

# Defeaters (Why Christianity Cannot Be True)

What are the dominant defeaters to Christian belief in contemporary Western civilization? Here's some popular reasons why Christianity can't be true (and a brief response):

**1) The other religions.** Christians seem to greatly over-play the differences between their faith and all the other ones. Though millions of people in other religions say they have encountered God, have built marvelous civilizations and cultures, and have had their lives and characters changed by their experience of faith, Christians insist that only they go to heaven – that their religion is the only one that is 'right' and true. The exclusivity of this is breath taking. It also appears to many to be a threat to international peace.

**Brief response:** Inclusivism is really covert exclusivism. It is common to hear people say: "No one should insist their view of God better than all the rest. Every religion is equally valid." But that statement could only be true if: First, there is no God at all, or second, God is an impersonal force that doesn't care what your beliefs about him are. So as you speak you are assuming (by faith) a very particular view of God and you are pushing it as better than the rest! That is at best inconsistent and at worst hypocritical, since you are doing the very thing you are forbidding. To say "all religions are equally valid" is itself a very white, Western view based in the European enlightenment's idea of knowledge and values. Why should that view be privileged over anyone else's?

**2) Evil and suffering.** Christianity teaches the existence of an all-powerful, all-good and loving God. But how can that belief be reconciled with the horrors that occur daily? If there is a God, he must be either all-powerful but not good enough to want an end to evil and suffering, or he's all-good but not powerful enough to bring an end to evil and suffering. Either way the God of the Bible couldn't exist. For many people, this is not only an intellectual conundrum but also an intensely personal problem. Their own personal lives are marred by tragedy, abuse, and injustice.

**Brief response:** If God himself has suffered our suffering isn't senseless. First, if you have a God great and transcendent enough to be mad at because he hasn't stopped evil and suffering in the world, then

you have to (at the same moment) have a God great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can't know. (You can't have it both ways.) Second, though we don't know the reasons why he allows it to continue, he can't be indifferent or un-caring, because the Christian God (unlike the gods of all the other religions) takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he is willing to get involved with it himself. On the cross, Jesus suffered with us.

**3) The ethical straitjacket.** In Christianity the Bible and the church dictate everything that a Christian must believe, feel, and do. Christians are not encouraged to make their own moral decisions, or to think out their beliefs or patterns of life for themselves. In a fiercely pluralistic society there are too many options, too many cultures, too many personality differences for this approach. We *must* be free to choose for ourselves how to live – this is the only truly authentic life. We should only feel guilty if we are not being true to ourselves – to our own chosen beliefs and practices and values and vision for life.

**Brief response:** Individual creation of truth removes the right to moral outrage. 1) Aren't there any people in the world who are doing things you believe are *wrong* that they should stop doing no matter what they believe inside about right and wrong? Then you *do* believe that there is some kind of moral obligation that people should abide by and which stands in judgment over their internal choices and convictions. So what is wrong with Christians doing that? 2) No one is really free anyway. We all have to live for something, and whatever our ultimate meaning in life is (whether approval, achievement, a love relationship, our work) it is basically our 'lord' and master. Everyone is ultimately in a spiritual straitjacket. Even the most independent people are dependent on their independence and so can't commit. Christianity gives you a lord and master who forgives and dies for you.

**4) The record of Christians.** Every religion will have its hypocrites of course. But it seems that the *most* fervent Christians are the most condemning, exclusive, and intolerant. The church has a history of supporting injustices, of destroying culture, of oppression. And there are so many people who are not Christian (or not religious at all) who appear to be much more kind, caring, and indeed moral than so many Christians. If Christianity is *the* true religion – then why can this be? Why would so much oppression have

been carried out over the centuries in the name of Christ and with the support of the church?

**Brief response:** The solution to injustices is not less but deeper Christianity.

1) There *have* been terrible abuses. 2) Christians have always claimed to be sinners, saved only by the grace of God. Christians deserve hell but they are not treated as their sins deserve only because they cling to the sacrifice of Christ on their behalf. 3) In the prophets and the gospels we are given tools for a devastating critique of moralistic religion. Scholars have shown that Marx and Nietzsche's critique of religion relied on the ideas of the prophets. So despite its abuses, Christianity provides perhaps greater tools than the other religions do for its own critique. 3) When Martin Luther King, Jr. confronted terrible abuses by the white church he did not call them to loosen their Christian commitments. He used the Bible's provision for self-critique and called them to truer, firmer, deeper Christianity. 4) Those who put forward this objection often ignore their own personal responsibility for adding evil to the world and are seeking to deflect the blame to others.

**5) The angry God.** Christianity seems to be built around the concept of a condemning, judgmental deity. For example, there's the cross – the teaching that the murder of one man (Jesus) leads to the forgiveness of others. But why can't God just forgive us? The God of Christianity seems a left-over from primitive religions where peevish gods demanded blood in order to assuage their wrath.

**Brief response:** On the cross God does not demand our blood but offers his own.

1) All forgiveness of any deep wrong and injustice entails suffering on the forgiver's part. If someone truly wrongs you, because of our deep sense of justice, we can't just shrug it off. We sense there's a 'debt.' We can then either a) make the perpetrator pay down the debt you feel (as you take it out of his hide in vengeance!) in which case evil spreads into us and hardens us **OR** b) you can forgive – but that is enormously difficult. But that is the only way to stop the evil from hardening us as well.

2) If we can't forgive without suffering (because of our sense of justice) it's not surprising to learn that God couldn't forgive us without suffering – coming in the person of Christ and dying on the cross.

**6) The unreliable Bible.** It seems impossible any longer to take the Bible as completely authoritative in the light of modern science, history, and culture. Also we can't be sure what in the Bible's accounts of events is legendary and what really happened. Finally, much of the Bible's social teaching (for example, about women) is socially regressive. So how can we trust it scientifically, historically, and socially?

**Brief response:** The gospels' form precludes their being legends. The Biblical gospels are not legends but historically reliable accounts about Jesus' life. Why? 1) *Their timing is far too early for them to be legends.* The gospels, however, were written 30-60 years after Jesus' death – and Paul's letters, which support all the accounts, came just 20 years after the events. 2) *Their content is far too counter-productive to be legends.* The accounts of Jesus crying out that God had abandoned him, or the resurrection where all the witnesses were women – did not help Christianity in the eyes of first century readers. The only historically plausible reason that these incidents are recorded is that they happened. The 'offensiveness' of the Bible is culturally relative. Texts you find difficult and offensive are 'common sense' to people in other cultures. And many of the things you find offensive because of your beliefs and convictions, many will seem silly to your grandchildren just as many of your grandparents' beliefs offend you. Therefore, to simply reject any Scripture is to assume your culture (and worse yet, your time in history) is superior to all others. It is narrow-minded in the extreme.

**Think about whether or not you believe or understand the following things in your quest for truth...**

**1) Deconstructing doubt.** Your doubts are really beliefs, and you can't avoid betting your life and destiny on some kind of belief in God and the universe. Non-commitment is impossible. Faith-acts are inevitable.

**2) Knowing there's God.** You actually already believe in God at the deep level, whatever you tell yourself intellectually. Our outrage against injustice despite how natural it is (in a world based on natural selection) shows that we already do believe in God at the most basic level, but are suppressing that knowledge for our convenience. The Christian view of God means our world is not the product of violence or random disorder (as in both the ancient and modern accounts of creation) but was created by a Triune God to be a place

of peace and community. So at the root of all reality is not power and individual self-assertion (as in the pagan and post-modern view of things) but love and sacrificial service for the common good.

**3) Recognizing your biggest problem.** You aren't spiritually free. No one is. Everyone is spiritually enthralled to something. 'Sin' is not simply breaking rules but is building your identity on things other than God, which leads internally to emptiness, craving, and spiritual slavery and externally to exclusion, conflict, and social injustice.

**4) Discerning the difference between religion and the gospel.** There is a radical difference between religion – in which we believe our morality secures for us a place of favor in God and in the world – and gospel Christianity – in which our standing with God is strictly a gift of grace. These two different core understandings produce very different communities and character. The former produces both superiority and inferiority complexes, self-righteousness, religiously warranted strife, wars, and violence. The latter creates a mixture of both humility and enormous inner confidence, a respect for 'the Other', and a new freedom to defer our needs for the common good.

**5) Understanding the Cross.** All forgiveness entails suffering and the only way for God to forgive us and restore justice in the world without destroying us was to come into history and give himself and suffer and die on the Cross in the person of Jesus Christ. Both the results of the Cross (freedom from shame and guilt; awareness of our significance and value) and the pattern of the Cross (power through service, wealth through giving, joy through suffering) radically changes the way we relate to God, ourselves, and the world.

**6) Embracing the resurrection.** Because there is no historically possible alternative explanation of the rise of the Christian church than the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. And if Jesus was raised from the dead as a forerunner of the renewal of all the material and physical world, then this gives Christians both incentive to work to restore creation (fighting poverty, hunger, and injustice) as well as infinite hope that our labors will not be in vain. And finally, it eliminates the fear of death.

**Adapted from Cornelius Plantinga by Tim Keller, Revised by J.E. Pensak**