



Title: What is the Point of Being a Christian?

Author: Timothy Radcliffe OP

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By Wilson Henry

Timothy Radcliffe, a widely regarded speaker of international standing and a progressive theologian, made waves recently in the Catholic-Christian world with his latest *Why Go to Church? The Drama of the Eucharist*. But it is Radcliffe's award winning work *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* that made many sit up and wise up to what it means to be a Christian, to stand up and make a difference. The work, popular enough to see reprints from publishers on both sides of the Atlantic, won him the Michael Ramsey prize in 2007. But awards aside, Radcliffe's pointed question that is the title of the book is a provocative read for anyone questioning why they remain or want to be a follower of Christ.

Christians, agnostics and part-time believers picking up Radcliffe's work can expect nothing less than a stirred heart and conscience, what with a title that already provokes some sort of reaction from even the most distracted or jaded Catholic-Christian.

Without the heavy dose of theological embellishments and heading straight to the point, Radcliffe examines the variety of human conditions from fear, anxiety, to an inability to love and reach out to others. Like an apologist for Christian living Radcliffe persuasively convinces us in *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* that Christianity is meant to free us from our fears, anxieties and to radically love like no other. Seamlessly exploring the question through 11 chapters Radcliffe begins with our present secular preoccupation of analyzing the world in our

own self centred fashion. Christianity, he argues, expects us to move beyond this. But in a world where self gratification is seen to be a more meaningful antidote to the complexities of living, Radcliffe explains that Christians are expected to rise above it all to see beyond the Passion of Christ. Tall order or so it seems. But not with the remaining chapters that make for the case that we are created to do so and only then find a relevance and meaning for our very presence and existence.

Radcliffe himself found it absorbing considering the answers to the often unexamined question which eventually led to much reflection of why most of us are Christians and the entire business of where it points towards. From his recollections it appears that examining the question not only enhanced his journey but deepened his relationship with God and the people around him. When a friend challenged him to consider the question he offered at first an answer that his training shaped him to answer "...because it was true." His mind automatically reflected that it is true that humanity is destined to share God's own unutterable happiness which somehow leads to the answer.

But, Radcliffe writes, his friend did not seem satisfied with the answer. Surely there has to be something more than vague and tailormade responses. Radcliffe then painstakingly uses a variety of sources from contemporary life to make that link and arrive at some meaningful point. Christianity if lived with true conviction does not just make us settle for mere comfortable living, but a meaningful one in the face of the human condition whether it is dealing with excessive joy, senseless tragedy or loss. Christianity helps us make sense of many things we take for granted and that is what Radcliffe examines when he writes on our understanding of peace, freedom, fears, political turmoil all exposed under the light of the gospels.

Perhaps some of his sources that inspire the clues help him shape the answers that convinced him of why he remains a Christian or why it should make a difference in his own life as a man, religious, priest, thinker and teacher. While scripture is his primary source for articulating his claims and beliefs he sharpens it with his varied experiences gathered from his travels visiting Dominicans, on speaking engagements, his reading and his observations. Not many can elegantly and decisively make a case for the relevance of Christianity the way Radcliffe does especially in the way he gets inspiration from the world around him and links it back to the truths found in the gospels.

From the usual suspects in theology (Congar, Bonhoeffer), to wide areas of philosophy and

literature, Radcliffe quotes from them as comfortably as he does with bestseller author Michael Ondaatje (Anil's Ghost) to Jeremy Rifkin when he discusses issues such as freedom as seen in the Christian context or fear when everything seems to go wrong. He even uses celebrities, poster boys and girls to drive home his point which helps make his case even more relevant to a marketplace that can relate more to Brad Pitt and Gwyneth Paltrow than Aquinas or Plato.

He does this especially well with the chapter on the human body and our faith. The chapter provocatively titled The Body Electric (inspired by Walt Whitman's verse) pushes us Christians to consider the vitality of our body in relation to our faith. Often Christian clergy seem to be at pains to articulate the realities of the human condition when it concerns sex, sexuality or even the church position on this area. Radcliffe is not one of them. He is able to comfortably discuss the area and finds our human body a central starting point to reinforce and understand our faith. Radcliffe begins by turning to the Last Supper. It is here that we find answers and Radcliffe sees how our sexuality is given a dignity when it is seen in the context of the Eucharist. But he writes that most of us find it difficult to make this link since "our society trivializes the body," as well as because we "tend to see our bodies as objects that we own."

Radcliffe then explains why the church teachings actually helps us understand why our bodies and sexuality is not to be understood in terms of self ownership.

"Christianity and Judaism both stress the connection between worshipping the God who created us, body and soul, and caring for other people's bodies, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, nursing the sick."

In this chapter one of the most resonating lines among many surely has to be when Radcliffe writes "it is in the body that we encounter God." and he goes on to explain how as society and individuals we encounter God this way. What many of us never even realize and which Radcliffe stresses is how our prayer life is intimately connected with our bodily movements.

In many ways he makes us relook at our understanding and concept of meeting God whether in prayer or in our daily activity of living. In a world where we often struggle to find meaning, Radcliffe's exploration of ourselves is a helpful beginning to something even more profound.

Will reading this book make you a better Christian or at least a more enlightened one? Perhaps. But more than that, the book may set off ideas of your own and give you hope especially in a journey of life fraught with cynicism, and a sense of hopelessness.

Radcliffe in Singapore

Fr. Timothy Radcliffe, OP will be in Singapore in November 2009! Here is the schedule of events. Talks open to the public are indicated with *

NOVEMBER

Friday 13 to Sunday 15

Retreat for Religious communities of Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei

Friday 13, 8:00pm*

"Being a Christian in the 21st Century"
Catholic Junior College, Training and Development Centre

Tuesday 17

Recollection for Catholic School Teachers and Principals: How Can We Share Our Faith With the Young?

Wednesday 18

Recollection for Priests

Thursday 19, 7:30pm*

Dialogue Session with Young Catholics: "What is the Hope that the Church Offers to Young People Today?"

Participation requires registration, contact CAYC for details.

Friday 20, 7:30pm*

"What Does it Mean to Recite the Creed?"
Catholic Archdiocesan Education Centre, St. Peter Auditorium

Saturday 21

Recollection for Caritas Singapore and Member Organizations: "Our Father and Justice"

Public events are free of charge but seating is limited. Except for Thursday 19 November, please register early with us. spi@catholic.org.sg