
The Reasonableness of Christianity

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What I think I shall say, instead of a semi-scholarly or pseudo-scholarly examination of some arcane point that would leave you all gasping for breath, is to go through eight very simple and elementary points about the reasonableness of Christianity—each of which is highly controversial. They will serve as a sort of diving board so that we can swim around in the pool of discussion for a half hour or so afterwards because, in my experience, speeches are usually dull and discussions are usually interesting. This is why Plato is my favorite philosopher.

My purpose then is to try to confront and answer the eight most common objections to the reasonableness of Christianity, in an attempt to follow the advice of the apostle Peter who said, "Be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15).

Four of these points are general and preliminary presuppositions to Christianity which are often denied by modern thought. They are not specifically Christian. A Jew, a Christian, a Muslim, a Unitarian, a theist, a Platonist, would all agree with them. But they are very frequently denied. They are sort of pre-evangelical, like the fertilizers of the soil. The other four are specific doctrines of Christianity that are quite often controverted or denied.

The four preliminary points are:

1. the objectivity of truth,
2. the non-contradictoriness or synthesizability of faith and reason,
3. the ability of reason to prove that a God exists and,
4. the ability of reason to prove that the soul is immortal, that there is life after death.

The four specifically Christian points are:

1. that Christianity is a divine revelation,
2. that miracles are possible,
3. that Christ is divine, and
4. that our eternal destiny is either Heaven or Hell.

Objective truth

Let's begin with our old friend objective truth. I remember being suckered out of \$18 in a bookstore by a book by Allan Bloom, parts of which are so bad that they are unreadable, other parts of which made me want to clap. But the first sentence is what suckered me into buying the book. It was something like this: "If a college professor in this century can be absolutely certain of one thing, it is that everyone in his philosophy class will believe, or think that they believe, that truth is subjective." Socrates disagreed. So do I.

If one believes that there is no such thing as objective truth, or that such a thing is unknowable, then all the subsequent points, instead of being arguments about what is true, are simply exercises in intellectual muscle-building, or dialectical ping pong, or opportunities to sound off and listen to each other, or "sharing and caring," all of which may be valuable, but not in the great tradition of debate. Socrates' basic argument against the Sophists, like Protagoras who also believed that truth means simply "truth to me," was very simple. The idea that there is no such thing as objective truth seems immediately self-contradictory no matter how you phrase it: "It is objectively true that there is no objective truth. It's true that there is no truth. I'm certain that there is no certainty. It is absolutely true that there is no absolute truth. You can be dogmatically certain that you can't be dogmatically certain," etc.

I admire Socrates because he is a practical skeptic without being a theoretical skeptic. He acts as if truth were difficult or impossible to find. He is extremely critical, but he has an extremely open mind. He is utterly scientific. He takes nothing for granted. I admire that kind of practical skepticism, especially when it goes together with a theoretical non-skepticism. If in fact, we were certain that we could never find this thing called truth, why would we bother to have the patience that Socrates has to question, to discover it?

The skeptic and the dogmatist seem to me to be similar psychologically; both are lazy. Only the questioner, only the one that believes: 1) that truth exists, and, 2) that I don't have very much of it yet, or that the part I have isn't worth a hill of beans, only such a person is going to be passionate in the quest for this thing. Like Romeo courting Juliette: if Romeo believed that he already had Juliette, or that Juliette was unattainable, he wouldn't bother to court her. Thus the very essence of philosophy, it seems to me, like the love of wisdom, the passionate love of wisdom, presupposes two things: 1) that objective truth exists, and I can hope to get her, and 2) that I don't have her yet.

Now anyone who is quite convinced that there is no such thing as objective truth, that is, anyone who is quite convinced that one cannot be convinced of anything, or anyone who is equally convinced that they already have it—I wonder why you came to this talk. You're welcome to stay, but you can't really, I think, share in the next seven points, at least not in the spirit in which they are offered.

The purpose of an open mind, it seems to me, is precisely to invite truth to enter. Chesterton says somewhere that an open mind is like an open mouth: it is a means to the end of closing tight on something solid. It is not an end in itself.

Faith and reason

The second point concerns the reasonableness of faith or the relationship between faith and reason. The issue is very complicated when we deal with it psychologically—the attitude of faith, or what goes on in a person's psyche when he believes. That varies, it seems to me, depending on which religion you are talking about. How reason, as the psychological attitude of searching for the truth by means of argument, relates psychologically to the opposite psychological attitude, or the other psychological attitude of faith. I don't want to get into psychology because I don't claim to know much about it. However, when we talk about that which can be known by faith and that which can be known by reason—when we talk about faith and reason as different subjective means of apprehending objective truth—then it seems to me that the answer to the question, "What is the relation between these two sets of truths?" can be very simply stated. Thomas Aquinas did a much better job of it, I think, than any of his subsequent commentators in the first few chapters of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. He assumes that there are five possible logical relationships between any two classes of things, such as classes of propositions known by faith and classes of propositions known by reason. One can contain the other, the other can contain the one, they may be identical, they may be exclusive of each other, or they may overlap.

In this case, says Aquinas, they overlap. Thus there are three classes of propositions: 1) propositions which can be proved by reason, but form no part of religious faith—propositions such as $2 + 2 = 4$, or New Haven is a city in Connecticut; 2) propositions that are revealed to be believed but cannot be proved by reason, such as that God is a Trinity; and 3) propositions which both have been revealed to be believed by religious faith and also can be proved by philosophical reasoning, such as that God exists or that there is a moral law. It is this last class of propositions which forms the bulk of the subject of the philosophy of religion.

The important point which Aquinas makes is that the relationship between those propositions which faith alone knows, such as the Trinity, and those which reason knows, can never be a relation of contradiction. That is, nothing that reason can validly prove can ever contradict anything that is revealed to faith. And he gives two reasons for this: first, God is the teacher of both, and God doesn't contradict himself; and second, truth cannot be opposed to truth by its very definition. And he draws a corollary, a rather astonishing corollary to us typically modern anti-intellectualists, or people who are suspicious of the validity of human reason. The corollary is that every objection that anyone can ever offer against any dogma of the Christian faith, whether that be a dogma like the Trinity, that cannot be proved by reason, or a doctrine like the existence of God, which can, every such objection can be answered, and can be answered adequately, by reason alone. Such an objection must contain a fallacy, since the conclusion of the objection is a falsehood. And a fallacy is in principle detectable and refutable by reason alone.

I think that if he hadn't believed that, he wouldn't have undertaken a work as massive as the *Summa Theologica*. That's its foundation. Now I agree with that corollary. It's a controversial claim. And it forms the basis of some of the arguments that I hope we are going to be dealing with next.

The existence of God

A third point: I believe the existence of God can be proved. I believe in fact that there are at least 25 distinct and probable, fairly decent arguments for something that could only be called God, at least to such an extent that an atheist would tremble a bit.

I think that not much about the God revealed in the Bible can be proved, that certainly can put you down on the theistic rather than the atheistic side.

Some of these arguments, it seems to me, are only clues, such as the arguments from authority or common consent. Some of them are practical, like Pascal's wager. But there are at least four good solid theoretical arguments, probably the four most common, which all appear to me to be valid. First, the cosmological argument: the argument from causality in the cosmos (the contingency argument in other words); the argument towards an eternal and necessary self-existing being in order to ground the chain of contingent and not self-caused beings that we see around us. Second, the moral argument: It has as its premise the absolute authority of conscience. If you agree that you should never, ever, under any circumstances, disobey your conscience, then the next question is why does it have such an absolute authority? If you don't admit that anyone else's will or feelings have absolute authority, why do yours? Perhaps they are not yours. Perhaps they are the voice of God.

Third, the argument from design: that the order in the universe which makes it a cosmos rather than a chaos came about without a super-cosmic intelligence but just by chance seems immensely improbable. No one in his right mind would ever use probability or chance as an explanation even of something as simple as my Chevrolet Cavalier parked out here. But the universe is much more complicated than a Chevrolet.

And finally, the teleological argument: the argument for an end to the universe and to human life. This is the existential argument, that there must be a final cause or purpose or goal to our lives. If not, they are "full of sound and fury signifying nothing." This is basically parallel to the cosmological argument—an argument for God as Omega rather than Alpha.

The cosmological argument says in effect that if there are no first causes there can't be second causes. We see around us a chain of second causes, therefore there must have been a first cause. The teleological argument says there must be a final end. If there were no final end, no summum bonum, no ultimate outcome and meaning and point and purpose to all of human life, then, if we knew that, we wouldn't be motivated to do anything because everything is a means to that end. You wouldn't lift your little finger or get out of bed in the morning unless you believed at least unconsciously that you were contributing to something that had worth in itself.

Life after death

I also believe that life after death can be proved. I've found at least 25 arguments for life after death, some of which seem to be only clues or probabilities, but at least three of which seem to me to be good solid arguments.

One of them is the argument familiar to medieval philosophers from the distinction between the intellect and the senses, the will and the desires, the soul and the body. What we will be after death depends on what we are now. If “soul” is just a camouflaged word for brain, then there is apparently nothing in us that survives because the brain dies as part of the body.

If, however, in addition to the body, the nervous system, the senses, and the brain, there is also something that works in us right now, that we can observe by direct introspection, which does not use or depend on a material organ such as the eye as its instrument—if there is, in other words, the intellect, that can do such things as understand the difference between, let's say, a 105-sided figure and a 104-sided figure. The senses and the imagination boggle when you try to imagine the difference between those two things, and you simply can't; but you can certainly understand the difference.

If there exists an intellect which can understand the abstract essence or universal form of humanity whereas the senses can only imagine a man or a woman, a fat man or a thin man, then that thing in us need not die when the senses, the imagination, and the body die.

If there is in us a rational deliberate will distinct from sense appetite and desire: if I can say like Descartes, not just "I think, therefore I am," but "I will, therefore I am"; if I can even say, "I fast, therefore I am," that is, I oppose my sense appetite—then that something else in me is not necessarily subject to the law of decay and death.

There may be scientific confirmation for this in near-death experiences or out-of-the-body experiences, just as there may be scientific confirmation for the cosmological argument in the form of "Big Bang" cosmology. But I don't want to rest the entire argument on the weight of current scientific evidence because the glory of science is that it is constantly revising its evidence.

I think the Middle Ages made too much of current science. The Middle Ages is often criticized for being insufficiently scientific; I criticize it for being too scientific. The Aristotelian astronomy of its day dominated the thinkers to such an extent that many of their arguments were too attached to the science that had dominated their thinking for over a thousand years but was subsequently refuted. Who knows whether our most precious scientific hypotheses such as the Big Bang theory or evolution may not turn out a thousand years from now to be mere superstitions? So I want to keep the argument on a philosophical level.

Innate desires

A second argument for life after death which seems to me quite valid is C. S. Lewis's argument from desire.

The major premise is that every innate or instinctive desire that we have corresponds to some objectively real entity that can satisfy that desire.

Let us first distinguish innate desires from conditioned desires. I'm conditioned to want the land of Oz or Superman, but no such things exist. But I'm not conditioned to want food, sex, friendship, or knowledge. And such things exist.

I'm hungry? Well, there is food. I may not get it. I may starve. But being hungry shows not only something about me, but something about the world I live in. Wouldn't it be very strange if we went to some other planet and found some race of beings that were made of stone and had no stomachs and no mouths but were always getting hungry, and there was no food on that planet? Or a race of monosexual beings who were always falling in love with a nonexistent other sex? In each case that we can observe, a desire corresponds to a possible source of satisfaction.

The minor premise is that there is one desire in us very difficult to name or to define, but if you're honest with yourself, I think you'll have to admit that it exists—one desire in us which corresponds to nothing in this world. You might say it is a desire for perfection, or a desire for total love or total meaning or total joy. But it is something that keeps saying "no, not yet," to everything that appears in our experience. Something that is like the medieval legend about the wandering Jew, a kind of anti-Semitic legend about Lazarus, Jesus' friend, whom he raised from the dead.

According to the legend, Lazarus didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah, even after he raised him from the dead. "In punishment," Jesus said, "you'll hang around until I come again at the end of the world, and you'll be the bitter old cynic. You've seen the real Messiah and now you'll be able to pick out all the fake Messiahs and tell the world, 'Nope, that's not him, I've seen the real one.'"

Well, there's a little Lazarus in all of us which says such amazing things as this (this is from John Paul Sartre, of all people): Sartre says, "There comes a time when we say even of Goethe, even of Shakespeare, even of Beethoven—is that all?"

Why do we say that? What are we looking for? We're obviously looking for something like heaven. Now is heaven a myth? What all the major religions of the world have sought, heaven, paradise, or Utopia, appears to correspond to an innate desire. If all innate desires correspond to some objective reality, this would seem to prove an objective reality beyond this world.

The "eye of love"

A third argument for the existence of life after death that seems to me quite good is what I could call the argument "from the eye of love." Love has an eye in it. Pascal says, "The heart has its reasons which the reason does not know." That is not sentimentalism. It's just the opposite of sentimentalism. The heart has its reasons.

I think we can all accept the premise from our own experience. Whom can you trust to know you, to understand you the best: a brilliant psychoanalyst who wants to use you for an experiment and who explores your psyche for ten hours a day for ten years and writes a 30-volume book about you, but doesn't care about you at all; or your best friend who isn't terribly bright but loves you dearly? Isn't there a true sense in which only your friend understands you?

All right, that's the kind of love we are talking about. The love that has an "eye" in it. Now this eye is like a telescope. Look at your neighbor with this eye of love and you will directly perceive the immortality of the soul.

This is the argument that Fr. Zossima uses in Dostoyevski's *The Brothers Karamazov*, when Lisa's mother Madam Hohlov comes to him confessing her doubts. She says, "When I was a little girl, I believed in God and immortality instinctively. And then I went to college and learned it could all be explained by chemistry. There's no soul; there's just little squiggles in the brain with tails. And when I die there is nothing but the flowers on my grave. How can I get my faith back again? Can you prove it to me?"

Fr. Zossima says, "I'm not a philosopher, I can't prove it to you, and you can't simply go back to unthinking faith now. You're too old for that. But there is a way that you can find out for yourself. Love your neighbor indefatigably, truly, and actively; and then you will come to perceive the immortality of the soul (which, being the image of God, also brings you to God)."

So it's an experiment which anyone can perform, and it's guaranteed to work. It's a little bit like the prayer of the skeptic. If somebody says to me, "How can I find out if God exists?" I say, "If you really want to know there's a way of finding out. Pray. Go out into your back yard at night and say: 'Hello there. Maybe I'm talking to nobody and nothing, and maybe I'm making a fool of myself; but nobody is listening, and so that's all right. But, on the other hand, maybe I'm talking to you; and if you exist, as these believers say, and if you really love me and care about me and want to establish a relationship with me, as these believers say, then I want you to know that I am ready. Let me know that you exist, in your own time and in your own way.'"

Part of the package deal is the guarantee that if you do that, there will be a response. All who seek, find. That makes it an almost scientifically testable hypothesis. Like the hypothesis that there's a live person trapped in this fireplace: how do you find out, by sitting here and arguing about it philosophically? Or should we go and look up the chimney, or at least tap on it and say, "Hello, anybody there?" They might be unconscious, and so they might be there but not speaking; or they may be there but hold their tongue for some reason we don't know about. Or they might be there and say, "Yes, I'm here." You might get an answer. Who knows? What do you have to lose? Those are the four preliminaries.

Christianity: A divine revelation

Now briefly, I want to test what I think are the four most often controverted doctrines of Christianity. The first has something to do with objective truth: the claim that Christianity makes to be a divine revelation, the claim to be different from all the other religions in the world.

To be a Christian is not necessarily to believe that all of the other religions are bad, wicked, false, or worthless. One can believe that there is a profound amount of truth in something like Buddhism, as

one can believe that there is a profound amount of truth in Platonism. But Christianity does believe that Jesus Christ is God's unique Word or revelation to mankind. It is to believe that, although the religions of the world may be like roads up the mountain and God is at the top, yet there is one road that God himself made down from the top of the mountain. This claim of being revealed by God is why it is not, as some people think, arrogance but humility to say that Christ is the only way. If we made the roads up the mountain, then for us to pick out one of those human ways and say that it is the only way would indeed be arrogance. But if, after trying to climb the mountain, after struggling up the mountain on our own, we were to receive a road from God down the mountain, and we were to say to that road down the mountain, "No, you're no better than any other," that would be arrogance rather than humility.

But Christ's claim is exactly that: "I am the way, the truth, the life. No one can come to the Father but through me." That's the claim. If it's false, he's arrogant. If it's true, well you'd better pay attention to it.

Ronald Knox once said that "the study of comparative religions is the best way I know to become comparatively religious." The religions of the world contradict each other. How could they all be true? If Jesus is the Messiah, then Jews, except the Jews for Jesus, are wrong. If the Jews are God's chosen people, then the Muslims are wrong, Mohammed is not the greatest prophet. If God is a person, then orthodox Hinduism is wrong. If there is neither a Brahman nor Atman, then Buddhism is right, and Hinduism is wrong.

Well, there seems to be between Eastern and Western religions and among the three major Western religions pretty clear and simple contradictions. People who say that all of the religions of the world are equal and synthesizable and noncontradictory are usually thinking of religions in terms of: 1) their moral teachings, which indeed are strikingly similar, and 2) their practical utility in helping you cope, or be happy, or get along with life. And perhaps religions can be used in that way too, just as masterpieces of painting can be used as door stops if you want. But there is something more to them than that: the ultimate truths are more than human utilities.

Miracles

Second, there are supposedly many contradictions between faith and reason, but the one that people in the twentieth century usually focused on as the major reason for thinking Christianity is irrational and unscientific is miracles. Christianity is essentially miraculous. Subtract creation, the choosing of the chosen people, the sending of prophets, the incarnation, the resurrection, the ascension, the second coming—subtract this from Christianity, and you have nothing left. Subtract the miracles from Buddhism and Confucianism and from Islam (except the Koran), and you have the essentials of the religion left.

Surely Bultmann was wrong when he said that if the bones of the dead Jesus were discovered in some Palestinian tomb tomorrow, all the essentials of Christianity would remain intact. That is to define Christianity in terms of a theory invented by a nineteenth-century German theologian, rather than the

beliefs of the writers of the New Testament such as the Apostle Paul, who says, "If Christ has not been raised from the dead, our faith is vain."

Now, has science refuted miracles? This claim is often made. Ah, but what science? How has it refuted miracles? What are the experiments? What are the discoveries? Who made them? What is the argument? Somehow no one ever answers those questions. Rather it is claimed that "Science" in some vague and filmy sense has refuted miracles.

The argument from David Hume is that miracles contradict natural law as discovered by science. That argument seems to me to be easily refutable. I don't say that Hume is a fool or easily refutable. I remember losing hours of sleep trying to refute his epistemology once. He is a very clever philosopher. But I think his argument against miracles is just confusion. A miracle no more refutes natural law than a gift of a thousand dollars refutes a checkbook balance, or a presidential pardon refutes the laws of a court, or additional fish food refutes the ecology of the fish bowl.

In each case we have a system that can be understood on its own terms apart from outside interference, but you can't tell from the laws of the system whether outside interference is possible or not. Just from looking at the fish bowl and nothing else, you can't tell whether or not there is someone out there who is going to throw more food in. Just from looking at the law enforced by the court, you can't tell whether the president is going to come in and pardon the person who has been convicted. Just by looking at the balance in your checkbook, you can't tell whether somebody is going to give you a gift or not. So just by looking at the laws of nature, how can you tell whether there is a God who could produce events within nature by a supernatural power?

A miracle seems to me something like a meteor. Once it comes to earth it is digested by the earth and follows natural laws, just as, for example, a virginal birth follows the rules of ordinary pregnancy; but its origin is supernatural.

The resurrection is the key miracle claimed by Christians. Frank Morrison was an associate of Robert Ingersoll, a famous atheist of about a hundred years ago who went around the country trying to refute Christianity. The two of them decided that together they would refute this "myth" once and for all. Ingersoll focused on the existence of God and tried to refute all of the arguments in its favor, while Morrison focused on the resurrection of Christ since he was a professional scientific historian. And after years of searching through the evidence, trying to refute this myth of the resurrection, he came to the conclusion, based on strictest rationalistic scientific research, that there was only one explanation for all of the data—namely, that Christ really did rise from the dead.

He wrote a book about it entitled *Who Moved the Stone*, about the year 1920. It's still in print. It's a best seller, a very good book. He said that there are three questions that nobody can answer except Christians. They are: 1) Who moved the stone? 2) Who got the body? 3) Who started the myth and why? If it is a myth, if it is a lie, who are the liars, and what did they get out of it? They got persecuted and martyred, most of them. If someone can come up with answers to any of those three questions, fine; but there don't seem to be any.

The divinity of Christ

The third doctrine that seems to many people outrageous is the doctrine that Jesus Christ is literally divine. Not just divine in the sense that the Hartford Whalers or Calvin Klein jeans are "divine." But divine in the literal sense—God become a man.

The reasonableness of this astonishing doctrine—and it certainly is astonishing: here is a man who gets dirt under his fingernails, who sleeps, who can be killed, and he claims to be God, the God who made the universe—the reasonableness of this astonishing doctrine is that to deny it is to be even more unreasonable. It is just barely possible that the author of the universe might want to enter his own story as one of his characters. But is it possible that Jesus is not divine? Why not? Why couldn't he just be a good man? Well, that's the one thing he couldn't possibly be.

Any mere man who claims to be God, wants people to worship him, claims to forgive sins, says that he is sinless, promises that he will save souls, and asks for peoples' adoration, is not a good man. And if anyone deserves to be tortured and crucified it is that man; but no one says that, no one except perhaps Nietzsche.

Nietzsche is at least consistent. Nietzsche says that Jesus and Socrates are the two greatest tragedies that ever happened to mankind. Kierkegaard says that they are the two greatest things that ever happened to mankind. (There are two philosophers who at least understand each other. No wimpy compromise there.)

The argument is a very old and a very well-known one. It comes from the earliest of the Church fathers, and it was made popular especially by C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*. It is called the "aut Deus aut homo malus" argument: either God or a bad man. A man who claims to be God either is or isn't. If he isn't, then he's a bad man, not a good man. He is either intellectually bad—if he sincerely believes that, then he is insane—or morally bad, if he knows his claim is false but wants you to believe it anyway. Then he is a blasphemer.

If you cannot believe—based on the Gospel records and the character and personality of Jesus as revealed in those records—if you can't believe that this man is either insane or an incredibly wicked blasphemer, then there's only one other possibility left. He is exactly what he claims to be. Which alternative do you take?

Heaven and hell

The last of the four doctrines of Christianity that I will consider is the existence of heaven and hell. What difference do a real heaven and hell make? Well, for one thing, it makes life a drama. It makes life something different from oozing into an automatic eternal-growth laboratory—like squeezing toothpaste out of a tube. I think this is a main reason why the modern world is so incredibly passionless, bored, and wimpy; a main reason why, if you look at a movie about some previous time like

Henry the Fifth, or A Man for all Seasons, one of the overall impressions that comes across, to me anyway, is the passion with which everybody lived their lives then.

Why? Because life had light to it, had drama to it. At the end was either infinite bliss or infinite emptiness. Anything was worthwhile for that bliss. Heroic sacrifice was natural and normal.

Well, people will say, "heaven, yes, but hell?" The distinctively loved Christian doctrine is that God is love. How can one hold that God is love and that there is a hell at the same time? Isn't that a contradiction? Certainly not! Love does not rape; love seduces. Love leaves you free. Thus there is a hell. Hell immediately follows from the love of God. It is not God that creates hell. It is our own free choice that creates hell. There seems to be not only no contradiction, but a sort of "the other side of the coin" principle, that relates the love of God, the freeing love of God, on the one hand, and the existence of the possibility of the refusal of God on the other hand.

The reason for believing in hell, the fundamental reason for believing in hell, I think, is the same reason for believing that God is love. Why do you believe that God is love, if you do? Does nature prove it? Does the history of the world prove it? Does the history of religious warfare prove it? There's one thing and only one thing that proves that God is love. Jesus Christ says so, and he also says there is a hell. So if you accept his authority for one thing, why don't you accept his authority for the other?

I have just discussed the reasonableness of Christianity under eight headings—eight controversial doctrines which I think can be defended reasonably. I wouldn't be completely honest with you if I didn't tell you that I also believe in the unreasonableness of Christianity, in the sense that Christianity is fundamentally a passionate love affair. It is a fight to the death for love against hate, for good against evil, for God against his enemies. It means standing up to all the forces that can be brought against him from without and within. It means being prepared for death a thousand times before you die, for martyrdom, for being scorned, for being used. And it means thereby being open to infinite joy.