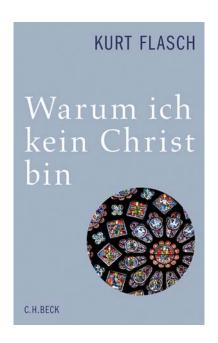Translated excerpt

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Warum ich kein Christ bin

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Kurt Flasch
Why I am Not a Christian

Translated by David Burnett

1. Taking Stock

I'm 83 years old now and marching towards the end of my life. I would like to use this opportunity to account for my experiences. The Christian religion is one of them. It was not the only topic in my life, not even the main focus; politics and philosophy, history and literature were just as important to me. But I always came back to it in different ways, and will now briefly summarize the conclusion I have come to.

I got to know Christianity early on in my life, and under the best possible circumstances – not at the moment of its triumph, but as part of a small group that suffered and was persecuted. An uncle of mine is listed in the register of Catholic martyrs of the twentieth century. Later I had the opportunity to study its greatest intellectual and artistic achievements, and was given ample time and freedom to do so. I read all the fine print, and discussed its truth with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in the Grand Amphitheater of the Sorbonne. The result was not hatred, but calm, even cheerful distance. I am no longer a Christian. I would like to explain why.

My concern is the Christian doctrine. I can already hear my detractors saying Christianity is not about *doctrine*, it's a *way of life*. In those cases where it truly is about living, I see no need to criticize it. It is now more than 2,000 years old, however. It was in power for a long time and showed what it was capable of. It availed itself of every opportunity to explain what it was really about. Many of my fellow human beings consider themselves Christians, but rarely, if ever, do they bother to ask themselves what Christianity says about itself. There are good reasons for this. It is not their fault if Christian doctrine is far removed from real life.

Still, they deserve to be ridiculed by Fichte, because more than a few Christians have persuaded themselves and others that they could "believe in something as long as they had no objections to it and could let it be." The Christian churches themselves in their three main traditions – Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism – have depicted themselves often enough. They have created creeds of faith and council resolutions, confessional writings, rules and rituals. Synods and teaching offices have established authoritative doctrine. And well into the twentieth century, they were gracious enough, not to put too fine a point on it, to add that those who disagreed with its teachings were damned for all eternity. Formal excommunication, or anathema, was used so frequently that they developed their own abbreviation for it. Older theological works simply wrote *a.s.*, meaning *anathema sit* – let him be accursed. They were never at a loss for answers when asked "What is your purpose? What do you believe?"

These answers are often inconsistent. The Christian faith has a history of discord and disagreement. If you ask what Christians believe in nowadays, you'll receive a hundred different answers. But there are some commonalities. These are taken from the distant past, from books written in the year 100, from resolutions reached by church assemblies in the fourth and fifth centuries, and confessions of faith from the sixteenth century. Christians sometimes deny this. They want to look younger than they are. Small groups take the old structure and chip off little pieces of it. In doing so they claim to offer the "original" Christianity. They, too, derive Christian "living" from "tradition."

The most *visible* church officials usually make a musty impression. This is no coincidence. The way they act and present themselves – with pompous titles such as "His Holiness," exuding an antiquated and exotic air, using robes and a monstrously inflated language – basically reflects the way they think. *Representative* church life cultivates sclerotic forms. We have a weakness for old men in outmoded clothing and take pleasure in their old-fashioned language. Some of them feel pressured to abandon their stodgy manners. This or that theologian tones it down for the times. A pious father offers words of encouragement and dedicates himself to the well-being of his flock. Lutherans gladly fall back on environmentalism. But any attempts to break free are thwarted, they all remain shackled to the past. If you want to know modern Christianity, there is no avoiding its archaic self-interpretations. I do not deny that Christian life does exist in some quarters. No one would confuse it with papal funerals and Reformation anniversaries. What's debatable is the historical self-definitions. That's why contemplating Christianity nowadays means taking a good look at its old constituent parts, preferably the ritual creeds professed by Catholics and Protestants alike.

It is not my fault that Christianity looks so antiquated. Its origins date back 2,000 years. Of course being ancient does not make it wrong. Geometry is even older. Greek philosophy as well. It, too, suffers from the burden of tradition.

And it, too, must be taken into account here, because philosophy and historical research have fed and nourished my doubts about the Christian

faith. Which is not to say I borrowed a pre-existing anti-Christian philosophy. My infection developed more subtly. Philosophers reinforced my growing conviction that I alone was responsible for my views, and that I should and was entitled to examined and evaluate them. Historians and Hellenists showed me how to read carefully. Philosophers also taught me to reflect on the pros and cons of Christian documents. They emboldened me to rethink my convictions. They quelled my doubts about whether or not I, the fickle one, should allow myself at all to scrutinize the most solemn principles. They showed me that believers, just like nonbelievers, were inevitably reasoning subjects confronted with tradition. Even those who accept it, and those who teach that no mortal may judge God's word, pass judgment on it, declaring it worthy of acceptance and rejecting other traditions. The friction was not caused by anti-Christian philosophical theories I had happened to encounter; it was I myself who created it. I felt encouraged to look at various interpretations of the world from an individualistic and detached perspective. I decided not to take anything that mattered to me for granted – neither politics (the criminals were still in power at the time), none of what I learned in school, none of all my disparate reading, nor the Christian religion either, which had helped me think of myself as a subject, one that was responsible for discerning between truth and falsehood.

Accidents of birth, history, and environment did their part, and will have to be recounted here. They made my life and thought into a personal example of the relationship nowadays between philosophy and religion. Portraying all of this in a simplified way is the aim of this book. I will not

leave out the personal aspects, though I neither can nor want to give a play-by-play. It is up to the reader to decide if my experiences are relevant to his own perspective or not. The connection between individuality and truth I will address in depth later on. To begin with I would like to ask my readers to reflect on this passage from Goethe's *Truth and Fiction*:

> *Man may seek his higher destination on earth or in heaven, in the present or in the future, he yet remains on this account exposed to an eternal wavering, to an influence from without which ever disturbs him, until he once for all makes a resolution to declare that that is right which is suitable to himself.*

None of which is meant to suggest that talking about Christian faith is a strictly personal affair. A number of objective claims can be made, about Christianity as well as philosophy. To start with philosophy, it is a verifiable fact that it quickly came into conflict with the world of the Greek gods, that it asserted its primacy of education against poetry and religion in a polemical way, and often rather crudely.

Heraclitus, for example, wanted to have Homer flogged, because Homer's many competing gods failed to recognize the *one*, divine and natural reality. The Greeks had to be reeducated. According to the early philosophers, the gods of Homer and Hesiod were human inventions.

Plato criticized these gods. His philosophy attempted to correct the corrupt ways of Athens, both public and private. It aimed to promote the

right life, sometimes in opposition to popular religious beliefs, and if need be by reinterpreting them. While some of these beliefs may contain an intuitive apprehension of the truth in the manner of the oracle's prophecies, excessive corruption and the resultant execution of the most righteous man prove that it is time to substantiate the claims of life-guiding convictions.

Socrates set an example of how to go about this. The individual holds himself accountable for what he thinks and says. He no longer sees himself as the product of his environment, but actively engages with it. Nothing of life-determining importance goes unquestioned; his only certainty is that he has to examine all of these things. He doesn't want to examine *everything*, of course, but everything that is generally considered good. This examination unleashes enthusiasm in some young people, but it also produces hatred. Socrates showed how uncertain the prevailing opinions about the right life are. And so he looked for new ones. It is this very willfulness that people took offense to. Indeed, he paid the price for this method, loyal to it until his death. This conflict existed already in the pre-Socratic era, as fragment B42 of Heraclitus shows. Anaxagoras declared that Helios, the sun, was not a god but a heap of red-hot stone. He attacked the prevailing religion, asserting the principle of knowledge over tradition. The pious reacted by putting him on trial for godlessness.

Xenophanes, too, was reserved towards popular religion. He relativized by noting that the gods of the Ethiopians are black and pug-nosed, whereas those of the Thracians are blue-eyed and red-haired. He argued as follows: if oxen, horses, and lions had hands and could draw, the

horses would draw their gods to look like horses, the oxen to look like oxen, and the lions would make their gods look lion-like (B15).

The battle was fierce from the outset. Bitter words were exchanged, and this largely because of the shared ground between philosophy and religion. Both laid claim to the big topics. They told about the origin of things. They explained where we came from and divided time into periods and epochs: the Golden Age, *before* and *after* the Fall of Man. Poets who pondered the gods, *theologêsantes*, were the first philosophers. They told stories, *mythoi*, and offered food for thought. Aristotle referred to them in this vein at the start of his *Metaphysics*. They were the starting point, which philosophers had to acknowledge and abandon. The ancients provided images, stimulated discussion about the cosmos, its whence and whither, but these were awkward beginnings for Aristotle.

The old religions gave peoples a cultural mold, ensured their way of life, helped them survive social breakdowns. No wonder people defended them, often tooth and nail. This is why I emphasize the common ground between religion and philosophy: to begin with their common origin. Greek religion was older than philosophy. Both were concerned with universal themes, touching on ethics and medicine, magic and natural phenomena. Both claimed to offer guidance in private and political affairs. And the two were often in competition. In the course of the modern era, both had to forfeit certain areas of responsibility, were marginalized, became specialized departments. This is how the historical situation emerged which the religious and nonreligious now face.

My concern is the historical and intellectual situation which religion and the critique of religion are faced with in *today's* world. My topic is not religion in general, neither its nature nor its future. I can't say much about either. And I doubt whether others know much more about them, or even one of them. Many talk about the future of religious belief nowadays. I don't know what the future holds, which is why I don't talk about it. Of course I can't dispense with some general assumptions about religion, not even in the opening words of this book, but these were merely provisional, more experimental in nature. I will scrutinize them later. This book is not about a general concept of religion; it is about Christianity, the only religion I know comprehensively from its sources and as a reality in the present. I want to know if I have good reasons to acknowledge it as the truth or not. I will comment on the concept of truth underlying it, but will not discuss the general concept of religion.

This limitation is due to the following observation. If you start with a general concept of religion then proceed to evaluate its individual manifestations, e.g., Christianity, you will end up distilling the common features of two or three historical religions. You will concentrate on its ethics or describe the language it uses. It is unlikely that anyone will be a true expert in more than one or two religions. Any description of the "essentials" of religion are thus based on fragmentary and dubious factual assumptions, and often on a weak knowledge of the respective source languages. Any definition of religion obtained in this manner will often conceal an attitude of favoritism or aloofness. Applied to Christianity, the

desired result will easily materialize. I do not trust such generalizing descriptions of historical phenomena. They tend to feign neutrality.

What I can and need to offer is a theoretical explanation for what I mean by the "truth." To answer the question of what Islam *is* and apply a prefabricated definition of religion to it, for example, would require years of learning. Many Islamic scholars themselves fall short – sometimes because they cling to Western biases, sometimes because they mistake the self-understanding of individual groups for "the Islamic," and sometimes because the focus of their research is not the *origin* and development of Islam. Such a task would require a knowledge of Syrian, Aramaic, and probably other languages, as well as archeological and numismatic studies. For this reason I limit myself to Christianity. Christianity itself, of course, has taken many and sometimes conflicting forms. I will talk about this in a moment.

But first a brief word about the nature of my investigation. My aim if self-understanding, and I hope to remain philosophical even when touching on theological topics. I will take a close look at all things historical, Christianity being a historical religion. In presenting modern-day Christianity, I refer to the old confessions of faith and sometimes to the Bible itself. I want to depict a historical movement and not debunk abstract theories. My arguments are verifiable, philological, without going into the kind of detail required for an in-depth study. But some details are necessary. Philosophical thinking is never rigorous without exact observation. Observations have to be *made*, they don't just fall in your lap. Of course there are people who make too many observations, who

spend their time gathering rather than thinking. I try to combine philosophy with history, in other words, to think about the truth without overlooking important Biblical writings or developments in the thinking of Saint Augustine or Luther. I want to give the sources of Christianity a thorough reading and ask which truths they offer me nowadays. As a philosopher with an interest in the truth, I want to talk about Christianity as a complex historical development. From a purely historical perspective, it is not very wise to put much store in the documents of the Christian religion. We are right in being skeptical towards such philosophically minded authors who first want to *change*, improve, and reform Christianity before embracing it wholeheartedly. They say that the Christian church does not understand its own intentions; if only it would grasp this or that, it would become the religion of the future whose hour is now. They usually want to cure it of its literal self-understanding. They would like to see it more free, figurative, and human. Only Christianity the way they conceive it is considered true and legitimate. Philosophers (or theologians) like this would much prefer to found a new church. But this is not the task of philosophers and, anyway, they wouldn't succeed.

One such well-meaning figure is Gianni Vattimo. He loves his Catholic church and doesn't want to part with it. But he wants it to adopt a different stance towards women and homosexuals. Actually, Vattimo demands even more: it should give up the "objectivism" of its concept of truth and allow a new interpretation of its message. It should interpret its dogmas metaphorically.

It doesn't seem likely that the Roman church will fulfill Vattimo's wishes. They were wishful thinking even back in 1965. The question is whether it could do so at all, even if it wanted to. Vattimo seems to me like a friendly and sensible young man who, thanks to family tradition, has become a member of a fishing club – incidentally, to this very day there are fishing guilds in Germany that you have to be *born* into, where no stranger is admitted – but who then discovers his sympathy for fish and suggests that the fishing club start crocheting tablecloths instead of killing fish. I admire the emotional sensitivity of such young men, but don't find their ideas very promising. Wishing for something fervently does not make it any more logical. A more philosophically coherent approach would be to leave the fishing club behind without condemning it, and to recognize the power of inertia that gives such societies their longevity.

2. What do you mean "Christian"?

"That sounds all right, and yet

It's all askew to me;

For you have no Christianity."

Margaret to Faust, Goethe *Faust I*

Martha's Garden, verses 346ff.

Anyone who claims to not be a Christian has to explain what he means by "being Christian." This is not an easy task. For there is no such thing as

Christianity, just Christianities in the plural. Luckily it's not up to me to decide who has the right to call themselves a Christian. The label seems much in demand, its ownership controversial. All I want to say is in what sense I am *not* a Christian.

The word "Christian" can be interpreted in different ways. Some men are considered Christian because they don't forge checks or beat their wives. Others define being Christian as caring for one's neighbor. This is surely better, but still not enough. There is a whole range of additional characteristics. I will start with the basic ones and move on to more complex definitions.

Some people call themselves Christians and have a minimalist notion in mind: the belief that God is well-meaning with him, or with all human beings for that matter. If I ask him what Christ has to do with this, he adds that Jesus spread the word that God is not wrathful and does not demand blood sacrifices; God is benevolent, even love itself. Accordingly, a Christian is a metaphysical optimist. His belief is basically his reliance on the grace of God.

A *second* type of Christian trusts in God and hopes that a better life in a more just world awaits him *after death*. He adds to his belief the hope in an afterlife and the notion of justice, if not in this world than in the next. If asked, he might answer that he is a Christian because Christ opened up a path to God for him.

In a *third* version, the Christian says he believes in the Bible. He assumes that God created the world. Maybe not in six days, but at least he gave mankind a prominent position in it. He doesn't claim that the

story of Adam and Eve tells the *actual* origin of humanity; he understands it "figuratively." He doesn't know if humanity is descended from a single man and woman. If asked what all of this has to do with Christ, he might answer that Christ confirmed these notions and taught us to say "Father" to God the Creator. It is thanks to Jesus that we have a friendly relationship to our Maker.

A *fourth* and rather special group gives reasons why they are right to believe. They defend orthodoxy – literally the "right opinion." Nowadays he tends not to say it out loud, but he thinks that Muslims are *light-minded* believers, whereas Christians believe with good reason. The credibility of their Christian faith is based on undeniable philosophical and historical proofs, they claim, which provide a rational foundation for belief. They refer to them as the *praeambula fidei*. They acknowledge two groups of proofs that make Christianity *worthy* of belief. The first group is comprised of philosophical arguments which, using natural and universal reason, prove that God exists and the soul is immortal. The second group proves historically that God in fact revealed Himself through Christ.

Buttressing the Christian faith through philosophical arguments in favor of theism and the immortality of the soul was not only something that Catholics did. Muslims also began to do so when they came into contact with Greek philosophy. Protestants, too, until about 1800, practiced "natural theology," appealing to the rational mind. One need only think of Leibniz, who died in 1716. Even Kant did not entirely abandon this tradition. In the course of the nineteenth century it increasingly became the reserve of the Roman Catholics, however. The

First Vatican Council declared it authoritative Christian doctrine, decreeing that proper reason *proved* the principles of faith, *cum recta ratio fidei fundamenta demonstret*. This position was based on philosophy as well as historical research. It justified faith with philosophical and historical arguments.

The *fifth* viewpoint is the exact opposite of the one just mentioned. This type of Christianity demands no proofs of faith, appealing instead to the heart and the emotions. It assumes there is *no* conclusive proof in favor of believing; the Christian must take a *leap* of faith.

This theory developed as a rejection of the religious philosophy of German Idealism and gained currency in the twentieth century, especially among Protestant theologians. To them, the God of the philosophers had fallen into disrepute. The metaphysics of the immortal soul was considered a thing of the past. German Protestants had lost their Pontifex Maximus in November 1918 with the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II; they learned to pray when in need, and sought refuge in the stronger arm of the Heavenly Father. This group of believers cites Pascal and Kierkegaard as their authority, and considers itself the progressive version, more suitable to the present. It takes an awkward position and boasts about its magnanimous renunciation of metaphysics and policing. The fourth form of Christianity was brimming with certitude in its knowledge of philosophical theology and put too many demands on historical research, expecting it to deliver proof of "the facts of faith." It distinguished between belief and believability, and thought of them rationalistically as the rational groundwork of faith. The fifth variant is utterly different. It is

skeptical about attaining divine knowledge through philosophy, about the metaphysics of the soul, relying instead on the leap of faith. It interprets "faith" as a personal relationship, as trust in God, not as obedience to a group of principles prescribed by the church. It sees itself as critical of reason and culture. Whereas Christians of the fourth type insisted that their message conveyed historical facts, the fifth concept understands the message of faith to be primarily figurative, but runs into difficulties in making a clear distinction between what they understand figuratively and what is supposed to be factual and historically real. Hence a protest movement has emerged within its ranks which wants to return to a literal interpretation, to a "theology of facts." The tomb of Jesus must once again be empty.

And so it is like a seesaw with the question of metaphors and allegories. There is no escaping it. No Bible reader can get by without a figurative approach. There are two proofs of this.

First, Jesus calls Herod a "fox" in Luke 13:32. Does the Christian have to believe that the Son of God has actually *transformed* the king into a fox? Or was he using a metaphor and meant that Herod was clever as a fox? But when Jesus says at the Last Supper, "This is my body," referring to the bread, Thomas Aquinas and Luther instruct us that the bread is no longer there, or only appears to be, because Jesus has transformed, *transubstantiated*, the bread into his body. Why figurative with the fox and literal in the case of the bread? Where and why is the boundary of metaphorical interpretation? Simple faith can leave the matter open, but theology, aspiring as it did to be a science, could not. This gave rise to

endless conflicts. Combining it with socioethical or "spiritual" motives has made it is neither more peaceful nor clear.

The second proof concerns the six days that God took to create the world in the first book of the Bible. A present-day defender of religion calls anyone a "fundamentalist" who takes the six days literally. But the Bible itself presents them as a literal fact; it offers no indication that this depiction of the work of God is unreasonable. But already in Antiquity, Jews and Christians argued in favor of the philosophical concept of God and understood the six days "symbolically." Their God was timeless; his works could not be measured in terms of days. The Bible was allegorized so long ago that the literal belief in six days of creation is now considered a mark of "Biblical fundamentalism."

I am not a Christian in any of the above-mentioned senses. Even less so do I identify with mixtures of these versions, which – apart from strictly regulated circles – seem to be the norm nowadays, at least in the German-speaking world.

I don't take Christianity as a single entity, in other words, but distinguish between different types. Maybe I will prompt some Christian readers to ask themselves which of these variants he is most inclined to. He might rethink and reevaluate his beliefs. By saying I don't adhere to any of these five versions, I am not claiming that they are nonsense. None of them are nonsense, but I don't make use of their hypotheses. My position is consistently agnostic, not atheist. An atheist thinks he is able to prove that there is no God. I'm not that sure of myself.

I am therefore not obliged to offer a better alternative to the Christian faith. By saying that I am not a Christian, I am often asked if I've become a Buddhist. I answer: No, I don't need a surrogate, nothing to take its place. I leave it vacant. I don't suffer from any phantom pain. I've cut myself off and feel no loss. The history of Christianity, its art and literature, interest me as always, but everything having to do with dogma is of purely historical interest to me. I like to know what claims are being made, what arguments are used nowadays. Anyone who consciously gives up Christianity, has no need for the usual religion substitutes: nationalism, being better than the competition, setting athletic records, economic growth, science, or earning tons of money. Anything that purports to be an ultimate value can be countered skeptically and analytically, just like the radical believers in the afterlife once did – Saint Augustine, for example, who scorned the Roman Empire and wouldn't even concede it the status of a commonwealth (*civitas*).

It has now become sufficiently clear what my understanding of "philosophy" is, namely, contemplating the general preconditions of everyday and scholarly speech. It is also an effective motive force to uncover hidden facts. Philosophy deliberately transforms itself into philology in the process – temporarily, of course. In my opinion both are needed in our day and age: a tendency to abstract argument as well as to philological and historical detail. I would like to describe both in more detail.

Philosophy has become a vast and unmanageable university subject. I myself take part in its specialist debates – about Aristotle's theory of time,

for example. In the present book, however, I understand philosophy in a more simple and general way: as a challenge to myself to remain coherent when doubts arise. In this case the starting point is not to be found in the minute details, but in something that is in plain view. The topic can vary: school organizations, euthanasia, arms exports. In discussions about such general topics, the individual practicing philosophy looks for general presuppositions, which he analyzes and evaluates. Philosophy begins with the decision to take a closer look at the doubts that arise about general things. We don't spend much time in daily life thinking about the doubts we have, e.g., about concepts of "nature," health, or death. We rush right past them. The person engaging in philosophy stops and takes a closer look. He takes for granted that it is useful, if not downright necessary, to clarify them. Their clarification is good for the community. No one makes this kind of demand in the case of specialist discourses, e.g., about Aristotle's theory of time. But philosophy in the sense used here proceeds from this assumption. It rejects the hackneyed language of superficial speakers and insists: tell me why you celebrate Christmas. Christmas nowadays is a tremendous economic, social, and psychological phenomenon, often comic, sometimes tragic. Anyone claiming it is based on the "truth," or anyone contradicting this, presupposes a certain concept of truth. Searching for this in argumentative fashion is the business of philosophy the way I understand it.

It presupposes that an individual is *entitled* to ask. There would be no point if it were clear from the start that no results were forthcoming. Both

preconditions – its being allowed and its prospect of yielding some kind of result – are worth being examined, because both are controversial. Suffice it to have mentioned them. But even the most modest participation in such deliberations presupposes that the reader may and can form an opinion. He must consider himself a "subject." He must acknowledge his belief or disbelief as his *own* thoughts, which he can and is entitled to assess. This certainly doesn't mean that he can and may adjudicate *everything*. But he *can* judge that which he has adopted as his own and can ask himself how he perceives it today. Enough will remain obscure. Life is full of surprises, but he is entitled to judge his own opinions, however limited his judgment might be: he can't really know, for example, if homeopathic medicines help. *He* will decide which views are important to him, perhaps just for the present, perhaps for his entire life. Some things that were important five years ago are irrelevant to him today. The same goes for religious beliefs. I don't say they're an abiding part of human nature, because I don't know. All I know is that some people in our part of the world still adhere to them, while others discuss them. What's more, they have a social and political influence. They're even of economic importance, not only at places of pilgrimage. That's why I won't let myself be talked into believing that I'm not *allowed* to question them. I know that pious Christians view their faith as the work of God and see no need to justify it. If by this they want to say that they're not in a position to discuss it, they *put an end to* the philosophical debate. My understanding of "philosophy" here is the crucial view that I'm accountable for my own beliefs and assumptions. I therefore don't feel

violated if someone else doesn't share them. I insist, however, on being a "subject" who is entitled to judge for himself what's important. In doing so I am well aware that I'm one subject *among many*. That's why I'm interested in others, and take their self-portrayals so seriously that a casual observer might accuse me of being a "positivist." What I am really doing is the *momentary* transformation of the philosophical impulse into historical-philological investigation. This is indispensable in the case of a historical subject like Christianity. My contemplation endeavors to decide something that wants to be decided for me right *now*. It takes into account *my* position in time – not just a calendar date – and is fully aware of the historical discrepancy between the present and the object of my investigation, in this case the forms of Christianity that have evolved historically and their role in today's society.

It is evident how tricky the question of what it means to be a Christian can be. Christians have long since abandoned their disdain for property and ownership, their communism of love. Few of them long for the Last Judgment anymore. These ancient versions have all but disappeared, or only exist as a fringe phenomenon. They show that Christianity has something akin to geological strata.

What Christianity says is not decisive for those who choose it. They give it their own stamp, their personal touch, because they decide on their *own* terms. They adapt it to their expectations and way of thinking; they see it from their individual circumstances. And yet they're confronted with nuanced historical material. Christianity was once a lively religion, embroiling entire nations in its fate. Today it is sclerotic, but presents

itself to us in well-ordered fashion, because the churches used to define their views with searing precision, to highlight their selling points, as it were. I proceed from their self-portrayals, not from the self-description of individual Christians. The breadth of historical material is monumental, from the first Letters of Paul to the church statements of recent years. I only use the documents of Western Christianity, apart from the Bible, of course. This material is unavoidable for anyone who identifies with *select points* of the Christian message — the Passion of Christ, Christian charity, or the grace of God. I take the historical sources of Christianity as my source, which presumably gives the impression that what I reject is only an antiquated form of Christianity no longer in practice today. Christians who know only a trimmed down Christianity, "orthodoxy light," would surely make this claim. But I maintain that this archaism is unabridged Christianity itself. Whether this is true can only be decided by investigating each point of doctrine and its sources. This is the path my little book will take.

I begin with a brief autobiographical intermezzo. I will tell a little bit about my Christian socialization. Objective argumentation begins in the first chapter. It describes the historical living conditions of modern Christianity, from a real-historical and intellectual perspective. It deals with the historical watersheds that have transformed it since the eighteenth century more than its believers normally realize. Some will admit that Christianity is a historical subject, but I would like to turn this expression into concrete ideas and terms. The way we see it has changed

as well. A major turning point was ushered in with the historical-critical method. I will therefore introduce it in the first chapter.

The second chapter will show that, as of about 1800, European Christians reacted to the losses of the eighteenth century with new rationales for believing. They recommended adopting the Christian faith in trying circumstances. But do the new defenders of the faith tell us why it is *true*? I ask what it means when someone says that Christianity is "true," or when he contests its truth. I consider this abstract question essential, not least of all to clarify what "fundmentalism" means, but I keep it as brief as possible. I move on to more concrete topics in chapter three, where I examine the traditional arguments used by defenders of the faith: prophecies and miracles.

The second part of the book takes a look at the main contents of the Christian belief. To begin with it discusses the Christian doctrine of God. Chapter IV investigates the various proofs of God, and confronts the God of philosophers with the not so gentle "God of the fathers." Chapter V examines its relationship to the world, the age-old problem of theodicy. Does the evil of the world refute the image of a good and all-powerful Creator?

Then I take a closer look at dogmatics, and inquire into the Christian concept of salvation (Chapter VI). This is followed by a brief critique of Christian ethics, including sexual ethics (Chapter VII). Finally I deal with the "last things," death and immortality; I take a look at the fate of souls in Heaven and Hell (Chapter VIII). At the end, in the ninth and final chapter, I answer the question of how it feels to not be a Christian.