a girl, a man, and another man).
- At Jesus’ baptism, Luke 3 originally said “today I have begotten you,” leading many early Christians to teach that Jesus became divine at his baptism
- Matt. 27 says many people were raised from their tombs when Jesus was raised, but no historical manuscripts or other Bible books talk about people seeing zombies. And what happened to them?
- Men wrapped Jesus’ body in spices on Friday (John 19) or the women did on Sunday (Mark 16 & Luke 24).
- There was one angel at the tomb (Matt. & Mark) or two angels (Luke & John).
- The two accounts of the death of Judas in Matthew and Acts are pretty hard to reconcile.

- All the verses that say about prayer that if you ask in faith, you will receive it. But the amount of times that happens is no different from random chance.

The Bible is not a science manual, they say, so it shouldn't be used like one. As an example, the Catholic Church doesn't require believing in a literal six days of creation, although many Protestant churches do. If it's not literal, then there really cannot be a literal Adam and Eve. Then Paul's theology (such as: by one man sin entered the world in Romans) is built on a flawed Jewish mythology.

Then we have the problem of time passage. In the Old Testament, we have centuries between when events were supposed to have happened and when they were written about. If they did happen, the stories may not be that reliable after hundreds of years of oral transmission. Imagine if we didn't have writing and stories about the American Revolution were passed down to today. There would not be any authoritative, accurate version of those stories today. They would have been enhanced or modified to fit the needs or agenda of the storyteller. And that's only 250 years. The Torah was probably not compiled until a thousand years after the Exodus was supposed to have happened, and the earlier stories in Genesis are thousands of years earlier before that. The earliest fragments we have were written in 250 BCE. And that's just fragments. In the New Testament, the time is much less. Only a generation or two between events and writing.

▪ **Christmas**

The only account of Jesus' birth in the New Testament comes in the Gospel of Luke, which says Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem because of a census being taken by the Roman emperor Augustus, held while Quirinius was the governor of Syria. The Gospel of Matthew adds more details about Joseph dealing with the pregnancy and also the Wise Men afterwards. As Bible.org explains, however, this causes a problem of chronology. For one thing, the first known Roman census of Palestine occurred in 6 or 7 A.D., and Luke specifies this was the first census made while Quirinius was governor, which was 6 A.D. to 12 A.D., but secondly, there is no evidence Quirinius' time in office as governor of Syria overlapped with Herod the Great's life since he died in 4 B.C. Since the details of the timing don't overlap, it is tricky trying to nail down when exactly the circumstances of Jesus' birth occurred and it presents a clear conflict between the Bible and documented history.

Interestingly, this Roman census was only taken in Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. Not in Galilee, which is where Nazareth is located and where Jesus' family lived. Bethlehem is located in Judea. Since throughout the rest of the Bible, no mention is made of Bethlehem, but Jesus is always called "the Nazarene," it can be pretty safely assumed that Jesus was actually born in Nazareth (in Galilee) and the writer of Luke was trying to use the census as a way to justify saying Jesus was born in Bethlehem (where King David had been born) and was fulfilling a prophecy.

This leads to the passage of the Christmas story known as the Massacre of the Innocents, which, in a parallel to the life story of Moses, sees Herod the Great issuing a decree that all boys in Bethlehem two years and under should be killed. How many babies does that include? Even though most modern scholars say there is no evidence a Massacre of the Innocents ever happened at all, there were apparently about 500-600 people living in Bethlehem in the time of Herod, suggesting somewhere between seven and 20 babies and toddlers. By comparison, the traditional Catholic liturgy commemorates the death of 14,000 babies in Herod's massacre and medieval authors say it was as many as 144,000. So, you know, somewhere between seven and 144,000. We do have an account of this killing of babies outside the Bible, by someone

named Macrobius in the early 400s A.D. But we also know that Herod died in 1 B.C. or 4 B.C., depending on your source. So that generally puts Jesus' birth around 2 or 3 B.C.

While Matthew chapter 1 quotes Isaiah 7:14, there are a couple problems with that. The Septuagint mistranslated the word "virgin" which originally meant "young woman." The following several verses provide the context for this prophecy, and it was fulfilled in the very next chapter of Isaiah. So the quote in Matthew was taken out of context and didn't really refer to the Messiah.

So many passages in the Old Testament were NOT prophecies about Jesus, but New Testament writers reframed them and sometimes even reworded them or fudged on details about Jesus to make them all appear like they were prophecies that were fulfilled in Jesus.

▪ **Easter**

The Bible also says that Jesus was put on trial before Pontius Pilate. But Pilate was known for being violent and sending soldiers into the town to kill Jews when they disagreed with any of his decisions. He regularly went out of his way to offend the Jews and the Jews actually filed a complaint against him with the Roman emperor because he was so bloodthirsty. And since he was a Roman leader, he would not have given Jesus (or any Jews) a Roman trial. Especially one who was being accused of sedition and violating Jewish religious laws. Pilate probably would not have cared, let alone accepted Jesus in a Roman trial.

Note that as the Gospels were written, Pilate looked worst in the earliest one, Mark. As Matthew, Luke, and John were written, Pilate looked better and better as the Christians of the day wanted to place more and more of the guilt for the crucifixion on the Jews.

Also, the Romans never buried their crucified victims. It would have been extremely charitable on their part. Normally the victims were left on the cross long after they died, so the birds could eat them, and the witnesses could be intimidated. Then the bodies were taken off the cross and thrown on a garbage heap where the dogs ate the rest. That's why Golgotha got its name, meaning "place of the skulls," because it literally was a huge pile of human remains.

Growing up as a Christian, I was taught that there were many eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection. But we don't have their testimony. The number of people who identify themselves in the Bible and say they saw the resurrected Jesus is one: the Apostle Paul. All the other accounts are stories that were passed down verbally until they were finally written down decades later. They were anonymous; most modern Biblical scholars believe they were not written by their namesakes. So we have stories of people seeing the resurrected Jesus, but only one eyewitness account, and that was only a vision.

Cruelty and Inequity

It seems incredibly cruel for an all-loving God to condemn all of humanity and curse all of creation because of two people disobeying one command. The many billions of descendants of those two are now subject to death and eternal suffering. Is that really even moral? Other examples of the seemingly needless cruelty in the Bible include:

- The Egyptians having their firstborn killed and livestock and livelihoods ruined because of the Pharaoh's treatment of the Israelites
- Millions of people including women and children being killed in the Flood
- Several entire countries, including innocent children, commanded to be entirely wiped out by the Israelites

- When going to war, the Israelites were told to kill everyone, but save the virgin women for themselves
- God promising to kill the old and young, male and female of every one of the Israelites who incited God's jealousy by worshiping other gods
- Sentencing to death any Israelites who cursed their parents, worked on the Sabbath, or wasn't a virgin on their wedding night
- Even telling Abraham to sacrifice his son. Sure it's supposed to prefigure Christ, but telling a parent to kill their child as a test of their obedience is definitely cruel
- Slavery is condoned and expected in both the Old and New Testaments, and people for thousands of years have used those Bible verses to justify enslaving others

Nobody interprets the Bible totally literally. Everyone is selective about which parts are morally relevant today. Christians generally accept the Ten Commandments as being required, but not other parts of Exodus & Leviticus. Some portions of the Old Testament are believed to be relevant and some are "cultural" or "Old Testament law" and don't apply today, but different denominations have different views about this. (Like food laws, slavery, marrying the dead husband's brother for offspring, death for sexual sins.) Or all the OT violence, with God commanding that every last man, woman, and child be murdered. To rationalize those laws or historical events, Christians have to come up with convoluted explanations to make sense of it all.

And then there are the awkward passages that may have made sense at the time but now are hard to explain. Like Abraham being commanded to kill his son. Or Jesus cursing the fig tree. Or Elisha cursing the children to be eaten by bears. Or if your eye/hand offends you pluck it out. Or how deformed people cannot approach God. Or if people were hostile to God, he would make them eat the flesh of their children. Or if you're a bastard you cannot enter the church, even to 10 generations. Or even how looking counts as adultery. Or mankind was at peace and working together, so God gave them different languages.

Or all the passages that treat women harshly but not men? Like stoning women if they're not found to be virgins on their wedding day. Or how a woman who is raped must marry her rapist and the man has to pay 50 shekels of silver to her father. Or how Eve was the first human villain. Or how women are not to teach but should keep silent. Or how they should keep their heads covered in church and be obedient to their husbands, who are to rule over them, and if they have any questions, they should wait until they get home and ask their husband. It still seems a bit awkward to say that an all-knowing, loving God insists that we love him and requires that love before he will help us. The first commandment is to love God, and the second is to love each other.

The amount of cruelty in the Bible and in the teachings of "God's people" could arguably have led to those people being cruel themselves. Many reasoned that since God, who they saw as loving and just, condoned and even commanded such brutal acts, they could be good Christians and do the same. Thus the long history of Christian atrocities such as the Crusades, the Inquisition, torture, religious wars, persecution of other religions or non-Christian cultures, burning of witches, slavery, forced conversions, and brutal treatment of the mentally ill in the name of trying to save the victims' souls. There is an inherent contradiction between these actions and the belief that God is love. The same is true for eternal punishment for finite sin.

Exclusivity

Most Christian denominations basically want everyone to take on their beliefs about God, the Bible, and how to live. But unless those beliefs and morals are based on objective and impartial evidence, rather than being fundamentally subjective, forcing that morality on others is itself immoral. Passing laws that force non-Christians to live by Christian standards is one example.

Christianity was the first religion to require that everyone in the world believe it or be condemned. Missionaries went all over the world teaching people that they had a problem, then offering them the solution, with the threat of eternal torture if the people didn't accept it. Fear is a powerful motivator.

There is no absolute and objective religious moral truth that the majority of the people in the world agree with. Religious moral truth is, by its own nature, then, subjective. If Christianity is right, then earnest followers of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Shintoism, etc. are all condemned to eternity of suffering in hell. How do we know which religion is right? They all say they are. They're right and everyone else is wrong, and therefore going to hell. That's why others have to be converted. And whenever a logical conclusion of Christianity's teachings causes too much inner conflict, an exception is created to accommodate it.

Whatever religion and culture you are born into is the one that shapes how you relate to the world and make sense of it. To think that people from other parts of the world are condemned to an eternity of suffering because they don't believe what you do is rather egotistical. And it can drive believers to outrageous acts, as I've mentioned, in the name of trying to save others' souls.

Since God punished people with pestilence, drought, and more in the Bible, a natural outgrowth was to focus on spiritual or supernatural solutions for these problems. Plagues were seen as God's anger or the Devil's actions. And with Jesus healing all kinds of sicknesses and casting out demons, early church leaders developed the idea that demons were responsible for the bad things that happen. Praying to God to ease suffering or to stop the Devil from working were the result. This was already happening in other ancient religions as well. Religious leaders, then, stopped looking for physical ways to end suffering and focused on praying, giving money to churches and monasteries, attending church services, and, for a long time, killing witches or Jews. Coincidentally, the frequency and severity of these plagues did not diminish until the development of scientific hygiene.

Free Will

There is a difference between free will and freedom of action. Parents don't let kids play in the road – that's not blocking their free will, but their freedom of action. If someone is killing children, we all pretty much agree that their freedom of action should be blocked. Therefore, God interfering with someone's freedom of action would not destroy free will. If that is so, why would God allow the Holocaust or human trafficking? Most of us agree that, if we can prevent evil action, we are morally obliged to do that. Shouldn't a moral God also be obligated the same way, keeping innocent people from suffering at the hands of evil people by blocking their freedom of action?

Some evil may be a result of God giving us free will, but non-moral evil, such as floods, plagues, and droughts, causes indiscriminate suffering. And so many innocent children suffer or die every day. A moral God would treat his created people as individuals. If God cannot or will not prevent evil, how can we trust that he is moral, loving, and just? Doesn't that kind of suffering illustrate that the universe is not moral, but amoral?

If some people are forced to suffer so that others can demonstrate moral excellence, then God is using the most vulnerable people as a means for others to be rewarded. If Christians say that we cannot understand God's reasons for allowing suffering, then they also cannot say there is a need for God to explain the design of the universe. That is based on the assumption that we can understand God's purposes.

For any of these questions, falling back on the mystery of God and our inability to understand his thoughts and purposes, like saying “God works in mysterious ways” is a cop-out. It’s a way to say, “We’re right and you just have to believe us.”

Borrowing from Other Religions

Even Judaism didn’t start out as the monotheistic religion we know it as today. Asherah was a Canaanite fertility goddess, and there were poles/trees dedicated to her throughout the history of the Israelites. The Bible refers to these poles and the sacred trees more than 30 times. Bethel had one of these poles next to the altar of YHWH, and so did Samaria. King Jehu was a reformer but he allowed the pole in Samaria to remain, suggesting that he saw the Asherah pole as appropriate to be included in the worship of YHWH. So far, several inscriptions have been found from 8th or 9th century BCE that refer to “YHWH and his Asherah,” which seems to imply that they were worshiped as a pair and there was even one in YHWH’s temple. Biblical scholars generally agree that actual monotheism didn’t become the norm in Israel until the 6th century BCE. Before that, it’s likely that they worshiped more than one god, at least Asherah. Just like all the other religions of that time. And during the time of exile, there was a movement to assimilate the attributes of the many gods and goddesses of older polytheistic systems to the one god, YHWH.

Christianity did not come up with all of its ideas in isolation. Many concepts were taken from earlier religions. During the first five centuries of Christianity, rather than coming up with original beliefs and practices, many pagan beliefs and traditions were absorbed into Christian ones and adapted for Christian use. Even the ritual elements of candles, incense, an altar, and the presentation of a sacrifice were used by previous religions. When you compare various religions from throughout history and dig into them a little, you find that there was a lot of borrowing of ideas. Everything was shared to various degrees, all forms of religions, from organized religions to less structured religions like paganism, with people picking and choosing what sounds “right to them” and then codifying those beliefs in a document. From the beginning, the Christian holidays have been a blend of Christian and pagan elements. The Puritans in New England were even opposed to celebrating Christmas and Easter because they felt they were too “tainted” by non-Christian influences.

- Christmas - The Roman holiday *Sol Invictus* was celebrated the week leading up to Dec 25. The Sun God was the most important Roman God in the 3rd century. A Roman emperor built a big temple for the Sun God and inaugurated it on Dec 25, 274. Saturnalia ran from Dec 17-25 and involved banquets and parties with family and friends and especially exchanged gifts. They even gave gifts of little figurines of gods (like the Nativity Scene?). Many similarities between how Saturnalia was celebrated and how Christmas was celebrated when it began to be celebrated in the year 336 when Constantine was Emperor of Rome. The story of shepherds in the fields watching their flocks speaks of a springtime birth of Jesus, and censuses were generally done in the summer when it was easiest to travel. Evergreen trees and boughs were used by early Christians for decorating because it was believed they kept away witches, ghosts, and illness, though bringing trees indoors for Christmas was indeed a Christian tradition that started in 16th century. Pope Julius I may have thought that celebrating Christmas on December 25 might have made it easier for converts to switch from Saturnalia to Christmas (and to keep them away from the pagan celebrations). It stayed a festival of drinking and partying for over 1,000 years. It was so well-known as a holiday of debauchery that the Puritans BANNED Christmas when they came to North America.
- Easter - started with Jewish Passover. Easter was named for Eostre, the pre-Christian Germanic goddess of Spring. The “venerable” Bede said that the month in which Easter is celebrated was called Eosturmonath in Old English.

- Epiphany (Three Kings) - Romans believed that during the 12 days after the winter solstice, the goddess Diana would fly over the fields to make them fertile. And the year was seen as an old lady who gave food and seeds as gifts to promise her birth in the Spring. She also gave coal to children. This evolved into the Italian tradition of Befana, an old witchy lady who, on the night before Epiphany, gave naughty children coal and good children candy and little gifts. There is also an Italian tradition that she pointed the way to Bethlehem for the Magi.
- Ash Wednesday - Ashes were placed above the brow to bring the protection of the Norse god Odin. And Odin's day was Wednesday. Ashes were also seen to symbolize the blood of Shiva and the seed of the Indian god Agni, both of which were said to have the power to cleanse and forgive sins.
- Lent - Babylonians believed the king's wife, Semiramis, had a son with the Sun God and called him Tamuz. Tamuz was killed while hunting. After 40 days of mourning, he came back from the dead. Semiramis declared an annual commemoration that lasted 40 days and involved denial and fasting. 40-day fasts were also observed in Mexico in honor of the sun.
- Immortal Soul - Ancient Babylonians and Egyptians believed in life after death and a path to heaven. The Egyptians worshiped the god Osiris was killed and brought back to life. They had beliefs about a Hall of Judgment and a version of heaven and hell that preceded Christian versions of it. Babylonians believed in the goddess Ishtar who had a son who died every year and was reborn (thus creating the seasons like Persephone). She was called the Queen of Heaven. The Greek goddess Aphrodite had many parallels and early Christians in the Middle East assimilated parts of these stories into those of the Virgin Mary.
- Wedding Ceremony - Many elements of the Christian wedding ceremony come from pagan traditions, including the father giving away the bride, the bridal veil, bridal bouquet, bridesmaids, and even the wedding ring on the left ring finger.
- Halos around the heads of holy people in art were used in Ancient Greece, and Hindu and Buddhist art.
- Many of the elements of the story of Jesus are similar to other mythological figures and tend to resonate well with humans. The story of Jesus was just the next major narrative to use them.

Morality & Behavior

Another question that needs to be asked is how we get our morals. Are they supernatural and given to us by the religion we follow? Or are they natural and able to be learned without religion? Many Christians feel that morality is a Christian thing, or at least a religious thing. "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt and their actions are evil; not one of them does good." From this perspective, the ability to do good is related to one's belief in God. For non-Christians, this looks like another way to control the believers and keep them "in the flock."

The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics states that, "it is not hard to imagine a society of people that has no religion but has a morality, as well as a legal system, just because it says that people cannot live together without rules against killing, etc., and that it is not desirable for these all to be legally enforced. There have also certainly been people who have had a morality but no religious beliefs." In the 18th century BCE, the Code of Hammurabi spelled out 282 rules that were like a code of ethics, well before Christianity. Over two thousand years ago Plato argued that if the gods approve of some actions it must be because those actions are good, in which case it cannot be the gods' approval that makes them good.

In general, people want to be good. They want to lead good lives. If it requires the threat of eternal punishment for you to be a good person, you're not a good person. With so much of the Western world believing that it's impossible to be good without God, people are motivated to take religion seriously and stay involved in it. That may be the strongest argument for staying in one church or the other, because it's "the right thing to do." That and because people's social and emotional needs are met.

▪ - **Morality & Religion in Society**

And yet, the most secular democracies in the world score very high on international indexes of happiness and well-being and they have among the lowest violent crime and homicide rates. There is a negative relationship between society's well-being and religion: the least religious societies tend to be the most successful. The least religious societies have the lowest levels of divorce, homicide, incarceration, juvenile mortality, alcohol consumption, poverty, income inequality, etc., while the opposite is true in the most religious countries. A study of 300,000 people in some 90 countries found that stricter morality for highly religious people was not about trust, honesty, or generosity, but instead was a stricter control of sex, marriage, and reproduction.

Morality does not require a god to exist. And without God, that does not mean that all opinions are equal. As society has developed over thousands of years, society has mutually determined basic morality to be what benefits us as a society. Believing that murder is wrong benefits our society, both for safety and self-preservation. "I don't hurt or kill others because I don't want to be hurt or killed." Even animals have basic standards of behavior, with those that go against those norms being removed from that pack/tribe/society. It doesn't require belief in God or the existence of any god to determine morality. And if you do require a higher power telling you not to do certain things (under threat of eternal punishment) to keep you from doing those things, you're not really a good person. Even if there was a being that made up rules for us, how could you demonstrate that, apart from saying "the Bible says so"?

▪ - **Violence**

So much evil has been done in the name of religion. In 36 studies that were conducted between 1940 and 1975, almost all of them found a correlation between intolerance and involvement in religion (C. Daniel Batson, in *Religion, Intolerance and Conflict: A Scientific and Conceptual Investigation*, edited by Steve Clarke, 2013).

Higher levels of participation in conservative religion are associated with elevated levels of racial and ethnic prejudice. In the USA, for example, religious practice is matched by increased racial prejudice, intolerance of non-conformists, and a punitive rather than forgiving attitude. (Hall, Deborah L., et al. "Why Don't We Practice What We Preach? A Meta-analytic Review of Religious Racism." *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14, no. 1, 2010; Scheepers, Peer, et al. "Religiosity and Prejudice against Ethnic Minorities in Europe: Cross-National Tests on a Controversial Relationship." *Review of Religious Research* 43, no. 3, 2002).

Violence is usually based on conflicting claims of moral superiority. Whether secular nations or religious groups, it's more about moral superiority than cultural conflict. Sunnis and Shiites are still Muslims and have the same cultural background. They kill each other for faith alone. The same between Catholics and Protestants. Even the most trivial differences in religious belief can generate large amounts of hostility and hatred. Here are some of the places where there is or has been violence because of religion:

- Palestine (Jews vs. Muslims)

- The Balkans (Orthodox Christian Serbians vs. Catholic Christian Croatians and Orthodox Serbians vs. Bosnian and Albanian Muslims)
- Northern Ireland (Christian Protestants vs. Christian Catholics)
- Kashmir (Muslims vs. Hindus)
- Sudan (Muslims vs. Christians and animists)
- Nigeria (Muslims vs. Christians)
- Ethiopia and Eritrea (Muslims vs. Christians)
- Sri Lanka (Sinhalese Buddhists vs. Tamil Hindus)
- Indonesia (Muslims vs. Timorese Christians)
- Iran and Iraq (Shiite vs. Sunni Muslims)
- The Caucasus (Orthodox Russians vs. Chechen Muslims and Muslim Azerbaijanis vs. Catholic and Orthodox Armenians)

▪ - **Abortion**

Abortion is another moral issue that separates conservative religious groups from the rest of the world. Again, most people want to do the right thing. The most important factor is when people believe life actually begins, followed by whether it goes against their teachings against violence. For example, the Jewish teaching is that life begins at birth. There is a huge Wikipedia article dealing with the “Beginning of human personhood” that addresses religious, ethical, and legal perspectives. Even in *Roe v. Wade*, the court opinion acknowledged that the disciplines of medicine, philosophy, and theology are unable to arrive at any consensus about when life begins.

About 20% of pregnancies are naturally aborted before 20 weeks, with most of them being before 12 weeks. Many happen without the woman even knowing she is pregnant. Why would a God who considers embryos to be valued as eternal souls design a human reproductive system like that? If life has not truly begun, then abortion is not killing a baby. Regardless of one’s perspective about abortion, if the definition of when life begins is based on religion because nobody can agree on it otherwise, then it should not be legislated in a non-theocratic government.

▪ - **Faith**

Regarding faith, Christians are required to believe and accept revelations of divine authority such as the Bible, but they also have to believe that there is such an authority that should be accepted on divine/religious authority. It’s circular. And we have seen, especially in the last five years, that religious faith can make people blind to objective evidence when it goes against their views. Most people’s religious beliefs depend on the culture they were born into. And if you were born into the “wrong” culture, there is a good chance you’ll never find the “right” religion.

If impartial evidence of trustworthiness is not required for us to have reasonable trust, then faith is not different from blind trust. Blind trust means to trust in a God who is passive in suffering when people want to do something about it, such as in child abuse. If faith is a firmly held belief, faith could not be a virtue, because believing is not a virtue. A virtue requires assent or the ability to choose it over the alternative. Those who worship other gods claim similar certainties of faith, so how can the certainty of faith be conclusive evidence? Faith, then, is biased and is based on the scriptures or teachings that you choose to follow.

In recent years, religious belief (especially conservative belief) has often paralleled conservative politics, including being against science and COVID vaccines, supporting conspiracy theories, and supporting Trump (which totally appalls me for reasons too numerous to discuss here). The Moral Majority, which led to the current drive for Christian Nationalism, is an example. It was

only after the Moral Majority was founded that the Southern Baptist Convention changed their tenets about abortion from supporting it to fighting it.

Also in recent years, though, the trend has been away from Christianity and religion in general. According to a Pew survey from 2021, 29% of adults in the U.S. are religious “nones” – people who describe themselves as atheists, agnostics, or “nothing in particular” when asked about their religious identity. It was 23% in 2016 and 19% in 2011. Self-identified Christians are 12% fewer in the same ten-year period. In 2007, when Pew first began asking its current question about religious identity, the proportion was about 5 Christians to 1 “none.” Now it is just over 2 to 1.

As for church attendance, only 31% of adults say they attend services once a month or more. That means 69% attend less than monthly, including never. That sounds like they are Christian in name only. Pew reports that only 45% of adults in the U.S. say that they pray daily, which is a drop of 13%, while the number that say they seldom or never pray has gone from 18% to 32%. Similar numbers were found for people saying that religion is “very important” in their lives.

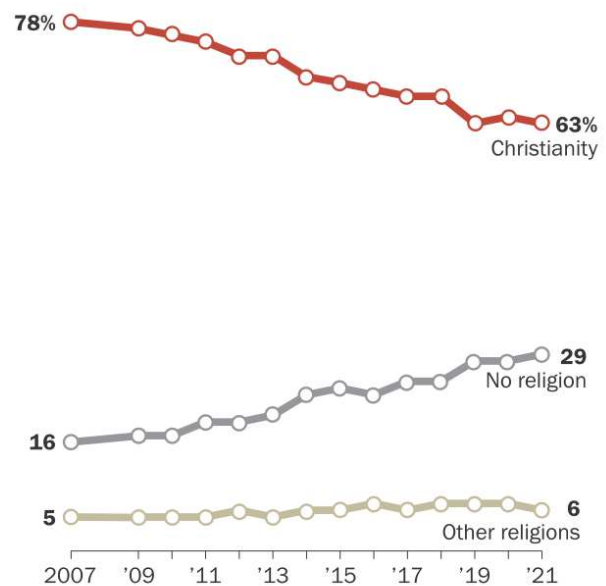
Since all these numbers are based on self-identification, I would guess that there is a more even balance between the “nones” and the Christians now. People who have been Christians would generally have a hard time self-identifying as non-Christian. It means admitting they think they were wrong before, and it can take a lot of courage to say “I’m not a Christian” after spending your whole life as one. This seems to indicate that there are more people who self-identify as Christians but don’t really practice (pray, attend services, etc.). <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>

Conclusion

This narrative has summarized my deconversion process and the answers that became reasons along my journey. I’m not trying to make people believe like I do or take away anyone’s faith. I am only explaining some of the elements of my deconstruction, where I examined my beliefs and jettisoned those that I could no longer defend. It is very complex and there is definitely more involved, but hopefully my family and friends can understand why I’ve left religion. I haven’t lost my faith or anything; I’ve reexamined it and felt compelled to leave it. There just is not enough reliable evidence for the truth of the Bible and Christianity. They say “extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof,” and that’s just not there. Honest scholarship requires that we start with questions and look for objective truth, rather than starting with predetermined conclusions and trying to find evidence to back it up. “The Bible tells me so” is not evidence at all.

In U.S., roughly three-in-ten adults now religiously unaffiliated

% of U.S. adults who identify with ...



Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.

Source: Data from 2020-21 based on Pew Research Center's National Public Opinion Reference Surveys (NORS), conducted online and by mail among a nationally representative group of respondents recruited using address-based sampling. All data from 2019 and earlier from the Center's random-digit-dial telephone surveys, including the 2007 and 2014 Religious Landscape Studies. See Methodology for details.

"About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Ultimately, people can believe whatever they want, and as long as it's not harming anyone or advocating social policies that harm people, that's fine with me. There's no reason to argue about that or try to talk them out of that belief. Whatever we do believe should be something that brings good in the world and not harm.

More Information

I have created a YouTube playlist collecting videos that explain what I've learned in greater depth. If you would like to dig deeper or get a broader background of the elements that went into my deconversion, these videos are roughly in the order that my journey took me.

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLaU96gY5U6XGRdqIJ3aR88FSXWRVJMctQ>