

An Almighty Predicament

A Discourse on the Arguments For and Against Christianity

INTRODUCTION

This is an essay that I hope will appeal to truth-seekers everywhere who like to think deeply about the major questions of theology and philosophy. I hope that it will shed light on some of the struggles that Christians encounter as they seek to reconcile a passion for the gospel with intellectual curiosity.

There are certain areas of Christian doctrine that I have found very difficult to understand and therefore to accept and believe. In recent years, however, I have strived to humble myself in relation to God's Word, accepting it as truth, and suppressing the confusion that I have felt concerning various areas of Christian theology. You could say I have chosen faith over reason. But as I have done so my mind has been restless, sometimes to the point of despair. For there are certain truths, fundamental to my understanding of the God/world relationship, that from an intellectual standpoint make Christianity seem foolish.

In this essay I take for granted the existence of God, as that is a matter concerning which there is no doubt in my mind. If you are reading this and don't believe in God, you may wish to read my arguments for the existence of God, which can be found in Part 2 of my book *The Philosophy of a Mad Man* (SilverWood Books, 2012).

In the pages that follow I will begin by talking a little about the recent events that have caused me to consider abandoning my Christian faith quite unexpectedly and suddenly. I will go on to discuss the specific problems I have with Christian doctrine, and after that I will look at some of the major arguments to the contrary (i.e. those in support of Christianity) and will explain why the Christian faith continues to exert a powerful pull over my soul. Finally, I will conclude with some closing remarks, summing up the arguments on both sides of what is, for me, a deeply troubling predicament.

GOD ENCOUNTERS

On Tuesday evening I was in a cafe, and a man came and sat opposite me. He must have seen me reading the Bible as after some time had passed he asked me if I was studying theology. We proceeded to have a long conversation about spiritual matters, with him talking from an Ahmadi Muslim viewpoint and me arguing from a Christian perspective.

We talked about Holy Scripture, Jesus, Muhammad, sin, eschatology, the Trinity, and more, and I was pleased to have the opportunity to defend the Christian faith and its doctrines. We were actually asked to leave the cafe, as we were still immersed in debate when it was closing. We carried on talking and walked to the train station together, covering a variety of issues, and disagreeing in a respectful way.

After our conversation finally ended I got the train home. I felt energised by our discussions and was grateful that God had given me this opportunity to

witness to a Muslim. I felt I had been able to draw upon years of study and Bible reading, and present good arguments in defence of Christianity.

Later that evening I was in prayer in my bedroom and thanking God for the events of the day. God began to speak to me very clearly and continued to speak to me for around two hours. He spoke to me in a very loving way about the things He had promised me and the things He was going to do for me in the future. God has always spoken to me in a loving way, but on this occasion, I felt a joy and a peace like I had never experienced before.

I won't go into detail about what God said to me as I believe some things are personal and should be kept just between an individual and God. But the words He spoke related to my health, my future, my beliefs, and my past troubles. I felt He was being really open with me in a way that was truly wonderful, and He spoke in a way that was full of goodness and mercy.

It became clear during my conversation with God that He really appreciates the reasons why I find it so difficult to embrace many aspects of the Christian faith. It seemed, from what God was saying, that I may have a role to play that is outside of the confines of the Christian faith. God assured me that I would not be sent to hell because of this and that He was not going to make me suffer in any significant way in the future, during this life or in the life to come. He assured me that all of my past sufferings, which have been many and varied, are valuable, and are among the reasons why He will bless me in the future.

I was really taken by surprise by this conversation with God. It happened at a time when I think I have never felt more Christian. I have been so determined

not to depart from the Christian faith, and in recent weeks I have witnessed God perform miracles that only served to strengthen my faith. I have been convinced that Jesus is Lord and my faith has become the lens through which I view all moral and spiritual issues and all the big problems and questions of life.

I feel that God is now telling me that the problems I have with Christian doctrine are not insignificant. I wish to now explain some of these problems for the sake of clarity and to aid your understanding of my predicament. The difficulty is not so much that I'm confused, but on the contrary, the problems I will discuss below arise because I have certain convictions, or one might say insights, concerning the nature of God and those aspects of Christian thought that don't make sense.

PROBLEMS WITH CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

Introduction

There are certain things that are foundational to an understanding of God that we might call His attributes. Philosophers and theologians debate what these attributes are, but it is generally agreed that omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence, are definitional of God. I am in agreement, as it seems to me that any being who did not possess these attributes would be limited in such a way as to be disqualified from being God.

The only caveat I would add is that God *is* actually limited in one specific way, which I will now explain. Instead of saying God has knowledge of

everything, I prefer to say God has knowledge of everything of which it is possible to have knowledge. For instance, God doesn't have knowledge of other omniscient gods, because they don't exist. God doesn't have power over other omnipotent gods, because there are no other omnipotent gods. God is unable to destroy Himself because His very nature is being. So the point that I am making is simply that God's attributes apply only in respect of reality. You might regard this as a minor philosophical quibble, but I wanted to state the argument for the sake of clarity.

There is another attribute that Christians often apply to God, which is omnibenevolence, or in other words, the idea that God is kind and generous towards everyone and everything. This is problematic as the Bible is so full of suffering and evil. Christians often try to escape this problem by arguing God is the cause of all good, and man, by his own free will (or under the auspices of Satan) is responsible for all evil. There are serious problems with this claim, as I will argue below in the section entitled 'God is not Responsible for so-called Evil'.

In light of this discussion about the nature of God, let us now look at the Christian doctrines that I find to be illogical.

An Eternal Trinity

Orthodox Christians argue that God is one being in three persons, and this causes a lot of confusion. Christianity is a monotheistic religion, yet believers argue that the three persons in the Godhead have existed eternally. In Trinitarian theology, a distinction is made between the *being* of God, which is a unity, and the *persons* of God, which are a trinity. All three of the persons in

the Godhead (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are said to have existed eternally.

I have tried to get my head around how Jesus could have existed eternally, but I don't understand it. Distinction within the Godhead implies separate agencies, but it is my strong conviction that there can only be one eternal agent. I believe that divinity, at its most fundamental level, must reflect simplicity, rather than complexity. If there are two or three agents in the Godhead, then there is confusion, and I cannot accept that there would be confusion in God.

Theism and the Incarnation

Another aspect of the Christian view of God is that He is somehow separate from creation, but intervenes in it. Contrary to this view, I believe the nature of God to be boundless existence. God has no boundaries. This is the meaning of the term 'omnipresence', which theologians have often applied to God. I believe God actively sustains everything in existence, and is everywhere, all of the time.

It is therefore confusing to hear Christians speaking of a God who 'entered into' His own creation in the person of Jesus Christ. This idea suggests a kind of separation between creator and creation that I find to be absurd and illogical. Surely, God is present everywhere in creation, and always has been. Is it not God who makes the trees grow their fruit, the rain fall from the skies, and the hearts of His creatures beat? God is not dipping in and out of creation. If there is any part of existence where God is not, then God is limited. But I don't believe God is limited. God is everywhere.

Human Beings Have Free Will

Surely every reader can understand the following truth (please consider it carefully as it is the key principle of this essay): If God is omnipresent, it logically follows that there is no free will. My understanding of omnipresence is literal, in that I believe every atom in existence is a part of God and therefore under God's control. In this context, freedom to make decisions aside from or contrary to the will of God is impossible. So we do not have free will, and if we don't have free will, many central aspects of Christian thought become illogical, as I will continue to demonstrate below.

We do at times have the illusion of free will, as God can cause us to live our lives without being aware of Him. This is a kind of veil, or mode of mind, under God's control. We all make decisions every day that may seem free in the human dimension of reality, but in the ultimate dimension we are just puppets of God's sovereign will.

We are Sinners who Need to Repent

If it is true that God is in control of everything that happens, as I have argued above, then God has been controlling our lives from the moment of our conception. Few Christians would argue against the fact that it is God who grows a human being in their mother's womb. We do not choose to grow from babies into teenagers into adults; this process is under God's control. In a similar way, all of our actions throughout our lives are under God's control.

In light of this, can it really be said that we sin against God? The idea of sin necessitates that we have free will, otherwise our sin is part of the will of God. If our sin is willed by God then are we really sinning *against* God?

We all Deserve Punishment in Hell

It logically follows that if God is responsible for all we do that is described as sinful, it makes little sense to say that we deserve punishment for those sins. If we are punished, then God is punishing us for His own actions, as He is in control of every aspect of our lives.

It is true that as human beings we experience guilt in relation to moral issues. But in truth, we must acknowledge that all our feelings come from God. The urge to undertake any action comes from God, and so does the activity itself, and the guilt associated with it. It is therefore peculiar to hold a belief that we somehow *deserve* punishment if we act in a certain way.

This perspective has obvious implications for the Atonement in Christian doctrine, and the whole gospel. I can only envisage the gospel making sense if the world is seen as a performance or play, directed and performed by God, in which we are merely puppet-like characters under God's control. If we look at life in this way, we can see God as the cosmic animator, unfolding a grand game in which good and evil, reward and punishment, sin and obedience, are all a part of God's storyline. This is the only context I can think of in which punishment for sin makes sense, but this is not what Christians profess to believe – they believe God has truly given us free will, and that we are truly free to sin.

Christians often argue that people of different faiths and no faith are going to hell. I must argue is that if this is true, this is not justice on God's part, it is cruelty. It cannot be just for God to punish people for actions He has orchestrated by His sovereign will that they undertake.

God is not Responsible for so-called 'Evil'

Again, the idea that God is omnibenevolent and responsible for all good, but not evil, is a complete affront to the idea of omnipresence. Christians argue that God is in control of some aspects of their lives (you will hear Christians say "God planted me in a great church", or "God healed my sickness") but not other aspects (you won't hear a Christian say "God caused me to commit a sexual sin", for instance).

But I ask those Christians, was God controlling your body as you walked into that great church? Of course He was. That's why it makes sense to say that God planted you there. He controlled your decision to go, your footsteps, and your hand on the door handle which allowed you to enter the building. But did God somehow leave your body, mind, and spirit, when you committed the sexual sin? Is God really dipping in and out of the lives of human beings in this way? Surely such a suggestion is absurd. The truth is that God is in control of *all* activity in existence, both those things that we call 'good' and those things that we call 'evil'.

The Devil is in Rebellion Against God

I have established by now that all creatures are under God's control. So any argument relating to the free will of creatures must be considered in this context. Christians argue that the devil (or Satan, Lucifer, Beelzebub) is a 'fallen angel' – a being who attempted to exalt Himself above God in heaven and in doing so angered God and was, therefore, cast out of heaven and down to earth. He is described in the Bible as 'the ruler of this world'.

Christians will often use the devil to explain the cause of evil. But in opposition to this, I must argue that ultimately, Satan must be under God's control. Again we return to the nature of God, and the fact that He is omnipresent. Satan is just a puppet in God's hands, in the same way as human beings and all God's creatures are. If there is a being called Satan who exists somewhere in his realm (here on earth) in physical form and does things that are evil (such as tormenting people and lying to them), all of this might be attributed to Satan on one level, but we must be aware that in the realm of ultimate truth God is in control of everything Satan does, and Satan does not have free will, as free will is impossible with an omnipresent God.

Christianity is the Only True Religion

During times when I have been immersed in Christian life and enthusiastically proclaiming the gospel message, there has been an urgency to my endeavours owing to a passion for Jesus and a fear that everyone who isn't saved is going to hell. This is the basis for Christian evangelism, and this is why Christian evangelists can often seem pushy. It's because they genuinely feel they have an exclusive claim to truth, and that the only way to avoid eternal punishment is by becoming a believer.

But if God is the omnipresent creator of the universe, then He has created every religion, not just Christianity. He is the creator of millions of Muslims, Jews, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses. He is also the creator of all those people who are atheists, or agnostics. He has created literally billions of people who have lived and died outside of the Christian faith. Can it really be the case that all of these lives, with all their richness and diversity, are meaningless, because they are empty of Jesus Christ?

An alternative view would be that creation is a rich tapestry in which every thread, or every person, has a distinct and meaningful role to play. Existence can be seen as a grand performance in which God is expressing His infinite power by creating great diversity. Everyone who has lived and died has played out their role in God's grand game, and God will bring everything together in a coherent way in the future.

Some Christians argue that nonbelievers are judged 'by the light they have received', and this is a way of accommodating all those outside of the faith into the Christian worldview. But I wonder whether every life might be valuable to God in its own right, because everyone has lived in exactly the way God intended them to live.

Is it arrogant and prejudiced of Christians to claim only they have the truth? Or is it God's plan that Christians are the lucky ones who He will bless with eternal life, while all other people will be doomed to hell?

I hope that by now it is clear to every reader that if God is truly everywhere, many important Christian doctrines cease to make sense. So much theology is built upon the belief in free will which is central to the Christian worldview, yet this belief directly contradicts one of God's key attributes, omnipresence.

Having documented some of the major inconsistencies in the Christian worldview, in the next part of this essay I will examine some of the main arguments in favour of that worldview. All scriptures quoted in this essay are from the New King James Version of the Bible.

IN DEFENCE OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

The Bible is the Word of God

Many Protestant Christians believe in biblical inerrancy, which is the doctrine that the Bible contains no errors or faults. Or more specifically, inerrantists argue that in the original manuscripts the Bible doesn't contain anything that is contrary to fact. Surely these arguments only make sense in relation to Scripture if it is divinely inspired.

In the pages of the Bible there are scriptures that support the Christian claim that Holy Scripture is inspired by God. In 2 Timothy 3:16, we read, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness...". The Greek version of the word here translated as 'inspired' in the NKJV version is *theopneustos*, which literally means 'God-breathed', and in some translations it is rendered in this way. The meaning of this verse is clear - God has spoken, and the Bible is His Word.

We can further understand the doctrine of Scriptural Infallibility by looking at a few other key scriptures. 2 Peter 1:20-21 states, "knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit". The Holy Spirit is the spirit of God, so we can see this scripture as evidence that the Bible's real author is God.

What did Jesus have to say about the idea that Scripture is infallible? In Matthew 24:35 we read a telling statement from Jesus: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away." Arguably, when Jesus speaks of his words here we can relate this statement to the words Jesus spoke which are recorded in the New Testament.

Jesus clearly had a 'high' view of Scripture. He often quoted from the Old Testament and by doing so demonstrated its authority in His eyes. In John 10:35, Jesus uses the phrase "Scripture cannot be broken" which is evidence of this.

We also find scriptures in the Old Testament that attest to the authority of Scripture. Isaiah 40:8 speaks of the eternity of God's Word, when the prophet says, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever." Another key scripture is Proverbs 30:5-6, which states, "Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him. Do not add to His words, lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar." These scriptures are from the Old Testament, so it is arguable that they are not necessarily speaking of the Bible as a whole (the New Testament hadn't been written yet). But these words *could* apply to the Bible as a whole, if God was looking forward when He inspired them. Some Christians would argue this is the case.

There is clearly an argument to be made from within Scripture itself that the Bible is the inspired and inerrant Word of God. Critics of this position argue that this is circular reasoning; we are using the Bible to defend the inspiration of the Bible, and that this weakens the argument in favour of inerrancy. Nevertheless, we must consider that if the Bible is God speaking to mankind

then it would seem vitally important that we take heed of this revelation, understand it, and apply it to our lives.

Instruction Concerning Wisdom

As I was preparing to write this essay there was one scripture in particular that really pierced my heart, and in many ways I see this as the most convincing argument in favour of accepting the Bible and the Christian message. The message comes in the book of Proverbs, which says, "Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the Lord and depart from evil." (Proverbs 3:7) Those eight words, 'do not be wise in your own eyes' reverberated around my mind with penetrating power. Here God is teaching us a lesson which shames philosophers, theologians, and academics of all stripes. We like to think ourselves wise and learned, but this scripture teaches that fear of God is much more important.

Aside from this quote in Proverbs, there are other scriptures in the Bible that clearly argue we should submit to God's Word even when we feel we have more rational or logical ideas about what the Bible says. Take, for instance, the apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:18, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." There is a clear warning here. If we dismiss the gospel message as recorded in Scripture we are in danger of 'perishing'. What may seem foolish to the intellect is in fact "the power of God". The gospel message which is here being spoken of is the beating heart of the Christian Scriptures, and according to the Bible the destiny of our souls depends on understanding and heeding this message.

Another scripture that follows on from this, slightly later in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, is this: "But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty" (1 Corinthians 1:27). This scripture is similar to the one just quoted, and again speaks of the radical nature of the gospel message and how despite the fact that it may appear foolish, it 'shames the mighty'. This could be seen as a further warning against trusting in any intellectual arguments that cause us to disregard the Scriptures.

I will just mention a couple more scriptures that speak along the same lines. In Matthew 11:25, Jesus says, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes." If you read the preceding verses you will see that Jesus is talking here about those things pertaining to divine judgment. So the implication is that Jesus' words, as recorded in Scripture, hold the key that answers the question of how we avoid God's wrath. Once again the argument is that worldly wisdom doesn't help with this, but the Word of God does.

We have an expression in England that is well known – 'Pride comes before a fall'. It is likely that this saying originated in the Bible, specifically in Proverbs 16:18 which reads, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." Having strong intellectual arguments can often cause us to feel proud of ourselves, but the scripture here is warning that such feelings can be to our own serious detriment. The importance of humility in our approach to spiritual matters is paramount.

I will end this section with one final reflection on the subject of wisdom. You will surely be familiar with the story of the fall of man that is found in the first

book of the Bible, in Genesis chapter 3. Adam and Eve are told they can eat from any tree in the garden, except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. After being tempted by a serpent, the couple disobey God and eat the forbidden fruit from the tree.

There is no doubt that this story has mythical qualities, and it could be considered metaphor. I wonder whether the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents ultimate truth itself, which God holds, but which is forbidden to humans. If we try to gain knowledge outside of biblical revelation, perhaps we are doing something forbidden by God, like when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Perhaps here, at the very beginning of the Bible, we have a stark warning to every spiritual seeker – "don't try to become wise", God is saying, "it is not your place to do so. Instead, trust my Word".

A Purpose and a Hope

People like myself who are spiritually minded see the apparent chaos and abundant suffering in the world and we look for answers. We simply won't settle for anything other than what is ultimately true. Jesus said "...seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7) I believe He was referring to this quest for spiritual understanding. Part of the reason why I was depressed for so many years was that I had no real sense of purpose or hope.

In John 3:16 we read possibly the most famous scripture in the Bible, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." What a wonderfully

hope-giving passage this is! When I first read the New Testament, the depth and wonder of this promise eluded me. It was only in later years, during a time of crisis, when I read the Bible afresh, that these words really spoke to me.

Christianity is a religion that looks beyond the confines of our earthly existence. The truth is that this lifetime is as a mere moment in eternity. As Solomon says in the book of Ecclesiastes in beautiful poetic style, "Life is fleeting, like a passing mist. It is like trying to catch hold of a breath; All vanishes like a vapour; everything is a great vanity." (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

Eschatology, which is the word that theologians use to refer to the study of the 'end times', is a subject that is important in the Bible. When we read the book of Revelation, for instance, with all its strange and grandiose imagery, we feel a sense of just how much greater and more wonderful the afterlife will be. I wouldn't want to suggest that we will all get there; a place in heaven is not something I take for granted by any means. There are many warnings in the Bible that people who are not obedient to Jesus will be thrown into "the furnace of fire" where there will be "wailing and gnashing of teeth" (e.g. Matthew 13:42).

Alongside the hope that Christianity gives to believers is also a great fear of eternal punishment. Some Christians argue that all we have to do to secure a place in heaven is believe in Jesus, for "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:13) Other believers argue that salvation is not that simple, and that we must *persevere* in our faith, to the point of death, if we are to inherit eternal life. Advocates of this understanding often quote passages like James 1:12, which says, "Blessed is the man who endures

temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him." This scripture implies salvation is a process, rather than a mere decision to follow Christ, and there are many other scriptures that speak of salvation in these terms.

So within Christianity there is the great hope of eternal life, but also great fear of God's wrath for those who are disobedient and fail to persevere in the faith. The Bible gives us something that is lacking in secular life – a glimpse of the bigger picture, and a meaningful understanding of our place in the grand scheme of things.

The Divinity of Christ

A famous event in Christian history was the Council of Nicea. This council gathered in 325 AD in Asia Minor by order of the Roman Emperor, Constantine. There was a fierce debate among Christians concerning whether or not Jesus had a divine nature, and Constantine wanted the conflict to be settled. At the council, nearly all of the roughly 300 bishops in attendance voted in favour of the assertion that Christ was indeed a divine person and of the same substance as the Father. This argument drew upon John 10:30, a famous scripture where Jesus says "I and the Father are one". Since the time of this council, the divinity of Christ has been considered Christian orthodoxy, although the debate rages on.

There are other scriptures in the Bible that point to Jesus' divinity. He claimed to have the authority to forgive sins (see Matthew 9:2), which traditionally had been something the Jews believed only God can do. Also, Jesus had miraculous powers, such as the ability to walk on water (Matthew 14:25) and

the ability to raise the dead (John 11:38-44). There are over 30 miracles Jesus is believed to have performed that are recorded in the Bible, and it's likely that he performed a great many more (see John 21:25).

Another argument for the divinity of Jesus is that in several places in the Bible He is referred to as God. When the Jews tried to stone Him for blasphemy they said, "You, a mere man, claim to be God" (John 10:33). In a similar way, the Jews were greatly offended when Jesus uttered the words "Before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58). The choice by Jesus to use the phrase 'I AM' here alludes to the many times that God used the same phrase to describe His nature in the Old Testament, for example in Exodus 3:14 where God says "I AM that I AM". By saying 'I AM', Jesus was making Himself equal with God.

In addition to the scriptural evidence for Jesus' divinity, I would like to add my own testimony. Christians believe that Jesus is still performing miracles today, and I have seen a great deal of evidence for this.

Just a few weeks ago I was at a Christian discipleship event, and after some teaching we went out onto the streets to pray for people who were sick. When we found people in pain, for instance, we would command the pain to go in the name of Jesus. I witnessed a man who had pain throughout his whole body being healed instantly, to his great surprise. And there were many other people we prayed for who were shocked to experience first hand the miraculous healing power of Jesus. All of these miraculous healings provide further evidence that Jesus is more than a mere man.

If Jesus is divine in the way we have evidenced here, then we would be wise to take His teachings seriously. The Scriptures provide us with a way to

understand everything we need to know in order to live a godly life, and Jesus, throughout the Gospels, gives a great deal of advice in relation to this. If Jesus is God, can we really afford to ignore His teaching?

Human Beings need Morality

Christians believe that, through His Word, God has spoken. He has revealed guidance concerning human nature, the divine nature, and also moral subjects like sin and the problem of evil. This is important because moral conduct is a matter at the heart of the human experience, and societies around the world have laws relating to how we are allowed to act.

Pretty much everyone in contemporary society has heard of the Ten Commandments, which were given by God to the Jewish people, and appear twice in the Bible, in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. Though the commandments were given to the Jews, many adherents to the three major Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) believe the commandments are relevant to their lives today.

Christians talk of the Old and New covenants. The Old Covenant came through Moses when God used him to deliver a whole host of laws to the Jewish people. These laws included, at their heart, the Ten Commandments. They were a moral guide for how the Jews, as the specially chosen people of God, should live. As well as commands which the Jews had to obey, they were also instructed to offer regular sacrifices to atone for the sins of the people. They really struggled to keep the commandments, breaking them constantly, and ended up being punished by God for their disobedience on a great number of occasions.

In the New Covenant (or 'New Testament'), Jesus brought the law to fulfilment. There was a prophecy from the prophet Jeremiah in the Old Testament which said, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." (Jeremiah 31:33) This prophecy looked forward to the time of Jesus, and Christians believe that when people are 'born again' (which is a process that happens when you accept Jesus), God writes His law on their hearts, and they will desire to live in obedience to God. Christians don't claim to be perfect, and sanctification is a process, but believers have a fear of God which causes them to hate sin and flee from it.

To the secular person, all of this can seem like religious nonsense. But the truth is that without God's guidance, there can only be moral anarchy. Take for instance the issues of gender and sexuality. The Bible clearly talks about how God made humans male and female (Genesis 5:2), and Jesus spoke about marriage as between a man and woman (see Matthew 19:4-6). God clearly had a design in mind for the family unit. But in our current society, there are people who define their sexuality or gender as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, intersex, non-binary, asexual, polysexual, genderqueer, and the list goes on. Sexually transmitted diseases are rife, suicide rates are rocketing, and it is quite clear that those who don't submit to the moral guidance of the Bible live in a state of moral anarchy which can be profoundly damaging to individuals and to society.

Here in Britain, the Magna Carta, which is the charter that underpins our legal system, was composed in accordance with Biblical moral principles. So in a very real way, British society is founded upon the revealed Word of God.

But in our postmodern society we are losing sight of these origins, and as a result, society is starting to fragment, and moral decay is setting in. The current secular climate is characterised by subjectivity, meaning that any opinion on a moral issue is just as valid as any other. Only if we have a standard of *objective moral truth*, such as the direction from God found in the Bible, can society function in an orderly way.

God our Healer

In Old Testament times, there were many prophecies from various prophets about the coming Messiah, who the Jews were eagerly waiting for in the hope that He would save Israel from Roman rule, and be their king forever. When Jesus came, many did not recognise Him to be the king they were waiting for, as they were expecting a military leader rather than a peaceful spiritual revolutionary.

But when we search the Scriptures, we find that the prophets did anticipate this different kind of ruler. The Messiah, said Isaiah, would have the power not only to forgive sins, but also to heal sicknesses, and bring peace to the hearts of those who believe in Him:

“But He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities;
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,
And by His stripes we are healed.”
(Isaiah 53:5)

This scripture clearly relates to the crucifixion, which Jesus often anticipated and spoke with His disciples about during His ministry. He knew that though He would have to suffer terribly, He would be doing so in order that He

might in the future claim a people as His own, and they would find peace in Him, and be healed by Him.

I have already described how I have witnessed miraculous healings in Jesus' name. Without the gospel, the only hope we have for healing is in human beings, with all their flaws, misunderstandings, errors, and frailties.

Casting out Demons

I am absolutely convinced of the reality of demons. While there is much about the spiritual dimension that we will not understand during this lifetime, there are certain manifestations of Satan and his agents that demonstrate demonic possession is a reality rather than a fantasy.

A lot of the time when people are suffering from serious physical and mental sickness it is because they are possessed by one or more demons. I know because I have seen these demons being cast out of people, with them fighting to hold onto a person, and eventually leaving their body with a loud cry leading to an experience of healing and freedom for the person involved.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus spoke a lot about demons. We read in the book of Mark when Jesus was commissioning the twelve apostles, "Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach, and to have power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons" (Mark 3:14-15). Demons were real in Jesus' day, and they are real today.

One of the things that makes the gospel so compelling is that I know of no other way that demons can be cast out of people than by the authority of Jesus, who said "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth."

(Matthew 28:18) People can take tablets, undergo operations and treatments, visit Reiki healers, or try a host of other medical or spiritual means to be set free, but demons will only leave a person if they are cast out by the authority of Jesus.

CLOSING REMARKS

In this short discourse I have stated some of the arguments that make the Christian worldview look absurd and nonsensical, and then explored some of the doctrines at the heart of Christianity that make the religion seem urgent and appealing. I have presented two very different perspectives, and it is now the job of each reader to come to their own conclusions and settle the predicament for him or herself.

So what do you think? Are we puppets under the control of an omnipresent God who has created many different religions in order to express some of the infinite creative possibilities contained within His nature, or are we all sinners with free will living in a fallen state who are in desperate need of the redeeming figure of Jesus Christ in order to be reconciled to a God who is willing to punish us in hell if we do not embrace the gospel? Do we accept the 'head' arguments, and embrace the theology, or the 'heart' arguments, and embrace the Messiah?

For me, this is not a predicament that is easily settled. As you may have noticed, I have strong convictions on either side of the debate. It isn't simply that the omnipresence argument is all about head, and the Jesus argument is all about heart – there is both head and heart on both sides of the debate. I

criticise Christianity out of a love of truth, and I embrace the gospel because, on some level, there is a rationale to it.

I fear God very much, and so want to obey Him. This makes me feel I must submit to the Bible and its teachings. But on the other hand, I would be contradicting myself if I didn't acknowledge that it is God Himself who is causing me to write this essay, and that He has given me the doubts and reservations about Christian doctrine that you have read about here. For me to deny this would go against everything my rational mind is telling me about the nature of God.

Some might argue that Christianity is about living out faith in a practical way and that we shouldn't get bogged down with theology. We should, they may say, focus on obeying the commandments of Christ, and where things don't make sense, we should 'give it to God' and just trust that it makes sense to Him, even if we are confused. The problem with this is that in my case, this amounts to suppressing my convictions, and how can I be devoted to the Christian life when my beliefs, which inevitably arise when I discuss doctrine with others, are at odds with the fundamentals of that religion? Should I just suppress my beliefs and dedicate my life to obeying a gospel that I feel is at odds with the truth, for fear of going to hell? Can I believe that God is omnipresent (and therefore that there is no free will), and still be a Christian?

My perspective that God is omnipresent is liberating in a sense. It means that I can value everything in creation as being God-ordained, so it helps me to avoid being prejudiced against people who hold different beliefs. The downside, though, is that there are repercussions in terms of morality. For if God is in control of everything that happens, we are then able to justify any

action that we undertake as 'the will of God'. I do actually believe that every action we undertake *is* the will of God, and nothing can happen that is not God's will. But I accept that this view is in certain respects problematic.

No doubt God is working many miracles in Jesus' name in our present time (I have witnessed them first-hand). This demonstrates that Jesus is beloved of God and that there is great power in His name. For some people that is enough, and they are able to live a faithful and fruitful Christian life without delving deep into the difficult problems that arise from the Christian worldview.

It seems that God may have a different role for me. I am passionate about theology, philosophy, and comparative religion, and perhaps the plans God has for me may involve my deeper investigations and study in these areas. I believe that the insights God has given me, which are at the heart of this essay, are important, as I don't find anyone else arguing the case for God's literal omnipresence in the way I have done.

Christians believe that we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. This is a fearful prospect if my thinking is somehow an affront to Jesus and His teaching. Yet I feel I must submit to God's voice and the things He is teaching me about what is ultimately true. It is true that many people of faith believe in other prophets, some believe Jesus has already returned, some believe in many gods, and some believe there is no God. What if all of this is actually part of the divine plan? Could it be that every life story is divinely ordained, and therefore valuable and wonderful and precious in the sight of God?

I will try to move forward with an openness to what God is going to reveal to me about truth and the way I should live. I pray that God will bless this pursuit, and I would be grateful for your prayers that God will bless me as I continue into the next phase of my spiritual journey. If there is anything that is in error or displeasing to God in my thinking, I pray that it will be ignored, and that my readers will not be adversely affected by my words. Ultimately, I pray for mercy, for me, for my readers, and for every sentient creature in existence.

Here lies Martin Elginbrod

Have mercy on my soul Lord God

As I would do were I Lord God

And Ye were Martin Elginbrod.

(From a tombstone outside Elgin Cathedral)

Ends



BOOKS BY STEVEN COLBORNE

The Philosophy of a Mad Man (SilverWood Books, 2012)
Ultimate Truth: God Beyond Religion (SilverWood Books, 2013)

© Steven Colborne 2017

www.stevencolborne.com
www.perfectchaos.org