

A Personal Relationship with God in Christ

*Dialogue with Josh M. Beach*

**Josh:** I want to ask some very involved questions concerning why you turned to Christianity and also I want to tease out the motivating logic behind your decisions and the statements you made.

We have had discussions before about Christian exceptionalism, especially the narrow view of many evangelical Christians who believe that Jesus as “Christ” is the only way to “salvation” and that the Christian tradition and the Bible are the only “way” to God. You mention that “full life” is to be found in Jesus Christ who “is *the* source of authentic existence [emphasis added]” and that your conversion experience, if I may call it that, came when you “realized” that “Jesus really is my Savior.” In light of your personal background, which is Christian; the country and region you live in, which is predominantly Christian and perhaps most visible evangelical Christian; and in light of the fact that all of the outside documents you turned to for spiritual direction mentioned in this essay are Christian - how intellectually or culturally rigorous was your search for “God” and the source of “authentic existence;” do you deny other cultural tradition as viable “ways” to “God;” and finally was your conversion to Christianity a conversion of convenience or did you make an enlightened decision?

**Patrick:** Thank you for your passionate honesty. You’ve raised good points and questions, and I’ll try to deal with what is most central. You mention “many evangelical Christians” “believe” “Jesus...is the only way to ‘salvation’ and that the Christian tradition and

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the Bible are the only ‘way’ to God.” First, I see salvation as being a personal relationship with God as known in Jesus Christ. Thus, full life is found in surrendering to that leadership and realizing that one’s ego is not the ultimate authority – God is. However, God can be known in many different forms of experience and mediums: music, art, literature, nature, other religious traditions – just about any form of encounter can be a conduit for the experience of God. Evangelicals speak of special revelation and general revelation. The former connotes the communication of what is necessary to salvation – such as the central narratives and teachings in the scriptures. General revelation connotes God’s truths as found in experiences of music, other religious traditions, the beauty of a spring day, the sound of the ocean, the pain of loss, the joy of unselfconscious freedom. So, God can be found in other religious traditions, but what is most necessarily true about God for salvation - what is most necessary to be saved from the state of ego elevation and separation from God – is located in Christianity via the relationship with God in Christ. A relationship with Christ is the fullest connection to God available, and it’s how we are most rightly meant to live. Other religions are inevitably partial in their understanding of God’s truth; full understanding is found in Christianity through giving one’s life to the one who walked the earth as both God and man, Jesus Christ.

You ask “how intellectually or culturally rigorous was your search for ‘God’ and the source of ‘authentic existence’”? I see life as a process of learning and growth that continues until death. After graduating from high school, I served for six years in the US Marine Corps, to include the first gulf war. In addition to having an MA in Interdisciplinary Studies (essentially religious studies and writing), I’ve taught writing at Oregon State University, been married and divorced, lost my mother to cancer, and graduated magna cum laude with a joint B.S. in history and philosophy. I’ve taken 5 courses (to include The Historical Jesus, Philosophy and Religion,

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and World Views/Values and the Bible) with Professor Marcus Borg plus I've completed roughly six months of independent study on psychology and religion with Dr. Borg. Further, I've had numerous conversations with Tibetan Buddhist Scholar Jim Blumenthal (who is a practicing Tibetan Buddhist) in addition to taking Dr. Blumenthal's course on The Buddha and Buddhist Philosophy. I've also taken a course in world religions and another course treating modern religions in Japan and China. Lastly, I practiced Zen Buddhist meditation for over two years, having been on three Zen Sesshins (silent meditation retreats – 4 days, 7 days, and 7 days respectively) and several day-long periods of silent meditation. All in all, I'd say my search for truth has been very intellectually, culturally, and experientially rigorous. I will continue searching for truth and insight until I die.

In all of these areas, I've continued to seek the truth as honestly and incisively as possible. You ask if my "conversion to Christianity" is "a conversion of convenience or did you make an enlightened decision?" I'm not familiar with the term "conversion of convenience," but it seems to have a negative connotation, as though suggesting that I embraced Christianity because it was convenient for me to do so, as though perhaps my new faith helped me to fit in better socially or to feel better about life. Let me be clear – my search has always been for what is real, what is true. I didn't expect to become an evangelical Christian – it is something that happened to me in the midst of my search. Prior to my conversion, I didn't believe in evangelical theology or the evangelical approach to the Bible. Indeed, I was quite critical of both, and I adamantly argued against them.

I used to disagree with the idea that Jesus was the primary way to God, and I did not believe the Bible was authoritative. Moreover, I believed that passages in the Bible had to be seen metaphorically so as to be plausible and meaningful because they could not be taken

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literally (an example is the Emmaus Road story in Luke 24). However, since my conversion, I've realized that in the past, I had been projecting my own views upon the biblical text, limiting what was possible. Regarding the Emmaus Road story, I thought it would be silly if taken literally, Jesus appearing unrecognized to his two disciples, later vanishing from sight when they recognize him. To me, that seemed absurd. Another example: I didn't believe dead people could be brought back to life, so I disregarded any passage that indicated otherwise. Thus, I limited my openness to the possibilities inherent in reality. Below that desire to limit reality, I've since realized that the real underlying issues have been my anger at God over my mother's death from cancer coupled with my resistance to surrendering to God as my authority. I had located authority in my ego judgments about what was possible or seemed plausible, not in an openness to what is real and the God who speaks through it all.

Now, I realize that our place is to stand with Job at the whirlwind and accept that the point is not what we can figure out, but an acceptance of what is. Further, we are to surrender to God's will, setting aside our own in favor of His. Instead of getting wrapped up in what we think we can figure out, we should instead surrender to the Lord of all.

**Josh:** You can forgive me if I cannot see past your Christian exceptionalism, which I find hard to palate given the greater intolerance of Christian fundamentalism. You say that other religions and art share a "general revelation," but only Christians have access to the "specific revelation" found in Christ. If I didn't know you personally Patrick I would say you were no different than the common Christian exceptionalist, but because I do know you I have to ask, don't you find it hard to take this position given that only a minority of the world's population professes Christianity? And what about the majority of the world's population who are Hindu's, Buddhists, Muslims, and Secularists and their inferior "general" revelation? Are they cosigned

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to a “general” less blissful heaven, or maybe to a purgatorial state after death, or maybe as a great many Christian exceptionalists believe the majority of the world will burn in hell for eternity because they could not come to accept the exalted “specific” way revealed in the Christian religion? This seems shaky ground my friend. And further, on what grounds do you base your supposition, besides your personal, pro-Christian belief that the Bible is the one and only handbook for salvation? Doesn't every ignorant religious exceptionalist say ‘my way is the only way’? How are you different?

**Patrick:** Well Josh, as usual, you're asking important questions, and for that, I'm grateful. The passion in your words suggests that these subjects strike close to your heart, however you may think about them. And, while I am not familiar with the term “Christian exceptionalism,” I expect you are referring to something analogous to “exclusivism” – the privileging of the Christian revelation over all other means of obtaining the truth. In any case, I will certainly forgive you for taking issue with me, even celebrating our disagreement as I think being real (even in opposition) is definitely preferable to a restraint that comprises what is truly felt and thought. Now, onto your questions and my responses:

No, I don't find it “hard to take” that I privilege the Christianity over all other religions even though there are various different religions around the world proposing different things that they claim to be true. In fact, I think the current academic fixation with relativistic thinking has damaged the ability to critically reason. There is no real relativism; it's a fantasy that inevitably privileges one point of view over another/others while claiming not to do so. If one is really a committed Buddhist or Hindu, he or she will privilege that faith position over all others. The Christian is no different. A Buddhist may believe that folks will be reincarnated infinitely until they are freed from the suffering of the samsara wheel and the Christian will see those who fail

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to accept Christ's lordship as going to hell after they die and the Muslim will see heaven as a place of paradise filled with virgins and an atheist rejects the possibility of any of it while the agnostic is uncertain.

We should all do the best to live fully and be who we are – to follow the truth where it leads. Doing this does not involve a wishy-washy relativistic compromise, but digging in and being real about what one thinks and feels. That's part of the reason I enjoy our dialogue so much Josh – because we're inviting each other to be real, and we're really to be friends even as we might agree to disagree. I think the model of this discussion is the model for how to live with each other when we're a variety of people coming from complex environmental and genetic backgrounds.

As to whether non-Christians will go to hell when they die – that's not for me to decide. I think one must have Jesus Christ to be in a right relationship with God. Period. But, as C.S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*: “But the truth is God has not told us what His arrangements about the other people are. We do know that no man can be saved except through Christ; we do not know that only those who know Him can be saved through Him” (62). Hence, I'm not qualified to judge who will or won't be sent to hell; but, given that I believe salvation is through Jesus Christ, it's in everyone's best interest to submit to Him for salvation. Most pertinent here is the relation to this world – those who have Christ are fundamentally on the right ground and those who don't have Christ are not. We were created to be in intimate relationship with God, and that intimate relationship is most fully realized by a connection to God through Jesus Christ.

In addition to what the Bible and Christian tradition teach, I base this conclusion on my personal conversion experience. When I encountered Christ in a personal way, I was persuaded experientially of a different reality – the reality that God is real, He's all around, and He's known

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in Christ. As my relationship with God through Christ has deepened, I've grown in ways that were previously unknown to me. I'm more confident, more assured, more settled, more grounded. Sure, I make mistakes and have a lifetime of learning ahead, but now I've crossed a fundamental bridge into a new, previously unrealized life. Now, there's a connectedness to my actions and my thoughts and my feelings that didn't exist before – a sense of feeling right about who I am and what I'm about.

When I reflect on how confused and unconfident I was before relative to my role in the larger scheme of life (though ironically I thought I knew a lot definitively), and then I compare that with what has been given to me now, it is clear to me that life in Christ is life as it's meant to be. The longer I live and grow in Him, the more convinced I am. Even more, as I look around and see all the pain and suffering and fracture and loss and misdirection that runs rampant in the world, I realize, Christ is the answer. The culture we live in is guilty for the way it validates the building of the ego and the hardening of self-absorption. Stuck in ourselves, we are lost. As such, we turn to all manner of false gods to relieve our pain: new age religions, eastern mysticism, sports, philosophy, drugs. We were created to be with God in deep relationship, yet we refuse to surrender our egos, so we seek fulfillment in false sources of spirituality. I see it all around – the pain, the confusion, the lost.

I am only different from those in other religions insofar as I believe that Christianity offers the best explanation for the realities of the world. All religions and ways of knowing contain some truth, but the fullest truth is found in Christianity. I have tested and weighed Christianity, and I will continue to do so as I continue to immerse myself in my own life and the Christian faith. I am a Christian because I believe it best provides an understanding of what is true and real.

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**Josh:** I want to follow up on the last question. All religious traditions have been grounded in concrete, historical cultures and regions. By way of provincialism, chauvinism, or the undisputable process of cultural assimilation people all across the globe are socialized (or indoctrinated) into particular social, political and religious traditions. The Christian tradition is no exception. Evangelical Christianity is founded on several, highly subjective, culturally limited assumptions (I will name only a few): the existence of a personal God that acts in history, the notion that Jesus was “Christ” and the “son of God,” the superiority of human beings over all other forms of life, the superiority of males over women, a belief in the total destruction and “end” of this world, and the belief in a dualistic afterlife where the elect are rewarded and the evil are punished. These assumptions are themselves grounded in the Bible, which is assumed by most Christians to be the “inerrant” “Word of God, to some Christians to be “literally” factual, i.e. many contemporary evangelical Christians believe the end of the world is *coming*. Should all Christian’s simply disregard “intellectual difficulties” as “smokescreens” in order to concentrate on their own highly subjective and, what seems to me, highly anti-social search for a *personal* relationship with Christ instead of critically understanding the evolution of their religious tradition and the way Christianity has historically and is currently manipulated by conservative political agendas? Specifically, is the “spiritual” approach to the Bible in its uncritical subjectivity a socially responsible program, especially in light of the precarious foreign and domestic policies of George W. Bush who claims to be a practicing evangelical Christian? What of “historical” Bible scholars like Crossan and Borg who have argued that one cannot responsibly approach the Bible without historical perspective? Can you admit some inherent dangers in the “spiritual” position in light of contemporary American politics?

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**Patrick:** Well, once again you've raised excellent points and asked penetrating questions. In fact, here you've challenged me the most of all. I'll do my best to provide an adequate response.

I agree that "All religious traditions have been grounded in concrete, historical cultures and regions." Of course they have. However, I won't reduce those traditions to their cultural/social conditioning alone. Instead, I believe that God's revelation – his divine will and concomitant truths – is an additional factor that has penetrated the mix of societies, cultures, regions.

I disagree with your claim about evangelicals and men/women. Evangelical Christianity is not founded on "the superiority of males over women." Rather, evangelicals see women and men as having different roles; hence, one is not superior to the other. I do believe the end of the world will come about by God's judgment (unless we humans destroy the world first), but I don't know when that will be.

You ask: "Should all Christians simply disregard 'intellectual difficulties' as 'smokescreens' in order to concentrate on their own highly subjective and, what seems to me, highly anti-social search for a *personal* relationship with Christ instead of critically understanding the evolution of their religious tradition and the way Christianity has historically and is currently manipulated by conservative political agendas?" First, you have set up a false opposition between seeking a relationship with God in Christ and thinking critically about the ways in which one's religious tradition interacts with its society/culture/political systems. This opposition is not necessary, and uncritical thought does not follow logically from a relationship with Christ (though the two can certainly exist together). Regarding "intellectual difficulties" and "smokescreens," these refer to concerns around the veracity of the Bible and the relationship

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with God. Previously, I thought everything had to make sense to me intellectually – I had to understand it, or it was not valid. However, I've since learned that such a view is untenable regarding God. When we set ourselves up as sole authorities, those intellectual difficulties can block us from the real issue – surrendering to God in Jesus Christ, the one in whom we were created to obey and follow. Given that we naturally resist such a surrender, we use various means to distance ourselves from God, and in my case, it was intellectual difficulties. An example: prior to becoming a Christian I'd say to myself, I've never seen a dead person raised, so therefore the Gospel of John can't be true nor can its claims have any bearing on me. Those sorts of ego judgments kept me trapped in myself and unable to relate to God (who speaks through the Bible); those judgments kept me closed.

I totally agree that we should study the evolution of our traditions, to include whether they have become tools for oppression. None of what I assert above contradicts the importance of critical study (hence the false opposition).

You raise an excellent concern regarding George W. Bush and his policies. After all, Bush claims to be an evangelical Christian, yet one can legitimately argue that many of Bush's policies are detrimental and potentially dangerous to individuals in the US as well as to the world as a whole. In my view, we must always remember that the church should be separated from the kingdoms of this world. Indeed, Donald Bloesch has asserted that the church must act as a check on political oppression carried out by such kingdoms; the church should never align itself too closely with political institutions for fear of being co-opted. I agree. When opposing immoral segregation laws, Martin Luther King Jr. was a Baptist minister acting deeply out of his Christian convictions and faith.

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While George W. Bush can espouse Christianity all he wants, the evidence of his faith will be found in his actions. It's up to the individual believer to sort out whether Bush's Christianity is in fact credible. Further, your concern is of huge importance regarding those who might take Bush at face value, saying to themselves, well, he says he's a Christian, so he must be and thus, I'll vote for him. To be so simplistic about such matters can be dangerous, yet it's likely a real potential problem. Finally, Borg and Crossan are right about the need for historical perspective. I concur that if people are uncritical of their society/culture/political systems, this can create real problems in trying to determine what is true and right both for themselves and others.

**Josh:** Christianity seems to me to be a very anti-human religion denying human beings rational capacity, community motivated ideals, and the capacity for progressive self-direction (with the exception of a "savior" figure). You mention several times that you had to give up your ability to analyze, your critical thought, your ego, your "own lights" in order to accept Jesus as your "Lord," and that you are not "truly" who you are "supposed to be" without Jesus as your "savior." This seems to really denigrate the human being and imply an inherent deficiency within human nature, which I completely disagree with. The Christian language you use is derivative of older forms of monarchical assumptions, wherein, the unenlightened masses were always in need of direction and protection from "above." Why must we have "Saviors," "Lords," and "Kings of Kings"? Why cannot we learn to understand our own human nature, use our brains, and collectively learn to live together somewhat peacefully and productively? Why must we "submit" to God?

**Patrick:** You raise important questions and concerns. In short, we must submit to God because that is how we are created to live fully. Thus, we are not supposed to be egos on our

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own, but rather, we are to cooperate with God, who leads us. I know this is hard to take, and in part, this is why I didn't become a Christian for so long. Our egos want to rule – the judging, analyzing, rationalizing side of ourselves that attempts to seize and control. Our empirically oriented culture tells us that what is real must be objectively measurable and what most matters is wealth and what is most important is our own self-aggrandizement. However, life as it is meant to be comes through transcending that ego and finding our meaning in God and serving others, not in elevating ourselves or gaining material possessions or rejecting what we don't understand. Further, the ego judging side of us is only one side – our bodies and minds are much more holistic, and God fills the deep need we all have.

The danger of a position that emphasizes human attributes alone is that authority is located falsely within the ego. It's an illusion that we can control our destinies, yet we try to through our reasoning and judging so as to find some measure of comfort. However, peace will not come until we find right relation with the God who transcends our egos. Those in other spiritual traditions realize the importance of ego-transcendence, they just prescribe a different solution for the problem. Such ego-transcendence can be found in music, poetry, art – they free us from self-preoccupation to be more fully present to our lives and circumstances. Ego-transcendence through art, music, poetry, and other spiritual traditions is a partial solution while following Christ is the complete solution. Christianity is not “anti-human” nor does it deny “human beings rational capacity;” instead, Christianity offers a life that validates the whole person and not just his/her intellect.

**Josh:** Finally, I take exception to your comment on Ephesians. As I mentioned in my last question, the idea of “submitting” to the greater power in order to find and experience one's “true” self seems insulting to human beings, especially in this case to women – and of course you

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failed to comment on the later passage in Ephesians (6:5) where Paul says, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling.” Both passages have been invoked by those in power to deny women equal rights and to deny slaves and workers livable and just working conditions. You assume the “God-factor” and thus your idealized interpretation of this passage disregards the world we live in where Christian Promise Keepers deny their wives autonomy; where American women still earn less than men for equal work; where South East Asian, Eastern European and Russian women are sold into slavery as “wives;” where Islamic fundamentalists beat down woman for not being covered head to foot or for simply wanting to go to school. I would call into question your highly subjective presupposition that “God is watching and keeping score” thus we as humans need do nothing but submit to his will and wait for justice. This was the attitude of monarchists, slave-holders, monopolists, and those professing Christians who told Martin Luther King Jr. to bide his time and wait for the “Lord” to right the African American’s wrongs. Please comment.

**Patrick:** By asserting, “of course you failed to comment on the later passage in Ephesians (6:5) where Paul says, ‘Slaves...,’” you seem to be suggesting that I deliberately avoided commenting here. If so, you are incorrect. I don’t doubt that passages from Ephesians have been used to oppress women and slaves; however, to do so is a mistake and a distortion. As the saying goes, “even the devil quotes scripture.” Anyone can quote from the Bible and believe whatever they want about what it means, but that doesn’t make such an interpretation accurate. Paul is not seeking to advance oppression with these passages. Regarding male/female relations, he is establishing distinct roles in which both men and women subordinate themselves to God (as I’ve explained previously re: Ephesians 5:22-33). As for slaves, this should be understood in its historical context. Paul was writing to particular slaves and advising them to obey their masters.

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Hence, Paul thought that not doing so in this case would be problematic; Paul is not talking about all enslaved peoples for all times.

You assert that I “assume the ‘God-factor’” and that my “idealized interpretation of this passage disregards the world we live in...” I believe God is as real as anything else; a fact of existence. That is my belief, and you are free to disagree with it, just as I disagree with the counter-belief/counter-assumption that a personal God does not exist. My view is not idealized, and I believe that husbands should not try to control their wives, slavery is wrong, and Islamic fundamentalists are wrong to beat women for seeking education.

You write, “I would call into question your highly subjective presupposition that ‘God is watching and keeping score’ thus we as humans need do nothing but submit to his will and wait for justice.” First, I ask that you refrain from attributing quotes to me that are not my own. I’m not sure whom you’re quoting here, but it’s not me. Second, this statement is inaccurate on its face. I have not said that we should “do nothing but submit to [God’s] will and wait for justice.” In fact, if my life is any indication, I have continued to seek knowledge and live my life as fully as possible, both before and after my conversation. My post-conversion insight is that we are to cooperate with God in our activities while placing him rightfully in authority over our lives.

**Josh:** You mention above that Paul was writing in a specific historical situation and that he was not writing to all people at all times, and the logical extension of that statement infers that *all* of the language of the *Bible* is historically conditioned, thus one *should not* use the *Bible* to justify intolerance, hatred, murder, slavery, dominating women, killing disobedient children, stoning witches, and killing homosexuals *all of which* are sanctioned in various parts of the *Bible*. Thus, as Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan argue, the Bible is a “historical” document, which one can use to access “God” through tradition, but it should not be used as the basis or

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sole authority for living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. You seem to be walking a slippery line between the fundamentalist's belief in the sole and fundamental authority of the *Bible* as *the* guide for living (no matter which century it was written in) and the more sophisticated and socio-politically aware Christianity of the Borg/Crossan-school of historical criticism. Please comment.

**Patrick:** You're on the right track in your understanding of what's at stake here Josh, but you must be careful so as not to oversimplify. The Bible is a very complex work written by multiple authors over thousands of years across a multitude of historical/social/political/economic conditions. It is into those complex conditions that I see the stream of God's revelation inserting itself. Before I will accept your terms, you must establish them. Thus, I will not accept your list above relative to the Bible until you make a case for your particular interpretative point of view. These are complex matters that require complex treatment. Right now, you have asserted a number of elements you believe are "sanctioned" by the Bible without providing any context or argument for why this is so. Next time, do so and I'll be happy to deal with any example you provide.

Your perception of what is at stake is accurate insofar as you raise the question of authority. I think that issue is central. Thus, do we follow the guidance of our own egos, or do we follow God's will, or do we follow some mix of the two – what do we look to as a fundamental guide for our lives? In my view, we are to see God as our ultimate authority – as the defining source of authority for our lives. The liberal theological position is to say that the Bible itself is not grounded in divine authority but is just a record of experience. The problem with liberal Christianity and atheism is that they minimize or eliminate God's role while maximizing the role of the ego. Ego idolatry is the source of sin and the very thing we need to get away from in order to be free to find life as it is meant.

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My position (and the broader evangelical position) is to accept that the Bible is conditioned by different times/places/events even as it contains the revelation of God's truths. Parts of that revelation are only applicable to the time in which they were given, and other parts are applicable for all times. The key to sorting this out is the problem of interpretation. Thus, I (and evangelicalism more broadly) combine a belief in the authority of the Bible with the importance of being socially and politically aware.