"A word to honest doubters"
BOOK THREE

Why I Am a Christian

MY THEME might also have been formulated thus: Why I became a Christian. For I had lived for many years as a religious heathen.

At that time, too, I naturally had my own ideas about the Christians and about their reasons for becoming Christians. Most of them, it seemed to me, became Christians out of fear. They were afraid of divine punishment, of everlasting torment especially. Others, it appeared to me, were less afraid, but were wiser. They wanted to fare well, preferably both here and in the hereafter.

But whether they were afraid or they were wise, or both, it seemed to me that they looked upon Christianity as the safest and at the same time the cheapest kind of insurance, offering benefits which extended even beyond death and the grave.

Now I think differently with regard to this.

It happens, you know, that we must revise our opinions, especially after we have had personal experience with a thing and not merely thought or speculated about it.

I have had personal experience in this matter. And if I were to tell you why I became a Christian and were to give my answer quickly and in one short sentence, I think that I would have to state it thus, to be as simple and as clear as possible: I did it to become a man.
This may perhaps sound somewhat strange to some people. But I know of no task which is so great and so difficult as that of becoming a man.

I know of statesmen who have rendered such great services to their country that their names are taught to and admired by every school child. I know of scientists who have done so much for humanity that their names will be mentioned to the end of time. I know of artists whose fame has spread throughout the whole civilized world. But many of these live their real lives, that which men thoughtlessly and superficially refer to as their private lives, in such a way that it is usually omitted from their biographies.

To be a real artist, a scientist, or a statesman requires certain definite abilities and training, but to be a real man requires not a little more than both ability and training. We have schools for educating men to become farmers, craftsmen, business men, professional men, and for training them for many other vocations in life; but whether these schools help to make men of these people or not, I am not so certain. Neither do I know, as far as that is concerned, whether a school which sought only to make men out of people would have a very large attendance.

As I look around in this remarkable world in which I find myself, I soon discover that all life is subject to its own particular laws. Among these laws I find, again, two which are fundamental and which recur in all forms of life.

In the first place, all life, in plants, in animals, in fish, and in man, has a nature which is peculiar to itself. If we sow oats, we reap oats, not barley. From birds’ eggs we get birds, not fish.

In the second place, every form of life, each with its own peculiar characteristics, is dependent upon certain outward conditions. Some plants must have sunlight; others, shade. Some animals must have water in which to live; others, air; others, earth; and still others must be below the earth’s surface.

If they are not allowed to live in these particular surroundings, the result will be an impaired life, ending finally in death. Think of a bird in a cage, or of a bear in captivity. Have you ever seen an evergreen, the tallest tree in our forests, standing in a swamp? It is short, moss-covered, and full of dry branches. No one would think that it was the queen of our forests.

Man, too, is subject to certain laws.

Human life has its own peculiar characteristics, which make it human. And this life develops only under certain conditions and in certain environments.

One of the characteristics of human life, among others, is that it must discover its own peculiarity, that is, discover the meaning of life. In all other living beings the innate life unfolds itself automatically, by means of the instincts. In man, however, the unfolding of life takes place consciously and deliberately.

Man himself must know what it means to be a man, and will to be it. He himself must select the environment in which his own peculiar life can unfold itself. And this is what men have been working at down through the ages as far back as we have any historical records of human life. The best men and women of each generation have been the ones who have sacrificed the most time and energy to ascertain the meaning of life.

One day a quiet, good man came forth and said: “I have found it.”
Men crowded around him and listened. After they had heard him to the end, they said: “Verily, we have found it!”

And a religion had been founded upon earth.

Now, all life is supplied with a peculiar apparatus which we call sensitiveness or feeling. It constitutes a very important factor in life. It serves life both positively and negatively. It serves positively by making the living organism aware of those things or conditions which will promote its existence. Even in plants we can clearly discern a “sensitiveness” of this kind. If a tree, for instance, is growing in lean earth and there is better earth a short distance away, we notice that the tree practically moves away from the lean earth by sending its roots over into the good earth.

The feelings serve the living organism negatively by making it aware of everything in its surroundings which is detrimental to its existence. Thus, for instance, the sensitiveness of our skin. It helps us to protect our bodies against dangerous cold or heat. If we touch a hot iron, our feelings give instant warning and we withdraw our hand, thereby escaping greater injury.

This is so self-evident that we think little of it. One of my old friends, however, told me that he lost the sense of feeling in one of his hands as the result of a stroke and that he no longer feels any pain when he burns himself. As a result his hand might now easily be badly injured by terrible burns.

We see this trait with exceptional clearness in animals. Think of how difficult it is to get a rat or a fox to eat poison. Their sensitiveness intuitively protects the living organism by giving the warning that this is dangerous. This is why wild animals do not eat things that are harm-
And another new religion had been founded on earth. Thus it continued through hundreds and thousands of years. But the conscience of man was not satisfied with any of the solutions.

Then came Jesus.
He showed us what the meaning of life is. When Jesus came, we saw for the first time on earth what a real man is. He called himself the “Son of Man.”
The others, who had preceded Jesus, could only tell us how a man should be. Jesus, however, exemplified it in His own life. He did not only point out the ideal, as others had done; He Himself was the ideal, and He actually lived it out before our very eyes.

Permit me to mention two things in connection with this ideal. In the first place, Jesus, too, directs His appeal to our consciences. Furthermore, He seeks no other following but that which the consciences of men will grant Him.

Many think that Jesus forces men to follow Him. In so doing they reveal how little they know about Him.

Let me call your attention to one incident in the life of Jesus. It was during the great awakening in Galilee. The people were streaming together and almost trampling one another down. One day Jesus stopped and looked at all these people. And He seemed to ask Himself this question: I wonder if they have understood me? Then He turned and cried out once again to the multitudes: “No man can be my disciple without renouncing all that he hath, yea, even his own life” (Luke 14:25-33).

A man who speaks to the people in that way does not expect to gain any other adherents but such as are convinced in their hearts that both the man and his message are trustworthy and that they, therefore, are inwardly bound to follow him, regardless of what it may cost them.

This is the remarkable thing that happens. When our consciences are confronted by Jesus, we are compelled to accord Him our full and unqualified approval. At least, He received the approval of my conscience. No matter in what situation I see Jesus, my conscience says: Verily, that is the way a man should be.

Whether I see Him as a child or as an adult, in the quiet home circle or in public life, among friends or among enemies, at rest or at work, in conflict, in temptation, in pain, yea, even in death—everywhere, my conscience says: that is the way a man should be.

In the second place, the Jesus-ideal is lofty enough for even the most gifted of men.

Down through the ages there have been many who have thought that they could improve upon the Jesus-ideal. But as yet no one has even been able to approach Him, not to speak of surpassing Him.

Those who have followed Him the farthest have gradually come to such a strong realization of their spiritual inferiority to Him that they have felt themselves unworthy to suffer martyrdom in the same way as He. Thus tradition says that Peter asked to be crucified with his head down because he felt that he was unworthy to hang upon a cross in the same way as his Master.

So high is the goal which Jesus has set for men by His own life. Yet the life which He lived is not beyond any one of us, not even the least gifted. Jesus expressed Himself with regard to this upon one occasion in the following manner: “I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and the understanding, and didst reveal them unto babes!”
High enough for the most gifted, and yet not beyond the least gifted! In this, too, we see the Master.

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What, then, was the life of Jesus like?
Large volumes, both scientific and devotional, have, of course, been written about this. I must be brief and shall, therefore, mention only a couple of the fundamental traits, the two which, to my mind, most clearly distinguish the life of Jesus from that of all other people.

In the first place, Jesus never had to grope His way to find the meaning of life, as everybody else has had to do, both before and after His time. Unerringly He discerned it and lived in harmony with it, to Him a perfectly natural way of living. We can not discover that He was ever in doubt, not even during His temptation or His passion.

The unique thing about Jesus, however, that which impresses us most, was, without comparison, His intimate and unbroken fellowship with the Father. He Himself knew that this was the secret of His life, of its radiant purity, as well as its quiet joy and its superhuman power.

He saw immediately and intuitively which were the right relationships in life and which was the proper environment for human life. Consequently His life was that perfectly successful and normal human life which it was. His whole life was rooted in God. He was its vital element. Jesus felt that His meat was to do the will of the Father. He tells us upon one occasion that He never did anything without first “seeing” His Father do it. He never said a word without first “hearing” it of His Father.

He walked upon earth; but lived in heaven, not as a religious dreamer, but as the most practical, the most capable, and the most willing to suffer of all men known to history.

In the second place, I would mention the life Jesus lived among men.

The unique thing about this aspect of His life, as contrasted with our lives, was that He sought the welfare of others to such an extent that He was oblivious of Himself if only He might do some good to others.

Jesus has had many enemies, both among His contemporaries and since, and they have scrutinized His life very closely. None of them, however, has been able to point to a single instance in which Jesus acted from selfish motives.

Jesus has given expression to this normal human life by saying: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God above all else, and thy neighbor as thyself.”

But before speaking about this life to others, He Himself lived it, among friends as well as among His enemies.

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When I first was given to “see” this picture of Jesus, I had been studying theology for five years. I had passed through all the various stages of doubt. I had doubted the inspiration of the Bible and everything supernatural and miraculous which the Scriptures and the Church had attributed to this Man.

I soon became acquainted with the methods of liberal theology and learned how to employ them. And when I had applied the current religio-historical tests to the little brochures about Jesus written by the four evangelists, there was not a great deal left in them of “scientific” value.

However, this portrait of Jesus can not be destroyed by doubt or by criticism of any kind. It is imprinted upon
the four Gospels of our New Testament. And it does its God-given work even when men try, as I did, by means of "science" to tear it to shreds.

During my whole student life I had taken a theoretical and impersonal attitude toward this portrait of Jesus. When I finally did give Christ access to the place which He had always desired to reach, namely my conscience, an entirely new movement was started in my whole inner being.

Permit me at this point to mention the two things which came to mean most to me.

In the first place, concerning the life of Jesus with which I had now come in contact, my conscience compelled me to say: Verily, that is the way a man should be. I began to feel also that the life of Jesus was a condemnation of my own life. I could not help but feel that my life was shameful; it grieved me; and I practically abhorred myself. I felt that my own life was a downright inhuman life.

Some may perhaps think that I had lived an unusually wicked life and had become one of Garborg's "tired men." But such was not the case. A good home and a number of good friends had saved me from a wild life during my youth.

Nevertheless, I now saw how inhuman the life was which I had been living. Jesus lived His life for others. I had lived my whole life for myself, in petty selfishness, pride, and pleasure.

That there were many others even among the theological students who lived as I did, did not help me any longer. My conscience was speaking to me now.

In the second place, the life of Jesus attracted me with a power which I had never before felt in all my life.

I saw before my eyes that pure, good, beautiful, and strong life which God had intended that I should live. It attracted me with a wonderful power.

I could understand now why so many young men were drawn to Jesus. All He had to say to them was: "Follow me," and they left all and followed Him, that wonderful peripatetic teacher.

I was, of course, tempted to continue to live as before; that would naturally have been the easiest and would have involved the least effort. But I felt an indescribable fear at the mere thought of it, because I knew that by so doing I would betray my very innermost self.

Jesus once said: "Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice." Now I knew that Jesus was right. Every one who is confronted by Jesus and refuses to accept Him is untrue to himself.

I had formerly believed that people who became Christians had to deny their own convictions, if they were people who did their own thinking, but now I saw that I had to become a Christian if I was not to be untrue to myself and my most sacred convictions.

Then came the choice.

I had to choose. Do not misunderstand me. I was not compelled to become a Christian. I could choose whichever way I would. That was the terrible thing about it. But I had to choose.

I was to say a few words about why I became a Christian.

I can answer more readily now. I could not endure being untrue to myself, both for time and for eternity. I could not enter upon a life of unequivocal falsehood, such as would have been the case if, after having been confronted with Jesus, I had continued to live as before.
Why I Am a Christian

So I chose to follow Jesus.
And God be praised now and forever for that choice! When I had made it, a quiet, peaceful joy descended upon my soul, a joy which I had not known since I was a child. I had made the greatest choice of my life, and my conscience was fully and completely in accord with it.

I had made a whole-hearted decision to follow Jesus.
But you might as well have asked me to climb to the moon as to follow Jesus. The one was as impossible as the other. All day long my conscience would say to me: "Jesus would have done this, but you didn't. Jesus would not have done that, but you did."

Now and then I thought that I really had done what Jesus would have done. Then my conscience would say: "Very well, and everything would be all right if you only had done it in the same spirit as Jesus!"

My despair at this I shall not endeavor to describe. I could not go back to my former way of living. It was impossible to go ahead. Every way was closed.

I began to feel the truth of Jesus' words: "Ye... being evil." Before, this hard saying had irritated me more than most of Jesus' sayings. Now, it was beginning to dawn upon me that the great difference between Jesus and us is His spirit. I now began to realize that it was my spirit which made it impossible for me to follow Jesus.

My spirit was one of selfishness throughout. I had myself in mind whether I did good or evil. My own advantage, my own pleasure, my own comfort, or my own honor was always in the background of even the most praiseworthy things I did.

And I could not change my own attitude, even though I was able to change my words and my deeds, which made men believe that a great change had taken place within me. I remember in this connection what one of my friends upon one occasion said to my father about me: "He has become so holy that it is almost too much of a good thing." But I, who knew the condition of my own mind, knew how helplessly unholy I really was.

I was completely at a loss as to what to do.

There I was, under a steady downpour of reproaches from my conscience. The feeling of guilt lay heavily and painfully upon my soul. The desire for forgiveness, for the remission of sins, now became stronger. The human heart's age-old cry after a gracious God began to be heard above all the other voices in my soul.

Scripture speaks about "that which is lost," about the poor, the helpless, those who weep and mourn, who hunger and thirst after righteousness. I had had a feeling before that these expressions were exaggerations, were unnatural, yes, even untruthful and inhuman.

Now, however, they all seemed appropriate, as though they had been written with me in mind. I felt how true everything is which Scripture says concerning man's moral impotence and complete helplessness before God and God's holy, immutable law.

I was now in the dust before the living God. My conscience had brought me to this as I was confronted with the living God and His absolute truth in Jesus Christ. The same thing had happened to me as that which Paul speaks of when he says that his mouth had been stopped and he felt guilty before God.

Now I permitted God to speak to me.

In Jesus Christ I had experienced the absolute God. And when a person is confronted with the Absolute One, he must do one of two things: either reject Him, or cast
himself down into the dust before Him. Face to face with the Absolute One, it will not do to bargain, negotiate, or criticize. All such things are silenced when we are confronted with the living God in Jesus Christ.

Søren Kierkegaard has given classic expression to this feeling in the words: “Before God we are always in the wrong.” That means that God is always in the right. That is essentially how we feel the authority of God as we stand before Him. Because I have met the living God in Christ, therefore Christ has become my authority, to whom I submit with my deepest and most sacred convictions. I do so voluntarily, and feel secure in so doing.

Jesus Christ had become my Lord, whom I no longer criticized or sought to instruct in religious and moral questions, and to whom I submitted unconditionally whether He spoke about God or man, sin or grace, fall or redemption, heaven or hell, angels or devils, baptism or communion, eternal life or eternal death.

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I was now in a position to see a new aspect of this most remarkable of all men. I saw that Jesus Himself considered it His real mission to be a Saviour. He was, indeed, our example, our ideal. But He never says that this was the reason for His coming to our world. On the contrary, He said expressly upon various occasions that He came “to give His life a ransom,” “to save that which is lost,” and that His “blood is poured out unto the remission of sins.”

When my eyes were finally opened to this, I saw, of course, that the whole Bible is full of similar truths concerning the Saviour. Why had I not seen this before?

And now I saw, especially in the Gospels, how people whose condition was identical with mine were helped by Jesus. They were just as oppressed and terrified by their sins as I was. Nevertheless Jesus received them mercifully unto Himself. In fact, I now saw that this was really the thing with which Jesus was constantly occupied.

One thing I noticed especially, namely, the wonderful power in the words of Jesus. He did not merely give good advice, like the founders of other religions had done. When He spoke to a person who in distress had sought Him out, His words took effect immediately and demonstrated their regenerative power.

The people who entered into fellowship with Jesus became new people. If He said to them: “Thy sins are forgiven,” they believed His word and became happy, believing souls. If He said: “Follow me,” they received power to live a new life in fellowship with Him. I began to understand that there was something about Jesus, about His words and also about His person, which delivered people from their old life, from both the guilt and the power of sin.

In my own mind I often thought: would that I could have lived at the same time as Jesus did! Then I, too, could have received some of that wonderful power which emanated from His mighty person, and my aching and weary soul could have heard at least one single regenerative word from His lips.

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Then I came in touch with the holy church of God on earth. Or, more correctly, I began to see and to hear what it had been trying to show me and tell me all the time.

There stood the church of God, a never-ending succession of men and women all the way from the morning of Christ’s resurrection down to our day. I had, of course,
read a great deal about them; and I knew that they were
the best men and women that the human race had produc-
ded. There they all stood, saying to me: “We have seen
Jesus. He has made us new creatures by His mighty
person and His regenerative word. You may see Him,
even though He is invisible. Turn to Him in your distress,
and you will experience the salvation for which you are
so earnestly praying. Go to Him in prayer and study
His word intently, and He will reveal Himself to your
soul.”

I did so, and I very soon experienced a distinct peace.
I noticed it especially when I read of the quiet, powerful
love which Jesus showed toward all the helpless. I
noticed also that the words of Jesus concerning His suf-
ferring and death were the ones which gave my soul the
greatest security and peace.

I alternated thus for awhile between fear and joy until
one day when I experienced the great miracle. In a
manner which I can not explain, the mystery of the Gos-
pel, the cross, was unveiled to me. Not in such a way
that I could understand it or explain it. I experienced it.
Face to face with the crucified Saviour I experienced the
God of grace. And that in such a way that all doubt and
fear vanished. A happy feeling of security, a blessed
assurance, filled my soul, not only for occasional moments,
but as an abiding and basic sentiment in my soul.

This would, of course, be dimmed occasionally through
spiritual neglect and, especially, through disobedience.
But it would return with equal certainty as soon as I
sincerely repented at the feet of my Saviour.

I now experienced the second great miracle, that which
the Bible calls the new birth.

An entirely new world was opened to me. Quietly
and wondrously I was lifted into the presence of God.
As though I had been endowed with a sixth sense, I
felt the world of invisible things which surrounded me.

I see now that this invisible world had surrounded me
before also. But I lacked the faculties with which to
apprehend it and to participate in its life. Now, on the
other hand, the eyes of my soul are open; I see the in-
visible. The ears of my soul are open; I hear the music
of heaven. Celestial melodies in mighty billows of re-
joicing surge through me, body and soul.

My soul experiences wonderful healing in its new en-
vironment. Enveloped by the infinite goodness of God
and permeated through and through with that unspeak-
able peace which the intimate nearness of the Lord im-
parts, my former life of selfishness loses its attractiv-
erness. By beholding the glory and listening to the music
of the invisible and eternal world, my former life with
its love of pleasure, honor, and advantage loses its en-
ticing and bewitching power.

Now I know the love of God, but no longer as a heavy
and burdensome duty. Now I know the joy of being
loved of God for Jesus's sake, and I feel grateful for
the privilege of loving Him in return.

I feel that a new moral power is being imparted to
my soul. I have come under the personal influence of the
mightiest and purest Person in the universe. From Him
I am now receiving vital, personal impulses each day.
His love it is which gives these impulses their unique
power.

I am weighed down when I do anything which grieves
my Saviour. I rejoice when I do that which I know is
according to His will.
Do not misunderstand me! I am not sinless or perfect. I often leave the narrow pathway and slip back into my old ways of living, into a self-loving and self-guided life.

But now I know what to do. I tell it all to my Saviour. He leads me back to the right path again. First He forgives me for my unfaithfulness and disobedience and then He works in me both to will and to do according to His good pleasure.

My progress is slow. But I know that the miracle has taken place within me and that Jesus's own life has been planted into my heart.

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And I find that this new life which I am experiencing is a truly human life, the life for which I was created. I receive direct assurance of this through the inner emancipation which I feel that this life imparts to my whole being.

The more I give myself to this intimate fellowship with my invisible Saviour, the more my soul is filled with that bliss which tells me that I am in my true element and that I am following that plan of life for which I was created. And the more whole-heartedly and frequently I say no to the self-loving and self-directed impulses of my own will, the more I feel that my real human self is being allowed to unfold itself. The more I submit my will to God's will, which is holy love, the unconditional giving of self for others, the more I feel that I find myself and am myself.

Fish are made to live in water. They are free only in water. Birds are made for the air. They are free only in air. I was created to live in God. And I am free only when I am dependent upon Him.

Moreover, I know that He who has begun the good work within me will Himself perfect it. He will not give me up until He has brought me to the goal: to live the same life as He, to love Him above all else and my neighbor as myself.

Then shall I have become what I was created to be: a man.

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A little incident in closing.

Once earlier during my theological course I had stepped into Professor Petersen's study to get a certificate from him to show that I had completed his course of lectures.

He was known as a man with a lively, jovial nature, who was always master of the situation and knew full well what he wanted. When I asked for the certificate, he assumed a jovial but very astonished mien and inquired: “Why, are you studying theology?”

“Yes,” I replied, with all the modesty I could command at the time, “I have ventured to do so.”

“And you have not consulted me as yet as to how you should plan your course?”

No, I had not. In parenthesis it might be remarked that Professor Petersen's conservative and warm-hearted Christianity had appealed very little to me during my whole theological course.

“Then I would advise you to make an appointment with me,” said the kind old man with a twinkle in his eye.

I promised to do so, and a few days later I sat in Professor Petersen's spacious study in Uranienborg Terrace. I had come to receive his advice.

Meanwhile, the wise old gentleman, who was well acquainted both with me and my theological views, understood very well that I would scarcely profit very much
by his advice. Nor was it for the purpose of giving such advice that he had given the hint that I should have a conference with him.

In the course of a half minute or so he had made an end of his counselling. Then he turned and looked me straight in the eye with his own warm, tender eyes and said, after a very brief pause: "Will you not become a Christian, Hallesby?"

Those words and that moment I shall never forget, no matter how old I become.

Like lightning the thought flashed through me: It is true, I am a heathen! That day I received a mortal wound, which within a half year brought me to my knees before my crucified Saviour.

At the time I sought bravely to parry off the well-aimed blow. I summoned to the occasion all my doubts and intellectual difficulties. He listened quietly and patiently to everything I had with which to defend myself. I believe, too, that he answered some of the objections I raised against the intellectual crosses in the Christian faith. My recollection of that, however, is no longer very definite.

Then he suddenly broke off the whole conversation with these words: "Why force this? It will come; it will come!"

My young friends! Today I would send this question along to you. I would ask each one of you: Will you not become a Christian now?

I have now told you a little about why I became a Christian. When in my thoughts I dwell upon the in-calculable and unspeakable riches which have been showered upon me since I became a Christian, my desire is that each one of you might also become a Christian.

BOOK FOUR

The Mysterious Element in Christianity

ALL LIFE contains something which our mind is unable to penetrate. We usually term this the mysterious element in life, although we are unable to accurately define it.

The higher the form of life, the greater this element of mystery becomes and the greater becomes that realm of life through which our mind is unable to penetrate. Since Christianity is the highest form of life, it will not surprise us to find that in it we come in contact with the greatest of all mysteries.

In trying to speak briefly about the mysterious element in Christian life, I shall by no means endeavor to make the irrational rational, nor seek to explain the inexplicable. Permit me to concentrate our attention about the following points:

First, that there is a mysterious element in Christianity. Second, wherein does the mystery lie? And, third, how can this mysterious element be experienced?

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Christianity has, from the very beginning, maintained that it possesses a life which is qualitatively different from all other forms of life.