

# A History of Ritual, Philosophy, and Christianity

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.  
-1 Corinthians 11:23-29

**Introduction:** In this passage from Saint Paul, we not only see the second strongest argument for the Sacrament of the Eucharist (the strongest comes from Jesus the Christ Himself during the Bread of Life Discourse (John 6:22-59)), but a beautiful summary of something that is radically unique to Christianity. We see the Ritual of the Eucharist, complete with a short liturgy, being spelled out, followed immediately by a commandment to examine one's own being. To question the nature of "being" is the very heart of Philosophy. What we have is a marriage of the Ritual to Philosophy.

This is one of the greatest unifying aspects of Christianity. As I will explain shortly, the Ritual is appealing to the commoners while the Philosophy is appealing to the patricians. But note that this goes beyond merely making the "high brow" and the "low brow" sit next to each other. Each must join what they find agreeable with what they find disagreeable. The commoners must leave their comfort zone and think about a transcendental concept, while the patricians must humble themselves to the routine of the Ritual.

**A) The Ritual:** Almost the entire history of religion has dealt with the Ritual. Because the Ritual lacks sophistication, we see man in his most primitive state. This is why Rituals are generally universally recognized: offering a sacrifice on an altar (for example) is common to almost every religion in the world. The desired effects are also universal. All Rituals basically take on one of two forms: either nurturing the body or denying the body. Nurturing the body accounts for a lot of things: pleasure (drinking at the temple of Dionysus), sustenance (sacrifice to the goddess of the harvest for a future bounty) and protection (offering horses to Poseidon to ensure a safe sea voyage). Denying the body also can take on many forms, with sacrifice, fasting, mortification and mutilation (including tattoos and piercings) also being common worldwide. Note that while Christianity has replaced most pagan Religions, the Rituals of nourishing and denying the body are still widely practiced in a secular context. People still eat, drink and perform other activities beyond basic necessity, while fasting and tattoos are very common.

The need to both nourish and deny the body is universal. It is common to mankind throughout all times and cultures. It is the Ritual that ties the earliest man with the man of tomorrow, and all men in between. In a like manner, religious Rituals bond man to God. This unifying aspect should not be underestimated. By having shared experiences, a very real bond of brotherhood develops. And the more intense the Ritual, the stronger the bond.

**B) Philosophy:** But it is also the nature of man to seek to improve his position in a more permanent fashion, as well as to stand out from the others as an individual. As tests with primates who have learned sign language have shown, only man has the capability to grasp the concept of the "unknown knowledge." By recognizing there is unknown knowledge, man has made efforts to discover it, and thus philosophy was born. Most animals will simply accept that a tiger will easily kill it. Man, by asking why, realized that the teeth and claws of this animal make it possible. From this discovery, man sought to make weapons that were even more lethal than the tiger's. And from here began a virtuous cycle. The more philosophy helped man, the more time man had to philosophize to make his life better still.

But while the Ritual helps bring people together, Philosophy invariably begins to separate. Those who are more clever in a particular task will outperform those who are less clever. The discovery that man is different than other animals must lead to the discovery that each person is different from others as well.

**C) The Co-Existence of the Ritual and Philosophy:** Man is a curious mix of the Ritual and the Philosophical. An uneducated toddler can express outrage when something he feels he owns has been taken from him. Likewise, even the most reflective man may have a superstition or irrational guilty pleasure (such as smoking) that he undertakes. I want to focus on the reality that most people (commoners) tend to favor the Ritual while a smaller number (patricians) tend to favor the Philosophical. But, before we can really understand how the two work as a mixture, we need to know what they look like "pure."

**1) Pagan Priests and Ancient Philosophers:** In ancient times, the priests and philosophers walked separate but parallel paths. The priests focused on the commoners and provided the necessary Rituals to ensure they had the proper temperament for their lives. The philosophers focused on the patricians and provided the advice necessary for them to administer their possessions properly. We see this in both the Eastern and Western cultures, as well as in the more advanced Native American cultures. As long as the priest did not tell a patrician what to do, and a philosopher did not tell a commoner what to believe, an uneasy truce existed between the two. Commoners were just philosophical enough to be effective at whatever they were expected to do, and the patricians were just religious enough to create a bond with the commoners they ruled. In the famous example of Socrates being condemned to death in Athens for questioning the existence of the gods to the commoners, we see just how critical this division of the Ritual and Philosophical really was to the Ancients.

**2) Judaism and Hinduism:** Judaism and Hinduism were attempts to bring the Ritual and the Philosophical together, as both have Rituals and a meaningful Philosophy. But I propose that the Jewish nation was unable to keep the two together, and that Hinduism does not even try.

**i) Judaism:** Much can be said about Jewish Ritual. It was presented from Moses as a means to build a relationship with Jehovah, and the Jews were incredibly honest in showing how poorly they followed it. If the Prophets are to be trusted, the error was in failing to give Philosophy its proper due. We see time and time again in the Old Testament how the Hebrews fell back to pagan ways. I would propose that, by focusing too much on the Ritual, they fell into Paganism.

Even the Pharisaic movement of Jesus's time clearly shows the Jewish emphasis on the Ritual. The Pharisees did try to ensure the specific Rituals the people performed were those uniquely Jewish, but according to the Gospels, their teachings were completely bereft of Philosophy. Also note that, while Jesus was constantly in opposition to the Pharisees, we do not have a single example of Jesus

claiming the Rituals themselves were wrong. In each and every example of the conflict, it all came to the pharisees the meaning behind the Ritual. In other words, the lack of Philosophy.

**ii) Hinduism:** Hinduism does have a place for Philosophy and a desire to understand the nature of the universe. Hinduism also has pagan gods and their attendant Rituals. But the two are not united in a meaningful way. A monk may sit in his cottage contemplating a universal Truth while nearby a village turned out to participate in a big Ritual. The monk has no obligation to attend the Ritual, and the villagers have no obligation to seek the monk's insights to better their lives. In this respect, Hinduism is more like a micro-culture with its own priests to attend to the commoners and philosophers to attend to the patricians.

**D) Christianity:** As was shown by Saint Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, as well as in the power struggle between Jesus and the Pharisees (**Topic C.2.i**), Christianity demands the marriage of the Ritual with the Philosophical. Jesus Himself, as both Prophet *par excellence* and the Most High Priest, is the ultimate bridge between the Ritual and the Philosophical. With Him as the head and us as the body, we share in this unifying aspect between priest and philosopher.

Christians do not have a choice between the Ritual or the Philosophical. A Christian *must* embrace both. The early Church certainly did, and I believe that is the reason why it spread so fast despite (first) a hostile Jewish community and a violent Roman Empire, and (later) throughout the markedly different cultures of pagan Europe and Western Asia. It was for *everyone*. Everyone could find (if they looked) something familiar they could embrace as well as a challenge to overcome. Without an organized government to protect it from the barbarians (mostly far and middle eastern tribes like the Huns by this time), the Church not only survived for the 500 years of dark and early middle ages, but ushered in an enlightened age of hospitals, universities and art later in the 14th and 15th centuries.

**1) The Fall:** A victim of its own success (of sorts), the Christian commoners became more sophisticated. The printing press and the ability of the middle class citizenry to read made people begin to question. Now, the questioning itself is not a problem; it is, after all, what Philosophy is about. But unfortunately, it appears that the Philosophical began to outweigh the Ritual (in marked contrast to what happened with the Jews (**Topic C.2.i**)).

Being the only empire-wide institution to survive the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the Church leaders began to take on responsibilities they never had before, and they began to embrace the patrician attitudes. Philosophy within the Church extended beyond mere Theology at the cost of the Ritual. Abuses took place, with Indulgences becoming a flash point with Martin Luther. But while Martin Luther was certainly right in identifying certain excesses in the Church, he also had his own revolutionary ideas. In other words, while he was able to point out very real problems, he failed to understand the real cause of these problems and therefore created more problems of his own.

I do not wish to give a detailed account of the Protestant Reformation here, but I do want to point out that the Catholic Church *did* find its way back to the Ritual, as humble monks (especially the Franciscans) entered the order of bishops (the Magisterium) and eventually the papacy. The fact that so many Protestants today accuse the Catholic Church of following "traditions" instead of the Bible (which is not true, but beyond the scope of this document) is evidence of the success the Franciscans and others had.

**2) The Fallout:**

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you realize that we will be judged more strictly, for we all fall short in many respects. If anyone does not fall short in speech, he is a perfect man, able to bridle his whole body also.

-James 3:1-2

So, who was right and who was wrong? It is not my intent to pass judgment, but to present the facts as I see them. I do not write this to criticize those whose belief is grounded in their teachings, but to point out that those who teach are held to higher standards (Hosea Chp 4 and 5), and I do feel I need to be honest over the consequences of the Protestant Reformation.

Today, the Catholic Church represents 50% of the Christian population ([www.livescience.com](http://www.livescience.com)) while the percentage of Christian Protestants is estimated between 33% and 40% ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)). The balance (10% to 17%) is mostly the 16 Eastern Orthodox Churches. Now when it comes to God, numbers alone do not mean anything. After all, at the time Jesus ascended into Heaven, our best guess is that Christianity only numbered about 500 followers (implied by 1 Corinthians 15:6). We know how proud the Christians were when they reached the 5,000 mark, as it is recorded in Acts of the Apostles (4:4). But while numbers do not mean anything in themselves, should we not at least pay attention to a Churches' ability to grow if spreading the Word is the will of God?

Spain and Portugal were Catholic during the Age of Exploration, and did quite well converting Central and South America, as well as the Philippians, to Christianity. The more Philosophical-minded Protestant missionaries to the aborigines of North America, Africa, Asia and Australia, however, did not do as well. The Ritual aspect of Catholicism removed a large barrier, whose impact cannot be overstated. By embracing the existing Rituals of the natives that promoted Christian scripture, Catholic missionaries were able to welcome aborigines as those who already had a foretaste of Christ. In contrast, the more Philosophical efforts to educate the "wretched savages" was justifiably insulting to those the missionaries sought to convert.

One might also consider all that the Orthodox Churches have gone through, as they are near theological twins of Catholicism. They have survived persecution under the Ottoman Turkish Empire, pagan Mongol Hoards and the Atheistic purges by both Hitler and Stalin. Yet despite the programmed genocide by some of the most ruthless dictators in history, not to mention being geographically limited in population, they still hold an impressive 10 to 17% of the Christian population worldwide.

Protestants, however, comprise at least 35,000 independent and non-denominational churches in the U.S. alone (Religious Congregations and Membership Study of 2010), and a further 600 to 2,100 formal denominations exist in addition to that (I looked at three different surveys, each who used different definitions of what a "denomination" was). The independents and non-denominationals are growing at a frantic speed too, I am curious as to what the 2020 survey will report (expected in 2022). And remember, these numbers are only for the U.S.! Why is a Faith that professes to know the "Truth" so fractured?

**E) Something to Think About:** Despite my focus above, however, I want to point out that the separation between the Ritual and the Philosophical during Martin Luther's time was still minor. The Catholic Church was still in need of true reform, but the first Protestants didn't see the need to change all that much. This is why so-called "traditional" Christian churches are so theologically similar. But these first Protestant Churches had, in turn, their own reformations, and with every new generation of

Protestant Churches, the gap between the Ritual and the Philosophical has grown larger and larger. What happens to a Christian that is split like that?

### 1) Ritual Christianity:

Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than they love the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest and sacrificial.  
-Dietrich Bonhoeffer

This type is more common, as the Ritual appeals to the commoner. Yet it is also the most ironic, because the more extremist members of this type usually and loudly reject the "man-made traditions of the Catholic Church." These more Ritual-minded Christians claim they have given up the Ritual. But have they? Baptism, marriage, ordination (or otherwise an appointment) of clergy, and prayers for the sick are performed in a liturgical manner. Even the Last Supper is usually observed at least annually. Of the Seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church, this only leaves out Confirmation and Reconciliation. But what most Protestants do in Baptism is a combination of what the Catholics do with Baptism and Confirmation. This is, admittedly, supported by the Bible. We see several times in the Acts of the Apostles where Baptism and Confirmation were performed at the same time. But we also see that they were still considered separate and distinct Rituals. In Acts of the Apostles 8:12, Saint Philip baptized while in a city of Samaria. Shortly afterwards, Saints Peter and John came to this city and "laid hands on them" so these people "might receive the Holy Spirit" because "they had *only* been baptized" (taken from the Acts of the Apostles 8:14-17, italics mine). So the only major Ritual the Catholics do that most Protestants do not is the Sacrament of Reconciliation. And even here we see most Protestants acknowledging the Philosophical need for forgiveness of sins made since Baptism, they just drop the Catholic Ritual concerning it. Most of the Rituals that Protestants truly reject are the ones that, individually, have little impact.

But despite their protests against the Ritual, the Ritual is a deep-seated need in most people that is foolish to ignore. Philosophically, this is called "Bad Faith," as we are lying to ourselves. Ignoring this need does not make the need go away; the need *will* be met in one way or another. What ignoring this need *does* do is prevent one from controlling *how* it is met. And here is one way it feeds itself that I find quite common: Scripture becomes Ritualized. A given statement, usually a verse (but oftentimes just a part of one) is taken as a act of Faith in and of itself with no context as to where it came from or what it might have originally meant.

Salvation, as described in the Bible, is a very complicated matter with room for a certain amount of interpretation and is well beyond the scope of this paper. To say things like, "Are you born again?" or "Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?" is actually insulting to Christian and non-Christian alike. Indeed, the only ones who seem to appreciate being asked it are those who also ask that question themselves. Speaking personally, if I have already identified myself as a Christian and yet I am still asked that, then I feel like the person is really saying, "We only want certain Christians here," or "I think you are lying to me." I can only imagine what a non-Christian must feel, but I doubt any converts will be won that way.

But hurt feelings aside, note the Ritualization of "salvation" that is taking place here. A few simple questions are asked and if one answers "yes" to all, then the assumption is that one is saved. I won't lie -- this makes me nervous with or without a Biblical passage. If one thinks one has a free ride

to Heaven after taking a short true or false test, then that's between oneself and God. Granted, this is not quite as extreme with some Churches as it is with others, but with 36,000 or more flavors of Christianity in the U.S., these truly extreme cases seem to come from those who have no problem talking about it in public with strangers.

Now, in all fairness, these individuals are demonstrating an extremely strong Faith. However, it is an Immature Faith (my preferred way of describing Bad Faith) as they are merely parroting what someone they respect told them. And it is easy to tell who they are because no line of reason and no scripture from the Bible will convince them that they have it wrong or even incomplete. A Mature Faith needs the Immature to start with (Faith is learned, after all), but a Mature Faith realizes that it should be based on education and self-reflection.

I would like to be able to say that these kinds of things are limited to those who are not Philosophically inclined (in which case they may be excused and credited as doing the best they can), but there are learned men who essentially do the same; only now they add their intellect to the situation. It is of great sadness to me when a "theologian" is attempting to explain a Bible verse by offering different options, and explains the pros and cons of each option, only to get to the last one and simply say, "This is what the Catholics believe, so it is obviously wrong." This is not teaching Theology, this is teaching bigotry. Again, I would recommend Hosea Chp 4-5 for those who would teach the Christian faith.

## **2) Philosophical Christianity:**

It is true, that a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion.  
-Sir Francis Bacon, *Essay 16: On Atheism*

This is the rarer form of a divided Christianity because it takes certain personal traits to embrace Philosophy that most people don't have, or at least don't have in the right combination. But while most Ritualistic Christians will remain faithful to the concept of Christianity in some form or another for generations, it appears to me that to endorse Christianity without the Ritual is the fastest road to Atheism. By not participating in the Ritual, they have weak or no ties to Christianity. Such Christians, therefore, tend to stop being Christians rather quickly.

To deny the Ritual is ultimately to deny one's reliance on God, and the "elitist" comes out (I picked the word "patricians" earlier with much care). Even if one did try to mix with the commoners, they wouldn't understand the higher thoughts one has anyway. Eventually, one decides one knows better than God does, at least in some small way concerning a particular subject. At this point, it becomes a slippery slope.

*Nurturing* the body makes a lot of sense to a Philosophical Christian, but when one no longer feels the need to *deny* the body, one starts to question Christian Ethics. Some Ethics will make sense, but others either won't make sense at all or, at best, will seem to be obsolete. Once enough Ethics look unnecessary or obsolete, the need for God also becomes unnecessary and/or obsolete. Some may give up Theism altogether while others may become Deists, which lets them pretend to be religious while not actually having to do anything religious. Still others may become Pantheists, who claim to believe in everything while really believing in nothing. Another option is what I refer to as the Spiritualists, who focus on a single god (like Deism), yet have a "nothing goes" attitude because their fundamental belief is that it is impossible to know anything with certainty. Regardless of which Philosophical gate

one chooses to enter, all that is left to become an Atheist is to realize that, if God is not part of one's life, why believe in Him at all?

**3) Personal Testimony of Philosophical Christianity:** I once went down this road and found Pantheism because, in no small part, I rejected the Ritual. While it may sound silly, one of the things I really disliked with the outcome of Vatican II was making parishioners hold hands during the Lord's Prayer in the middle of mass. Then fast forward many years to when my first wife and I had become estranged. Experiencing pain beyond anything I had known before or since, I finally broke down and went to mass again. There, the woman next to me reached out and took my hand for the Lord's Prayer. I was stunned with the realization that this woman, whom I never saw before nor since, was showing me more care and concern in this small act than my own wife. And this was being expressed through a Ritual which I had held in contempt. God, in his own merciful way, showed me that His foolishness was greater than my wisdom, and I haven't forgotten that lesson since. This experience also showed me that God has a very peculiar sense of humor.

It was the Ritual that drove me away from Christianity, and the Ritual that brought me back. I now understand the power of the Ritual when the Philosophical is present, but I will never forget how empty the Ritual is when Philosophy is absent (as I hope this paper shows).

**Conclusion:** There is no shame in the Ritual, as without the Ritual the Philosophical has no anchor and drifts away. There is no crime in being Philosophical, as without the Philosophy the Ritual would be motion without purpose. Christianity is about being whole, and the Ritual/Philosophical relationship is how the Bible tells us how to be whole here on Earth. God gave all of us a need for the Ritual and a passion for the Philosophical. While one or the other may have a greater influence on a person, it is this imbalance that helps define the lack of wholeness one has. Perhaps it is *the* reason for our lack of wholeness. If Biblical Love can be described as loving ourselves despite our wretchedness and humbling ourselves in our achievements, then it seems to me that the love of self comes from the Philosophical, and the humility comes from the Ritual.

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Original Publication Date: 30 December 2021