



The Evidence for Christianity

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I. The great atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell was once asked what he would say if he found himself standing before God on the judgement day and God asked him, 'Why didn't you believe in Me?' Russell replied, 'I would say, 'Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence!'

As I travel around North America and Europe speaking on university campuses, I think that most of the non-Christian university professors that I meet would probably say the same thing. And this attitude is in turn communicated to their students: 'There's not enough evidence.'

II. But what do we mean when we say 'There's not enough evidence?' Not enough for what?

A. Not enough to be coercive? Not enough to compel someone to become a Christian?

1. A lot of people seem to take it this way. Most people are spiritually apathetic, too busy or unconcerned to be bothered about spiritual things. Or if they are into spirituality, they may be pursuing gods of their own making, as in the New Age movement. They just can't be bothered to look into the evidence for Christianity.

2. So most people aren't even acquainted with the evidence for Christianity. This is true in particular for university professors.

a. One of the most interesting aspects of my work is the debates I participate in on university campuses. Typically I'll be invited onto a campus to debate some professor who has a reputation of being especially abusive to Christian students in his classes. We'll have a public debate on, say,

the existence of God, or Christianity vs. humanism, or some such topic. And you know what? I find that while most of these fellows are pretty good at beating up intellectually on an 18 year student, they can't even hold their own when it comes to going toe to toe with one of their peers. In their first speech they usually trot out the obsolete, 18th century objections of Hume and Kant, and after I answer these, they're just left with nothing much to say, so they start repeating themselves or making emotional appeals. They're especially ignorant of the evidence for the gospels. Most of them turn out to be just big, inflated, intellectual blowhards who have no good reasons for rejecting Christianity and ridiculing their students' faith.

b. Not surprising. We all specialize in a certain field and are ignorant of things in other fields. I know something about philosophy; but I know absolutely nothing about economics, or chemical engineering, or agriculture, or business. Thus, it's possible to have a perfectly profound knowledge of one's area of specialization and yet have little better than a Sunday School education when it comes to Christianity. E.g. of professor at University of South Carolina. he was a brilliant philosopher of quantum physics, but knew nothing about philosophy of religion. Most atheists lost their faith when they were 11 or 12 years old, and they've never studied it since. What that means is that most of these men reject Christianity based on the objections of a 12 year old!

c. So when people say, 'There's not enough evidence,' what they mean is 'There's not enough evidence to coerce me out of my indifference. If I choose to ignore it, the evidence isn't going to grab me by the lapels and force me to believe.'

d. Of course, the evidence isn't coercive. But why should it be?

1. Knowledge of God is unique in that it is conditioned by moral and spiritual factors. A spiritually indifferent person can have a profound knowledge of physics, or literature, or history, or sociology, or even of theology. But a spiritually indifferent person cannot know God. According to the Bible, the knowledge of God is promised to those who honestly seek him.

Jeremiah: 'And you shall seek me and you shall

find me, if you seek for me with all your heart.'

Jesus: 'Seek and you will find, knock and the door shall be opened, ask and it will be given you. For he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened, and to him who asks it shall be given.'

2. God doesn't force himself upon us. He has given evidence of Himself which is sufficiently clear for those with an open mind and an open heart, but sufficiently vague so as to not to compel those whose hearts are closed. The great French mathematical genius Blaise Pascal, who came to know God through Jesus Christ at the age of 31, put it this way:

Willing to appear openly to those who seek him with all their heart, and to be hidden from those who flee from him with all their heart, God so regulates the knowledge of himself that he has given indications of himself which are visible to those who seek him and not to those who do not seek him. There is enough light for those to see who only desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who have a contrary disposition.

In other words, the evidence is there for those who have eyes to see.

B. So there's not enough evidence to be coercive. But is there enough evidence for faith to be rational? Of course there is! The traditional arguments for the existence of God and the evidences of Christianity are not coercive, but they are certainly sufficient to make Christian belief rational.

1. Existence of God.

a. There has been literally a revolution in American philosophy with regard to this question during the second half of the 20th century. Back in the '40's and '50's it was widely believed among philosophers that talk about God was meaningless--literal gibberish. To say 'God loves you and created you to know Him' is as meaningful as saying, "'Twas brillig and the slithey toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe.' Complete nonsense! This movement reached its crescendo in America with the Death of God theology of the mid-1960's. On April 8, 1966, in a dramatic red on black cover *Time* magazine asked 'Is God Dead?'

But at the same time that theologians were writing God's obituary, a new generation of philosophers were re-discovering His vitality. Just a few years after its death of God issue, *Time* ran a similar red on black cover study, only this time the question read, 'Is God Coming Back to Life?' That's how it must have seemed to those theological morticians of the 1960's! During the 1970's interest in philosophy of religion continued to grow, and in 1980 *Time* ran another major story entitled 'Modernizing the Case for God' in which it described the movement among contemporary philosophers to refurbish the traditional arguments for God's existence. *Time* marveled,

In a quiet revolution in thought and argument that hardly anybody could have foreseen only two decades ago, God is making a comeback. Most intriguingly, this is happening not among theologians or ordinary believers, but in the crisp intellectual circles of academic philosophers, where the consensus had long banished the Almighty from fruitful discourse.

According to the article, the noted American philosopher Roderick Chisholm believes that the reason that atheism was so influential a generation ago is that the brightest philosophers were atheists; but, he says, today many of the brightest philosophers are theists, and they are using a tough-minded intellectualism in defense of that belief that was formerly lacking on their side of the debate..

So today some of America's finest philosophers at major universities are outspoken Christians. I think of Robert Adams at Yale, William Alston at Syracuse, George Mavrodes at the University of Michigan, Alvin Plantinga at Notre Dame, Eleonore Stump at St. Louis, Dallas Willard at USC--I could go on and on. The idea that Christians are intellectual nincompoops and losers is a view rooted in ignorance and needs to be decisively and once for all repudiated.

b. My own work has focused on the implications of cosmology for theology.

(1) The evidence for the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe points to the creation of the universe out of nothing. Not just matter and energy, but physical space and time themselves come into existence at the Big Bang. In the words

of the British physicist P. C. W. Davies, 'the big bang represents the creation event; the creation not only of all the matter and energy in the universe, but also of spacetime itself.'

But how can the universe come into existence out of nothing? This is a philosophical, not a scientific question. Out of nothing, nothing comes. The atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen gives this illustration:

Suppose you suddenly hear a loud bang . . . and you ask me, 'What made that bang?' and I reply, 'Nothing, it just happened.' You wouldn't accept that. In fact you would find my reply quite unintelligible.

Well, what's true of the little bang is also true of the Big Bang. It must have been caused. From the very nature of the case, this cause would have to be uncaused, immaterial, changeless, timeless, and enormously powerful.

(2) Moreover, the evidence for the fine-tuning of the universe for intelligent life points to this cause's being a personal, intelligent mind. During the last thirty years or so, scientists have discovered that the initial conditions present in the Big Bang were fine-tuned for the existence of intelligent life with a complexity and precision that literally defies human comprehension. For example, Stephen Hawking has estimated that if the rate of the universe's expansion one second after the Big Bang had been smaller by even one part in a hundred thousand million million, the universe would have re-collapsed into a hot fireball. British physicist P. C. W. Davies has calculated that the odds against the initial conditions being suitable for later star formation (without which planets could not exist) is one followed by a thousand billion billion zeroes, at least. He also estimates that a change in the strength of gravity or of the weak force by only one part in 10100 would have prevented a life-permitting universe. Roger Penrose of Oxford University has calculated that the odds of the Big Bang's low entropy condition existing by chance are on the order of one out of 10 to the power of 10¹²³. There is no physical reason why these quantities have the values they do. The inference to an intelligent Designer of the cosmos seems far more rational than the atheistic hypothesis of chance.

Now some people have tried to avoid this conclusion by saying that we shouldn't be surprised at the incredible fine-tuning of the universe because if the universe were not fine-tuned, then we wouldn't be here to be surprised about it. Given that we are here, we should expect the universe to be fine-tuned. But the fallacy of this reasoning can be made clear by means of an illustration. Suppose you're traveling abroad and are arrested on a trumped up drug charge and dragged before a firing squad of 100 trained marksmen to be executed. The command is given: 'Ready. Aim. Fire!' You hear the deafening roar of the guns. And you discover that you are still alive, that all the 100 trained marksmen missed! Now what do you conclude? 'I really shouldn't be surprised at the improbability of them all missing because if they hadn't missed, then I wouldn't be here. Since I am here, I should expect them all to miss.' Of course not! You would rightly conclude that they all missed on purpose, that the whole thing was set up, for some reason, by someone. In exactly the same way, given the incomprehensibly improbable fine-tuning of the universe for intelligent life, it is rational to conclude that this is not the result of chance, but design.

Much more could and should be said about these matters, but I think this is sufficient to show that there is certainly enough evidence to make the belief in God rational.

2. But what about belief in the Christian God? Is it rational to believe in Jesus as the gospels portray him?

a. Jesus has become a stormcenter of controversy today, as radical scholars like those in the so-called Jesus Seminar have said that only 20% of Jesus's recorded words were authentic. When you check out the evidence, however, a much different picture emerges than the one painted by the radical critics. Today the majority of New Testament scholars agree that the historical Jesus deliberately stood and spoke in the place of God Himself, that he claimed that in himself the kingdom of God had come, and that he carried out a ministry of miracle-working and exorcisms as signs of that fact. According to the German theologian Horst George Pöhlmann,

Today there is virtually a consensus . . . that Jesus came on the scene with an unheard of authority, with the claim of the authority to stand in God's place and speak to us and bring us to salvation. With regard to Jesus there are only two possible modes of behavior: either to believe that in him God encounters us or to nail him to the cross as a blasphemer. *Tertium non datur*. [There is no third way.]

Thus, Jesus either was who he claimed to be, or he was a blasphemous megalomaniac, which seems utterly implausible.

b. But there's more. For we have dramatic confirmation of the validity of Jesus's radical claims about himself, namely, his resurrection from the dead. Again, in the second half of this century, there has been a dramatic reversal of scholarship on this issue. Back in the thirties and forties, gospel-events like the discovery of Jesus's empty tomb were widely regarded as legendary and as an embarrassment for the Christian faith. Similarly, Jesus's appearances alive after his death were widely taken to be hallucinations induced by the disciples' faith in Jesus. This scepticism concerning the resurrection also peaked in the late 1960's and then began rapidly to recede. Today it lingers on in liberal backwaters like the Jesus Seminar. But the majority of critics agree: (1) that after his crucifixion Jesus of Nazareth was interred in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea, (2) that the tomb of Jesus was found empty by a group of his women followers on Sunday morning, (3) that various individuals and groups of people on multiple occasions and under different circumstances saw appearances of Jesus alive after his death, and (4) that the original disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection was not a result of their faith in him or of wishful thinking, but that, on the contrary, their faith was the result of their having come to believe in this resurrection. These are the facts. The question is, how do you explain them?

Here the skeptic faces a desperate situation. A few years ago I had debate on the resurrection with a professor at the University of California, Irvine, who had written his doctoral dissertation on the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. He did not deny the facts of Jesus' honorable burial, the empty tomb, his resurrection appearances, or the origin of the disciples' faith. Rather his only

recourse way to try to explain them away by some new theory. So he argued that Jesus must have had an unknown, identical twin brother who was separated from him at birth, and who showed up in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion, stole Jesus's body, and then showed himself to the disciples, leading them to mistakenly infer that Jesus rose from the dead. I won't bother you with how I went about refuting the theory; but I think this example is instructive because it shows to what desperate lengths the skeptic has to go to avoid the resurrection of Jesus. In fact, the evidence is so good that one of the world's leading Jewish theologians, the late Pinchas Lapide, declared himself convinced on the basis of the evidence that the God of Israel raised Jesus from the dead.

Again, much more deserves to be said about this, but I think that again enough has been shared to show that the Christian is rational in believing Jesus rose from the dead and was who he claimed to be.

So while the evidence is not enough to coerce you if your heart is closed, it is enough to ground faith rationally if you are willing to look at it with an open mind and an open heart.

III. Our whole discussion up to this point has just assumed that becoming a Christian hinges on assessing the evidence and then making up one's mind. But surely this assumption is wrong. Example of Kierkegaard's student. Or a native who hears a missionary broadcast. God does not abandon us to our own devices to work out through our own ingenuity whether or not He exists. Rather God Himself pursues us and draws us to Himself.

Jesus said: 'No man comes to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.' And again: 'When I am lifted up, I will draw all men to myself.'

So it wasn't quite accurate when I said earlier that we must seek God in order to find Him. From a cosmic perspective it is really God who is seeking us, and it's up to us whether we open our hearts to His love and forgiveness or shut up our hearts against His grace.

I mentioned earlier that when he was 31, Pascal came to know God personally through Jesus

Christ. That conversion experience changed his life. When Pascal died, there was found sewn into his clothing a reminder of that experience which he constantly carried with him:

From about 10:30 at night until about 12:30.
FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and of the learned. Certitude certitude, feeling, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ . . . Jesus Christ . . . Let me never be separated from Him.

Arguments and evidence can help. But as Pascal discovered, ultimately we have to deal, not with arguments, but with God Himself.