

Christianity `a la carte

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Abstract

This essay seeks to identify and discuss some of the essential features and dominant themes running across the established literature on the topic of false versions of Christianity variously named (pagan, nominal, fake, and so forth), an overriding concern rooted in a plethora of biblical passages. It begins by explaining the grounded motivations for writing the essay, and then moves on to provide an operational definition of false Christianity. The essay argues that the primary focus in the contrast between false and genuine Christianity in the literature is modeled upon an assumed irreconcilable difference between a worldly cultural and a biblical spiritual Christianity viewed largely as ideal types. For the purposes of analysis and exegesis, the essay collapses all variously named false versions of Christianity into one cultural category as contrasted with biblical Christianity in terms of worldview, spiritual vs. material emphasis, and disposition towards scriptural passages, among other factors. Using the modern concept of social justice as a heuristic guide, the essay offers some sobering final thoughts on the essential difference between the various versions of secular cultural Christianity and authentic biblical Christianity, highlighting the issue of adherence to relative cultural mandates versus absolute biblical values, principles, and doctrines. It concludes by suggesting that an obsessive preoccupation with social justice by cultural Christians, like the social gospel movement before it, tends to transfer attention and confidence away from the God of the Christian Bible toward secular human institutions, independent reason, and anthropomorphic experience. In the

process, cultural Christians increasingly relate to the Bible and Christian doctrine much like they might browse through a menu at a local restaurant where original sin and repentance, like many other biblical doctrines and values, are simply not among the selections.

Keywords: false Christianity; cultural vs. biblical Christianity; à la carte; social justice; social gospel; material vs. spiritual; Bible; motifs; worldview; secular; cherry-picking passages.

Preliminary Comments

Some important preliminary remarks regarding the motivations for writing this essay are perhaps in order here before we begin to tackle the subject at hand. In a lengthy footnote of a previous paper presented as part of a keynote speaker series,¹ it was pointed out how a social phenomenon known as cultural Christianity (Inserra, 2019; Ferris, 2019; Pearcy, 2008; DeMar and Leithart, 2021 (1988) is very different from a strict biblical Christianity in many respects (Hunt, 1986, 1985; Forster, 2014, 2008; Harrell, 2021; McCune, 2009; MacArthur & Mayhue, 2017; Daring, 2020; Hanna, 2011; Calvin, 1998).

There the emphasis was on four general distinguishing features which tend to differentiate cultural Christianity from biblical Christianity. In that footnote, the four distinguishing features of biblical Christianity generally referenced in the pertinent literature were broadly identified as follows:

- Jesus Christ as Son of God and Savior of humanity.
- Working on Earth to achieve eternal life by observing the values and teachings contained in the Bible.
- Fully embracing the entire Bible, Old AND New Testaments, as an interconnected organic whole

¹ Marc Grenier, "Shades of Resurrection Doctrine Within Ancient Judaism", paper presented at the Keynote Speaker Biblical Studies Series -Round 1, April 26, 2022, Department of Theology, CJCU, Tainan, Taiwan.

without separating them.

- Viewing the Bible from the heart at all times as the true, inspired living Word of the Creator God the Father.

At the end of that long footnote, there was a statement that elicited a lot of heated discussion and debate during the question-and-answer period and in the hallways after the talk that bears directly on the present essay:

“Again, cultural Christianity is not true Christianity but, rather, a fake watered-down replica misrepresented as authentic”.

Apparently, the notion of false or ‘fake’ Christianity touched the nerves of a few people who had never considered such a possibility despite numerous biblical references to the contrary.

After the discussions, requests were made for another follow-up paper and presentation to deal more extensively with the controversial issues and assumptions implied in the concept of false Christianity. However, it was officially delayed so many times due to COVID concerns at the time that too much time had elapsed to address those concerns in a presentation format. In the interim, a decision was made to write the present essay as a manuscript for publication.

Introduction

Obviously, the keyword in that last phrase is ‘fake’. That is to say, the implication is that there are different versions or masks, if you will, of Christianity existing in the world which collectively can be categorized or viewed as false or fake Christianity.² Hence the title of this paper is a logical extension of a central idea contained in a previous essay.

² Both the word and the phrase have been used in several publications up to the present time. For example, see Matthews, 2012; and Andrew, 2018.

It turns out that the phrase ‘fake Christianity’ has been kicking around in the scholarly, clerical and lay literature for quite some time often under various aliases such as pagan (Chase, 2021; Viola & Barna, 2012; Viola, 2005), nominal (Nolte, 2015), false (Jensen, 2017), cultural (Inserra, 2017), cafeteria (Kreeft, 2022), counterfeit (Oshman, 2022; Mercier, 2020; Wax, 2011), progressive (Olson, 2022; Piippo, 2021; Young, 2019), liberal (Machen, 2009), and a whole slew of other largely pejorative monikers. So, then, the concept itself is not original although a manifestly different interpretation will be offered in the present essay. There are slight but sometimes significant differences between these different conceptual versions of Christianity, of course. But from a strict biblical point of view, they have more in common than they differ from each other.

Essentially, they imply that there are kinds of Christianity existing everywhere in the modern world in terms of actual religious attitudes, ways of thinking, and behavioral practices which are not authentic or genuine. Significantly, it should also be remembered that the present discussion about different versions of false versus genuine beliefs has tended to be a central feature not only of the Christian faith since its birth but, as well, most if not all other religious belief systems including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and even Judaism itself, the very foundation of Christianity.³

Some General Considerations

The question arises then, where did this sort of idea arise or emerge from, this notion of a ‘fake Christianity’? An answer to this question may help to shed some light on why it has become such a dominant focus in the multi-disciplinary study of modern religious attitudinal and behavioral trends in Christianity across multiple societies, as the comprehensive bibliography attached to this essay makes clear.

³ The last phrase in the previous sentence is important to keep firmly in mind when thinking about Christianity or the Christian faith in general. No Judaism, no Christianity.

From the mountain of readings on this topic, one of the first things we notice is how it crosses the secular-religious divide. Materials addressing this topic stem from both secular scholars derived from just about every field of study as well as religious officials such as priests, bishops, reverends, pastors, and so forth. Within academic scholarship, it crosses the natural science-social science divide from biology, chemistry, and math to sociology, psychology, economics and just about everything else in between.

Within the Christian field, they are written by authors across the divide of religious orders, both Protestants and Catholics alike, and within the denominational divide as well. Baptists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and hundreds of other authors from a wide assortment of denominations. Evangelicals don't appear to have a monopoly on identifying and trying to understand this modern religious phenomenon although they may be heavily represented. Even self-professed agnostics and atheists like the notorious Richard Dawkins are getting in on this fashionable bandwagon, now repeatedly claiming to be a proud card-carrying member of 'cultural Christianity'.⁴

As well, there doesn't appear to be any geographical or regional limitations on this recent religious trend. The literature on the topic of inauthentic Christianity points out that the same phenomenon can be found in numerous

⁴ Although there have been many famous self-acknowledged agnostics and atheists over the course of recent history such as Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Charles Darwin, the Oxford University-trained evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins is a world famous and highly outspoken contemporary atheist who has explicitly declared himself against God and all religions even a person who does not believe in Christ nor God nor Bible while at the same time publicly defining himself as a 'cultural Christian' in all media and across a plethora of books and scholarly journals (Dawkins 2021, 2019, 2017, 2015, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2011, 2009, 2006, 2003, 1998, 1996, 1995, 1993, 1986, 1982, 1976). As stated above, Dawkins defines himself officially as a cultural Christian not simply in publications but, also in television and print news media (See Dawkins, 2001, 2013b and 2013c.)

countries around the world although in varying stages or phases of development. So, then, the claim is that its fast becoming a worldwide phenomenon, if it isn't already. It's not just a pronounced characteristic restricted to America or Canada or other advanced Western nations (Barna, 2022, 2005).

False Christianity in the Bible

The motivational and inspirational source for recognizing, describing, and explaining this trendy religious phenomenon called 'fake Christianity' is, curiously enough, the Bible itself. Just about every reading on the topic appears to be derived from various passages contained in both the Old and New Testaments, with perhaps slightly more examples from the latter. And within the Bible itself, some passages are referred to more frequently than others. The following are just a small but significant sample of the most frequently cited biblical passages out of hundreds that either directly talk about and/or strongly imply the notion of a false or counterfeit or 'fake' Christianity:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter the kingdom of heaven. On that day, many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.’” (Matthew 7: 21-23)

“Do not love this world nor the things it offers you, for when you love the world, you do not have the love of the Father in you.” (1 John 2: 25)

“And the Lord says, ‘These people say they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And their worship of me is nothing but

man-made rules learned by rote.’” (Isaiah 29:13)

“For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ...” (Corinthians 11: 13-15)

“For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” (Jude 1:4)

“But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord..., and bring upon themselves swift destruction.” (2 Peter 2: 1)

“For false Christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect.” (Mark 13:22)

“Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name and will deceive many.” (Matthew 24: 4-5)

“For laying aside the commandments of God, you hold the tradition of men All too well you reject the commandments of God, that you may keep your tradition.” (Mark 7:8-9)

“If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments”. (Matthew 19:17)

“Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.” (Colossians 2:8)

“Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many”. (Matthew 24: 11)

“...., but keeping the commandments of God is what matters”. (1 Corinthians 7: 19)

“For this is the Love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5: 3).

Some Dominant Themes in the Literature

In the existing literature on the topic of false Christianity, several motifs can be readily identified. One major thematic thread running across this material is the constant contrast between cultural Christianity viewed as worldly and biblical Christianity interpreted exclusively as a spiritual entity. The claim is that anything other than a Christianity that encompasses both the Old and the New Testament is asserted to be a false Christianity, despite containing some features of genuine Christianity.

A. Different Worldviews

So, then, let's review once again some of the key differences between false or fake cultural Christianity and genuine biblical Christianity are constantly mentioned in this literature as well as notably suggested in so many passages of the Bible itself, as we just reviewed above. Generally speaking, the essential difference between these two conceptions of Christianity is that the beliefs and practices contained within them are defined and motivated by different worldviews or sets of ideas about the nature of God, the universe and humanity as well as the relationship between them.

As the name implies, cultural Christianity is largely if not entirely derived from and driven by values, beliefs, and attitudes that have their source in contemporary worldly or material culture in the present. In other words, the organizing

principle and key reference point in the thinking and behavior of so-called cultural Christians tends to be culture, not the Bible, even if unbeknownst to them. By contrast, the values and beliefs contained within biblical Christianity are founded upon the entire Bible alone viewed organically as the inspired Word of an omnipotent and caring God. That God created the world and everything in it, created humanity in His own image, and is to be worshipped and obeyed over and above culture according to His own Word and laws or commandments contained in the Old Testament of the Holy Bible.

This one God is believed to reign supreme and sovereign, almighty over all nations, rulers, empires and governments in human history, and will hold them accountable on judgment day. In other words, the determining principle and key reference point in the thinking and behavior of biblical Christians is the ancient worldview contained in the Holy Bible itself as represented in Genesis and Mosaic Law; it is not to be found at all within the contemporary material world of culture.

These are the general worldview differences between cultural and biblical Christianity described in the literature. Now let's get into some of the finer details which may help us to understand why so many different terms are used to contrast them such as nominal, false, counterfeit, and so forth. It bears repeating that biblical Christianity uses the Bible alone as the primary foundation for Christian behavior. In other words, a truly biblical style of living adopts an ancient biblical worldview flowing into the first century of Christ, not a contemporary secular worldview flowing out of culture.

B. Cultural Compromise vs. Spiritual Obedience

That means that at the spiritual level of meaning, it inwardly or internally identifies itself as 'Christian' in order to adhere to biblical principles, values, and teachings in general. Biblical Christians are not willing to compromise or disobey or

contradict biblical principles, values and teachings in order to satisfy or pacify cultural demands or challenges even if such cultural requirements are legalities or laws. Unquestioned or unexamined cultural conformity tends not to be a central part of the authentic biblical Christian's vocabulary and behavior.

By contrast, cultural Christians are quite willing to compromise biblical principles and teachings to suit cultural requirements. This means that cultural Christians habitually only outwardly identify as Christian, not inwardly at the spiritual level of meaning, that is, at the level of the human heart. They tend to conform to unbiblical worldly or cultural value systems which are opposed to the laws and teachings promulgated by the Bible. By making themselves friends of the world in this way, they put themselves in enmity with the biblical God (James 4:4). That means that when Christ suggests believers should be in the world but not of the world, cultural Christians lodge a contrary preference.

It must be emphasized here that it doesn't necessarily take a self-professed Christian to engage in cultural compromise. The ideologies, philosophies, and doctrines of the world find many adherents who are not Christian. In terms of actual concrete behavior in practice, not only Christians may be captive to worldly philosophies and ideologies (Colossians 2:8). The point is that there are plenty of people who are not Christians who constantly and willingly disobey, contradict, and even despise biblical laws and teachings in their everyday behavior and thinking, consciously or not.

Biblical Christians emphasize the spiritual requirements of repentance, obedience to God's Word as represented in the full Bible, and pursuing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through which followers believe salvation is achieved. The commandments of God contained in Mosaic law and the biblical worldview contained in the creation doctrine of Genesis refuse to be compromised, broken, ignored or abandoned in order to uphold cultural traditions or worldly

ideologies, philosophies, and doctrines. For cultural Christians, it's a different story.

C. Cherry-Picking Bible Passages

Another dominant thematic focus in this literature is that there is no cherry-picking of Bible passages in biblical Christianity. This is because it is viewed as a living organic system of meaning which represents and establishes the cement in the foundation of the biblical belief system, largely poised as antithetical to one's culture or ideology or philosophy. For biblical Christians, the Bible is the final authority in one's values, beliefs, and life, not out of convenience but from necessity. The living organic system of biblical meanings is the judge of cultural history, traditions, ideologies, philosophies, religious group affiliation, or other worldly doctrines, not the other way around.

The Bible is never doubted as being the Word of God for genuine biblical Christians even though certain passages or parts may not be well understood, whereas that is not necessarily the case for cultural Christians. In other words, biblical Christians steadfastly maintain full and complete humility and subservience towards the Bible. They tend not to view themselves free to be selective about what they want and don't want to believe in the Bible according to what may or may not be culturally fashionable. By contrast, the humility of cultural Christians is found wanting because they tend to cherish their freedom to do so as sovereign.

Sobering Final Thoughts

Therefore, biblical Christianity is about pleasing God through obeying God's Word, commandments, and laws without question nor doubt as represented in the Holy Bible. It's about having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as savior and living a lifestyle in conformity with the teachings of Christ, not a comfortable conformity to the trendy value systems or

cultural traditions of the material world.

Cultural Christians actively seek the approval of human institutions, not God, contrary to what biblical Christians do (Galatians 1:10; 1 Thessalonians 2:4). Cultural Christians may share certain self-selected features of biblical Christianity, but in the end, they are what may be regarded as a la carte Christians who relate to Christianity much like they relate to a menu while ordering a meal at one of their favorite restaurants.

For our purposes here, one final dominant theme highly characteristic of false Christianity in countries around the world in our modern times needs to be singled out for special attention. Whether it is called cultural, nominal, counterfeit, false, progressive, liberal, pagan, cafeteria, or any other praiseworthy or pejorative nomenclature, contemporary writing on false Christianity focus heavily on the contrast between the material or physical social features of the world and the spiritual requirements of adherence to God's Word as proclaimed in Genesis and the commandments as promulgated through Mosaic Law in the Old Testament. As a result, not unexpectedly, the false Christian ends up heavily portrayed as emphasizing the fashionable cultural mandate of 'social justice' while arguably ignoring or undervaluing God's sole independent supreme spiritual role in rendering earthly justice at a personal time of choosing as the Bible confirms.⁵

The implication here is that the focus on material social justice detracts the attention of faith away from God the Father Creator to overriding confidence in human institutions, reason, experience, and science, focusing upon the central role of humanity rather than God in establishing justice on earth, totally in consonance with the values of the

⁵ There is a huge literature on the 'social gospel' source of the Judaic 'social justice' movement both of which are rooted in the European Enlightenment and the Protestant Reformation. This is a fascinating and absolutely core part of the entire fake Christianity debate, to be sure. Unfortunately, there is no time here to fully address this feature.

Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment. (Wright, 2003). When the primary focus of worldly analysis becomes social justice, authentic biblical Christians get upset and worried, but not because they don't believe in justice. It's because it conflicts with their biblical worldview as outlined above. They believe it tends to lead people to shy away from appealing to biblical values and principles for guidance in addressing contemporary problems.

It leads them astray from a genuine biblical view of the world in several ways. One way of leading people astray and deceiving them is by encouraging them to feel free to cherry-pick any parts of the Bible to accept or not accept and using a contemporary cultural worldview to define, evaluate, and apply them. Another way it deceives people is by promoting the belief that Christianity is only one among many different but equally valid religions. In other words, it tends to relativize the absolute truths contained in the Holy Bible, therefore neutralizing the values, principles, and teachings of the Christian faith.

Further, a social justice focus tends also to effectively relativize and displace biblical definitions of marriage, sexuality, and gender with modern cultural definitions. People start to believe that their cultural identity or their ethnic identity is more important than their Christian citizenship at least in terms of how they actually behave in reality. Finally, biblical Christianity also claims that the social justice concept is a tangled web of abstract deceptions that encourages people to think that the only thing God requires you to do is to be good to people and have faith; there's no need to worry about doing deeds or works.

In this view, the behavioral maxim becomes just to love one another and be good to each other; be nice people; just be good jello, that is, soft and malleable, cultural Christians and not to worry too much about their own moral depravity and sinful nature or repentance or even death and salvation. The

real ‘original sin’, if you will, is to be found in the exploitative or otherwise problematic structures of society, not so much sourced in sinful human nature as per genuine Christianity. By contrast, biblical Christians would view all of these features collectively as just another of many false gospels that are characteristic of the end times predicted in the Holy Bible of the Christian faith (Childers, 2020).

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