
A Fresh Look at Faith and Reason

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THE ARGUMENT FOR CHRISTIANITY

I have come to see most of Christian apologetics as an *ad ignorantiam* argument. Like this: We assume Christianity is true. Then we invite everybody to disprove what we've already assumed, but we demand that they do so within the scope and limitations of our original assumptions.

Or maybe like this: Say, we discover a collection of ancient texts, and our discovery is facilitated by a bunch of folks who claim that the apparent irrationality of the events in their ancient context is not irrational at all, since (1) it can be demonstrated that the original authors really meant what they claimed, and (2) there's been no end of corroboration over the years since their original publication. No metaphor here, just real-life events.

Say, it is posited that Paul Bunyan was really divine. His followers have located a plethora of proof texts in the Hindu Shastric scriptures that the incarnated one would seem larger, more powerful, more relevant to his followers' lives than anything previously experienced. Perhaps the blue ox is seen to be an incarnation of the creation principle, and the axe is seen to represent eternal justice. Miracles abound in the texts (the carving of the Grand Canyon, the building up of the Rocky Mountains, etc.), and all of them are consistent with the claims to deity. These newly revealed documents might even describe a death, resurrection, and redemption, as have almost all religions from Egypt, through Greece and Rome..., to Christianity, Mormonism, and beyond.

My point is that nobody would be expected to take such claims seriously. Anybody attempting to refute them would be wasting her or his time. Of course. And if anyone did make the effort, mistakes could easily be written off to the triviality of the claims.

SPECIAL PLEADING

But here's the problem. Why take Christianity any more seriously *a priori*? OK, it has large numbers of followers today: You and I happen to have been born into a demographic likely to become such followers, which we have. What if Bunyanism had a parallel demographic superiority, as does Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Animism, etc. in various times and places? So Christianity connects to ancient Hebrew documents. Without prejudice, Bunyanism's connections to the Vedas is no less credible.

It seems to me that the largest obstacle facing Christianity for the genuinely objective scholar (that is, for the holy skeptic) is establishing its warrant to be taken seriously in the first place.

For example: Mel Gibson makes a movie about a deeply moving, obviously central moment in the Christian myth, the "Passion." For those who have bought into the system and already know the story, the flick is a life-changing event, notwithstanding that almost no theology or even character development are attempted. For objective viewers (our holy skeptics) it is merely grim, or perhaps equally moving on a purely humanistic level. That anybody should have to suffer the way Jim Caviezel does, unjustly and apparently without offering up resistance, is moving, to be sure. But if it ever took place, the historical "Passion" was hardly the first instance of such injustice, and if one is following the news today in Sudan, it was hardly the last.

(Nor would it be if one looked at Iraq today, Kosovo five years ago, Rwanda ten years ago, or the Third Reich or the American plantation, factory, or frontier, and on and on.) But now Mel is a rich man due to a raft of presuppositions and the shared literary experience of his audience.

Please don't misunderstand me: I'm denigrating neither Mr Gibson's art nor the sacrifice of his biblical original. But clearly the value Christians have assigned to the film is founded upon an *a priori* assumption.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Why should this matter to me more than Bunyanism? Because we are moved by tragedy? Because my dad and grandpa were? Why should an apologist feel more compelled to take any of it seriously, or more seriously anyway than the beliefs of the Hakawi tribesmen of the Amazon or the Looloos of the Congo? We know all too well that Islamic apologists are working overtime churning out highly rational arguments that are at odds with ours, to say the least.

As you can see, the conditions I'm describing really aren't about philosophy or theology, even about the logic of special pleading. I merely get stuck on demographics: the fact that Christian apologists consistently take Christianity most seriously, even when they do so with the purest motives, the most perfect objectivity, and the clearest reasoning. As is the case with Muslim apologists, Hindus, etc. And the converse is equally troubling: that conversion from one religion to another is statistically inconsequential, except in cases of moving from non-practicing to practicing, of financial or family convenience, and in forcible mass conversion of populations.

A Texas murderer apparently saw *The Passion of the Christ* and was moved to turn himself in. I would be shocked to discover he didn't have some Christian background. Almost all the converts at the big stadium crusades walked in either as believers in nothing or as lapsed Christians. Jews, Muslims, Christians, and others often convert in order to solidify their marriages or, as in the case of South Koreans, to establish beneficial relationships with trading partners. Ireland was "converted" by St Patrick and Germany by his successors, not by finely reasoned preaching but with swords. The modern-day Slavic Albanian Muslims weren't converted by careful reasoning. How? The Turks happen to have taken over their country a few hundred years ago, and oh well.... Islam itself, Mohammed taking Christianity as a model for his evangelistic technique, was established throughout the Middle East entirely by force.

LOGICAL OPTIONS

Of course none of this proves anything logically. All logical arguments must be considered on their own merits, regardless of any history of use or abuse. But to my mind the coincidences are overwhelming. Isn't it a little too convenient that I just happened to be brought up in the only true religion? Christian exclusivity is a problem that I can't seem to get past. As Mark Twain said, humanity is the only species to have the one true religion, hundreds of them.

As I see it, my problem can be understood in terms of logical options. Sticking with monotheism (atheistic religions such as

Buddhism, polytheistic religions such as Hinduism, and Animism work into this system too, but I need to simplify here), either...

- (1) God doesn't exist;
- (2) God exists, but he or she hasn't revealed himself or herself to anybody;
- (3) She has revealed herself to some but not to others;
- (4) He has revealed himself to everybody, and some got the revelation altogether right while some got it altogether wrong;
- (5) She revealed herself to everybody, and religions vary, some understanding it more correctly than others (I hope Buddhism, say, is more accurate than Moloch worship, and most would agree that Islam does better than African tribal Animism); or
- (6) He revealed himself to everybody, but everybody got it wrong.

CS Lewis's point that there is little substantive difference between the major world religions on most ethical points is well-taken, but it goes without saying that such transcendental issues as Christ's deity are non-negotiable. Jesus is either god or he isn't. And that of course is the central point for most Christians, all other questions naturally assuming secondary status.

WHAT DO THE OPTIONS MEAN?

If #1, #2, or #6 turns out to be the case, there is obviously no point to looking into historical religion at all. Most religions (except Hinduism, B'Hai Faith, ancient polytheism, and "new-age" pantheistic syncretism, I think) opt for #3, claiming to be the sole receptors of Truth. If we posit a just god, this kind of exclusivity seems illogical to me. If we accept the existence of god, if we hope that she is just, and if we assume that she is interested in revealing herself, #4 and #5 are the most likely options. The evidence pointing overwhelmingly in the direction of human fallibility, especially when the emotions, biases, and selfish motivations connected with religious power are involved, #5 seems the most reasonable option to me. Thus it seems that the honest person has but one duty: To investigate as many religions as possible and to decide between them on the merits of the case each presents. The only human I know of who did this rigorously was John Stuart Mill, and he finally opted for atheism. Oh, well....

It is no good to say that we should "trust the Lord" for answers (the "god said it, I believe it, that settles it" bumper-sticker approach). Nobody has *anything* to go on but the words of men and women. Even considering the possibility that one religion may be truer than the rest, including the possibility that god revealed himself to some individuals, we have absolutely nothing to go on outside of human reporting and human interpretation. We must either trust somebody implicitly, a very dangerous thing to do, or we must judge as carefully as we can, considering as much evidence and as many points of view as possible.

My friend, apologist Erick Nelson's, elegantly reasoned thesis becomes moot for me: Nelson establishes that Matthew & Co. meant what it looks like they meant, but Matthew never ceases to be Matthew, and Matthew is a human. I must either trust him, which I have no objective reason to do, or weigh his statements the same way I weigh Gautama's, Michael Moore's, or a Nike commercial's.) Trusting some "inner light," presumably the voice of the Holy Spirit, is objectively either a reasonable or an unreasonable thing to do: Either one reasons as carefully as one can, or one privileges emotion. As for feelings, I have fallen victim often enough both to wishful thinking and to a bizarre reverse psychology (I want X; therefore Y must be true), so my money is on reason—or as close to it as my small mind can get. We are back to evaluating the words of men and women on the merits of their arguments.

Don't think I don't worry a lot about being wrong. That's the whole point. "Pascal's Wager," blah, blah, blah. You have no idea how much I wish religion were true—or at least some of it. How convenient that would be. Belief would relieve me of no end of responsibility. But that's the problem. All the evidence, all the logic, and everything else consistently point for me in the precise opposite direction of what I'm invited by the Church to believe. If something is unbelievable to one, no matter how much CS Lewis, Pascal, Erick Nelson, or James Whiteside trumpet the benefits of belief, there is really nowhere to move but away, in the direction of one's conscience. Isn't conscience supposed to be the stirring of the Holy Ghost? It is flat out impossible genuinely to believe something that one honestly finds unbelievable—regardless of how convenient or sensible or advantageous it might be to believe it. Regardless of how dire the consequences might be of not believing.

I want nothing to do with a god who demands such dishonesty of anyone. Such a being is as close to a devil as I can imagine.

IS THERE ROOM FOR BELIEF?

So there's really nothing for me to be "wrong" about. I merely find myself incapable of believing that it is true, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or any of it. If anybody else can honestly look at the evidence, honestly consider all the alternatives, and honestly come up with belief—more power to 'em. The trouble is that I very, very rarely encounter a religious person who has done those things. And having done them myself, both as a confirmed believer and later as a post-believer, I am farther than ever from belief.

Please don't talk to me about faith. I memorized all the same verses you did as a child, and I can still recite them. I've read all of CS Lewis and can still quote the arguments back to you as thoroughly as any preacher can. But I have never seen any virtue whatsoever—in fact, I see considerable evil—in fostering "an assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen." □