

# CHRISTIANITY FOR YOUNG INTELLECTUALS

## Warm-up Exercises for Big Thinkers

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## WHY THESE READINGS?

If you're like many young intellectuals, Christianity seems quaint at best.

Maybe superstitious.

Maybe even pernicious, a sign of an anti-intellectual worldview.

The doors of your mind and heart may shut prematurely.

If so, these essays may blow the doors open wide.

Some of the world's leading authors appear here, mostly in pieces without wide circulation. Their writings engage and charm. They address big questions you may not have verbalized, but once raised, you say wow, that's right. What if you figured everything out—then what? Where do science and the humanities stop short? What is happiness? What is a full human life? Two essays describe Jesus' profound impact on history and on secular philosophy. Many signs point to *something more*. Could it be Jesus?

These "warm-up exercises for big thinkers" are not trying to convert you. Instead, they hope to help you broaden and deepen your studies and your life.

## 1. What if you could figure everything out? Then what?

As a girl, Annie Dillard brimmed with pursuits from science to baseball, from literature to boys with fast cars. In her twenties, she took off into the woods for a year and wrote a book that ended up winning the Pulitzer Prize (*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*).

When she was forty, she asked herself what connected the precocious girl, the passionate young woman, and the person she then was.

Where have they gone, those other dim dots that were you: you in the flesh swimming in a swift river, swinging a bat on the first pitch, opening a footlocker with a screwdriver, inking and painting clowns on celluloid, stepping out of a revolving door into the swift crowd on a sidewalk, being kissed and kissing till your brain grew smooth, stepping out of the cold woods into a warm field full of crows, or lying awake in a bed aware of your legs and suddenly aware of all of it, that the ceiling above you was under the sky—in what country, what town?

You may wonder, that is, as I sometimes wonder privately, but it doesn't matter. For it is not you or I that is important, neither what sort we might be nor how we came to be each where we are. What is important is anyone's coming awake and discovering a place, finding in full orbit a spinning globe one can lean over, catch, and jump on. What is important is the moment of opening a life and feeling it touch—with an electric hiss and cry—this speckled mineral sphere, our present home.

After the terrorist bombings of September 11, 2001, the editors of an obscure journal invited Dillard and others to reflect on life's meanings. The essay below was her contribution.

You might read it first by yourself, and then read it aloud in a group with each person taking a paragraph and then passing the baton.

Annie Dillard, "This Is the Life" (2002)  
<http://www.billememory.com/dillard/dillard.html>

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- a. Reflect on your own intellectual aspirations. Think big. Share some of your dreamy intellectual goals.
- b. Imagine you were to succeed in knowing what you long to know. Ask yourself these questions of Dillard's:

What would you do differently, you up on your beanstalk looking at scenes of all peoples at all times in all places? ...

Say you have seen something. You have seen an ordinary bit of what is real, the infinite fabric of time that eternity shoots through, and time's soft-skinned people working and dying under slowly shifting stars. Then what?

## 2. Are the arts and humanities your thing? How about science? Do they halt in the same way?

Wilson Poon is a Professor of Condensed Matter Physics at the University of Edinburgh, and Tom McLeish is a theoretical physicist at Durham University. Their article engages with a remarkable book called *Real Presences* by one of the leading literary critics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, George Steiner.

Steiner argued that “any coherent understanding of language and art, any capacity to communicate meaning and feeling, is premised on God.” Poon and McLeish speculate that science is the same.

Wilson Poon and Tom McLeish, “Real Presences: Two Scientists’ Response to George Steiner” (1999)

[http://www2.ph.ed.ac.uk/~wckp/Steiner\\_Theology.pdf](http://www2.ph.ed.ac.uk/~wckp/Steiner_Theology.pdf)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- a. Poon and McLeish write: “The discipline of courtesy inevitably leads one to the discovery of radical otherness.” What do they mean by “the discipline of courtesy”? What is “the discovery of radical otherness”? What do these ideas have to do with the humanities and science?
- b. Steiner said that in the humanities, “ours is the long day’s journey of the Saturday.” What did he mean? Why do Poon and McLeish think that science has the same journey?
- c. Poon and McLeish write: “Precisely this narrative (and thus ‘theoretical’?) shape is refracted by the double lens of cross and resurrection in the New Testament. The obvious resonance with creation and suffering is in the central passage of Romans 8.”

Have a look at Romans 8 in this lively translation:

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+8&version=MSG>

What connections do you see with what Poon and McLeish, and Steiner, say about tasks of the humanities and of science?

### 3. Philosophy—an overview, and an encouragement to become more.

Roberto Mangabeira Unger, a Brazilian, was a precocious student at Harvard Law School. The story goes that in the first week of class, a professor pointed out that a nation's postal service might be organized in many different ways. He suggested to students this was the kind of arcane but conceptually important question that they had never confronted but would at Harvard Law. Unger raised his hand. He proceeded to give a detailed analysis of postal systems around the world. The shock and awe on the professor's face became the stuff of legend.

Unger is a polymath. He helped found the Critical Legal Studies movement, which shook paradigms in the study of law. He has written iconoclastic works in philosophy, religion, and, recently, the foundations of physics. He has served twice in a government role that was virtually created for him: Minister of Strategic Affairs in Brazil, first in 2007 and again in 2015. Roberto Mangabeira Unger puts his ideas on the line.

The two readings here reveal Unger's playful side and his, well, not-so-playful side. The first is the charmer, a letter to graduating sixth graders. The second piece distinguishes classic patterns in metaphysics and in practical philosophy—and what they mean for your life.

Roberto Mangabeira Unger, "A Letter" (2002)

<http://www.robertounger.com/en/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/a-letter.pdf>

and "The Universal Grid of Philosophy" (n.d.)

<http://www.robertounger.com/en/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/the-universal-grid-of-philosophy.pdf>

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

a. You might read Unger's letter aloud in a group, and then discuss what in the letter surprises you.

b. In "The Universal Grid of Philosophy," Unger says:

The two overlapping questions that trump all others in the world history of moral thought are: What should I do with my life? and How should I live?...

There are two main directions the answer to these questions has taken: stay out of trouble and get into trouble; serenity or vulnerability."

Which of those "two main directions" feels closer to the way you now approach life?

c. How do you interpret the final paragraph of "The Universal Grid of Philosophy"?

#### 4. We human beings are vanishingly small and impermanent: life is meaningless. Isn't it?

William James (1842-1910) has been called America's first psychologist and first philosopher. As a young man, he was an artist. In medical school, he explored the Amazon with the great biologist Louis Agassiz. William was interested and engaged in everything from the Anti-Imperialist League to parapsychology. And he had a sense of humor.

Along with his scientific writings, James was known for his lively lectures, as in this reading.

William James, "Is Life Worth Living?" (1895)

[http://www.jstor.org/sici?sici=1526-422X\(189510\)6:1%3C1:ILWL%3E2.0.CO;2-3&](http://www.jstor.org/sici?sici=1526-422X(189510)6:1%3C1:ILWL%3E2.0.CO;2-3&)

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

a. In your experience, do some people address the big questions of life simply through a kind of congenital optimism or pessimism? What about you?

b. Discuss:

But those times are past, and we of the nineteenth century, with our evolutionary theories and our mechanical philosophies, already know nature too impartially and too well to worship unreservedly any god of whose character she can be an adequate expression

c. Consider this passage:

If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the Universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it feels like a real fight; as if there were something really wild in the Universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem.

In your life, where do you see "a game a private theatricals"? Where "a real fight" that you feel "needed to redeem"?

## 5. First reverence, then belief.

Marilynne Robinson is one of America's foremost novelists and essayists. She has won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Humanities Medal, and the Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction. Her remarkable 2015 conversation with President Barack Obama was published in the *New York Review of Books* and can be heard on iTunes: [itunes.com/nybooks](https://itunes.com/nybooks).

This easy-going yet profound essay argues that belief is secondary to ... something deeper.

Marilynne Robinson, "Credo" (2008)

<https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/spring2008/credo>

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

a. Robinson writes:

History up to the present moment tells us again and again that a narrow understanding of faith very readily turns to bitterness and coerciveness. There is something about certainty that makes Christianity un-Christian... Therefore, because I would be a good Christian, I have cultivated uncertainty, which I consider a form of reverence.

In your own life, have you seen certainty of any kind lead to bitterness and coerciveness? What does it mean to "cultivate uncertainty"?

b. When she was a sophomore in college, Robinson had an epiphany while reading a "daunting treatise" by the Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards. It was a footnote that got her. In it, Edwards compared the light of the moon—"reflecting light that is in fact continuously renewed"—to the "continuous renewal of the world by the will of God, which creates, to our eyes, seeming lawfulness and identity, but which is in fact a continuous free act of God." She writes:

Edwards' footnote was my first, best introduction to epistemology and ontology, and my escape—and what a rescue it was—from the contending, tedious determinisms that seemed to be all that was on offer to me then...

The determinism of the moment is the new genetics, but it looks more and more as though inferring human character and behavior from the genome would be like inferring the works of Mozart from the keyboard of a piano.

Have you ever had an "aha" moment like Robinson's? What was your epiphany and what triggered it?

## 6. Happiness: what is it, and how should you pursue it?

A few years ago, Yale University's Center for Faith and Culture invited distinguished lecturers to discuss "happiness and human flourishing." Here is Marilynne Robinson's contribution, dense yet agile, another dose of her inimitable style and substance.

Marilynne Robinson, "Happiness" (2011)

[https://faith.yale.edu/sites/default/files/robinson\\_1.pdf](https://faith.yale.edu/sites/default/files/robinson_1.pdf)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

a. Robinson writes: "No account of truth or holiness has ever been conclusive. This fact by itself should be taken as important information about the mind and the world in inhabits."

- i. Note "truth or holiness." In your opinion, what differentiates them?
- ii. What does Robinson mean by "conclusive"?
- iii. If she's right, how does this "important information" matter for science and for faith?

b. Why does Robinson find "positivism in combination with fundamentalist Darwinism" to be scientifically inadequate?

c. Robinson writes:

Theology, because it is anchored in pre-modern thought, not only accommodates anomaly but is devoted to its exploration. Why should irreconcilable things be equally true? How can we be precious and yet so appallingly mortal? ... These anomalies, or paradoxes, prepare for the one that crowns them all. Why the God Man? Tertullian's *Credo quia absurdum*<sup>1</sup> might be understood to mean that the paradox of Christ as God and Man is an ultimate expression of the sense, and the revelation of the fact, that creation is too large to be contained in the tight fist of reason.

- i. In your life, what realities do you find "anomalous" or "paradoxical"?
- ii. Where do you feel "too large to be contained in the tight fist of reason"?

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<sup>1</sup> "I believe because it is absurd."

## 7. What is a full human life?

Your friendly editor here contributes thoughts on what a “full human life” might be for you.

The thoughts begin with Thomas à Kempis’ extreme version of a warning you may have heard from your parents: watch out, the world is dangerous. But steadfastly avoiding the world can lead to a kind of living death. Between the dangers of embracing the world and the desiccation of dismissing it, where might you find your full human life?

Robert Klitgaard, *Your Life, Your Hero*, chapter 2.

<https://nebula.wsimg.com/cd899413cd02f3644335aecfe22b09e4?AccessKeyId=0C9C181402D54CC100D8&disposition=0&alloworigin=1f>

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- a. Who are one or two of your heroes? Please share.
- b. How can heroes inspire us even if our own lives are so much more ordinary than theirs?

## 8. What is special about Jesus?

Adam Gopnik is one of America's leading writers and critics. Trained in fine arts, his remarkable range of accomplishment spans politics, religion and Darwinism, cuisine, fantasy novels, writing musicals ... and what it all means.

Adam Gopnik (2010) "What Did Jesus Do?" *The New Yorker*.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/05/24/what-did-jesus-do>

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

a. Gopnik writes:

Jesus' morality has a brash, sidewise indifference to conventional ideas of goodness... There is a wild gaiety about Jesus' moral teachings that still leaps off the page. He is informal in a new way, too, that remains unusual among prophets.

What examples of these things in Gopnik's essay impressed you? Do they belie stereotypes about religion?

b. Read aloud these sentences:

Certain kinds of truths are convincing only in a narrative... If God he was—not some Hindu-ish avatar or offspring of God, but actually one with God—then God once was born and had dirty diapers and took naps. The longer you think about it, the more astounding, or absurd, it becomes. To be really believed at all, it can only be told again...

If one thing seems clear from all the scholarship, though, it's that Paul's divine Christ came first, and Jesus the wise rabbi came later. This fixed, steady twoness at the heart of the Christian story can't be wished away by liberal hope any more than it could be resolved by theological hair-splitting. Its intractability is part of the intoxication of belief. It can be amputated, mystically married, revealed as a fraud, or worshipped as the greatest of mysteries. The two go on, and their twoness is what distinguishes the faith and gives it its discursive dynamism.

- i. What is the "fixed, steady twoness" of the Christian story?
- ii. What do you think Gopnik means by "the intoxication of belief"?
- iii. If this twoness cannot be wished away or intellectually resolved, what do you think it means that some things can only be believed by telling them again, like stories?

## 9. What Jesus contributes to Western philosophy.

Leszek Kolakowski (1927-2009) was a Polish philosopher and historian of ideas. During World War II, his father was murdered by Nazi occupiers. Young Leszek became an ardent member of the Communist party and an atheist. In his twenties, he was already recognized as one of the most brilliant thinkers of his generation, and the Soviet Union invited him to Moscow in 1950 to view its Communism in action. Kolakowski was not impressed, writing of the “material and spiritual desolation” he witnessed. Through his subsequent critiques, Kolakowski became a kind of guru of anti-Communism on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

He later was a professor of philosophy at Oxford, Yale, Chicago, and the University of California, Berkeley. He was especially critical of people who rely solely on science for answers to the big questions. Increasingly dismissive of secular materialism, he became convinced that religion is a necessary component of our lives.

This essay was translated for his posthumous book, *Is God Happy?* (2013).

Leszek Kolakowski, “Jesus Christ—Prophet and Reformer” (1956).

<http://nebula.wsimg.com/c6b20f5f943ecee591aadc1cc9214f1?AccessKey=d=0C9C181402D54CC100D8&disposition=0&alloworigin=1>

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Kolakowski says Jesus passed along “precepts which were genuinely new and which—crucially—remain vital not as abstract norms but as living principles.”

1. Abolishing law in favor of love. “Again, this must be stressed: *abolishing*, not supplementing.”
  2. The hope of eliminating violence from human relations.
  3. Man shall not live by bread alone.
  4. The abolition of the idea of a chosen people.
  5. The essential wretchedness of the temporal world.
- a. Think about these five in your own life. Which one of them seems the strangest and most alien to you? Why?
  - b. Which of the five is closest to a “living principle” in your life?
  - c. Which of the five do you hope will play an even bigger role in your life?
  - d. Kolakowski concludes:

...[T]he person and the teaching of Jesus Christ cannot be invalidated or removed from our culture if that culture is to continue to exist and to create itself... For he incarnated, in his person, the ability to express one’s own truth fully and loudly, to defend it to the end with no evasion, and to resist to the end the pressure of

established reality which rejected him. He taught how we can confront the world and ourselves without resorting to violence. He was a model of that radical authenticity to which, uniquely, every human being can give true life to his own values.

How does this “radical authenticity” relate to your life?