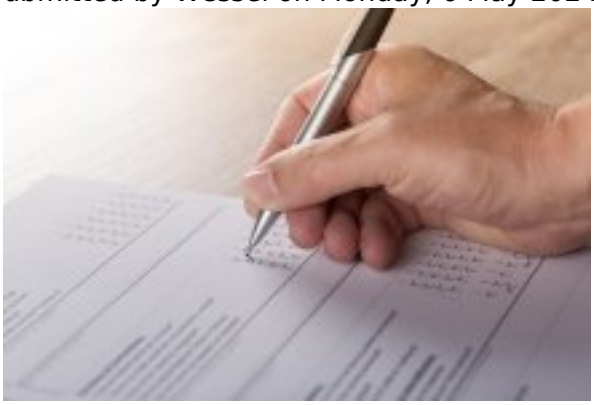
No Longer “Christian”: Changing the Language Used for the Faithful **[1]**

Submitted by Wessel on Monday, 6 May 2024 - 07:27



Read time: 9 minutes
Like many others, the question “what is a Christian” is intuitively much simpler to answer than giving a concrete, analytical answer [2].

I have been enjoying the Surprising Rebirth podcast [3] by Justin Brierly. It documents a period of recent history which I have also followed, as it runs parallel to my spiritual journey and interest and involvement in Christian apologetics. One of the fascinating focal points has been on secular intellectuals who have changed their mind about Christianity This has had the effect of softening a previously hostile stance against it (in many intellectual circles), or who have recognised its significance and value in the shaping the West and the value systems which we hold, or who have come to embrace Christianity as professing Christians. For example, episode seven, *The New Thinkers: A new conversation about God* quotes Douglas Murray, a British author and political commentator:

> I’m not asking people to be believing Christians; I’m not a believing Christian. But we are Christians anyway, whether we like it or not. We’re probably finding that out at the moment. Where the hell do people think that human rights came from? These are things which exist on the embers of Christian thought.
>
> Douglas Murray

Murray said this while not believing in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

The podcast also looks at intellectuals, such as psychologist Jordan Peterson, historian Tom Holland, and feminist Louise Perry, who have come to realise that Christianity is an intrinsic part of their heritage and value system. People have cited these individuals as important markers on their own journey to coming to faith in Jesus, even if they themselves are not confessing Christians. They are, in a sense, “Christian”, as Murray used the term in the above quote. They may not be, or still struggle with the question of being, creedal Christians1 in confessing to the existence of the Trinitarian God, and the historicity of the virgin birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Yet they are unapologetic about the value and importance of the Christian faith in having shaped Western culture, and about its values which are so woven into our being they are barely distinguishable.

In the same interview quoted above [4], Murray would go on to say that anyone who describe themself as being a “secular, rational atheist” is, in truth, a “secular, rational, Christian atheist”. Even outspoken atheist Richard Dawkins, who has no respect for the religion or the Bible, now calls himself “culturally Christian” [5].

But a "Christian atheist", like a married bachelor, is a logical contradiction, so what does Murray mean by this?

"Christian", here, does not refer to devout followers of the Christian religion. Instead, it refers to Western culture which is inextricably tied to Christian values. By "Christian values" I do not mean platitudes or over simplifications, such as "do not commit adultery", but rather the theological doctrines which lie at the root of the faith, makes it distinct from other religions, have become infused in Western culture and thought, and permeates Western laws and mores. This is what Tom Holland's book, Dominion *[6]*, explores after he realised that the Roman culture which he so admired, had values and morals which were alien to him. By investigating the matter further, as well as investigating the history of Islam, he came to the conclusion that what sets the West apart from the rest of the world is not some linear progression of science and philosophy, but rather that it had been steeped in Christianity for more than a millennium. For example the concept of human rights is by no means self-evident [7], but rather a conclusion reached by believing the doctrine that all human were created in the image of God. Islam and Hinduism lacks such a doctrine, thus the notion of human rights did not develop (independently) in cultures where those religions dominated.

This presents somewhat of a problem. The way "Christian" is used here, does not mean "follower of Jesus Christ", as it originally did. If a word acquires too many meanings, it means nothing.

Devout Christians have for a while already been distinguishing between "Christians" and "nominal Christians"—that is to say, people who outwardly confess to be Christians, and may have a Christian culture or heritage, but not a sincere faith to which they devout their lives. Such people can all too readily be referred to by some as "Christians", e.g. the common statistic that there are "two billion Christians in the world". This statistic does not mean that there are two billion devout, practising Christians in the world. It is not even a collation of census data from all over the world. In the most basic cases, it is likely an approximation of countries where the majority religion has (historically) been Christianity, as opposed to Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or other religions; a generalisation which would be objected to be (a-)religious minorities.

With Peterson, Holland, Perry, Murray, and others, however, it is not a case of people who grew up in church, are indifferent to it, and are merely ticking a box to not cause a furore at the next family gathering. Instead, they recognise something deeply valuable in Christianity and have spent a great deal of time thinking about it. Christianity has shaped the world in a certain way, and by being honest about how the West looked before Christianity, and by looking at parallel cultures which are not Christian, they acknowledge that they rather want to live in a culture whose values has been shaped by orthodox Christian belief. But, as mentioned earlier, they are not confessing, creedal Christians. Although it is true that the son who responded to his father's command to go work in the vineyard "'I will not,' but afterwards changed his mind, and went… did the will of his father" (Matthew 21:28–32), it is still important to say "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28), or at least "I believe. Help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

Sam Allberry has pointed out [8] that, in the Bible, the word "Christian" occurs only rarely. Instead, those who sincerely believe in Jesus and His message are referred to as people who are "in Christ" (e.g. Romans 8:1, 1 Corinthians 3:1, Galatians 3:28, Philippians 1:1, Philemon 23, 1 Peter 5:14). While being a "Christian" or a "cultural Christian" may sound like an affiliation or allegiance, Allberry argues that someone who is "in Christ" has a *relationship* with Jesus. (This is comprehensible for anyone who believes that He rose from the dead, is alive now, and is now reigning from outside of space and time—i.e. creedal Christians—but is nonsensical for other people.) Being "in Christ" is like a leaf which is attached to a branch, and receives its sustaining nutrients from it2. Our lives are changed and steered, not by a static list of rules, axioms, and principles given by a long-dead prophet, but by the love, witness, and grace which flows into us from the living Jesus. Such an organic relationship is much richer than even a mere creedal adherence.

Throughout this blog (i.e. this website), whenever I have used the word "Christian", I have meant sincere, devout and creedal Christian. That may not be what comes to mind for everyone when they read the word "Christian". I am sure that I have had conversations where we were using the same words, but meant different things, which increased the friction of the discussion. As discussed above,

for some it could refer to a culture, even an insincere (or, in a certain sense, a reluctantly sincere one). That means that, in their minds, sweeping generalisations which I have made about Christians may be less accurate than if I had used the prefix of “sincere, devout, creedal, and living”.

In the future, I intend to revise previous articles on this website, updating with new information as I have learned more over the years, and making corrections where necessary. In this process I intend to replace references to “Christian” with references to those who are “in Christ”. I may, in places, still be making bold statements and generalisations from a particular perspective among many, but it is my hope that this change will bring more people into agreement about those bold statements and generalisations.

> If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever will lose his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what will a man give in exchange for his life?
>
> Matthew 16:24–26

- 1. By “creedal Christian”, I mean people who, in principle, at least, would sincerely confess the Apostle’s, Nicene, and Athanasian creeds, and not merely as a rote repetition. They would, _a priori_, be willing to do so when faced with death for doing so (“I can do no other”).
- 2. This metaphor also calls to mind that we, “being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the root and of the richness of the olive tree” (Romans 11:17). We were once dying (branches which had nothing to feed it), but now receive our nutrients and sustenance from God.

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