

# Why I am a Christian

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William James made a famous distinction between *once-born* and *twice-born* religiosity. Perhaps I exemplify a further category: *thrice-born*. I was raised as a Methodist and then I went through the usual adolescent revolt. Later, when I began teaching philosophy at the University of Michigan, I found myself drawn to the Episcopal Church. I was fairly active for about ten years. But then things seemed to go sour, and I jumped ship again and was completely out of it for years. It was about ten years ago that I came back to the Church. I hope and trust that the third time is the charm; at least it seems to have taken this time. What I'm going to say in the short time at my disposal is how I happened to come back to the Christian Faith and why I am still there.

The first point I want to make is a negative one. I'm a Christian not because I have been convinced by some impressive arguments: arguments from natural theology for the existence of God, historical arguments concerning the authenticity of the Scriptures or the reliability of the Apostles, or whatever. My coming back was less like seeing that certain premises implied a conclusion than it was like coming to hear some things in music that I hadn't heard before, or having my eyes opened to the significance of things that are going on around me. G. K. Chesterton once wrote: "In the last analysis, the reason why I am a Christian is that the Church is living and not a dead teacher." That pretty much sums it up for me. I'm a Christian because it was in the Christian Church that I came to discover the presence and activity of God in my life. I came back to Christianity because it was in the Church that I heard the proclamation of the Gospel and, for some reason or other, (by God's Grace I would now say), I responded to that proclamation-to the requirements it laid down, to the promise it made, to the way of life it enjoined. Furthermore, it wasn't just that I was sitting there passively, listening to a proclamation and then going about my business as usual as if I had been watching television. What happened, I think, could be put in this way. I found myself drawn into the community of the faithful, the community of those who stand in the tradition inaugurated by, and continuously involved with, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. As I see it, the Church is the community founded by Christ for the purpose of disseminating His message, of bringing people to Him, of presenting Him bodily in the sacraments. It exists, as C. S. Lewis says in a vivid passage in *Mere Christianity*, for the purpose of spreading the "good contagion", the contagion of the Holy Spirit. So basically, I am a Christian, rather than a Buddhist or a Marxist or a Moslem, because it was in the Christian Church that I was enabled to get into effective touch with God; it was there that I was enabled to begin to participate in the joint effort of God and His people. Thus far, I've been talking about the beginning, albeit a new beginning. This is almost ten years after that new beginning. Why am I still a Christian? Well, why shouldn't I still be a Christian? When one has made a commitment one should stick to it. There is something to that, of course, but it is not the whole story. More importantly, it is working; the promise is being fulfilled, however fitfully and sporadically. I find that God is active in my life, in ways that are often surprising and

often uncomfortable, ways I would not have anticipated or welcomed in advance. (As for the surprise and discomfort, God presumably knows better than I do what He is up to). Through the worship of the Church, through the discipline and the regimen it enjoins I have been able, with many ups and downs, to deepen and extend the area of the effective work of the Holy Spirit in my life. Or better, through all this I have been enabled to reduce my interference with the work of the Holy Spirit. I am still a Christian because the Christian drama is being played out within me, in ways I can sometimes dimly descry. With the emphasis I have been putting on being drawn into the community of the faithful and all that, some people might suspect that I am peddling one of the contemporary naturalistic or humanistic substitutes for Christianity, in which the whole ballgame is some set of human attitudes, orientations, and interactions. But that is not my message at all. To use a couple of trendy terms, I'm not suggesting that we substitute the horizontal for the vertical. If I were to use those terms, I would say that what has happened to me is that I have discovered, and entered into effective contact with, the vertical through being absorbed into a stretch of the horizontal that is already open to the vertical.