

Why Christianity is not true

If Christianity is true, it is of vital importance to every one of us. If it is not true, Christians are deluded and it is not 'great for us' - it is very sad and the sooner we are put right the better

-- Nicky Gumbel

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Setting the scene

In a book called *Alpha - Questions of Life*, Nicky Gumbel, a Christian, writes:

If Christianity is true, it is of vital importance to every one of us. If it is not true, Christians are deluded and it is not 'great for us' - it is very sad and the sooner we are put right the better. **(1)**

In this book I'm responding to Nicky Gumbel's invitation and the title of the book is inspired by these words.

Christianity makes various claims about the way reality is. Are those claims true or false? This question has been one of the most important in my life and my reflections through the last 30 or so years. I've reached the conclusion that the claims made by Christianity are not true and the main purpose of this book is to communicate the reasons for that conclusion.

The reader may think there is no place for a book like this in the modern world - a world where there are many different religions and viewpoints and in which there should be tolerance and acceptance of diversity. Well, I fully acknowledge and accept the right of all people to believe whatever they wish to believe. And I fully acknowledge and accept the right of Christians - and people of every other religion - to have freedom of religious expression, to worship as they see fit and so on. But in as much as Christians make claims about reality ("*This ... is the way reality is*") and have the right to assert those claims, likewise I believe it's legitimate for a non-Christian, such as myself, to respond to those claims - having evaluated them in relation to the available evidence.

At the mention of the word 'evidence' the reader might want to say "*But surely religious belief isn't based on evidence - it's all about faith isn't it?*" This is a fair point. For now, in defence of using evidence, I'll refer to another book by Nicky Gumbel. The book is called *Is God a delusion?* and has the sub-title *What is the evidence?* In other words here is at least one

Christian who appears to be happy to defend Christianity on the basis of evidence. The relationship between evidence on the one hand and faith on the other is interesting and important and will be explored later in the book.

When I've spoken with people about the importance of evidence in regard to evaluating religious beliefs I sometimes get a response along these lines: "*Oh, you mean the big bang and the theory of evolution, things like that?*" And I usually reply to say, yes, I do mean scientific theories such as those but that I also mean evidence in a much wider sense. For example, if a Christian says that since he became a Christian he feels that he's come to know God - well, that is evidence. The astonishing claim made by many Christians that they know God is something we shall look at later. Or if we think of certain events from history - the Inquisition for example or, from more recent history, the "paedophile priest scandal" - these too may well be relevant as evidence. The key point here is that evidence should be understood in quite a broad way - certainly much wider than scientific evidence alone.

Another response the reader might want to make is that I'm addressing the wrong question. The important question, it may be claimed, is not "*Is Christianity true?*" but "*Does Christianity work?*" That is, does Christianity succeed in giving people benefits such as greater happiness, fulfilment and hope, and a greater sense of meaning about their lives than they would otherwise have? Well, I'm in no doubt at all that Christianity does indeed "work" in that sort of way for many people. But the same is also true of most, if not all, other religions too.

The issue here is that I'm wanting to avoid giving a patronising response to Christians. I could for example say:

You're a Christian? Great! I'm so happy for you that you have a religion, it must be a great comfort to you. To believe that God's up there watching over you and that death isn't the end, it must be so wonderful. I'm really quite envious of you - I wish I had your faith.

Another similar kind of response:

You're a Christian? Great! That's so wonderful. I mean, all religions are wonderful and beautiful. They all lead to God - Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism - they're all basically the same. I'm sure God is broad-minded enough that He's not

bothered which spiritual path a person chooses. Really all religions have the same message - they all talk about love and kindness and the brotherhood of man.

However well meaning these responses might be, they are, I believe, patronising and insulting.

In the film *Brüno* we have an example of a well intentioned attitude that is in fact insulting. Near the end of the film a song is sung which features these words:

Stop fighting North and South Korea,
You're both basically Chinese.

The message here is that political, historical and ideological differences can all be ignored - North Koreans and South Koreans all look the same ("Chinese"), so what's the problem? why can't they just get along? Sacha Baron Cohen (**2**) - the man who plays the Brüno character - has skilfully and with irony captured how an attitude that seems to mean well can in fact be insulting.

A religious equivalent of the North Korea / South Korea example might be:

Stop arguing and fighting Christianity and Islam.
You both believe in God.
Your beliefs are basically the same.

Again, this should be understood as irony. It's intended to capture how a supposedly liberal, broad-minded, well-intentioned viewpoint can in fact be very insulting. In reality Christianity and Islam are not the same as each other.

The following is from the Christian writer, C.S. Lewis:

Christianity claims to give an account of *facts* - to tell you what the real universe is like. Its account of the universe may be true, or it may not, and once the question is really before you, then your natural inquisitiveness must make you want to know the answer. If Christianity is untrue, then no honest man will want to believe it, however helpful it might be: if it is true,

every honest man will want to believe it, even if it gives him no help at all. (3)

These words capture the approach I'm seeking to follow. That is, the question is not whether or not Christianity is helpful or comforting, but whether or not Christianity is in fact true. So I agree completely with what Lewis says here about the question we should be trying to answer - even though I have reached a different answer than he did.

This then is the scope of this book: we're seeking to address the question of whether Christianity is true or untrue. You will find little here about issues - however topical - such as Christianity and homosexuality or whether or not women should be allowed to be priests or bishops.

Despite what C.S. Lewis says here and what Nicky Gumbel says in quote (1) above, I've found that in practice most Christians tend to be reluctant to enter into dialogue about their beliefs. So, although Christians may assent to the idea "*If Christianity is not true ... the sooner we are put right the better*" in practice they often make it very difficult for this to happen.

C.S. Lewis again:

If you are thinking of becoming a Christian, I warn you, you are embarking on something which is going to take the whole of you, brains and all. (4)

When I was a Christian I was inspired by what Lewis says here but I'm quoting these words because in practice I've tended to encounter more or less the opposite - namely a skepticism and hostility in most Christians towards anything they perceive as being "intellectual". For example, a Christian may say something like "*Oh, I'm not an intellectual. I've got a simple faith*" as a way of ending any possibility of dialogue.

Who is this book for?

This book may well be for you if you're considering becoming a Christian or if you're already a Christian:

If you're considering becoming a Christian: It may be that you're considering becoming a Christian - perhaps as a result of attending an Alpha course or reading a book by a Christian author. At the outset I think you need to be as conscious as you can be of what your motivations really are. If you're genuinely interested in the question of whether or not the truth lies with Christianity then this book is for you. But if you're considering becoming a Christian in the hope that you'll become happier and more fulfilled and you'll gain a better social life then this book probably isn't for you. There's a good chance Christianity can indeed give you those kinds of benefits, but so can most other religions. On the basis of that criterion there's no particular reason to choose Christianity rather than anything else. (Some people do treat being a Christian in that kind of way - their local church being like a social club, though a social club with a religious/spiritual flavour).

If you're a Christian: If you're a Christian because you believe that the truth lies with Christianity then this book is definitely for you - and you can read it with a clear conscience on the basis of the view expressed by Nicky Gumbel in quote (1) above. But if you're a Christian simply because this gives you, for example, happiness, fulfilment and a good social life then this book probably won't be of much relevance to you.

There is also a third, "catch-all", category: simply, people who are interested in this kind of subject but without being a Christian or much likelihood of ever becoming a Christian.

“Christian”

In this book I'm using the word "Christian" as a noun. Sometimes people use it as an adjective as in "*He's a Christian person*" - intended to convey "*He's a good person*". C.S. Lewis points out that this makes the word "Christian" almost useless (5) and I agree with him.

How are we to define "Christian"?

Within Christianity there exist, for historical reasons, various groups or divisions - for example, Catholicism, Protestantism and Orthodoxy. Within Protestantism there are different churches such as Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians. There are also labels such as *Conservative, Liberal, Evangelical* and *Fundamentalist*. Such labels generally exist for legitimate reasons and are sometimes helpful, but may also be confusing. Clearly there is great scope for us to get bogged down in the task of trying to define which of these groupings, churches and labels *really* represent "true Christianity".

Nicky Gumbel writes:

In one sense it is not so important what denomination we are - Roman Catholic or Protestant; Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, Anglican or House Church. What is more important is whether or not we have the Spirit of God. (6)

C.S. Lewis makes a similar point:

The reader should be warned that I offer no help to anyone who is hesitating between two Christian 'denominations'. You will not learn from me whether you ought to become an Anglican, a Methodist, a Presbyterian, or a Roman Catholic. (7)

I'm happy to follow the lead of Nicky Gumbel and C.S. Lewis here and largely sidestep these issues. This book is therefore a response to Christianity, as understood in quite a broad way. I'm understanding Christianity, roughly, as the sum total of the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant churches, the Orthodox Church and a handful of smaller Churches, for example the Coptic Church.

But we're excluding from our scope various religious groups that have similarities to Christianity but which are seen by most Christians (as laid out in the previous paragraph) as not being Christian: groups such as the Jehovah's witnesses and the Mormons.

Occasionally Christians use the term *committed Christian* - this is explored in Appendix 1.

We can also note that some Christians make the interesting claim that Christianity is not a religion - this is explored in Appendix 2.

Christians' beliefs

What are the beliefs that Christians hold? Well, these vary a little amongst different churches and traditions but the following list which consists of 18 items is, I believe, reasonably fair and complete:-

- There is one God - eternal, all-loving, all-powerful and all-knowing.
- God's nature is triune. This is sometimes expressed as The doctrine of the Trinity or "three persons in one God". These are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
- There exists a spirit world - angels and demons - that was created by God. This includes the devil (also known as Satan or Lucifer).
- The universe was created by God.
- Mankind is sinful and sin deserves punishment.
- The man Jesus, in his life on earth some 2000 years ago, was God manifest in the flesh - fully God and fully man.
- Jesus was born of a virgin, Mary, and was the Messiah.
- Jesus was crucified to death but was resurrected "on the third day".
- As a result of Jesus' resurrection, sin and death have been defeated.
- Although there is some controversy amongst Christians about the nature of salvation, most Christians would say that salvation is a gift offered by God that an individual can receive - or reject.
- When a person becomes a Christian he/she has therefore been saved by Jesus.
- As a Christian a person is a new creation, filled with the Holy Spirit and expressing God's love in and to the world.
- Jesus shall return to earth - this is known as The Second Coming.
- There shall be a final judgement of all people.
- People who are saved are destined for eternity in heaven.

- Those who are not saved are not destined for heaven - and, according to many Christians, are destined for hell.
- The Bible is the authoritative word of God.
- On occasions God intervenes in the natural world through miracles - including miracles of healing - often in response to prayers by Christians.

Having given that list I want to acknowledge the viewpoint of many Christians that being a Christian isn't first and foremost about holding a particular set of beliefs. Rather it's about "being in a relationship with God through Christ". I've put that phrase in quotes because there may or may not be a reality that corresponds to those words.

We should also note that Christians believe not only in eternal life in heaven but also in "life in all its fullness" now. This is important because I think many non-Christians tend to view Christianity as only offering something after death - whereas most Christians want to emphasise that God is interested not only in people's eternal destiny but also in their well-being here and now in this life.

"The Christianity hypothesis"

In the book *The God delusion* Richard Dawkins talks about "The God hypothesis" - the hypothesis that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent being. Dawkins believes the God hypothesis to be false and is therefore an atheist.

We could say that the purpose of this book is to examine "The Christianity hypothesis". I believe the Christianity hypothesis to be false.

However in this book I'm not asserting any particular position as to where I think the truth *does* lie. I'm not asserting that the truth lies (for example) with Atheism, with Buddhism or with Islam. I'm simply asserting that the truth doesn't lie with Christianity. The reader may feel that this is therefore a very negative book that's just concerned with rejecting Christianity but without being positive and putting forward an alternative. I acknowledge that accusation and feel its force and I'll make two points in response:

Firstly, in quote (3) above C.S. Lewis says "*If Christianity is untrue, then no honest man will want to believe it, however helpful it might be*". He doesn't say that Christianity should

be rejected only after one has identified a better position - an alternative worldview - where you think the truth does lie.

And secondly, if we're concerned with where the truth lies then being able to reach a conclusion such as "the truth doesn't lie with Christianity" is extremely useful. If we're seeking a lost object that we know is *somewhere* within our house and reach the point of concluding "OK, it definitely isn't in the lounge" - that is useful and we can continue our search in the other rooms.

I want now to raise an apparent difficulty which I will however then sidestep: Suppose we were to evaluate each of the beliefs above and conclude that all 18 were strongly supported by evidence. Clearly we could then say that the evidence appears to strongly support Christianity being true. Likewise, if we arrived at a score of zero (0/18) we could say that the evidence seems to be hugely against Christianity being true. But what if we arrived at a score of say 17/18? Where would missing out on 100% by such a small margin leave us? Or suppose our score was 10/18? This would be a far from perfect score but nonetheless over 50%.

We shall sidestep these sorts of issues for the following reason: this isn't a work of theology and I shall not be addressing most of the 18 points in a direct way. If we think of the scientific method, one way in which a theory can be tested is to see how well it makes predictions. My approach in this book is somewhat similar: the Christian view of reality gives rise to expectations (probably a better word here than predictions) and we can try to evaluate whether or not those expectations are borne out in reality. Clearly this is a less precise method than would be the case in a scientific context but I believe we can make good headway nonetheless.

An example: I have no expertise in either history or mythology and therefore make no attempt to evaluate whether the Resurrection of Jesus is a historical event. Christians claim that one of the reasons why Jesus' Resurrection is so important is that it allows Christians to participate in a new quality of life that would otherwise be unavailable:

Time after time after time, all around the world,
millions of people are experiencing the risen Christ
today. This is evidence. It is not just individual lives
that have been transformed, but whole communities. **(8)**

And this is something we can try to evaluate: Does it seem to that Christians do indeed have such a changed quality of life that non-Christians don't have? This is a question we shall look at later.

Truth

The reader may feel ill at ease, annoyed or antagonised at my using the words “true” and “truth” as much as I already have. You may want to ask “*Who on earth do you think you are to pontificate about what is and isn't true?*” In other words there may be an implication that I, the writer, think that I “know the truth”. And if you agree with me then you're similarly enlightened but if you disagree with me then you're lost in ignorance.

In response I'll say that what I do have, I believe, is a mindset that seeks to evaluate what is or isn't true by assessing the available evidence. This mindset is potentially open to everyone but is probably linked to personality type and the way a person's brain is “wired”. That is, some people find it relatively easy and natural to seek to evaluate assertions and beliefs in an evidence-based way, while others find it harder and less natural to do this.

The title of this book, *Why Christianity is not true*, has a 100% quality to it - as if I'm stating a fact. I am, of course, stating a belief / opinion / judgement rather than a fact. A more accurate title for the book would have been *Why, in my judgement, the claims made by Christianity are poorly supported by the available evidence and are therefore, in my judgement, almost certainly not true*. But I think I can be forgiven for wanting to avoid such pedantic wording.

Truth therefore is our goal. And we seek to approach that goal by means of evidence - that is, by evaluating relevant evidence. A good alternative to talking about truth (which is in contrast to falsehood) is to talk about beliefs/assertions that are strongly supported by evidence (which are in contrast to beliefs/assertions which are poorly supported by evidence). There is usually a public aspect to evidence. Therefore if I say something like “I think belief X is false because of pieces of evidence *h*, *i*, and *j*” another person then has the opportunity to respond by perhaps trying to show that I've misinterpreted those items of evidence and by also citing new pieces of evidence (*k*, *l* and *m*) in support of X. In this way an honest and healthy debate can unfold - a debate that is evidence-based.

Reality, beliefs, evidence

I want now to say a little more about reality, beliefs and evidence and the relationships between them:

- Reality is the way that it is.
- We hold beliefs (make assertions) about the way reality is. In general each such belief/assertion is either true or false (though in practice we may encounter some which are partially true).
- In the interests of liberalism and a desire to be nice to everyone we may be tempted to say - especially in a religious context - that “*all beliefs are equally true*”. Of course, this cannot be the case.
- We may also be tempted to say “Surely, if I hold a belief then that belief is true for me?” I strongly disagree with this viewpoint and it is addressed in the section *Personal truth* below.
- We can arrive at the beliefs that we hold (including our religious beliefs) in various different ways.
- The method I advocate, as already stated, is an evidence-based approach. I can see no good alternative to this.

To illustrate these last 2 points: a person may have been told by someone in authority - maybe a parent, teacher or religious leader - what he is to believe and he dutifully does so. We might associate such a compliant response more with childhood than adulthood. Nonetheless many adults seem to have the ability to believe “at will” what they've been told they should believe.

Or we can imagine someone wanting to “convert to a religion” and he goes about this in a very unusual way - by throwing a dice. Firstly he writes out something like this:

- 1 *Buddhism*
- 2 *Christianity*

- 3 *Hinduism*
- 4 *Islam*
- 5 *Judaism*
- 6 *Sikhism*

He now throws the dice to determine what religion he should join / convert to - and thereby what beliefs he should hold.

This example is meant to be seen as absurd. But our place of birth often plays a big part in determining what religious beliefs we go on to hold - and is this so different than the dice method? For example, someone born in the USA is more likely than someone born in Indonesia to become a Christian. The Indonesian person is more likely than the American to be a Muslim. Someone born in Brazil is more likely than not to be a Roman Catholic Christian, and so on.

By contrast in an evidence-based approach we seek to evaluate available, relevant evidence and come to hold the beliefs that we do as a result of that process.

I think there should always be a provisional aspect to our beliefs as in: *“I believe what I do now on the basis of the evidence I’ve encountered so far. But if I encounter new evidence that shows my present beliefs to be inadequate or wrong, then I must be prepared to change what I believe”*. The ability to change our minds should be seen as a strength and an asset, not as a sign of weakness or a character flaw.

Personal truth

Someone may say “If I hold a belief then surely that belief is true for me?”

To this I must respond with an emphatic *No!*

I feel that to go down this path - the idea of “personal truth” - makes dialogue almost impossible. A given belief may be true. Or it may be mistaken. But to talk in terms of it being “true for me” - well, what does that mean?

By way of illustration, consider the following:

- (i) Suppose it is the case that God exists. Suppose also that no-one on planet earth believes in God. Does that absence of belief in God mean that God no longer exists? No, it doesn’t. Reality is the way it is regardless of what we happen to believe.

(ii) Suppose it is the case that there is no God. Suppose also that *everyone* on planet earth believes in God. Does that universal belief in God mean that God exists? No, it doesn't. Reality is the way it is regardless of what we happen to believe.

It's vital to make the distinction between beliefs on the one hand and the way reality actually is on the other.

Some readers may feel insulted by what I've said here, feeling that this section on personal truth is completely unnecessary. But I've found down the years that so many people think and talk in terms of personal truth and the idea that "if I believe X then X is true for me" that laying out these fundamental points is, I think, necessary.

Proof

Throughout this book I will rarely use the word "proof" (or "prove" or "disprove" etc). "Proof" has a 100% quality that I think is unrealistic.

We are not (and, I think, cannot be) concerned with proof - we're concerned with evidence. We therefore have to live with a certain amount of uncertainty. I believe that *proof* is not in practice attainable.

Three different axes - a source of confusion

Note that "*axes*" here is the plural of "*axis*" rather than "*axe*".

I was once involved in an on-line discussion / debate with another person. Suddenly he said something like "*Look, I'm entitled to my own opinion. I assume you wouldn't dispute that?*" I was for a while confused by what he'd said in that I hadn't for a moment said or implied that he didn't have the right to believe whatever he wished to believe. I've reflected on this scenario (and other similar examples) and realised that what can happen is that sometimes a person may suddenly jump from one axis to another. This is what I mean:

Our first axis concerns the question of "where does the truth lie?" and is concerned with evidence. We can think of one end of this axis as representing beliefs which are well supported by evidence and the other end of the axis as representing beliefs which are poorly supported by evidence.

A second axis is concerned with a person's right to believe whatever he wishes to believe. We can think of one end of this axis as representing freedom and liberalism and the other end of the axis as representing a lack or absence of freedom.

Now although these two axes are clearly distinct from each other they may sometimes get confused and a person can perceive a disagreement with what he believes (i.e. axis one) as being an attack on his right to believe what he does (i.e. axis two).

Disagreeing with what someone believes is not the same thing at all as saying he doesn't have the right to hold those beliefs. We can think here of the saying: "*I disagree strongly with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.*" (9)

We can also introduce a third axis: the question of whether or not a belief is beneficial to a person. We can think of one end of this axis as representing beliefs which provide benefits to the person (e.g. comfort, happiness, a greater sense of meaning, an improved sense of well-being) and the other end representing beliefs which fail to provide such benefits. So, it may well be the case that most religious beliefs are located at the first end of this axis. And it may be the case that atheism sits at the second end of this axis.

Sometimes some people confuse this third axis with the first axis. That is, they think that if a belief provides benefits (greater happiness, improved sense of well-being etc) it must therefore be true. This, of course, is not necessarily the case.

In this book we are concerned only with the first of these 3 axes.

Overview of the book

Here are listed the headings of each remaining chapter - with brief comments.

Chapter 2 - Miraculous healing is concerned with the claim made by many Christians that miracles of healing are possible. We find that astonishing healings occur in many other settings as well as Christianity but we have little reason to view any such healings as miraculous.

Chapter 3 - Evangelism and Eternity looks at Christians' belief that salvation is in Jesus alone - and the diffidence many Christians have about this belief. The concept of hell is also looked at.

Chapter 4 - Faith examines different ways in which the word “faith” is used and the relationship between faith and evidence. We find that Christians have the luxury of being able to appeal to evidence or faith as convenient: evidence when evidence seems to be available and faith when evidence is lacking.

Chapter 5 - The Bible considers the claim by many Christians that the Bible is the word of God. Included here is a demonstration that the doctrine of the Trinity is unbiblical.

Chapter 6 - Narrative Formation looks at how easy it is for Christians to form narratives (commentaries) about events which thereby create the illusion that Christianity is well supported by evidence.

Chapter 7 - Does God exist? is concerned with this important question. However, for reasons discussed below, this chapter isn't really central to the book.

Chapter 8 - Good and evil, love and indifference looks at Christianity's track record, both past and present, and is probably the most important chapter. In contrast to Christian propaganda we see that Christianity's track record is pretty dreadful.

Chapter 9 - Conclusions and final thoughts seeks to draw together the most important findings from the earlier chapters. I also say a little more about my journey and offer brief advice to anyone considering becoming a Christian and to any Christian who may be going through a "faith crisis".

The existence of God

The reader may by now have noted that I've left the question *Does God exist?* to very near the end of the book. But surely, it might be argued, this is such a central question that it should be considered right at the outset. We can, for example, think of the book *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis in which Lewis seeks to establish early on that God exists - and from there he moves on to seeking to establish that, amongst the various monotheistic religions, it is with Christianity that the truth lies.

In response I'll say the following: It may be that God exists - but it doesn't follow from this that the truth lies with Christianity. The existence of God is a necessary condition for Christianity to be true but not a sufficient condition. (I'm ignoring here the viewpoint that it's possible to have a Godless Christianity). In this book I'm not promoting an atheist position. There are many different positions on the theism-atheism spectrum **(10)** and although I'm probably closer to the atheism end of the spectrum I'm not sufficiently close to describe myself as an atheist.

So, although the question of the existence / non-existence of God is hugely important it is not central to this book. There is, I believe, ample evidence against Christianity being true - regardless of whether or not God exists.

A few final thoughts....

I feel that I could have written this book some 10 years ago or even 20 years ago. My tendency to procrastinate and to be lazy is the main cause of the delay.

A little about me: I became a Christian aged 23. Some three and a half years later I ceased to be a Christian. Writing the bare facts like that might make it sound like my ceasing to be a Christian was a casual event - but that is not so. The process whereby I ceased to be a Christian was one of the most agonising experiences I've been through and I shall say a little more about this later. I would become a Christian again in an instant if I came to believe that the truth lies with Christianity - why on earth would I not?

Many people today find themselves very attracted to and interested in the person of Jesus - but extremely ill at ease with Christianity and Christian churches. I am one such person. There is a feeling that Jesus was profoundly good and visionary but that somehow the way Christianity has manifested through the last 2000 years - and including today - has been a betrayal of Jesus' vision.

I shall as far as possible refer to evidence that is in the public domain, for example, by quoting from books by Christians. I shall keep to a minimum citing evidence from my own experiences - but when I do so I shall ensure that anyone I refer to cannot be identified by disguising any features that might make him/her identifiable. I shall refer to all such people as male regardless of their gender in reality, and the names I use in such cases are fictitious.

Two Christians I quote from a lot are **Nicky Gumbel** and **C.S Lewis** (1898 - 1963). In fact I've already quoted from each of them more than once. Nicky Gumbel is a leading figure in the Alpha course which most readers will have heard of. C.S. Lewis, perhaps best known

for the Narnia books, also wrote many books about Christianity. I believe that in quoting from these two well respected Christians I'm giving a good representation of what Christians believe.

I quote occasionally from Wikipedia. Given that the content of a Wikipedia entry may change over time I shall in each case give the date I obtained the quote.

Christianity is a worldwide religion and some of the evidence I cite has an international flavour, e.g. major events from history. However other items of evidence, e.g. in relation to evangelism, shall relate mainly to Christianity in the UK (that is, The United Kingdom of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland).

Key points

- We're seeking to answer the question "*Is Christianity true?*" This may also be stated as "*Are the claims made by Christianity true?*" or "*Are the beliefs held by Christians true?*"
- We may also state the question in pseudo-scientific language: "*Is the Christianity hypothesis true?*"
- We're interested in the word "Christian" as a noun, not an adjective. And we're understanding "Christianity" in quite a broad way: roughly, as the sum total of the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant churches and the Orthodox Church.
- Our approach is evidence-based.
- Truth is our concern, our goal. We seek to approach that goal using evidence. But we have to live with uncertainty - it's unlikely that "proof" or 100% certainty are possible.
- We're not really concerned with the question of whether or not being a Christian is helpful or brings benefits such as improved health and happiness. For many people it surely does - but, as C.S. Lewis notes, this is irrelevant to our question.

- The right of Christians (indeed, everybody) to believe whatever they wish to believe is not being questioned: disagreeing with a belief is not the same as attacking the right to hold that belief.

Chapter 2

Miraculous healing

Setting the scene

For most readers the subject of miraculous healing will be reasonably familiar territory. Many Christians (though not all) believe in the possibility of miraculous healing - that is, the healing of a condition or illness in a way that seems to be inexplicable within the scope of ordinary medicine.

Some Christians go so far as to say that it's possible to *claim* healing from God, as if in such a case God has no choice but to deliver the healing that has been claimed. We can note that this usage of the word “claim” is not Biblical.

Alongside their belief in miraculous healing most Christians usually acknowledge the important role of conventional medicine. Nicky Gumbel says:

Of course, God heals with the co-operation of doctors, nurses and the whole medical profession. But the more I have looked, the more convinced I am that we should also expect God to heal miraculously today. **(11)**

What sort of conditions tend to feature in cases of apparently miraculous healing today? I've created the following list from a number of Christian websites concerned with healing: *cancer, damaged knee, chronic fatigue syndrome, deafness, schizophrenia, hay fever, asthma, sinusitis, epilepsy, high blood pressure, eczema, dermatitis*. Note that by listing these conditions I am not endorsing the claim that Christians have been able to heal any of these conditions.

Conditions not healed

But what about conditions like Alzheimer's disease? Huntington's chorea? Cerebral palsy? Why are people diagnosed with these conditions never healed?

The following is from a newspaper article by Minette Marrin:-

Years ago I spent many months in the BBC trying to make television documentaries about supernatural healing, including Christian healing. After a great deal of research and countless visits, conversations and false trails, I had to accept that **I could not find one single example of Christian healing (or any other supernatural healing). There were plenty of claims, but very little evidence, and certainly no evidence that would stand up in a documentary.** What I did find was something that shocked me - the bamboozling of frightened, suffering, suggestible people by Christians who offered them the hope of a miraculous cure, if their faith were strong enough. (12)

I have put into bold the words I see as most significant.

Astonishing healings

I believe that *astonishing* or *surprising* healings do sometimes occur.

If a healing is described as *miraculous* it smuggles in a particular view about what has happened - that the healing was by God. The advantage of describing a healing as *astonishing* or *surprising* is that we're communicating our emotional response to what has happened but we're leaving open both possibilities - maybe the healing was miraculous or maybe it wasn't.

Other religions, traditions and techniques

We can note that astonishing healings occur in other religions and traditions besides Christianity, for example: Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, shamanism. And astonishing healings sometimes occur under conditions of hypnosis.

If Christianity were true we might expect miraculous healings to occur only through Christian healers. Or we might expect Christian healings to be far more impressive than

healings in other contexts - for example, there being conditions which only Christian healers, but no-one else, are able to heal. I am not aware of any definitive investigation of comparative success at healing in different religions but my strong impression is that all have about the same success rate. Christianity doesn't stand out as noticeably superior (nor does any other religion).

In the Wikipedia entry for *Faith healing* the following quote from one John Dominic Crossan is given:

Faith Healing claims have been made by many religions and the sick have visited their shrines in hopes of recovery. I have visited Lourdes in France and Fatima in Portugal, healing shrines of the Christian Virgin Mary. I have also visited Epidaurus in Greece and Pergamum in Turkey, healing shrines of the pagan god Asklepios. The miraculous healings recorded in both places were remarkably the same. **(13)**

Two astonishing healings

Nicky Gumbel gives an account of present day healing. He tells us about a man in his early 20s who developed erythrodermic psoriasis, a chronic skin disease. Standard medical treatment was of no benefit. Finally, in hospital, the man prayed to God and began reading from the Bible:

He prayed for God to heal him and fell into a deep sleep. When he awoke the next morning 'everything looked new'. He went to the bathroom and relaxed in a bath. As he looked at the bathwater, he saw his skin had lifted off and was floating in the bath. He called the nurses in and told them that God was healing him. All his skin was new like a baby's. He had been totally healed. **(14)**

Now consider a second account which also concerns a skin condition:

The patient was a sixteen-year-old boy ... suffering from ichthyosis, a most unsightly condition that from ever since he had been born had covered his body with a black, horny, reptilian layer that was as uncomfortable and evil-smelling as it was disfiguring. (15)

Plastic surgery was attempted but without success. The account continues:

By chance, however, the boy's plight came to the notice of a young physician with an interest in hypnosis, Dr A.A. Mason, today a psychoanalyst in Beverley Hills, California. Mason asked if he might at least try hypnosis, and on 10 February 1951, having induced a hypnotic state, he suggested to the youth that his left arm's reptilian layer would disappear. There ensued an extraordinary transformation. Within five days the horny covering on this arm simply fell away, and within a further few days the skin was soft, pink and normal for the first time in the boy's life. (15)

I've given these two accounts together because of their similarities. In each case healing of a devastating skin condition occurred to the huge benefit of the individual concerned. Is it the case, as many Christians would surely assert, that the first healing was miraculous and from God in that it involved prayer and reading from the Bible but the second healing wasn't miraculous and wasn't of God in that it entailed a non-religious technique?

There is an increasing understanding of mind-body interactions and how extremely powerful these can be. The second healing was achieved through hypnosis and therefore, although it was extremely impressive, we have little reason to think that it was miraculous.

Applying Occam's Razor I think the most reasonable view here is that the first healing entailed a powerful mind-body interaction just as the second healing did. It seems far more reasonable to believe that neither healing was miraculous than to believe that the first healing was miraculous and the second one wasn't.

Possession and exorcism

Christians believe in the possibility of a person becoming “possessed” by a demon or evil spirit - and that this state can be dealt with by means of an exorcism. The same or similar beliefs are also present in other religions. Some of the alleged symptoms of demonic possession include: the person speaking or understanding languages unknown to him; the person speaking in a voice very different from his normal voice; extreme strength; aversion to religious symbols; local drop in temperature; poltergeist and other ‘paranormal’ phenomena.

It’s hard to know what to make of the phenomenon of possession. A religious view is that it’s exactly as advertised - a state where a person has been invaded and taken over by something alien, a demon.

An alternative viewpoint is that whatever occurs in a state of possession occurs solely within the psyche of the person affected - it is not supernatural and nothing from outside is involved. Modern psychiatry offers diagnoses such as possession syndrome and dissociative identity disorder (previously known as multiple personality disorder). From the perspective of analytical psychology Jung talks about archetypal possession - that is, a person can be possessed by an archetype of the collective unconscious, for example the archetype of the Shadow.

Likewise, exorcism may be viewed either as a supernatural event or as a form of healing that is not supernatural but rather belongs in the realms of abnormal psychology. That exorcisms can “work” there is no doubt - through a ritual of exorcism the possessed person is healed and returned to his previous state (“the demon has been cast out”).

If possession and exorcism - no matter how bizarre or strange - are in reality non-supernatural then this is inconsistent with the Christian, supernatural, viewpoint. On the other hand if possession and exorcism *are* supernatural then an issue for Christians to address is that exorcisms from all manner of religions and traditions work: shamans and witchdoctors perform exorcisms. There are Hindu exorcists, Islamic exorcists and Jewish exorcists. If the truth lay with Christianity we might expect only Christian exorcisms to work - or for Christian exorcisms to work far more effectively than any of the alternatives. This doesn’t appear to be the case, although accurate information on this is not easy to obtain.

Ageing and shifts in Christians’ beliefs about healing

I think of a Christian I once knew, Albert, who, as a young man, believed fervently in miraculous healing. He would from time to time confront older Christians who had health

problems with questions: *“Have you sought healing?”*, *“Have you claimed God’s healing?”* - often resulting in resentment and hostility towards him. Many years later, Albert’s wife became ill with a potentially fatal illness. Immediately they sought modern, standard medical help; the possibility of miraculous healing didn't seem to feature in their thinking at all. (Albert’s wife eventually died of the illness).

This sort of example raises the possibility that the nature of beliefs in relation to healing from God may change with age: A young Christian, enjoying youth, fitness, health and optimism can, naturally and easily, think about wholeness and good health - and he looks at older people, and especially fellow-Christians with health problems, with a certain amount of puzzlement (*“Why is he suffering so much when all he has to do is claim healing from God?”*). An older Christian on the other hand, more acquainted with the challenges of life and facing an increasing number of health problems as the years go by, becomes more tuned into - and more accepting of - the realities of life.

Most Christians therefore, as they age, seem to reinterpret healing: they shift away from an expectation of miracles into what might be described as a more “spiritual” interpretation that accepts that miraculous healing in fact doesn't occur.

Realities of life

Here are some realities of human life:-

- People of all ages can and do become ill.
- When we are ill we suffer to greater or lesser degree.
- If we live a long life our bodies will start to function less well than when we were young. Our mobility isn't what it was, our eyesight and hearing maybe start to fail. We may develop respiratory or circulatory problems and so on.
- Many people loyally care for a loved one - someone who is elderly or disabled or terminally ill.

- People of all ages - babies, children, adults - can and do die.
- When a loved one dies we experience grief: anger, feelings of hopelessness, disbelief, extreme mental pain. We have been bereaved. And working through a bereavement is usually a slow, difficult and extremely painful process.

I think that here Buddhism is much more realistic than Christianity in that it highlights such realities “up front”.

It seems that many Christians seek to deny some of these realities. Of course, if supernatural healing is available it would be wrong to keep this quiet. But many, many Christians discover that miraculous healing has not “worked” for them. What they prayed for - earnestly and with great faith, hope and expectation - has not happened. How then to cope? Here are some possible responses:-

- *“God always answers prayer. But sometimes the answer is 'no'.”*
- *“God's timing is perfect. He will heal me. But not yet.”*
- *“I used not to accept my illness. Now I do accept it. I accept that I must suffer but that God will be with me in that suffering - like Christ in Gethsemane. That is my healing - my change of outlook.”*
- *“It was God's Will that I grow closer to Him through this suffering. If He had healed me in the obvious way I initially sought then this possibility for spiritual growth would have been lost.”*
- One Christian I knew (referring to the death of a fellow Christian who had sought healing) solemnly told me: *“Death - the final healing”*. Well, I don't think that's a Biblical view of death nor of healing. And if you define death as being an instance of healing you're pretty much saying that whatever happens can be viewed as healing.

These are not necessarily all foolish responses. Some contain insights that an individual may find helpful. But they are very different to the God-will-heal-everything position that some Christians believe in and promote.

I understand why many Christians feel that miraculous healing should be pursued and offered. After all, if miraculous healing from God is available it would be wrong for people to have that possibility hidden from them. But I think the position many Christians hold on miraculous healing can cause immense pain to those who are not healed and immense pain to those who, day after day, face the difficult reality of caring for a loved one who is sick or disabled.

Many Christians who seek healing but don't receive it do eventually shift to a more realistic outlook - to what we might call a more Buddhist outlook. How much better here to be a Buddhist who is taught early on about the reality of suffering! On the other hand a Christian who encounters and trusts Christian propaganda about miraculous healing may have to experience years of disappointment before eventually shifting to a more Buddhist perspective.

There is therefore something quite tragic about Christians' belief in miraculous healing. Through the last 30 or so years I've never witnessed nor heard about any example of successful miraculous healing. But I'm aware of many, many occasions when a Christian had the opportunity to seek miraculous healing from God but didn't do so, apparently making the judgement (rightly, in my view) that such healing just wouldn't happen.

Some Christians therefore seem to be caught up in a quite complex state of mind whereby they simultaneously both believe and disbelieve in miraculous healing. They believe in miraculous healing because of their belief that God is all-powerful and all-loving and that it would be blasphemous not to believe in it. But they disbelieve in miraculous healing in that they have no expectation that it will ever actually happen in practice.

“Church politics”

Here's another consideration:

A local church - like any other group of people - has its own “politics”. In any group most people want to be respected rather than not; to be higher in the hierarchy rather than lower; to be seen as “successful” rather than “unsuccessful” and so on. And in a church setting a person typically wants to be seen as having a “strong” faith rather than a “weak” faith and as being a “mature” Christian rather than an “immature” Christian.

Now, suppose you seek miraculous healing for something but don't receive it - what does that suggest about you? Was it lack of faith that prevented you being healed? Was it because spiritually you're an immature Christian? Maybe your walk with God is not sufficiently close? Or maybe there's unconfessed sin in your life? An individual may well see the potential for his reputation being damaged in a scenario where others in the church know that he sought, but did not receive, healing.

Simply not seeking healing is one solution, for example by not telling anyone about the illness or condition.

Another possible scenario: A Christian seeks healing but isn't healed. Rather than risk the negative interpretations others may put on this, he claims that in fact he **was** healed. This is only possible of course with some conditions.

Another example: a Christian seeks miraculous healing from God but isn't healed. He now goes to his GP and is prescribed medicine for the condition. The medicine cures or significantly benefits him. He doesn't mention the medicine to anyone in the church and instead claims to have been healed by God. Others in the church are impressed by his faith which has made the healing possible.

I don't want to overegg the pudding here: I think that such examples of dishonesty are relatively rare.

Disabled people - Christianity versus secular initiatives

Many Christians believe that a disabled person can receive miraculous healing for his disability and become a "normal", "whole" person. So, someone who walks on crutches can be healed and throw the crutches away. Or someone who is confined to a wheelchair can be healed so that he no longer needs the wheelchair.

In the UK in the last 30 or so years there have been initiatives that seek to help disabled people to lives that are as fulfilling as possible. These have primarily been secular initiatives often pushed by disabled people themselves in which they demand that disabled people be seen as being just as human, just as valuable, just as significant and just as much owners of human rights as their non-disabled counterparts. Many people (including some Christians) have sneered at such initiatives, seeing them as "political correctness gone mad". In the late 1980s / early 1990s I recall hearing the complaint made that in "left wing" boroughs in London you could only get employed if you were "a disabled black lesbian" - "normal people don't stand a chance".

Nonetheless, as a result of such initiatives society has changed and more and more disabled people have become able to live fulfilling lives in which they have scope to play a full and active part in society. For example in the world of work: where once an employer might have said “We can't possibly employ someone who's stuck in a wheelchair” or “This man dribbles saliva down his jacket when he speaks - we can't employ him” - for many years now such attitudes have been on the retreat and more and more disabled people find employment and are able to build successful careers.

We can also think of sympathetic, informative, TV documentaries about conditions such as autism, Asperger's syndrome and Tourette's syndrome. In this country in the last 20-30 years there has been a significant change in attitudes to these sorts of conditions such that now the general public are much better informed and more likely to respond with understanding rather than condemnation to a person with, for example, Tourette's syndrome. Ignorance about Tourette's syndrome does still exist, for example, a minority of Christians believe that someone with Tourette's is “possessed”.

So, here we have two viewpoints, two approaches, with regard to disabled people - and the results of both approaches can be evaluated.

On the one hand many Christians have said that disabled people can and should be healed of their disabilities. But, in practice, such healing doesn't happen.

And on the other hand you have a primarily secular initiative which sees disabled people as full people who have full human rights and who deserve respect, acceptance and opportunities just as much as non-disabled people. And this sort of outlook has changed society for the better (and continues to do so) giving disabled people a better chance of fulfilling lives.

Which position is better? One that promises much but delivers little (and may even cause harm)? Or one that is more modest but has, nonetheless, delivered significant changes for the better?

Key points

- Christian propaganda about miraculous healing gives rise to expectations which aren't borne out in reality.
- On occasion astonishing/surprising healings do occur in a Christian context - but similar astonishing/surprising healings also occur in other, non-Christian, contexts.

- There are many conditions for which miraculous healing never seems to happen.
- Many Christians in later life eventually reach an accepting / enlightened view (a Buddhist view we might say) about the realities of life - but to arrive there they first have to work through (and escape from) extravagant Christian claims about miraculous healing.
- We've noted that secular initiatives in the past three decades or so have been far more successful in benefitting disabled people than has supposed miraculous Christian healing.

Chapter 3

Evangelism and eternity

Setting the scene

Christians believe that salvation is in Jesus Christ alone and that those who are “saved” (Christians) are destined to spend eternity in Heaven. But those who aren’t saved (non-Christians) are destined to be lost for eternity.

Christians use a variety of terms in relation to salvation. Nicky Gumbel writes:-

There are many ways of speaking about starting the new life of the Christian faith - ‘becoming a Christian’, ‘giving our lives to Christ’, ‘receiving Christ’, ‘inviting Jesus into our lives’, ‘believing in him’ and ‘opening the door to Jesus’ are some of the variations.

(16)

Being “born again” is of course another example.

Christians believe that by default a person is “lost” - that is, he is destined for hell or, at least, not destined for heaven. But by becoming a Christian he can be assured of salvation and of eternity in Heaven. We shall look at the concept of hell later in this chapter.

Evangelism is the word used to describe the proclamation of the Christian Gospel and the process of seeking to bring an “unsaved” person to salvation in Jesus. Although some Christians believe that evangelism is only for an “elite” group of Christians (e.g. clergy rather than laity) the majority view is that evangelism is for all Christians. A passage from the Bible often cited here is “The Great Commission” given by Jesus after his Resurrection:-

Go therefore to all nations and make them my disciples...

(Matthew 28:19)

Something I've noticed down the last 30 or so years is that very few Christians actually do evangelise. Christians in the UK tend to assent to the importance of and need for evangelism - but don't actually do so themselves.

It's hard to think of a good analogy for the drama of salvation that Christians believe in. One imperfect analogy is to think of a house - a tall house - that's on fire and with several people trapped inside. You witness this situation - the building on fire with people at the upstairs windows, crying for help. Do you walk on by or do you get involved? Likewise, should a Christian leave non-Christians to their fate or should he get involved by proclaiming the Gospel and trying to lead them to salvation?

Nicky Gumbel offers a different metaphor:

[W]e tell people because there is a desperate need for people to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. If we were in the Sahara Desert and had discovered an oasis, it would be extremely selfish not to tell the people around us who were thirsty where their thirst could be satisfied. Jesus is the only One who can satisfy the thirsty hearts of men and women. **(17)**

My house fire analogy is imperfect in that we usually don't know when a given person will die - whereas in the house fire situation there is clearly an emergency "now". The need to be saved would seem to be less urgent for someone destined to die in 60 years time than for someone destined to die tomorrow. But of course we rarely know when someone is going to die. In general approximately 1% of any human population will die in the course of a year. So, if we think of a city of a million people, around 10,000 of those people will die in the course of a 12 month period. It should be apparent therefore (within the context of what Christians say they believe) that there is an urgent need to evangelise - a need to communicate the Christian Gospel in order that people have the opportunity to become Christians and thereby saved.

If Christianity were true we would therefore expect to see Christians proclaiming the Gospel - "gossiping the Gospel" we might say. But we rarely see this, at least not in the UK. In this country from around the 1950s into the 1980s, Evangelistic crusades were quite common. A celebrity evangelist - often from another continent - would proclaim the Gospel to a large number of people at a football stadium or other suitable venue. More recently,

especially in the last 10 to 20 years, the Alpha course has come to prominence as a way of communicating the Christian Gospel.

Both the evangelistic crusades of the past and the Alpha course of today are, I believe, significant evidence against Christianity being true. If Christianity were true we would expect to see Christians integrating into their lives what they say they believe - sharing the Gospel with their relatives, friends, neighbours and work colleagues. In which case neither the Evangelistic crusades of the past nor the Alpha course of today would have been necessary.

At this point the reader may want to say to me: *“Hey, you’re not a Christian. Surely if in practice Christians don’t evangelise that should be, for you, a good thing! Why on earth are you complaining?”*

But to ask this question is to lose the thread of the discussion. I’m not saying here that Christians *should* evangelise. That is a separate kind of issue and will be examined in a later chapter. Rather, I’m noting that *if* Christianity were true we’d *expect* to see Christians evangelising, gossiping the Gospel. We rarely see this - and that failure to evangelise seems therefore to be significant evidence against Christianity being true.

Reasons for not evangelising

We therefore have a key question: why don’t Christians evangelise? Or, to be more exact, why do so few Christians evangelise? We shall look at 6 possible responses that Christians may give. We should bear in mind that these may not be the real reasons.

1. Witnessing rather than evangelising

A response some Christians give is to say *“I don’t evangelise as such - instead I witness by the way I live my life.”*

I recall in a church service a fellow Christian praying a prayer along these lines: *“Lord, help us to live our lives in such a way that non-Christians will look at us and ask themselves ‘what have they got that we haven’t got?’ ”*

The sub-text of the prayer seemed to be: *Christianity may or may not actually be true, but it’s our duty as Christians to try to at least make it look as if it’s true - by trying to live our lives in such a way that non-Christians will be impressed and will want to become Christians themselves.*

A Muslim I once knew made a similar point to me - that he did his utmost to be a good advert for Islam in the hope of playing a role in other people's conversion to Islam.

On the issue of witnessing through how one lives one's life we might think of a contrast between two different Christians. Firstly we have a loud-mouthed Christian who takes every possible opportunity to proclaim the Gospel to every non-Christian he comes into contact with, antagonising everyone and making himself unpopular. Secondly we have a devout Christian, with an attractive personality. He is popular with both Christians and non-Christians alike, and by virtue of his good nature is a tremendously good advertisement for Christianity.

Now, I am someone who by far prefers subtlety and under-statement to an unsubtle, in-your-face style of communication. But if we think of the house fire analogy, subtlety and under-statement might be quite inadequate and inappropriate. Or, in Nicky Gumbel's Sahara desert metaphor, subtlety, under-statement and dropping hints might mean that years pass before the location of the oasis is revealed - by which time the thirsty people have long since died.

There's another problem here which I'll illustrate as follows:

Suppose I move house and in the course of the next few weeks meet my new neighbours. Firstly I meet a charming Christian who takes a sincere interest in me and shows me many kindnesses. I'm so impressed by him I seriously start to consider becoming a Christian. I'm about to become a Christian when I meet another neighbour, a Muslim. He is even more charming and kind than the Christian and I'm even more impressed so now I feel I should become a Muslim. I'm about to become a Muslim when I meet another neighbour, a Jehovah's witness, who is even more charming and kind than both the Christian and the Muslim. In fact I'm so impressed I now feel I should become a Jehovah's witness.

The purpose of this example is to show the precarious nature of "witnessing by the way I live my life" as a method of trying to impress other people into becoming Christians.

2. *"The Lord hasn't called me to evangelise"*

A Christian may say he doesn't evangelise because "The Lord hasn't called me to evangelise" or "The Lord has told me that evangelism is not part of His plan for me".

Even when I was a Christian I tended to be a bit suspicious whenever a fellow-Christian said “The Lord has told me....”

For example, a Christian couple might say “The Lord has told us we should move house” - and in due course they move into a house that’s bigger than the one they lived in before and in a more desirable location.

It’s not hard to speculate about the mental process involved here:

1. A Christian wants to do something - let’s call it X.
2. This becomes “It’s God’s Will for me that I do X.”
3. And then “Well, if it’s God’s Will that I do X, who am I to argue against God? Clearly I must do X.”

So when a Christian says “God has not called me to evangelise” it may really just be an expression of “I don’t want to evangelise.”

3. “*God is in control*”

Sometimes a Christian may say there’s no real need to evangelise because “God is in control”. It’s argued that God, being all-loving, all-knowing and all-powerful, is far better placed to attend to the destiny of non-Christians than a fallible Christian could possibly be. A Christian may, so to speak, shrug his shoulders, and say “It’s God’s problem, not mine”.

However, consider the following verse from a poem by one Annie Johnston Flint:

*Christ has no hands but our hands to do His work today
He has no feet but our feet to lead men in the way
He has no tongue but our tongue to tell men how He died
He has no help but our help to bring them to His side.*

As with proverbs expressing opposite views (e.g. “too many cooks spoil the broth”, “many hands make light work”) we have here two opposing views on the role of God in human affairs - “leave everything to God” versus “He has no hands but our hands...”.

4. “*I evangelise when I’m so led by the Holy Spirit*”

This point is similar to the previous one.

The problem with both these arguments is that in practice they provide an excuse / a reason for not evangelising. The fact is that many people die never having heard the Christian Gospel and therefore (in the event that Christianity were true) the vast majority of people die destined to be lost for eternity.

5. *“People already know the Christian Gospel”*

It may be claimed that the vast majority of non-Christians already know about Christianity - they've heard the Christian Gospel, but in their foolishness and selfishness have chosen not to receive Jesus. Further proclamation of the Gospel would make little if any difference.

But I don't think this claim stands up.

From time to time I've seen TV programmes in which “ordinary people” - members of the public - discuss “religious issues”. Or sometimes a “religious discussion” starts up amongst a group of people at work or in the pub. In such discussions things get said such as:-

“You don't have to go to church to be a Christian; I only ever set foot in a church for funerals and weddings, but I'm still a Christian.”

“All religions lead to God. There's nothing special about Christianity.”

“Why do I need saving from sin? I've never sinned in my life.”

“I've never sinned - how could I when I'm still a virgin?”

(From comments like this last one it becomes apparent that some people equate “sin” with sexual intercourse!)

Now, I don't want to get into the rights or wrongs of such viewpoints - I'm simply giving these examples to highlight that there are many, many non-Christians who have probably never heard (and certainly don't understand) the Christian Gospel.

This is confirmed by the following from Nicky Gumbel:-

There are many people today, in our secularised society, who don't know much about Jesus Christ, or what he did, or anything to do with Christianity. One hospital chaplain listed some of the replies he was given to the question, 'Would you like Holy Communion?' These are some of the answers:

'No thanks, I'm Church of England.'

'No thanks, I asked for Cornflakes.'

'No thanks, I've never been circumcised.' (18)

So, the argument that there's no need for evangelism because “people already know the Christian Gospel” appears to be unsound.

6. *“Better not to have heard the Gospel than to have heard and rejected it”*

Finally, a rare viewpoint which I'm including for completeness.

A Christian may reason:

If a person has never heard the Christian Gospel it may be that God is able to forgive him for not having received Christ. But if a person has heard the Gospel but rejected Christ then that would seem to be unforgivable. So, it may be better not to proclaim the Gospel to someone who has never heard it before. His present situation of ignorance about salvation is preferable to a situation where he has heard the Gospel but rejected it - so why risk making things worse for him?

That concludes our look at reasons Christians may give for not evangelising. I think we have cause to be skeptical of these reasons. We shall return to the issue of evangelism later.

The death of a non-Christian loved one

Imagine you're a Christian and that a non-Christian who you love dearly, perhaps a relative or friend, dies. How do you handle this? Well, I've witnessed this situation a few times - both when I was a Christian and since.

It's often said that religion provides great comfort to people - but I don't think the reality is quite as tidy as that. When a Christian experiences the death of a loved one who wasn't a Christian he faces a significant problem. If what he believes were true then the loved one is now destined to be lost for eternity - which is not at all comforting. One response I've witnessed is for the Christian to claim that in the hours before the person's death he may well have repented and become a Christian. This belief may come to be held even if there is absolutely no evidence for it - though of course it's very understandable why a Christian, in such a difficult situation, may respond in that way.

Hell

Many Christians believe in hell. To put it bluntly: they believe that they, Christians, are destined for eternity in heaven but non-Christians on the other hand are destined for hell.

The doctrine of hell - eternal punishment, endless suffering - is of course utterly appalling. Yet many Christians believe that it is there in the Bible and therefore must be so.

Of course, some Christians experience a great deal of anguish and soul-searching in relation to hell: *"How could a loving God send people to eternal hell?"* or *"What possible purpose could there be in a punishment that never ends?"* I have every sympathy with Christians who go through such angst - as I did when I was a Christian - and I feel that it's a very authentic response.

Some Christians - and I imagine it's a small minority - appear to be extremely cheerful about the concept of hell. The following was written by a Christian in relation to Richard Dawkins:

I defy any of my coreligionists to tell me they do not laugh at the idea of Dawkins burning in hell. (19)

Some Christians take the line that people send themselves to hell. Here is C.S. Lewis:-

I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*...They enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self-enslaved; just as the blessed, forever submitting to

obedience, become through all eternity more and more free.

In the long run, the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question: "What are you asking God to do?" To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does. **(20)**

Possibly some people find Lewis' argument credible.

Some Christians, appalled by the traditional doctrine of hell sometimes try to make hell less unattractive. So, for example, the suggestion may be made that hell is not eternal. Yes, those who are unsaved go to hell. But their suffering there is for a finite time - not forever. This is similar to the idea of purgatory - an idea usually associated with Roman Catholicism but rejected by many Christians as unbiblical.

Another response is to say that speculation about hell is unhealthy and unedifying: "*Faith is not about the furniture of heaven nor the temperature of hell*". Many Christians will say that the right focus is on the Christian good news - salvation in Jesus and the gift of eternal life - rather than the exact details of the fate of those who aren't saved.

In response to the different views Christians have about the fate of non-Christians I've tended towards using the word "lost" or the phrase "lost for eternity" rather than talking in terms of hell.

I want now to give 2 more scenarios - both fictitious - to further illustrate some of the problems Christians face in relation to belief in hell:

(i) A 65 year old Christian, Clive, is retiring from the job he has been in for the last 30 years. On his final day there is a presentation to him and he is shown a great deal of warmth and affection. Likewise Clive feels a deep love for his colleagues who he's spent so much time with and with whom he's been through many good times and bad times - challenges, disappointments, joys, successes. None of these colleagues are Christians.

A few days later, alone at home, Clive reflects about the eternal destiny of these people who he worked with and loves. Can it really be that they are condemned? he wonders. Can it really be that they're destined for hell? Surely not? He imagines himself in heaven with the knowledge that these dear people are suffering in hell. "Would I be able to enjoy heaven in those circumstances?" he asks himself. He vaguely wonders whether he should at some point have tried sharing the Gospel with any of them.

Then he reflects further: "*For your thoughts are not my thoughts' saith the Lord.*" With a deep sigh Clive reflects "Who am I to argue against the Word of God? Who am I to think that I can judge better than God what the consequences of unforgiven sin should be?"

And with this he makes himself a cup of coffee and switches on the TV.

So, there we have a Christian briefly reflecting on some of the possible implications of what he believes (or assents to). But it's only a vague passing awareness, and ultimately it doesn't cause him too much trouble.

(ii) A man, Donald, goes through his working life employed in a factory. He is a decent man, hard-working and honest. At 20 he marries his childhood sweetheart and they go on to have 3 children. Life is hard. Donald's health is poor but he rarely misses a day's work. He and his family constantly struggle to make ends meet. People who know Donald see him as a devoted husband and father, a man who is kind, reliable and trustworthy. Family life is happy and joyful despite the lack of money. Donald retires aged 65 but within a year he has a heart attack and dies. In his life Donald never became a Christian.

What can we say, from a Christian perspective, of Donald's eternal destiny? Well, given that he is a non-Christian he is destined to be lost for eternity. And this, for many Christians, means eternal hell. How do we feel about that? Does this sound credible as a final outcome, a final verdict on Donald's life? A life that has been well lived, decent and honest. My feeling is that it's an outrageous viewpoint. But I'm also fully aware of the position many Christians

would take in response: *“Trying to live a good life won’t earn you salvation”*, *“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”*, *“Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

Once again I’m trying to illustrate the implications of what Christians say they believe. And the question arises: if Christians *really* believe what they say they believe about salvation why don’t they integrate those beliefs into their lives?

Key points

- Christians believe that salvation is in Jesus alone. This is the Christian Gospel (or good news).
- If Christianity were true we would expect to see Christians evangelising - proclaiming the Christian Gospel - confidently and without embarrassment.
- We rarely see this: in general, Christians fail to evangelise. In the UK we instead see evangelistic crusades (in decades past) and the Alpha course (in more recent years).
- Christians may give various reasons for not evangelising. We have cause to doubt that these are the real reasons.
- Many Christians believe in hell as the destiny of people who are not saved. We might expect this to give Christians an added incentive to evangelise, but in practice this appears not to be the case.
- The doctrine of eternal hell is appalling. Many Christians are appalled by it - an authentic response, I believe. There are a few Christians who seem to enjoy the thought of non-Christians suffering in hell.
- We shall return to the issue of evangelism in later chapters, especially chapter 8, “Good and evil, love and indifference”.

Chapter 4

Faith

Setting the scene

The reader may for some time have been wanting to say something along these lines: *“What about faith? You’re talking about Christianity, a religion, but don’t religious beliefs just come down to faith? Aren’t you missing the point by ignoring faith and talking only about evidence?”*

In other words, religion and religious beliefs are seen as belonging to a different category than most human thought, one where beliefs not based on evidence are viewed as normal and to be expected.

We can think of the story of the schoolboy who says “faith is believing things you know aren’t true”. A clergyman giving a sermon on faith may quote this as an example of how the concept of faith is misunderstood. The congregation nod their heads and smile - they can see why the schoolboy might think that. But I wonder whether their smiles might in fact be smiles of anxiety? That this apocryphal schoolboy is actually uncomfortably near the truth in what he says.

In this chapter I want to explore some different usages of the word “faith”, our associations to and feelings about the word “faith” and look at what the relationship may be between evidence and faith.

Faith can be seen as trust. To have faith in someone is to trust them. We can think of faith in God or faith in the bible in this kind of way - trusting in God or trusting in the bible as the Word of God.

In the Bible and amongst Christians, faith is seen as something that is good and desirable.

Associations

To the word “faith” we might associate other words and ideas such as: *trust, hope, loyalty, optimism, positive mental attitude, living life to the full.*

And to absence of faith (or loss of faith) we might associate: *mistrust, despair, pessimism, depression, loss of vitality*.

We can also note how politicians and community leaders happily use terms like "faith schools" or "faith communities" because of the positive feel generated by the word "faith".

And we can think of how the words "faithfulness" and "faithful" are positive words: for example, being faithful in a marriage rather than committing adultery (being unfaithful).

Faith as loyalty

A word that I think captures what faith is like in practice is *loyalty*.

Having a religious faith in practice - and especially in the long term - may be similar to supporting a poor football team. A loyal supporter stays with his team through thick and thin. Even though his team have been relegated each of the last two seasons, have just been knocked out of the Cup in the first round and are still playing hopelessly - he still turns out week after week to support them. He is showing loyalty.

This, I think, is very similar to the outlook of religious people. There may be little evidence to support what the religious person believes. Nonetheless he is loyal. He sticks with what he believes. He has faith.

Faith as defiance, faith as rebellion

Somewhat similar to faith as loyalty is faith as defiance. I want to illustrate this by means of a fictitious (but, I think, plausible) example:-

A Roman Catholic is visited by two Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs). The Catholic has been warned by his priest that the JWs are "a cult" and are "dangerous" and that he should be wary of them. Nonetheless a conversation gets under way. The JWs ask the Catholic what he believes and he tells them. The JWs then ask the Catholic if he can show them anywhere in the Bible that supports his beliefs and the Catholic, whose knowledge of the Bible is poor, is unable to. The JWs now speak about what they believe - and for each belief they turn the pages of the Bible and quote passages in support. The Catholic feels more and more out of his depth - the JWs are so much more knowledgeable of the Bible. Finally, embarrassed and frustrated, he exclaims: "*Look - I don't care what you say or how clever you are with the Bible. I'm a*

Catholic. I was brought up a Catholic and I'll be a Catholic on the day I die. Nothing you can say will ever change that".

This is faith as defiance.

Is faith as defiance a desirable thing? Christians often portray non-Christians as being in a state of defiance and wilful rebellion against God. But I think that an outlook based on faith can itself be seen as a state of defiance and wilful rebellion - a determination to be loyal to ones religion "regardless".

Faith - attacking and destroying

Faith may be like a treasured possession - and an attack on a person's faith may therefore be experienced by him as being like attempted vandalism or attempted theft. Faith may feel like part, an integral part, of the person himself / herself - and an attack on a person's faith may therefore be experienced as being like an assault or even as attempted murder. These two observations, if correct, may help explain why "faith" in general tends to be given a strangely exalted status. As Richard Dawkins notes:

A widespread assumption, which nearly everyone in our society accepts - the non-religious included - is that religious faith is especially vulnerable to offence and should be protected by an abnormally thick wall of respect, in a different class from the respect that any human being should pay to any other. **(21)**

One interesting development in recent years - particularly since the publication of "The God delusion" - is the attempt by Christians to portray atheism as being a faith and atheists as having a faith. As an example, Alister McGrath writes about how he once "destroyed the faith" of an atheist through giving in a lecture an evidence-based rebuttal of Dawkins' views **(22)**

We usually think of the undermining (or, rarely, the destruction) of a person's faith as something where the "victim" is a religious person. But now that Christians, and perhaps others, are trying to present atheism as being a faith we have the curious scenario where (supposedly) an atheist is the victim of an attack which destroys his faith!

I have to say that I think the attempt to portray atheism as being a faith is absurd.

Faith as trump card

Many of the beliefs held by Christians (indeed, the majority of religious beliefs in general) seem to be poorly supported by evidence. How can a religion deal with this lack of evidence? And the answer seems to be: the concept of faith. And this scenario tends to work because of the positive associations we have to the word 'faith' and because faith is seen as something desirable and virtuous.

This is *faith as trump card*. The Ace of Spades of evidence is trumped by the lowly two of diamonds of faith.

“Belief” used with little or no context

We can now consider another word - “belief” (or “believe”).

The film *Fairytale - A True Story* is about how at the time of the First World War two girls apparently took photographs of fairies. The film’s tagline is just one word: “Believe”.

“Believe what?” we may ask. And the answer seems to be “Whatever. Fairies or anything else you choose. Just believe”.

There is here an undercurrent of “Belief is good for you. Belief will enchant you. Belief will bring you happiness.” But **what** we believe seems to be unimportant.

A second example: in many towns there are Salvation Army charity shops which, at this time, display the words *Belief in action!* We may want to ask: " 'Belief' - belief in what?" The implication is that belief is something generic and one belief (or set of beliefs) is just as good as another - a position that people who belong to the Salvation Army, as Christians, are unlikely to hold. I find myself therefore wondering why the slogan wasn't *Christian belief in action!* In that this would have been clear and specific rather than vague and generic.

A third example is from the epigraph of the book *Mysterious Stranger* by the magician David Blaine:

For those who believe,
no explanation is necessary.
For those who do not,
none will suffice. (23)

Again we may ask: “ ‘Believe’ - believe what?” And again the answer seems to be “whatever you like - just believe”. And why? Because to believe is to be positive. To believe is to engage with life, to have your horizons expanded. But if you don’t “believe” you can be abandoned as a hopeless case.

We can also think of the expression from the 1960s: “I’m a believer!” This expression feels optimistic and life-affirming but we’re told nothing about what is being believed, as if that’s irrelevant.

There is I think a similarity between faith and these uses of “belief” / “believe”, the assumption being that both are good for you. “To believe” is good just as “to have faith” is good. “To fail to believe” or “to be unable to believe” are bad just as “to be without faith” or “to lose one’s faith” are bad.

Loss of faith viewed as tragedy

In novels, plays and films “loss of faith” (where a religious person has lost his faith or is in danger of losing it) tends to be presented as something tragic – perhaps especially if the person concerned is a clergyman.

For example, in the film *The Exorcist* - in many ways quite a sophisticated film - the priest Father Karras is given the rather corny line “*I think I’ve lost my faith, Tom*” (24)

Is faith always a good thing?

As noted above, there’s a tendency to think that ‘faith’ is good - and that ‘doubt’ and ‘loss of faith’ are bad.

Well, here’s Kevin. He’s a devil worshipper. That is his faith. He has chosen to align himself with Satan and against God. He believes that Lucifer will ultimately triumph over God. There may not be any good evidence for this belief but Kevin overcomes this lack of evidence through faith. However in recent weeks he’s been having some serious doubts - he wonders whether Satan will in fact be victorious.

What should we as observers of Kevin’s situation be saying to him? Should we be saying: *Kevin. Faith is a good thing. Remain a devil worshipper! Stay faithful to what you*

believe!? I suspect that few if any readers would take that view. Faith therefore is not “free-floating” but has a context, as this example shows. And if we take the view that choosing to serve the devil rather than God is bad (to say the least) then faith on this occasion is not a good thing. This establishes a general principle that faith may not always be good - it depends on the context.

“The less faith the better”

In a book I once dipped into in a bookshop a Christian writer said something like this: *Some people believe there is no God, that Jesus was just a good man, that there is no life after death and that therefore everything ultimately is meaningless. But to believe all that requires more faith than believing in Christianity.*

What's interesting about this example is that it implies that faith is a commodity one should try to use as little of as possible. Better to be a Christian than an atheist because being a Christian requires less faith! What a strange twist this is given that in general Christians view faith as something desirable.

Blind faith

Amongst Christians the term *blind faith* is usually used in a critical way. Faith, as we have noted, tends to be seen as something good and positive. But blind faith is go too far - it's seen as a complete and unjustifiable suspension of one's critical faculties. Christians seem to enjoy it when they can accuse their opponents of blind faith. The sub-text is: *You're criticising our faith. But who are you to talk? You're exhibiting blind faith which is even worse!* An example:

In *The God delusion* Dawkins, somewhat tentatively, puts forward memes (“units of cultural inheritance”) as a possible explanation for religious belief. (25)

Commenting on this, Nicky Gumbel writes:

To be fair, Dawkins does not seem to be pushing this so much anymore, because it is a theory for which there is absolutely no evidence. It itself requires blind faith!

(26)

I think the process here is that Gumbel, by talking about blind faith, is projecting onto atheism the weakness - lack of evidence - that in fact applies much more to Christianity.

“Cognitive bias” and “conservative thinking”

The following is from the Christian theologian Alister McGrath:

The way that human beings perceive the world is indeed coloured by our agendas and expectations. 'Cognitive bias' is a fundamental characteristic of human psychology. Yet in general this unconscious bias is manifested not so much in our believing what we would like to be true, as in maintaining the status quo of our beliefs. The driving force is not wishful thinking, but conservative thinking - that is, thinking that conserves an existing world view...

...We thus have a built-in resistance to change our position - a resistance which is underpinned by 'cognitive biases' which predispose us to fail to notice or to discount data that are inconsistent with our view. On the whole we do this because it is efficient - it is effortful and upsetting to have to change one's mind..

...Do cognitive biases play a part in religious belief? The evidence is that they are as important here as in any other area of life. **(27)**

I am in agreement with this analysis.

My strong impression is that a major reason why Christians tend to stay loyal to Christianity (that is, tend to exhibit faith) is because of fear about the massive upheaval they would experience in their lives if they were to cease being a Christian. So, we can imagine a Christian, say around the age of 60, who in the core of his being has now come to believe that

the truth doesn't lie with Christianity and is now reflecting on the practical consequences if he were to cease to be a Christian:

“Hold on, if I were to stop being a Christian my wife might well leave me. All those Christian friends I have - well, most of them would drop me instantly. I'd be seen as a tragic figure: the man who lost his faith."My reputation and status would be badly damaged and I might end up facing constant loneliness through the remainder of my life. Am I really prepared to put myself through all that?"

In the last few decades we've become familiar with the phrase “living a lie” in the context of a gay man who is married to a woman. I think this phrase - *living a lie* - can also be applied to those Christians who continue going through the motions of being a Christian but who in their heart no longer believe Christianity to be true.

Faith and evidence

I believe that evidence is the only way we can seek to evaluate whether a belief/assertion is true or false. Given that faith, in practice, tends to mean holding beliefs for which the evidence is poor it's hard to see what faith contributes.

Christians have the luxury of being able to invoke either evidence or faith depending on circumstances. On the occasions when what they believe seems to be supported by evidence they can appeal to that evidence; on the occasions when evidence fails to support what they believe they can instead invoke faith.

Key points

- Faith tends to be viewed as something good, positive and life-affirming.
- Faith, in practice, is probably well described as being like loyalty.
- Continuing to believe things for which the evidence is extremely poor I have called *faith as trump card*. No matter how strong the evidence against a particular belief being true - that evidence can always be trumped by faith.

- We noted - in the example of the devil worshipper - that faith cannot always be seen as good.
- There is also the concept of blind faith - something seen as bad and that we tend to assign to people who we disagree with, but not ourselves!
- Sometimes Christians are quite cheerful about lack of evidence for what they believe - the lack of evidence means that faith (which is felt to be a good thing) can flourish.
- Christians seem to be caught in a dilemma between a traditional view of faith, where it's seen as highly desirable, and a different view, where it's seen as something one should use as little of as possible ("better to be a Christian than an atheist because being a Christian requires less faith").
- In practice most Christians just tend to hold onto what they believe "regardless" - this is the conservative thinking described by McGrath. One aspect of this may be the concern about the practical consequences of ceasing to be a Christian: damage to reputation, loss of friendships, fear of loneliness etc.
- Faith in practice is often a state of mind of continuing to hold a belief regardless of the evidence. Faith can therefore be seen as a mind-set of defiance or a state of rebellion.
- Christians appeal to evidence when evidence seems to be available and to faith when evidence is lacking.

Chapter 5

The Bible

Setting the scene

Most Christians believe that the Bible is the Word of God - although there is, reasonably enough, diversity of opinion as to how this belief is to be understood.

Nicky Gumbel writes:-

Paul wrote of the inspiration of the Scriptures that were available to him: 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that God's servant may be thoroughly equipped for every good work' (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

...

The writer is saying that Scripture is God speaking. Of course he used human agents. It is 100 per cent the work of human beings. But it is also 100 per cent inspired by God (just as Jesus is fully human and fully God).

...

This high view of the inspiration of the Bible has been held almost universally by the worldwide church down the ages. **(28)**

How was the canon of Scripture established?

Already some questions come to mind:-

What constitutes 'Scripture'? For example, some Bibles include a section called the Apocrypha between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Some Christians view the Apocrypha as part of the Word of God, others don't.

If we take Scripture to mean the Old Testament and the New Testament ("the canon of Scripture") then what was the mechanism by which this canon was established? That is, what was the mechanism by which it was determined what should be included and what excluded?

Looking specifically at the New Testament, the following, from a book about the Gnostic Gospels, is extremely interesting and relevant here:

Contemporary Christianity, diverse and complex as we find it, actually may show more unanimity than the Christian churches of the first and second centuries....Before that time, [the end of the second century] as Irenaeus and others attest, numerous gospels circulated among various Christian groups, ranging from those of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, to such writings as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Philip*, and the *Gospel of Truth*, as well as many other secret teachings, myths, and poems attributed to Jesus or his disciples. **(29)**

From the same book:

We now begin to see that what we call Christianity - and what we identify as Christian tradition - actually represents only a small selection of specific sources, chosen from among dozens of others. Who made that selection, and for what reasons? **(30)**

So, given that there were several Gospels available, what was the mechanism which determined that only Matthew, Mark, Luke and John should be included?

I shall not here be pursuing answers to this question. I'm simply flagging up that there were many writings about Jesus, but only some of them were included into the New Testament. Christians may assert that it was the hand of God that determined this - that is, it was God Himself who ensured that only those writings that He had inspired were included in the New Testament. But we may reasonably speculate that in fact it was "power struggles" in

the early Church and/or historical accident that determined what was included and what excluded.

"Picking and choosing"

Many Christians (and also other religious groups, for example, Jehovah's witnesses) object to the practice of "picking and choosing" - that is, choosing which parts of the Bible to accept and which parts to reject. In other words accepting "everything" in the Bible is seen as sound. After all, it is argued, the Bible is the Word of God and if we choose to accept some of the Bible but not all then we are having to trust our own fallible judgment in deciding which parts to accept.

In response I would point out that to accept 100% of the Bible and reject nothing is simply a special case of picking and choosing. Choosing to accept everything involves trusting in our own fallible judgment just as much as choosing to accept only parts.

Moral problems and contradictions

I now want to briefly address some of the problems that appear to exist in the Bible.

Firstly, there are moral problems. We have passages that appear to support genocide, slavery and the death penalty for relatively minor offences. Some Christians say that we can take "Bible" as standing for "Best Instructions Before Life Ends" (or "Best Instructions Before Leaving Earth"). I invite you to read the following passage with that in mind:

When a man has a son who is rebellious and out of control, who does not obey his father and mother, or take heed when they punish him, then his father and mother are to lay hold of him and bring him out to the elders of the town at the town gate, and say 'This son of ours is rebellious and out of control; he will not obey us, he is a wastrel and a drunkard.' Then all the men of the town must stone him to death, and you will thereby rid yourselves of this wickedness. **(Deuteronomy 21:18-21)**

I wonder how many Christians have applied this instruction in their lives?

Other examples include:

Exodus 21: 7-11

Exodus 21: 20,21

Deuteronomy 7: 1,2

Joshua 6: 20,21

And secondly, we appear to have contradictions. The best known of these is perhaps the two different accounts of the death of Judas (Matthew 27:5 and Acts 1:18). Also, the genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 differ significantly. And there are many, many more examples.

Nicky Gumbel acknowledges the existence of such difficulties. Having asserted that Scripture is God-breathed (quote (28) above) he goes on to write:

This does not mean that there are no difficulties in the Bible...There are moral and historical difficulties and some apparent contradictions. Some of the difficulties can be explained by the different contexts in which the authors were writing. It is important to remember that the Bible was written over a period of 1,500 years by at least forty authors, including kings, scholars, philosophers, fishermen, poets, statesmen, historians and doctors. There is a whole range of genres: historical, narrative, poetry, prophecy, letters and apocalyptic literature. **(31)**

This is all fair enough up to a point. But it's not clear how context or genre or occupation of the writer resolve some of the difficulties previously highlighted.

Nicky Gumbel continues:

Although some of the apparent contradictions can be explained by differing contexts, others are harder to resolve. This does not mean, however, that it is impossible and that we should abandon our belief in the

inspiration of Scripture...we need to hold on to the belief in the inspiration of the Bible and try to understand the difficult passages within that context.

...

It is very important to hold on to the fact that *all* Scripture is inspired by God, even if we cannot immediately resolve all the difficulties. (32)

That final sentence echoes faith as defiance, as described in the previous chapter. And although Nicky Gumbel uses the word *fact*, of course he isn't stating a fact - rather, he's expressing a belief or opinion that he holds.

"Dear Dr Laura"

There is a famous "letter", beginning with the words "Dear Dr Laura", which seeks to highlight some of the difficulties with trying to accept "everything" in the Bible. It is given in full in Appendix 3.

Christians have sometimes appealed to certain Old Testament passages in claiming that homosexuality is wrong and condemned by God. The purpose of the "Dear Dr Laura" letter is to illustrate the problem of this approach - namely that various other activities are also condemned in the Old Testament, including eating shellfish and wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread.

I think the point made by the "Dear Dr Laura" letter is a very valid one and it challenges Christians to engage with what it really means to see the Bible as the Word of God and to therefore accept "everything" in it.

Why the Trinity doctrine is unbiblical

This is for me the most important section in this chapter - and one of the most important sections in the book.

We need to start by taking a brief look at the doctrine of the Trinity:

Christians believe that God is triune - sometimes expressed as there being "three persons in one God". Usually an acknowledgment is made of the inadequacies of human language in trying to describe God - and such an acknowledgment is, I believe, very reasonable.

The doctrine of the Trinity can be expressed by means of the following four statements:

The Father is God

The Son is God

The Holy Spirit is God

There is only One God

This is of course mysterious and paradoxical - there is an apparent contradiction between the first 3 statements and the final statement. But it doesn't follow that it's therefore untrue.

The Trinity doctrine often leads Christians into confusion. For example, in Conservapedia, an online encyclopaedia written from a Christian point of view (slogan: *The Trustworthy Encyclopedia*), we read:

The Trinity refers to the three parts that make up the one God, all co-equal, and all forming one God. **(33)**

According to Christian doctrine this is wrong: it is heretical to describe the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as “parts” of God.

Christians who believe that the Trinity doctrine is Biblical are often eager to acknowledge that the word 'Trinity' doesn't appear in the Bible - as if that were the strongest or most significant difficulty to be faced. There is in fact a problem that is far, far more serious:

Christians worship God: they worship the Father, they worship the Son, and they worship the Holy Spirit. But (and it's a hugely important *but*) nowhere in the Bible is there authority for worshipping the Holy Spirit. That is to say, there exists no passage in the Bible in which the Holy Spirit is worshipped. Therefore every time a Christian worships the Holy Spirit he is straying beyond the Bible, venturing beyond the authority of the Bible.

Now, the reader - perhaps especially if he's a non-Christian - may feel that this is some rather obscure theological point. It isn't. Worship - and the conviction that God alone is to be worshipped - is there at the heart of Christianity.

In the Bible we see Jesus, on occasion, being worshipped and accepting that worship (or, at least, not refusing it or objecting to it). This observation is one of the most powerful arguments that belief in Jesus' Divinity (the belief that Jesus is God) is Biblical.

But a mirror image to this is the fact that nowhere in the Bible is the Holy Spirit worshipped.

Let me highlight the problem by quoting from Dr Billy Graham:-

....When I first began to study the Bible years ago, the doctrine of the Trinity was one of the most complex problems I had to encounter. I have never fully resolved it, for it contains an aspect of mystery. Though I do not totally understand it to this day, I accept it as a revelation of God....

....This is a terribly difficult subject - far beyond the ability of our limited minds to grasp fully. Nevertheless, **it is extremely important to declare what the Bible holds, and be silent where the Bible is silent....**

....The most important point I can make in summary is this: there is nothing that God is that the Holy Spirit is not. All of the essential aspects of deity belong to the Holy Spirit. We can say of Him exactly what was said of Jesus Christ in the ancient Nicene Creed: He is very God of very God! **So we bow before Him, we worship Him,** we accord Him every response Scripture requires of our relationship to Almighty God.

Who is the Holy Spirit? He is God! **(34)**

I've put into bold the parts I want to emphasise. So, at one point Billy Graham tells us that it's extremely important to be silent where the Bible is silent. But less than a page later he goes against this instruction by saying that we bow before and worship the Holy Spirit - even though this is something on which the Bible is silent.

Isn't this astonishing? Here we have one of the best known Christians in the world, a man who appears to be profoundly devoted to the Bible as the Word of God, a man who

would surely be appalled at the thought that he had stepped outside the authority of the Bible in his Christian beliefs. And yet that's exactly what he does.

When I was a Christian I believed the Bible to be the Word of God. In church services I worshipped the Holy Spirit (as well as the Father and the Son, of course). At some point it occurred to me that I should check that this was Biblical: I searched the Bible for a passage in which the Holy Spirit was worshipped but couldn't find one. Puzzled, I later resumed my search with the aid of a concordance. How desperately I searched the Bible and how despairing I felt when I realised there was no such passage. I asked some of my fellow Christians about this but they didn't seem interested. In the years since I ceased to be a Christian I have from time to time raised this issue with Christians who claim the Bible as their sole authority for what they believe. I have rarely encountered a Christian who was prepared to engage with this issue (just once, I believe).

The absence of authority in the Bible for worship of the Holy Spirit should be a cause of disquiet for all Christians. And for those Christians who are adamant that the Bible alone is their authority the problem is enormous. Such a Christian faces the following choice:-

1. He must find a passage in Scripture in which the Holy Spirit is worshipped (ideally several - to avoid reliance on a single "proof text")

or

2. He must stop worshipping the Holy Spirit given that there's no authority for this in the Bible

or

3. He continues worshipping the Holy Spirit - but thereby accepts that the Bible is not his sole authority for what he believes.

The ideal solution is the first one - finding several passages in the Bible in which the Holy Spirit is worshipped. But given that there are none, option 1 is not a possibility.

If he is serious about the Bible being his sole authority he will choose option 2. But this is a dreadful choice - to worship the Father and the Son but not the Holy Spirit makes a mockery of the Trinity Doctrine. The tri-unity of God is changed to a bi-unity. So option 2 can't be chosen.

This only leaves option 3, to continue worshipping the Holy Spirit. But in going beyond the Bible in this way the Christian is acknowledging that the Bible isn't his sole authority for what he believes.

In fact there is a fourth option:-

4. He ignores the question. He refuses to address the issue out of fear as to where it leads.

Sadly this is the choice made by many "Bible-believing" Christians.

The above discussion on worshipping the Holy Spirit takes us to the conclusion that the Trinity Doctrine is unbiblical: for the Trinity Doctrine to be Biblical various key elements would all have to be present in the Bible. One of these elements - the worship of the Holy Spirit - is absent.

We can conclude this section by saying:

If a Christian chooses to believe in the Trinity Doctrine he cannot then claim that the Bible is his sole authority for what he believes.

If he chooses to say that the Bible is his sole authority for what he believes he cannot then believe in the doctrine of the Trinity.

He can choose one or the other, but not both.

In practice many Christians *do* choose both - but this choice entails dishonesty and self-deception.

Key points

- Most Christians view the Bible as the Word of God.
- But significant questions can be asked about the mechanism by which the Bible as we now have it ("the canon of Scripture") came to exist.
- Many Christians object to "picking and choosing" which parts of the Bible to accept and which to reject. But accepting "everything" is itself an instance of picking and choosing - and involves trusting in our own fallible judgement just as much as choosing to believe only parts of the Bible.

- Despite the view that the Bible provides us with "best instructions" there are many passages in the Bible which should cause us grave concern from a moral viewpoint.
- There are many contradictions in the Bible.
- There is no authority in the Bible for worshipping the Holy Spirit - meaning that the Trinity doctrine is therefore unbiblical. This is hugely significant.

Chapter 6

Narrative formation

Setting the scene

Imagine someone who has been a Christian for some 50 years. He became a Christian in his 20s and is now in his 70s. As he looks back down the decades he feels that he has seen the hand of God at work in his life: he reflects on his own good health and good fortune, the happy marriage and happy family life he has enjoyed, the successful career he has had, his enjoyment of church activities and good times he's had with fellow Christians and so on. He takes all these positive things as signs of the hand of God in his life.

There is in addition a second aspect: he feels that he has encountered nothing that is inconsistent with what he believes. That is, he feels that nothing has occurred which leaves him wondering how to make sense of that event in the light of his Christian faith.

Now this isn't an imaginary situation - there are many Christians to whom this kind of description applies. And this at first seems to be very significant evidence for Christianity being true.

Examples

This takes us into the subject of this chapter - what I'm calling narrative formation. By "narrative" I'm meaning something like a version of events or a commentary on why something has happened the way it has. Some examples will hopefully clarify:

Example 1 A Christian, John, starts up a business and prays that it will be successful. Fellow Christians are supportive of him and his enterprise and they too pray that it will be a success. Two or three years pass and the business is indeed extremely successful. The narrative this group of Christians forms might be something like this: *"A Christian - someone who knows God - has God's blessing upon him and upon everything he does. This is why John's business has been such a success: John was committed to God and God's blessing was upon him"*.

Now such a narrative suggests that if John's business had failed these Christians would have been left scratching their heads and would find it almost impossible to explain what had happened. But in fact that's not the case at all. Let's suppose that despite his best efforts John's business fails. The response of these Christians might now be something like this: *"John is a Christian. He has assurance of salvation and eternity in heaven awaits him. In the light of that, does the failure of his business really matter so very much?"*

In other words, a new narrative has been formed - a narrative very different than the first one, but, like the first one, completely consistent with what these Christians believe.

Example 2 A Christian, Shaun, ceases to be a Christian and then a few months later sets himself up in business.

Firstly, let's suppose Shaun's business is a great success and after just two years he becomes a millionaire. The Christians he knew might form a narrative along these lines: *"Shaun turned his back on God. Without God your life is empty and you will try desperately to fill it with other things and this is what Shaun is doing. He's put his trust in worldly success, money, and the things money can buy. Poor Shaun - he's gaining the world and losing his soul."*

Next, let's instead suppose that Shaun's business fails and he finds himself financially ruined - he loses his house, his wife leaves him, he becomes an alcoholic and spends the rest of his life living in poverty. The Christians he knew might form a narrative along these lines: *"Shaun turned his back on God. If you attempt to do something like running a business having turned your back on God then His blessing will not be upon you. This is why things went so disastrously wrong for him."*

Through these two examples we've looked at four different scenarios. And yet for each one we are able to imagine how Christians can - quite easily - establish a narrative whereby what has happened is consistent with what they as Christians believe. This is an immensely important point - one of the most important in this book. I believe that *whatever* happens in the dramas of people's lives and the life of a community it's *always* possible for Christians to

come up with a narrative that reconciles what has happened with what they, as Christians, believe.

If you're a Christian and find yourself disagreeing then consider this: can you think of an event such that it would be impossible to reconcile the occurrence of that event with Christianity being true?

Some more examples of narrative formation:

Example 3 A Christian has cancer and other Christians pray for his healing.

Let's suppose he is healed in an apparently miraculous way - this would appear to be significant as evidence in support of Christianity being true.

But now suppose he isn't healed - the cancer remains and his health steadily deteriorates. Is this a situation where Christians are at a loss to supply a narrative by way of explanation? No, it isn't. We've already noted in the chapter on healing that a variety of narratives are available. This is one I gave previously which the man with cancer might use:

I used not to accept my illness. Now I do accept it. I accept that I must suffer but that God will be with me in that suffering - like Christ in Gethsemane. That is my healing - my change of outlook."

Example 4 A Christian couple (let's call them Charles and Carol) are wanting to start a family. They pray that Carol will become pregnant and after 2 or 3 months she does. They proclaim this as a miracle and an answer to prayer.

But let's suppose instead that months and then years go by and Carol doesn't become pregnant. Do Charles and Carol interpret this as evidence against Christianity being true? No, not for a moment. Here is a narrative that's available to them: *"There are so many children desperately needing adoption. The Lord has shown us that His Will is that we adopt one of those dear children. And in this way God is glorified even more than He would have been if Carol had given birth to a child".*

Example 5 A man, a non-Christian, commits suicide. Christians who knew him comment *“Ah, this is so sad, so tragic. But of course, without God in your life everything is ultimately meaningless and therefore despair and suicide can so easily result.”* The implication here is that a Christian would never take his own life - but of course on occasion Christians do commit suicide. When this happens a narrative might be formed along these lines: *“Of course, James taking his own life is so sad. But at least we can be joyful in the knowledge that he is now in heaven with Jesus.”*

Example 6 A church in a town is enjoying great success: Gifts of the Spirit are being experienced, there are manifestations of the Toronto blessing, Christians are speaking in tongues, prophesying and receiving words of knowledge. Christians at the church proclaim *The Lord is really moving here!*

But another church is experiencing failure and a steady decline in numbers attending. Eventually the church building faces closure and being sold off to be converted into flats. In this situation the final half dozen Christians may well say something like this: *The closure of our church may look like failure and a setback for the Kingdom of God. But humans think only in terms of years and decades whereas God has the perspective of centuries and millennia - and eternity. God will ultimately be victorious. The closure of our church should be seen in that context!*

So, regardless of whether a church is successful or a failure - either way Christians are able to form a narrative that they're happy with.

Example 7 A man is killed in a road traffic accident. A week previously he had become a Christian. Fellow Christians praise God that he'd received the gift of salvation shortly before his death: "God's timing is perfect".

However, imagine the same scenario but this time a week before his death the man had become a Wiccan. (Wicca is a modern pagan, witchcraft religion). The Christians who knew him might well say something like: "He gave himself to Satan - and he rapidly reaped the consequences".

Example 8 In a later chapter we shall look at the Holocaust and the fact that many Christians in Germany were by-standers in relation to the Holocaust. A Christian might give the following response: "A Christian just stood by and didn't intervene? Well, that just shows he wasn't a *true* Christian."

The appeal to the concept of a "true" Christian can create a narrative that sidesteps many difficulties: "A Christian clergyman sexually abused a child? Well, that just shows he wasn't a *true* Christian."

“Good” and “bad” events and narrative formation

In the lives of individuals, communities and countries both good things and bad things will inevitably happen. When something good happens in the life of a Christian or the life of a local church, that good event can be attributed to God:

The Lord has blessed us.

God is in control.

This is evidence of God's great love.

When something bad happens there are various responses available:

Well, God is infinite but we are finite. We may not know why God allowed this to happen but we can rest assured that He has a reason and we must continue to trust Him.

God is all-knowing whereas we live in relative ignorance. One day we will understand.

Sadly, Satan was at work.

Narrative formation and atheism

It might be claimed that what I've said about narrative formation applies just as much to atheism as it does to Christianity. That is, whatever happens, an atheist can always come up with a narrative that reconciles what has happened with what he believes. But I don't think that is the case:

Suppose a man who has lost a leg is prayed for by Christians and his leg is miraculously restored. I think an atheist would find it impossible to construct a narrative that reconciles what has happened with his atheism. Strictly speaking the restoration of the lost limb might not necessarily be seen as evidence of God's existence. We could perhaps imagine the possibility that there is no God but there is a preternatural realm - maybe a realm of spirits with astonishing powers - through which miracles happen. But I believe that is a detail which needn't trouble us. I think Richard Dawkins, for example, would acknowledge that his views as a scientist and atheist would be utterly wrecked if an amputee's lost limb were to be miraculously restored.

So, in fact we seem to have a falsifiability available in relation to atheism that we don't appear to have in relation to Christianity (nor religious beliefs in general).

Narrative formation and mindset

I think the majority of Christians are able to engage in narrative formation, as conveyed through the examples given. And it probably becomes quite enjoyable: with a little imagination *anything* that happens can be interpreted in such a way (i.e. given a suitable narrative) that it is made to appear completely consistent with Christianity being true.

As a Christian I don't think I ever quite mastered this. An example:

In the mid 1980s I spent a weekend in London visiting a friend. On the Monday morning the first stage of my journey home was on the London Underground. The underground train pulled in, I got into a carriage and standing there was my sister, who lived in London at that time, on her way to work. How extraordinary! Later, I described this to a Christian friend and his response (his narrative, if you will) was that God had arranged for the unexpected meeting to occur. ("God is in control").

But I wasn't so sure. The fact is that coincidences happen. A huge number of coincidences occur every day. And when some coincidences occur it is human nature to want to attach a special meaning to them. Furthermore, most of us are extremely poor at judging probabilities and therefore tend to see coincidences as far more remarkable than they actually are. For most Christians there is only one alternative to "God is in control" and that is "blind chance". (This, of course, also comes out in debates about Darwinian natural selection in which some Christians misrepresent natural selection as being about "blind chance").

So, I was never able to successfully get into the mindset of seeing the hand of God in such occurrences. Fellow Christians would confidently assert that such-and-such event was the hand of God while I'd find myself unsure and sitting on the fence. Today I feel pride rather than shame about this. As we've seen it's incredibly easy for a Christian to interpret *anything* in a way that's consistent with Christianity. My doubt and skepticism were, I believe, healthy.

We noted in the chapter on Miraculous Healing that miraculous healing almost certainly doesn't happen. We can also note that miracles in general almost certainly don't happen. What *do* occur are coincidences: coincidences are inevitable. And uncanny, spooky coincidences are also inevitable. My impression is that in the absence of miracles Christians instead focus on coincidences, and form narratives around them, and in that way believe they're seeing the hand of God.

Narrative formation - summary

In this book I have sought to be evidence based. Some Christians may want to respond that every day of their lives they encounter evidence in support of Christianity being true. When Christians offer a commentary on events in the sorts of ways I've used as illustrations they may well make an assumption along the lines: *It's only because Christianity is true that we're always able to make sense of what has happened.*

The purpose of this chapter has been to show that this perception is almost certainly an illusion: via the process of narrative formation anything and everything that happens can be made to appear consistent with Christianity being true. As noted above, it's extremely hard (perhaps impossible) to identify an event that Christians cannot reconcile with Christianity being true - usually all that's needed is a bit of imagination.

So, going back to the start of this chapter and the Christian in his 70s who feels he has encountered nothing that contradicts the beliefs he holds as a Christian - we now have an

explanation of why this is so. Everything that has happened in his life and everything he has witnessed (good and bad) he is able to reconcile with (make consistent with) his Christian faith via the process of narrative formation.

Key points

- Through the process of narrative formation Christians can gain the impression (and give the impression) that Christianity is strongly supported by evidence.
- However we can see that this impression is almost certainly an illusion. *Anything* that happens can be given a narrative that's completely consistent with Christianity being true.
- A challenge for Christians is to identify an event (a possible event) for which it would be impossible to create a narrative that is consistent with Christianity being true.
- We have seen that such falsifiability *is* possible in relation to atheism.
- In the absence of miracles Christians may instead try to discern the hand of God in coincidences.

Chapter 7

Does God exist?

Setting the scene

Although the question of God's existence is, I believe, a supremely important question, I won't be exploring this as fully as some of the other issues in the book. As I said in the Introduction, I'm probably closer to the atheist end on the theism-atheism spectrum, but not sufficiently close to call myself an atheist. Clearly if one is sufficiently convinced that the evidence points to there being no God, one can present that evidence as part of a case against Christianity being true. That's not the position I'm taking here. Nonetheless I do have a little to say.

“The God delusion”

In 2006 “The God delusion” by Richard Dawkins was published and this put the atheist position forcefully and with great clarity. Around 20 books, mostly by Christians, have been written in response to The God delusion. I see this debate as very healthy and very important - especially if both sides are able to be honest in what they say, courteous, and genuinely concerned about where the truth lies (where the evidence takes us) rather than just concerned with “winning”.

Knowing God

On the face of it, one of the most astonishing claims made by (some) Christians is that they "know God" or that they "know Jesus" - sometimes expressed in the words “I know Jesus as my own personal Saviour”.

Christians' claim to know God seems to be one of the strongest pieces of evidence in support of the existence of God. For if someone says "I know God" then (assuming he isn't mad and isn't a liar) it would seem to follow that God must exist. If many people (that is,

many Christians) all make the same claim - that they know God - then the evidence for God's existence seems to be overwhelming.

Nicky Gumbel writes:

Wilson Carlile, who was head of the Church Army in this country, was preaching at Hyde Park Corner. He was saying, 'Jesus Christ is alive today.' One of the hecklers shouted out to him, 'How do you know?' Wilson Carlile replied, 'Because I was speaking to him for half an hour this morning!' (35)

A similar sort of example: I remember when I was a student seeing a Christian Union poster on the wall advertising a meeting. Someone had written on it *For ****'s sake, Christ is dead!* Someone else - presumably a Christian - had written *He cannot be dead - I know Him!* This is the confidence Christians have - they know God, they know Christ.

Let's explore this a little:

Suppose Alan says to Bert "I know the man who lives in number 40 the High Street". Later that day Bert discovers that in fact no-one lives at 40 the High Street and the house has been empty for years. Bert is left very puzzled by what Alan had said.

Some years ago I was speaking with a Christian, a man in his 60s who had been a Christian for around 30 years. He said something like this: *It may be that there's no God, that when I die that's it - zero. But even if that's so I still wouldn't change anything about my life. I'd still make exactly the same decision to be a Christian and to serve Jesus!* Later, as I recalled our conversation I tried to reconcile these words with other things this man had said on other occasions - that he knew God, that he knew Jesus. How, I wondered, could he know God but also accept the possibility that God might not exist? This just didn't seem to make sense. Yet he didn't seem to be a liar and he certainly wasn't mad. Note the echo here of C.S. Lewis' "Mad, Bad or God" argument (36).

Here is the explanation, I think:

A Christian spends time alone in prayer to God. He also has "quiet times" - times spent listening to God, often described as "having a quiet time with the Lord". He

goes to Church and worships God with other Christians. He has fellowship with other Christians, for example, Bible studies or meals together. He reads the Bible - "the Word of God" - and feels (in a general sense) that God speaks to him. And sometimes he feels in a very specific sense that God is speaking to him - for example, through a specific verse or passage in the Bible that seems relevant to an issue in his life at that time.

And I think it is the sum of this collection of activities that is being referred to when a Christian says he knows God.

So, we started with what seemed to be a really impressive claim by Christians - that they know God. But on examination this seems to equate to a set of religious activities. So, this probably is our mystery solved: There was indeed no contradiction between the Christian in his 60s claiming to know God but also saying that maybe there is no God - once we realise that "knowing God" should be understood in this non-obvious way.

Why then do some Christians use the language of "knowing God"? I think a large part of the answer is peer group pressure. A new Christian may pick up - perhaps unconsciously or semi-consciously - the message: *If you want to be part of our church, if you want to be accepted and respected and fully part of things here - then this is the kind of language you should use....* This pressure to conform is, I think, more likely to apply in some churches, for example Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, than others.

I now want to make a connection from this subject - "knowing God" - to the subject of evangelism. We noted in the chapter on evangelism that Christians tend to be extremely reluctant to evangelise. In a personal evangelism scenario there is an expectation that the Christian may at some point ask the non-Christian "do you know God?" or "do you know Jesus?" or "do you know Jesus as your personal Saviour?" But a Christian, considering such a scenario, may well be aware of a mis-match between his own understanding of such a question and the listener's understanding of it. In other words, the Christian may be aware (i) that the listener might well understand the question in quite a literal way and (ii) that he, the Christian, actually means the question in a non-literal way (as outlined above). The awareness of this mis-match may well cause the Christian sufficient dis-ease that he is persuaded that evangelism is something he just can't get involved in. So, we may well have here another reason for Christians' reluctance to evangelise.

Finally, I must add an important qualifier to what I've said in this section. If a person (of whatever religious background, or maybe none) has some kind of experience (perhaps a very

profound, mystical experience) such that he subsequently says “I encountered God” or “I now know God” - then I wish to fully respect what that person is saying. There is something so profound and awesome about such a claim that it does not warrant being automatically dismissed. So, one’s initial response to someone claiming to know God should, I believe, be one of courtesy and respect. I say this as I may have given the impression that I’m dismissive of anyone claiming to know God. In the case of most Christians who say they know God it seems that the claim is not so remarkable after all. But I believe there may well be people (probably from a variety of religious contexts, including Christianity, as well as people who belong to no religion) who make the claim to know God as a result of some profound experience rather than just in response to peer group pressure.

The rise of science

The scientific method is powerful and has been able to explain more and more about the universe (as well as bringing many benefits - though also problems - to humankind). Atheists such as Richard Dawkins believe that where religions once attempted to explain why reality is as it is, religious explanations have steadily been replaced by scientific explanations. Christians aren’t necessarily troubled by this - most Christians tend to say that they see no contradiction between science on the one hand and the Christian faith on the other.

Two of the books written in response to *The God delusion* have a chapter entitled “*Has science disproved God?*” (37)

This question has a “straw man” quality to it. In *The God delusion* Dawkins had already said:

That you cannot prove God's non-existence is accepted and trivial, if only in the sense that we can never absolutely prove the non-existence of anything. What matters is not whether God is disprovable (he isn't) but whether his existence is *probable*. (38)

Although Christians feel that the rise of science has changed little if anything I want to give a recent example that illustrates how, in quite a short space of time, science has probably had a greater impact on how we see things than we may realise. The following story, titled “*The little boy thought it over*” appeared in a church magazine in the mid 1980s:-

An infant teacher arrived at school early one morning to find a small boy standing all alone in the playground.

"It was a beautiful day but very cold. I took him into the classroom with me. He stood against the large window, his chin resting on his hands, his elbows resting on the sill from where he could see the rising sun.

It was deep orange-red in colour, and so large it seemed unreal. It looked like a gigantic balloon.

The small boy said, 'Miss, who made that?'

'Who do you think made it?' was my reply.

'It wasn't a man', he said. A long silence followed."

When I read this story some 30 years ago it "worked" for me. And I think at that time it would have worked for many people. Clearly a man couldn't have made the sun, so it must have been God. I think that today this argument would work with very few people. Perhaps without our realising it a scientific explanation of the cosmos has increasingly entered our minds - even for people not particularly interested in science. This includes concepts such as the big bang, the expansion of the universe, the force of gravity and the formation of stars, galaxies and clusters of galaxies, the formation of planets around some stars and so on. So, in the space of just a few years a short story like the one quoted has lost most of its power.

Is disbelief in God evil?

An anxiety or fear that some of us may have is that disbelief in God might be evil. That is, it may be that God exists and that anyone who disbelieves in Him is in a state of evil, wilful rebellion against Him and at risk of punishment for that disbelief.

In response to this, consider the question: *Does the Loch Ness monster exist?* If we were seriously concerned about this question what we might do is try to assemble all available

evidence. So, we might seek out all known photographs and eyewitness accounts. We might visit Loch Ness itself and spend months there using photographic equipment both on the surface of the loch and under water. We might try to speak with people who claim to have seen the monster. Suppose in the fullness of time (perhaps after a year or two) we've examined and weighed up all the available evidence and we come to the conclusion *there is no Loch Ness monster*. Now, is there anything intrinsically evil about that conclusion?

For completeness we can in fact ask 4 questions here:

Is there anything intrinsically good about believing the monster exists?

Is there anything intrinsically evil about believing the monster exists?

Is there anything intrinsically good about believing the monster does not exist?

Is there anything intrinsically evil about believing the monster does not exist?

I think we have to say that the answer to all 4 of these questions is "no".

Now, the question of the existence or non-existence of God is, I believe, supremely important. Far more important than the Loch Ness question. But I find myself thinking that the same reasoning applies. If in good faith and with an open mind and with determination we evaluate all the available evidence how can there be anything intrinsically evil about coming to the conclusion that there is no God?

In a sense I feel that the approach one adopts - being honest and evidence-based and having a concern for where the truth lies - is almost more important than the conclusion one actually arrives at.

"Pascal's wager"

One possible response at this point is to mention Pascal's Wager. The reasoning within Pascal's Wager is an example of what is now called Games Theory. That is, we look at different possible strategies and different possible outcomes and evaluate which strategy is in our best interest.

Pascal's Wager reasons as follows:

If I believe in God and He does indeed exist my belief in Him will be rewarded.

If I believe in God and it turns out He doesn't exist - well, my belief was mistaken but I've probably lived a happier, more fulfilling life than I would have done as an atheist.

If I disbelieve in God but it turns out He does exist my disbelief may be punished.

If I disbelieve in God and it turns out He doesn't exist - well, I've chosen correctly - but so what? It's not like I'm going to receive any kind of reward for this.

Taking all 4 of these points into account the best strategy, it is claimed, is to believe in God.

I think Pascal's Wager is deeply flawed. Richard Dawkins discusses the wager in "The God delusion" (39). He also speculates:

Pascal was probably joking when he promoted his wager, ...
(40)

The two flaws I see as most significant are these:

- The assumption is made that the criterion on which a person will be judged / evaluated (in the event that God exists) is belief / disbelief in God.
- In the event that God exists the wager only "works" if God is not omniscient (all-knowing). Christians, and most people who believe in God, believe that God is all-knowing. In which case He will of course see through the calculation that has been made by anyone who believes in Him on the basis of Pascal's wager.

"Pascal's wager lite"

I want to now explore something I shall call *Pascal's wager lite* which is probably of more relevance than Pascal's Wager itself. Pascal's wager lite can be applied to the question of the existence or non-existence of God. It can also be applied to the question of the truth or falsity of Christianity or any other religion.

Imagine a Christian and an atheist discussing/arguing in an evidence-based way about their respective beliefs. Suppose that after an hour or so the atheist is getting much the better of the exchange. At this point the Christian takes a deep breath and says *OK, OK. Let's suppose - just for the sake of argument - that you're right and I'm wrong. Let's suppose there's no God. Let's suppose there's no life after death. We're born, we live a few years, then we die and that's it. Let's suppose that everything is ultimately meaningless. At least by being a Christian I will have experienced my life as meaningful and worthwhile. Studies show that I'll probably enjoy better physical and mental health and live longer than I would have done as an atheist - even if ultimately I'm wrong in what I believe. And even if you're right - it's not like there's any kind of reward awaiting you for having correctly believed that there's no God.*"

"Full blown" Pascal's Wager is an up-front cynical calculation based on self-interest. Pascal's Wager Lite is also based on self-interest but this is a "secondary" position which the Christian (or any religious person) can shift to when an initial evidence-based position can no longer easily be sustained.

Is Pascal's Wager lite a valid response, a valid viewpoint? I think not. Like full blown Pascal's Wager it isn't concerned with where the evidence takes us. Rather, it's concerned with self-interest, though this position of self-interest is not there from the outset as it is with full blown Pascal's Wager. If a Christian comes to realise that the evidence goes against Christianity being true, the right response (as pointed out by C.S. Lewis and at least implied by Nicky Gumbel) is to cease being a Christian, rather than shifting to a different justification for being a Christian.

The existence of God - two thought experiments

Thought experiment (1)

Consider these 2 scenarios:

Scenario 1. Suppose reality were as follows: that God exists and that He has created a universe in which the evidence for his existence is absolutely overwhelming. (I recognise that some Christians, and others, would claim that this is exactly the way reality in fact is. But inasmuch as many intelligent people are atheists I don't think

this claim stands up). In other words, in this scenario, anyone who disbelieved in God would be in a state of wilful rebellion against the evidence, and wilful rebellion against God. And, because of that state of wilful rebellion, such a person could perhaps be described as evil.

Scenario 2. Suppose reality were as follows: that there is no God and that the evidence for the non-existence of God is overwhelming. (I recognise that some atheists would claim that this is exactly the way reality in fact is. But inasmuch as many intelligent people do believe in God I don't think this claim stands up).

Now, in scenario 2, would it be fair to say that anyone who believed in God was in a state of wilful rebellion against the evidence? Could such a person be described as evil?

The symmetry involved between the 2 scenarios suggests that the answer to both these questions should be "yes", though many of us would probably feel a certain puzzlement at the idea that believing in God might be evil.

Thought experiment (2)

Suppose reality were as follows: that God exists but that He has created a universe in such a way that there is no evidence for His existence. So, He has set out to test human beings - to do an experiment on them. (The idea of an all-knowing God performing an experiment would seem to be absurd, but this kind of problem is already there when, for example, Christians talk in terms of God giving mankind free will in order that He could see how people would use that free will). In this scenario, people who disbelieve in God pass God's test and face reward. But people who believe in God fail the test and maybe face punishment. This is because, in this imaginary scenario, God is concerned that people should exhibit honesty and authenticity. (We may be reminded here of a well-designed psychology experiment where it appears to the participants that one thing is being tested, whereas in fact the experiment is concerned with something different than what the participants think).

As before, this outcome seems very strange - the idea of God "failing" people who believe in Him. I think we are so used to assuming that if God exists what He wants first and

foremost is that people believe in His existence that the possibility that He may in fact want something different takes us by surprise.

Christians (and others) frequently seem to assume that belief in God is intrinsically good and that disbelief in God is intrinsically evil; the purpose of these two thought experiments is to indicate that it may not necessarily be so.

Word Associations

As we noted in the chapter on Faith, the associations we tend to have with particular words can be revealing.

To the word “God” we might associate other words such as: *godly, law-abiding, civilised.*

To “atheism” we might associate these words and phrases: *godless, lawless, anarchy, chaos, breakdown of society.*

In other words, in relation to the question of whether or not God exists, we might well have a practical concern: that belief in God contributes to a stable, civilised, law-abiding society, whereas - we fear - disbelief in God almost inevitably leads to the breakdown of society. This concern may eclipse an evidence-based approach in relation to the question of God’s existence.

I have to say that I think the tendency to associate atheism with immorality or evil is profoundly mistaken. Likewise I think the tendency to associate belief in God with morality and goodness is also mistaken. We shall return to these kinds of issues in the next chapter.

God’s omnipotence

Christians believe that God is omnipotent - all-powerful. It may be that the concept of omnipotence inevitably leads to contradictions, e.g. can God create an object so heavy that He is unable to lift it up? I do not mean to suggest that there’s much value in such questions. What I’m more concerned with here is belief in God’s omnipotence in relation to things Christians sometimes say, of which here are two examples:

I believe that God was able to raise Jesus from the dead.

I believe that God is able to heal your psoriasis.

Given the concept of omnipotence, there is something slightly absurd about such statements - especially if we imagine the Christian pausing for reflection for a minute or two beforehand.

Suppose I tell a friend that I'm able to lift any weight up to 300 kg. It would then be pointless for him to ask me: "*Can you lift a weight of 150 kg?*" "*Can you lift a weight of 210 kg?*" "*Can you lift a weight of 275 kg?*" etc

Likewise, if God is omnipotent - that is, He can do anything - then any reflection on whether God can or can't do a particular thing is pointless. He can, by definition. And yet Christians make statements like the two given above - as if the possibility existed that it might not be so.

Solar Eclipses

I quoted earlier a short story to do with the sun and it is to the sun that we now return. Something that has long puzzled me - and astonished me - is how it is that, from our viewpoint on earth, the moon appears to fit perfectly over the sun during a solar eclipse. Or, to be more exact, there is a perfect fit during a total eclipse, and a near-perfect fit during annular or partial eclipses.

The sizes of the sun and the moon and the distances from the earth of the sun and the moon are all such that during a total eclipse the fit is perfect. How can this be so? This does not occur on any other planet in our solar system in relation to its satellites and the sun. Yet on the one planet in our solar system we know to have life on it (and conceivably the only planet in the universe with life on it) we have this "perfect eclipse". I find this utterly amazing. It is as if the sizes and relative positions of the earth, the moon and the sun had been designed. The probability of everything being just right by chance would seem to be extremely remote.

(The moon is in fact slowly moving away from the earth - by approximately 3.8 centimetres a year - but I don't believe this affects much, if at all, what I've said in the previous paragraph).

An atheist, I guess, would simply shrug his shoulders and say "It's just coincidence". But invoking coincidence in relation to something that appears to be of such incredibly low probability seems very unsatisfactory.

There is also for me a second mystery here - namely that I've never seen this possible example of intelligent design put forward as an argument for the existence of God.

However, it may be that there is some aspect of the anthropic principle at work here (41). So, for example, it may be that the presence of a satellite of a particular size increases the probability of life appearing on a planet - and perhaps this in turn massively increases the likelihood of the eclipse "perfect fit" occurring on a planet where there is life.

I give this example because it occurred to me several years ago and I've never seen it addressed. The majority of this chapter may appear to have had an atheistic slant and I'm happy to finish with what might be a valid argument for God's existence.

Key points

- The question of whether or not God exists is, I believe, supremely important.
- The book "The God delusion" and the responses to it have helped to create an important debate.
- The astonishing claim made by some Christians that they know God seems at first to be hugely significant evidence for God's existence. But on investigation this claim seems not to be anything like as impressive as it initially appears.
- We may have anxieties or fears in relation to the question of God's existence. Specifically, we may fear that if we disbelieve in God and it turns out that He does exist then we may face punishment for our disbelief.
- Pascal's Wager may initially appear to provide a good argument for belief in God. However, it is in fact concerned only with self-interest rather than evidence.
- What I've called *Pascal's Wager lite* is perhaps of more significance than the original Pascal's Wager - my impression is that it's there in the outlook of many Christians. But again we must note that it's concerned not with evidence but self-interest.
- We may tend to associate belief in God with morality - and atheism with immorality. This "practical" consideration may give us a preference towards belief in God, regardless of the evidence.

- However, this perception (associating belief in God with morality and associating atheism with immorality) is almost certainly mistaken in any case. We shall look at this in the next chapter.
- The occurrence of perfect (or near-perfect) solar eclipses is intriguing and *may* be evidence for God's existence.

Chapter 8

Good and evil, love and indifference

Setting the scene

Good and evil are profoundly important in the Christian view of reality: God is perfectly good. On the other hand Satan and his fallen angels have chosen evil and are in a state of rebellion against God. Likewise mankind has also chosen sin and rebellion against God, as communicated in the story of Adam and Eve.

Good and evil have been explored by theologians, philosophers and psychologists. "Good and evil" presents a challenge to each one of us.

In this chapter we shall look at good and evil and at love and the opposites of love.

Theism, atheism and morality

Speaking about God, good and evil in relation to Richard Dawkins and atheism, Nicky Gumbel writes:

Dawkins himself must have a sense of right and wrong, else he could not use words like 'good' and 'evil'. However, logically these words cannot be used if it is true that 'there's no such thing as universal good or absolute good or absolute evil'....If things just are, then there cannot be absolute right and absolute wrong.

(42)

Atheism could be said to be a form of wish fulfilment because something within us wants moral autonomy; we do not like the idea of anyone telling us that certain things are wrong. As some people say, they want to be free to live their own life. **(43)**

There are two issues here: (i) the relationship between the existence or non-existence of God on the one hand and good and evil on the other. (ii) the relationship between belief or disbelief in God on the one hand and good and evil on the other. Taking these in turn:

(i) Murder is evil. Rape is evil. Acts of kindness or generosity are good. Few people would disagree with these assertions. Is it the case that murder is evil because God exists and He says murder is evil? If so, could God have instead chosen to say that murder is good? Or that all acts of kindness are in fact evil? By virtue of His sovereignty presumably He could. But most people who believe in God would be appalled at the thought that He might decree that murder is good and that kindness is evil. So, it looks as if certain things are good and other things are evil quite independently of God. Quite independently, perhaps, of whether or not He actually exists. This line of exploration is known as *The Euthyphro dilemma* (44)

(ii) Is it really the case that atheists such as Dawkins wilfully chose to disbelieve in God out of a desire to be free from any moral constraints and therefore to be free to live lives of evil? Does Gumbel really believe that? Do we really have no sense of good and evil unless we believe in God? Do we really need to have beliefs based around hope of reward and/or fear of punishment in order to be persuaded to choose good rather than evil?

There seems to be a concern among some Christians that without God and without belief in God there is no final arbiter of what is good and what is evil, that there is no-one who will ultimately see that justice will be done, and that there is therefore no incentive to choose good over evil.

In response, consider this:

Imagine that you're sat on a bench in a park next to an elderly lady who has a white stick (i.e. she is blind or has very poor eyesight). You also notice that her handbag is open and her purse is clearly visible. You check that no-one is around and then carefully remove the purse and walk away with it.

Now, imagine the identical situation apart from the fact that now there is a CCTV camera up on a wall nearby. This time you refrain from stealing the purse because you're concerned that the crime would be recorded by the camera.

Christians sometimes seem to say that we can talk about morality and choosing good over evil only if God exists and/or only if we believe in Him. This seems to be equivalent to saying that it's only wrong to steal the purse when the CCTV camera is present - take away the CCTV camera and then stealing the purse is acceptable.

My view is that in general we can distinguish good from evil and that in general we do know right from wrong. I believe that choosing good over evil is the right thing for an individual to do regardless of whether or not God exists. Do we really need to have incentives - hope of reward or fear of punishment - in order to be persuaded to choose good over evil?

The conviction that we should define what is moral and ethical independently of belief in God and independently of religious beliefs in general is explored in the book "*Godless morality - keeping religion out of ethics*" by Richard Holloway - a very bold book.

Note that I'm not using our knowledge of good and evil (that is, our knowledge, in most situations, of what is the right choice to make) as an argument against the existence of God. What I'm saying is that in general the question of God's existence or non-existence appears to be irrelevant to our assessment of what is the right thing to do. I believe that asking the question "*What is the right thing to do in this situation?*" does not, in general, lead to an inferior decision than asking the question "*What is God's will for me in this situation?*" In fact, it may well be the case that the latter question, in practice, is more likely to lead to a worse outcome because, as history has shown, people can be at their most dangerous when they are doing evil but are motivated by the conviction that they are doing God's Will. Steven Weinberg, an American physicist, notes:

With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil - that takes religion. (45)

Let's look again at quote (43) above from Nicky Gumbel:

Atheism could be said to be a form of wish fulfilment because something within us wants moral autonomy; we do

not like the idea of anyone telling us that certain things are wrong. As some people say, they want to be free to live their own life.

I believe that what Gumbel says here is based on very sloppy reasoning. Consider:

Someone - let's call him Simon - decides that he wants to be free to live a life of evil, free from any moral constraints. He reasons: *"If God exists then I could be punished for choosing evil. But if he doesn't exist then there'll be no possibility of any such punishment. What I'll do therefore is disbelieve in God."*

But we saw in the Introduction the clear distinction between reality on the one hand and beliefs on the other. Simon's decision to disbelieve in God has no impact whatsoever on the reality of God's existence or non-existence. If Simon is vulnerable to punishment by God if he chooses evil over good - then that remains the case even if he disbelieves in Him. So, Simon's reasoning seems to be deeply flawed.

Likewise, Gumbel's reasoning is, I believe, also deeply flawed.

Nonetheless it's a common fantasy among Christians that atheists choose to disbelieve in God out of a desire to be free to choose evil.

Love and its opposites

The word "love" can be understood in a number of different ways, though when we hear the word we perhaps most often tend to think of romantic love. There is a risk that we may think of love in terms that are a bit slushy and sentimental. The loving way to behave in a given situation is not always clear. Our understanding of love can be advanced by thinking of its opposites. The obvious opposite of love is hate. But there is a more important opposite which is conveyed by the words 'apathy' and 'indifference':

Loving demands a state of intensity and commitment. Christian love cannot coexist with indifference. Indeed, the opposite of love is not hate but *apathy*, a lack of concern, a suspension of commitment (literally, *apathy* means to be "without pain"). **(46)**

This passage is from a book by a Catholic writer. I don't believe there is anything specifically Catholic or specifically Christian about what is said here and I think the second sentence in the quote can be generalised to read: *Love cannot coexist with indifference.*

Before I read this passage (about 20 years ago) it had never occurred to me that indifference / apathy were more significant than hate as the opposite of love. I think this observation is very important. We can think of phrases such as "*I couldn't care less*", "*What has that got to do with me?*", "*Am I my brother's keeper?*", "*It's not my problem*" - all of which may convey apathy or indifference or a refusal to get involved.

Christians - good and evil - love and indifference

We shall now consider good and evil, and love and indifference in relation to Christians and Christianity.

Christians claim that when a person becomes a Christian he is thereby better equipped to live a life based on love (rather than indifference) and based on goodness (rather than evil). He is, Christians claim, filled with the Holy Spirit and will bear the fruits of the Spirit in his life. It's acknowledged that this doesn't happen instantly and magically. Rather, as time passes the person grows as a Christian and becomes more Christ-like and more loving.

The next 2 quotes are from Nicky Gumbel:

Time after time after time, all around the world, millions of people are experiencing the risen Christ today. This is evidence. It is not just individual lives that have been transformed, but whole communities. The church is evidence. The church has made a difference to the lives of billions of men and women. It has had an impact on society, on culture, on the arts and on philosophy... It has had an impact on family life, on the dignity of human beings, on the rights of children, on care for the poor, for the sick, for the dying and the homeless. (47)

As we spend time in the presence of God, the Spirit of God transforms us....We are transformed into the moral likeness of Jesus Christ. The fruit of the Spirit is developed in our lives. Paul tells us that 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22). These are the characteristics that the Spirit of God develops in our lives. It is not that we become perfect immediately, but over a period of time there should be a change.

The first and most important fruit of the Spirit is love. Love lies at the heart of the Christian faith. The Bible is the story of God's love for us. His desire is that we should respond by loving him and loving our neighbour. The evidence of the work of the Spirit in our lives will be an increasing love for God and an increasing love for others. Without this love everything else counts for nothing. **(48)**

If Christianity were true we would therefore expect to see good (rather than evil) and love (rather than indifference) in Christianity's impact on history in the last 2000 years and in the lives of Christians today.

Are we able to evaluate this claim? Clearly we have to tread carefully. For example, if someone were to say something like "*Look, here's a Christian and he was unfaithful to his wife. What a hypocrite! This just shows that Christians are no better than anyone else*" - this would not, I believe, be a useful piece of evidence or a legitimate argument. We cannot pick up on isolated occurrences in this way. Major events and well established trends are much more likely to be relevant as evidence.

We shall look at 3 groupings of evidence:

- 1 Christianity in pre-twentieth century history
- 2 Christianity in recent history
- 3 Christianity and Christians today

1 Christianity in pre-twentieth century history

The reader will probably be familiar with the following items and I will state each of them just briefly. They all appear to be evidence against Christianity being a force for good in the world:-

- the crusades in the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries.
- the Inquisition and the use of torture against “heretics”.
- the witch hunts in Europe and America from around 1480 to 1750.
- Europe’s “wars of religion” in the 16th and 17th centuries and primarily between Protestants and Catholics. (From more recent times we can also think of “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland which started in the late 1960s and lasted for about 30 years).
- Christian anti-Semitism down the centuries.
- Christian nations’ involvement in imperialism and the exploitation, displacement and sometimes genocide of indigenous peoples - for example in Southern America, as portrayed in the film *The Mission*.

It may be claimed that Christianity achieved many good things in this time period - education, significant contributions to literature, drama and music, the building of magnificent cathedrals and so on. From this I think we can say that Christianity’s contribution has at best been mixed and patchy.

Therefore I don’t think the assessment made by Gumbel in quote (47) above is justified.

2 Christianity in recent history

The Holocaust

The Holocaust (also known as the Shoah) was clearly an event of enormous significance in human history. Around eleven million people were killed, approximately 6 million Jews and 5 million non-Jews.

As well as Jewish victims other targets were communists, trade unionists, dissenting clergy, “the mentally retarded, physically handicapped and emotionally disturbed Germans”, Jehovah’s Witnesses, pacifists, gypsies and male homosexuals. **(49)**

I recall reading an article by a Catholic priest who claimed that the Holocaust was an example of what happens when Christianity is replaced by Paganism. His claim was that Germany had been a Christian nation but then there was some kind of aberration by which Christianity was displaced and Paganism took its place. Result - the Holocaust. Such a narrative is very convenient and does not take into account, for example, the many centuries of Christian anti-Semitism which helped pave the way for the Holocaust.

The Holocaust occurred in a country where some 90% of the population were Christians. From the Wikipedia entry for *Religion in Nazi Germany*:

The German census of May 1939 indicates that 54 percent of Germans considered themselves Protestant, (including non-denominational Christians) and 40 percent considered themselves Catholic, with only 3.5 percent claiming to be neo-pagan "believers in God," and 1.5 percent nonbelievers. This census came more than six years into the Hitler era. **(50)**

A book that thoughtfully examines the Holocaust is *The Holocaust and the Christian world*, a collection of essays by both Jews and Christians. From that book:

Many Christians, when confronted with the *Shoah*, gaze on it as if some aliens landed on the earth, took on the name 'Nazi', and proceeded to torture and kill Jews...But the *Shoah* is not the story about a group of alien people, rather about human beings. And they, we must admit, were primarily Christians - from the great Lutheran and Catholic traditions. Somehow they had lost that which

made them followers of Jesus or they had chosen to suppress it in their horrid pursuit of killing Jews.

For some, to think of Christian participation in the *Shoah* is so horrific that it must be immediately denied. They protest quickly that the perpetrators were not Christian, for, they reason, a Christian by definition could not have committed such barbarity, such obscenity. Indeed, some Christians simply define Christians out of the *Shoah*: if someone did such horrendous acts, they cannot be called Christian....

But then there were all those who were bystanders. True, they didn't pull the triggers or herd Jews into boxcars. Rather they were on the sidelines, knowing or half-suspecting what was happening to their Jewish neighbors. And the bystanders were Christians. **(51)**

Martin Israel (1927 - 2007) was a convert from Judaism to Christianity and went on to become a priest in the Church of England. In his autobiography he notes:

The main churches [in Germany] played a sinister role in the triumph of Nazism, largely through their innate anti-Semitic bias, and even at the worst period of terror, their witness was ambivalent despite the self-sacrifice of a few really great Christians. **(52)**

It would probably be wrong to say that Christianity caused the Holocaust. But Christian anti-Semitism surely contributed to the Holocaust and many Christians in Germany were actively involved in it while others were bystanders, unprepared to take a stand against what was happening. It's extremely difficult to reconcile the reality of what happened with the claims made by Nicky Gumbel in quotes (47) and (48) above.

Bush and Blair and the 2003 invasion of Iraq

Christians often ask God in prayer that He will cause Christian men and women to be raised up into positions of authority and leadership so that they can make good and wise decisions, promote good over evil and help build the Kingdom of God. If the truth lay with Christianity then a time when we had a Christian President of the USA and a Christian Prime Minister of the UK would surely be a time of great blessing for the world. One major piece of evidence against this is the disastrous and illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003 which has led to such devastation in that country and the loss of tens of thousands of lives.

George W Bush served as President of the USA from 2001 to 2008. He was, and is, a Christian and the votes of American Christians were significant in both his election in 2000 and his re-election in 2004. As it turned out, he was probably one of the most disastrous Presidents the USA has ever had.

Tony Blair was Prime Minister of the UK from 1997 to 2007. He converted to Roman Catholicism in 2007 preferring to delay taking this step until he was no longer Prime Minister. Nonetheless he was a Christian prior to this and his faith as a Christian informed his decision-making as Prime Minister:

In an interview with Michael Parkinson broadcast on ITV1 on 4 March 2006, Blair referred to the role of his Christian faith in his decision to go to war in Iraq, stating that he had prayed about the issue,... **(53)**

David Owen writes:

It was to become a feature of both Blair and Bush that neither showed much attention to process or detail, nor were they great respecters of the facts. The combination was, of course, massively unequal in terms of power, but Blair made up for what he lacked in power in the relationship by his far greater verbal fluency and passionate language. Blair's importance was that he reinforced Bush's religious beliefs and prejudices in the period after the invasion of Afghanistan and in the run-

up to the war in Iraq. It was a form of what psychiatrists refer to as *folie à deux*. (54)

Where was the power of the Holy Spirit in Bush and Blair?

“Might is right” has again and again been the pattern in mankind’s sorry history. Christians frequently refer to the sinfulness inherent in mankind and the disastrous way this has manifested in human affairs. They then go on to present Christianity as an alternative and as the answer to the world’s problems. But the reality, as in the Bush/Blair/Iraq scenario, is that all too often Christians and Christianity are a big part of the problem, frequently making things worse not better.

At the end of the film *The Mission* there is an exchange between the Portuguese governor Don Hontar and Altamarino, a Roman Catholic Cardinal:

Hontar: We must work in the world, your eminence. The world is thus.

Altamarino: No, Señor Hontar, Thus have we made the world...thus have I made it.

So, Hontar is shrugging his shoulders and saying “the world is evil” whereas Altamarino is acknowledging the role played by Christianity in contributing to the evil in the world.

The paedophile priest scandal

When Roman Catholic bishops around the world began to hear about sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests, the bishops - in general - seemed to respond on the basis of just two criteria: *How can we maintain the good reputation of the Catholic church?* and *How can we avoid financial loss to the Catholic church?*

Victims of abuse were largely ignored. Known paedophile priests were simply relocated to new parishes: one effect of this was that such priests were in effect given the green light to continue abusing, knowing they'd almost certainly continue to get away with it. This policy “worked” in the short to medium term, though not in the longer term. In the last 20 or so years the paedophile priest scandal has come out into the open and has cost the Catholic church a vast amount of money in compensation payments to victims. We have not only the

evil of the original abuse but also a further response - by the Catholic bishops - that tended to be based on indifference rather than love.

We may note that sexual abuse of children by Christian clergymen and Christian leaders has occurred in other churches / denominations besides the Roman Catholic church - and it may be that the Catholic church has received a disproportionate amount of blame for such abuse.

3 Christianity and Christians today

The previous 2 sections were concerned with “big” events from distant and recent history. This section is on a smaller scale and is more concerned with the lives of individual Christians or groups of Christians.

I have known quite a large number of Christians in my life and some have been very impressive people in one way or another. I think of a Christian I once knew who always seemed to take a deep interest in people he met. I think of Christians who have shown great kindness. I think of Christians with a great sense of humour and the ability to put people at their ease. I think of Christians who have shown great hospitality. But, of course, I can think of non-Christians I’ve known who have shown similar attractive characteristics.

I can think also of Christians I’ve known who have displayed some extremely unattractive characteristics - being unreliable, dishonest, untrustworthy or manipulative and with a marked tendency to show indifference rather than love. And again I can think of non-Christians I’ve known who have shown some of these unattractive qualities.

Nicky Gumbel talks about the transformation of people who become Christians (quotes (47) and (48) above). Well, people do change over time, Christians and non-Christians alike. The personality of some people becomes more attractive over time while others change to become less attractive as people.

But I have to say that I’ve not seen the transformation that Gumbel speaks of - or at least I have not seen a significant difference between Christians and non-Christians. This may sound like a vicious thing to say but I don’t think that is the case. Christians make the astonishing claim that they have been transformed by the power of God’s Holy Spirit. This is a claim that warrants attention. Christians run the risk of causing offence (to non-Christians) by making such a claim and I run the risk of causing offence (to Christians) by saying that I’ve seen little or no evidence to support it.

When an astonishing claim is made we may initially respond with skepticism but hopefully we're open-minded enough not to dismiss it out of hand. We can then go on and evaluate the relevant evidence - but ultimately we shouldn't be surprised if the claim turns out not to be true. An illustration:

Suppose someone makes the claim that by holding a pendulum over a map he can identify where reserves of different metals are located. Our initial reaction to this might well be one of skepticism. However, the person has such utter conviction about what he's claiming that we decide to put our skepticism to one side and investigate in an open-minded way. We arrange for a variety of experiments to be set up in order to test the claim and as we do so we maybe get caught up in some excitement - *"wouldn't it be amazing if metal reserves (and perhaps other things) really could be located in this kind of way? How profoundly our understanding of reality would be changed!"*

The experiments are implemented - and they show that the claims are untrue / mistaken / fantasy. At this point we reflect that really this outcome was pretty obvious all along and we maybe feel slightly embarrassed that we had felt for a while that the outcome might be different.

In the same way, we should be prepared to investigate the astonishing claim that Christians have been transformed by the Holy Spirit - but we shouldn't be surprised if it turns out not to be true.

I'm aware that some people may want to say that this is an absurd area to be looking into anyway: To investigate whether Christians are more loving than non-Christians is like investigating whether, say, brown-eyed people are more loving than blue-eyed people or whether white people are more loving than black people. It's offensive, it might be claimed, even to start to go down such a path. But I disagree: I think it's legitimate for Christians to make claims about Christians being transformed by the Holy Spirit - so long as that is their honest view. Likewise, I think it's legitimate for non-Christians such as myself to examine such a claim and dispute it - so long as that is our honest conclusion.

Increased likelihood of evil rather than good and indifference rather than love among Christians

Among Christians there exists the conviction that Christianity is a force, or influence, for good in the world. However, I believe there are specific reasons why, in practice, Christians may be more likely to do evil rather than good and to show indifference rather than love - as a result of their Christian faith. We will look at 5 examples of this:

(i) *“God is infinitely better equipped than I am...”*

Consider the following:

In a particular situation, a person (let's call him Adrian) may have the opportunity to show love or kindness to someone else who is in need, perhaps desperate need (let's call this person Barry). In practice, Adrian may or may not give of himself in this way. He may feel that Barry is a bit of a pain and he resents the prospect of giving up his time for him. Or he may simply feel the pressure of other commitments in his life. There are many possible reasons for inaction.

But there is a key difference here between Christians and atheists: a Christian can rationalise his inaction by reasoning that he will instead pray for the other person.

So, if Adrian is a Christian he can reason “God is infinitely better equipped than I am to meet Barry's needs”. By praying instead of getting involved (for example by spending time with Barry) Adrian can disengage from Barry whilst all the time believing that he is still very much involved. After all, Adrian reasons, “I'm showing my profound love and concern for Barry by praying for him every day”.

If, on the other hand, Adrian is an atheist he doesn't have this option. As an atheist, Adrian may get involved with helping Barry, giving of himself and his time - or he may decide to disengage and not get involved. But if he chooses the latter option he can't rationalise this as being acceptable, or even good, in the way that a Christian can.

I believe that Christians do often disengage in this kind of way - simply because such a disengagement can be convenient and is something a Christian can justify by reference to his

Christian faith. When this happens it's actually very sad because a Christian, like anyone else, may have the ability - at least on some occasions - to bring a measure of peace and healing to someone in need, just by making himself fully available to that person.

If we think of the parable of the sheep and the goats (**Matthew 25: 31-46**) Jesus indicates that it's right to get involved in service to others - to the point that, according to that parable, this is the criterion by which we will ultimately be judged. There is no hint in this passage that it's better instead just to pray for people.

We tend to carry the idea that belief in God motivates an individual into a life of service to others or that Jesus' life of service can inspire a Christian into greater service. This undoubtedly does happen sometimes. But I think this discussion shows that the reality very often may be more or less the opposite.

(ii) Commitment to Christianity

Christians believe that they are committed to God and would tend to resist and resent the view that they are committed to their religion. It's unlikely a Christian would ever say "I'm committed to my religion" or "I'm committed to Christianity". He's much more likely to talk in terms of being committed to God or to say that Jesus is Lord of his life.

However, I believe that it's accurate to talk in terms of Christians being committed to Christianity. On several occasions where I've witnessed Christians failing to choose good over evil my impression was that it was their commitment to Christianity which was the cause. Relevant here is the concept of loyalty - and we saw in the chapter on faith that 'faith' in practice often tends to equate to 'loyalty'.

We can use the paedophile priest scandal as an example here. As the Catholic bishops became aware of the abuse their response was largely based on their concern about the reputation and finances of the Catholic Church.

Most readers will be familiar with the phrase "my country, right or wrong". Likewise I think that Christians - despite their claim to be committed to God rather than their religion - often have a mindset of "my religion, right or wrong".

"Tribal loyalty" and in-group / out-group thinking are, for better or worse, part of human nature. The problem is that there is a *regardless* implicit in such thinking: *"I'll put my country first [regardless]"* or *"I'll put my Christian faith first [regardless]"*. This isn't so far distant from *"I'll obey the orders I'm given [regardless]"*.

In-group / out-group thinking and "tribal loyalty" seem to be there in Christians just as much as any other group of people.

(iii) Difficulties with repentance

Most of us, most of the time, find repentance difficult and find it hard to say 'sorry'.

In the paedophile priest scandal the Catholic bishops failed to apologise for the abuse itself and for their mismanagement of the situation until such apologies were forced from them through the sheer weight of political pressure.

We can think also of Tony Blair's inability - so far - to give a clear and unambiguous apology for the 2003 Iraq invasion.

My impression is that Christians in general seem to find repentance harder than other groups of people. Why might this be?

Firstly, I think that Christians tend to view repentance as a one-off event that occurs when an individual becomes a Christian. A Christian may subsequently reason "*I now have assurance of salvation. I know that when I die I'm going to Heaven to spend eternity with Jesus. So what need could I possibly have of repentance?*" Repentance is therefore seen as something that non-Christians should be doing but as irrelevant to the lives of Christians. I feel that a more complete view of repentance is that, rather than being a one-off event, it's something for which there will be a need again and again throughout life.

Secondly, I think that Christians may feel that repentance could be seen as a poor advertisement for Christianity in that it's an admission that something has gone wrong. So, just as a Christian who once smoked but doesn't do so now because he feels smoking would be "a poor witness" for Christianity - in a similar way an act of repentance might be seen as being "a poor witness".

(iv) Shadow projection

I'm using this expression in much the same way that Jung and Jungians use it - in brief, it's a tendency to unconsciously project onto others the things we dislike about ourselves. An individual fails to see the evil that's present in himself and instead sees it in others. Shadow projection occurs not only in individuals but also in groups, including countries.

A good example of shadow projection occurred during the Presidency of George W Bush who, as we've already noted, was and is a Christian. In 2002, the year after the September 11

attacks on the USA, Bush made a speech - his Axis of Evil speech - in which he identified evil as existing “out there”, especially in Iraq, Iran and North Korea. In 2003 the USA and its allies invaded Iraq. The following year, 2004, the world saw images from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq of extremely serious physical, psychological and sexual abuse - abuse committed by United States personnel against Iraqi prisoners and which in some cases resulted in death. This was shocking evidence against the view that “we” - the USA and her allies - were good and “they” were evil.

This shadow projection flowed, I believe, from Bush’s Christian faith, his belief that there existed in the world a titanic battle between good and evil, and his belief that God had caused him to become US President in order to fight against evil in the world. Evangelical Christians in the USA played a vital role in Bush’s two elections and many of them seemed to be desperate to see nuclear war in the Middle East - in the belief that this would usher in Armageddon and the return of Jesus and they would have the pleasure of being “Raptured” (physically lifted up into Heaven).

The thirty years of "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland provide another example of shadow projection. Here, there were two groups of Christians - Catholics and Protestants - and each group tended to view the other as the incarnation of evil.

Shadow projection can also be seen when a local church “splits” - something that Pentecostal churches in particular seem vulnerable to. There is then a “continuing” group of Christians and another group who have split away. When this happens there is often a lot of acrimony and each group tends to accuse the other of having an inadequate commitment to God or of having been deceived by Satan. Where there is belief in God (who is Good) there is an increased likelihood of perceiving as evil anyone who disagrees with you or who doesn't belong to the group of Christians you belong to.

(v) Selective morality

To greater or lesser extent we're all somewhat selective in our morality. We tend to downplay faults that we recognise we're guilty of. And we assign a greater significance to those faults that we perceive as existing in others but not ourselves.

The following is from Nicky Gumbel and he is here giving common sense as one of the reasons for believing in the existence of the devil:

[C]ommon sense confirms the existence of the devil. Any kind of theology which ignores the existence of a personal devil has a great deal to explain: evil regimes, institutional torture and violence, mass murders, brutal rapes, large scale drug trafficking, terrorist atrocities, sexual and physical abuse of children, occult activity and satanic rituals. Who is behind all of this?
(55)

(I see this as an extremely dubious argument. Christianity already provides an explanation for the kinds of examples given: Original sin).

What's interesting about Nicky Gumbel's list of evils is what he fails to include. He lists drug trafficking, but makes no mention of the arms trade which has been an international scandal these last 50 or so years and has led to the deaths of many more people than drug trafficking. Maybe this is because there are Christians involved in the arms trade?

He mentions "terrorist atrocities" but why not also the atrocities of war?

It's also notable that he doesn't mention the Holocaust. If he wanted to give an example of apparently satanic activity from recent history it would be hard to think of a better example. But as noted earlier, Christianity is strongly implicated in the Holocaust.

A dead body, undiscovered for two years

Some Christians talk about how they receive "words of knowledge" from God.

In the news a few years ago there was an account of how a woman died in her flat in London and her body then went undiscovered for between two and three years during which time no-one seems to have noticed her absence **(56)**. In this example we can surely wonder why, sometime during those years, there was no word of knowledge from God to someone at a nearby London church to raise the alarm about the dead body? In principle such a word of knowledge could be delivered to a church anywhere - Aberdeen, Rio de Janeiro, Sydney - though it's perhaps more natural to imagine that it would be given to a church in London. More fundamentally, why was a word of knowledge not given *before* the woman died? e.g. "a woman named *X* at address *Y* is in imminent danger of death".

This kind of example can, of course, be multiplied many, many times over. Christians sometimes talk excitedly about amazing things happening in their churches - people speaking

in tongues, people running, jumping and skipping about, people barking like dogs, people prophesying, people receiving words of knowledge and so on - but this all seems pretty irrelevant unless something of real benefit in the real world is actually delivered at least occasionally.

Comparisons between religions

Imagine an impartial observer (we can maybe think of a visitor from another planet) being asked to examine human history and to rank different religions and traditions in terms of their successes and failures and the nature of their impact (for good or evil) on humankind and human affairs. Our observer will rank these religions / traditions from most successful overall to least successful.

There is little doubt in my mind that Christianity would get placed at or very near the bottom of such a list. And in first place? Possibly Buddhism. Possibly shamanism.

Martin Israel notes:

The terrible wars and persecutions undertaken in the name of religion - and they are with us even today - testify to the demonic aspect of man's search for God. It is noteworthy also that the Western theistic tradition has an infinitely more horrible record of cruelty in this respect than has the Hindu-Buddhist tradition, which being mystically aware, can see beyond personality to ultimate reality. (57)

If Christianity were true - if the views expressed by Nicky Gumbel in quotes (47) and (48) were true - we'd surely expect to see Christianity having a track record superior to other religions' - and not just slightly superior but vastly superior. What we in fact see is more or less the opposite: a pretty awful track record.

Christianity and Christians massively over-promise and massively under-deliver.

"Evangelism and eternity" revisited

We noted in chapter 3, *Evangelism and eternity*, Christians' reluctance to evangelise. How should we evaluate this in terms of good and evil, and in terms of love and indifference?

Many people would see Christians' reluctance to evangelise as absolutely fine. "*After all*", they might say, "*people like that can be a real pain, trying to force their religious beliefs down people's throats. It's very anti-social behaviour.*" We can think here of the attitude many people have towards the Jehovah's Witnesses. The Witnesses are frequently seen as a nuisance - for example, that they intrude into the peace and quiet of a lazy Sunday morning.

But if Christians believe (or, as many prefer to say, "know") that salvation is in Jesus alone, then failing to evangelise can surely be seen as evil. In Nicky Gumbel's metaphor the refusal to tell thirsty people in the Sahara the location of the oasis is an expression of indifference, not love. (Nicky Gumbel uses the words "extremely selfish"). Refusal to share the Gospel can be seen in the same way.

The judgement we're making here is not on the basis of something that everyone will agree on. Everyone, or at least nearly everyone, will agree that murder is evil. But it isn't the case that everyone, or even a majority of people, would agree that failing to evangelise is evil. Rather we're making a judgement that involves making a connection between, on the one hand, what Christians say they believe and, on the other hand, what they do / fail to do. If you see the house on fire and believe there are people inside who are at risk of death, but you choose not to get involved although you could - that surely is evil. And that conclusion stands even if you were mistaken and it turns out that no-one was in the house.

Likewise, Christians' failure to evangelise - when evaluated against what they say they believe - can be seen as Christians' choosing evil over good and showing indifference rather than love. And this is surely the case even if what Christians believe about salvation is not, in reality, true.

Consider this imaginary dialogue between God and a Christian, Joe, who has recently died:

God: So, you're a Christian?

Joe: I am indeed

God: And you believe that salvation is in Jesus alone?

Joe: That's right.

God: And Jesus is your Saviour?

Joe: He is indeed.

God: And people who don't know Jesus as their Saviour are destined for eternity in hell, is that what you believe?

Joe (a little reluctantly):

Yes.

God: Tell me Joe, if that's what you believe, why is it that in your life you never shared the Christian Gospel with anyone? Why is it that you never sought to bring anyone to salvation in Jesus?

I won't take this any further. My purpose here is to highlight the possibility that we may be answerable to God in this kind of way. A Christian who believes in salvation in Jesus alone and who believes in eternal hell for non-Christians but who never proclaims the Christian Gospel may ultimately have to answer to God for his inaction. A Christian may feel he has an explanation available (as explored in chapter 3) but if such an explanation is based on self-deception that deception would not, of course, stand up to the scrutiny of God's omniscience.

I believe that we just cannot be casual about our beliefs in the way so many Christians seem to be. If you really believe that salvation is in Jesus alone then surely you must integrate that belief into your life? If you find yourself unable to integrate that belief into your life, do you really believe it?

I want to introduce the possibility that, if God exists, His judgement of us might be based on the combination of what we have chosen to believe and how well or poorly we have tried to integrate those beliefs into our lives.

Let us look at two possible lives:

Joe, from the previous imaginary dialogue, is a Christian. He believes in God. And he believes that salvation is in Jesus alone and that eternal hell is the destiny of non-Christians. But he has never attempted to share the Christian Gospel with anyone.

Richard is an atheist. He has honestly evaluated the available evidence and come to the conclusion that it's extremely unlikely that God exists. He has a humanitarian outlook and, in his life, puts great effort into seeking to build a better world. He seeks to do good, not through any expectation of reward or fear of punishment, but simply because he feels that seeking to do good is the right thing to do. He believes that there

is no God who will make the world a better place (for example in response to prayer) and that therefore the efforts of individuals to improve the world are all important.

Suppose now that in fact God does exist and that Joe and Richard have both died and face judgement. A conventional Christian view would of course be that Joe now gains eternity in heaven as a result of being a Christian and that Richard, as an atheist, is lost - and may, indeed, face hell. But if instead it were the case that God judges us on the basis of what we have believed in combination with how well we have sought to integrate those beliefs into our lives then the outcome may well be different. It may be that Joe now faces God's anger because of his failure to integrate into his life what he said he believed about salvation. And Richard maybe faces reward from God because his atheism was based on an honest assessment of evidence and it led on to him making great efforts to build a better world.

There are therefore two stages here and I think each has a strong ethical component. Firstly, there is what we choose to believe. This should, I believe, be evidence-based. And secondly, there is what we then do - or fail to do - in the context of what we have chosen to believe.

I want to repeat the warning I gave before: I think that many Christians are incredibly casual about what they say they believe - and this should give them cause for disquiet. A Christian should reflect on the possibility of his having to answer before God not only for what he has chosen to believe, but also for his actions/inactions in the context of those beliefs.

There is one final element I want to consider in our discussion on evangelism. Consider this fictitious example:

Carl is a solicitor in his 20s and also a Christian - a "committed Christian". He's determined to build a successful career as a solicitor and is conscious that his reputation is all important in this regard. At the church Carl attends the clergyman, Henry, is extremely enthusiastic about the Christian Gospel. Henry encourages the people at the church to proclaim the Gospel in public places such as shopping centres and by knocking on doors in the parish.

Carl hears and understands Henry's conviction about the Gospel. Let's now consider two possible responses from him:

(i) Carl may reflect: *Hang on, if I proclaim the Gospel in the sort of way Henry envisages I run the risk of being seen by one of my work colleagues - perhaps, worst of all, one of the partners at the law firm. My reputation could be ruined. I might get labelled "a religious nutcase" and end up never getting promoted. I simply can't take that kind of risk with my career. Obviously as a Christian I'd like to be able to put God first - but I do have to be realistic about things."*

(ii) Carl may reflect: *My career is of course hugely important to me. But my service of God is even more important. Yes, it may be that by proclaiming the Gospel I thereby endanger my reputation, my career prospects and my future income. But, no matter - if that's a price I have to pay then so be it. I simply have to put God first!"*

According to Christian propaganda, when a person becomes a Christian he has a new centre of gravity. He shifts away from self and to God, away from "what's in my personal self interest?" to "how can I best serve God?" If Christianity were true we would therefore expect to see (ii) above rather than (i). But my strong impression is that in practice most Christians tend to respond along the lines of (i) rather than (ii). That is, they tend to put first what we might call their worldly self-interest - and then find a way to rationalise that decision.

The Christian view of reality is supernatural but here we may well have a natural (i.e. non-supernatural) explanation for Christians' diffidence about the Christian Gospel. On the very rare occasions when I have encountered Christians who weren't ashamed of the Gospel such a Christian was typically in a relatively "lowly" job where anxieties about reputation were less likely to arise.

It's also worth noting that a Christian's concern about evangelism and reputation may well relate not only to his reputation among non-Christians but also his reputation among fellow Christians. If in a local church there exists a culture of not proclaiming the Gospel, hostility may well get shown towards a Christian who steps out of line and does proclaim the Gospel.

Revolution and Conservatism

Christians make the claim that just as Christians in the first century were revolutionary and "turned the world upside down" likewise Christians today are doing exactly the same - turning the world upside down.

I heard this claim when I was a Christian and have continued to hear it down the years since. This claim may be true to some extent in some parts of the world, e.g. Latin America, but I don't see much evidence for it in the UK and doubt that it applies in any European country.

The majority of Christians in the UK are affluent and comfortably off. People who are affluent and comfortable tend not to want to turn the world upside down - rather, they prefer to keep things the way they are. Christians do not seem to be an exception to this.

In the USA Christians - especially Evangelical Christians - have made a big impact in the last 20 or 30 years, for example helping to achieve the election of George W Bush in 2000 and his re-election in 2004. But whether that impact has been for good or evil is open to debate. I imagine that many Christians in the UK (Evangelical Christians in particular) must be decidedly uneasy about the success of Evangelical Christianity in the USA. A Christian will naturally want to feel that as a Christian he's helping to change the world for the better - but a Christian in the UK, looking at the success of Evangelical Christianity in the USA, may well wonder what he is in fact helping to achieve and quite what he's got himself involved in.

Conformity and non-conformity

As human beings we face great pressure to conform to the norms of the society we live in. Someone who doesn't conform may get called various names, for example "the local nutter" or other names based on four-letter words. This name-calling acts as pressure upon him to fall into line and conform.

Nicky Gumbel writes:

As Christians we are called to be different from the world around us. Paul writes... 'Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mould'. This is not easy; there is a pressure to conform, to be like everybody else. It is very hard to be different. **(58)**

In practice I think this can create serious dilemmas for a Christian. On the one hand he may wish to serve God and put God first. On the other hand he is aware of great pressure on him to conform to society's norms. He may feel pulled one way by his Christian faith and pulled a different way by the norms of society.

The issue of evangelism, as already explored, is a good example of the conformity / non-conformity dilemma that Christians face.

We can think also of the word “salvation”. For Christians this has a specific meaning based around eternal life in Heaven. In our secular society “salvation” tends to be thought of in the following sorts of ways: winning the lottery; getting the mortgage paid off; having enough money to live off the interest. Even though such hopes/fantasies tend to be expressed in a humorous way, often it’s a genuine desire that’s being communicated. And I see little difference here between Christians and non-Christians. In the minds of Christians the Christian view of salvation tends to get eclipsed by current secular views of "salvation".

In general, I think Christians tend to conform to the norms of their society much more than they realise, despite believing themselves to be radical and believing that they are turning the world upside down and building the kingdom of God. Christians talk the language of revolution but tend to act in terms of conservatism and conformity. Of course Christians are not being conformist when they go to church each Sunday (in as much as most people in the UK don’t go to church) but church attendance is hardly a revolutionary act in itself.

Evidence from Christian writers

Also relevant as evidence are things various Christian writers have said.

The following is from David Watson (1933 - 1984):

...Christians in the West have largely neglected what it means to be a *disciple of Christ*. The vast majority of western Christians are church-members , pew-fillers, hymn-singers, sermon-tasters, Bible-readers, even born-again-believers or Spirit-filled-charismatics - but not true disciples of Jesus. If we were willing to learn the meaning of real discipleship and actually to become disciples, the church in the West would be transformed, and the resultant impact on society would be staggering.

This is no idle claim. It happened in the first century when a tiny handful of timid disciples began, in the

power of the Spirit, the greatest spiritual revolution the world has ever known. **(59)**

This was written in 1981. The hope that David Watson expressed here did not come to pass.

We can think also of books by Ronald Sider - *Rich Christians in an age of hunger* and his more recent book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* Both books are highly critical of western Christians. From the latter book:

Scandalous behavior is rapidly destroying American Christianity. By their daily activity, most "Christians" regularly commit treason. With their mouths they claim that Jesus is Lord, but with their actions they demonstrate allegiance to money, sex, and self-fulfilment. **(60)**

The following is from Nicky Gumbel and is in contrast to his usually up-beat descriptions of Christians:

There is an urgent need for the gifts [of the Holy Spirit] to be exercised. One of the major problems in the church at large is that so few are exercising their gifts. The church growth expert Eddie Gibbs once said, 'The level of unemployment in the nation pales into insignificance in comparison with that which prevails in the church.' As a result, a few people are left doing everything and are totally exhausted, while the rest are under-utilised. **(61)**

Most Christian writers are optimistic in most of what they write about Christianity - as we would expect. Nonetheless, their disappointment at the failures of Christianity in the UK,

the rest of Europe and the USA does get expressed from time to time. These Christians are to be commended for the honesty they show on these occasions.

Good and evil, love and indifference - summary

What Christians claim about their being transformed by God's love is a truly astonishing claim. It would be wonderful if it were true. It's a claim not to be automatically dismissed without any consideration, nor to be automatically accepted without question.

I believe the evidence we've looked at shows that the claim that Christians are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit is dubious and very unlikely to be true. Some Christians are indeed loving but likewise so are many non-Christians. Comparing "like with like" between Christians and non-Christians it's hard to see any great difference with regard to love and goodness. I believe that Christians in fact tend to be somewhat less loving than their non-Christian neighbours and we've explored possible reasons for this.

I therefore see Christianity as a tragic religion: there is such a huge contrast between the extravagant propaganda on the one hand and reality on the other.

Key points

- Good and evil are very significant in the Christian view of reality.
- Good and evil are also significant as part of what it is to be human and present a challenge to all of us.
- Linking morality (choosing good over evil) with the question of the existence/non-existence of God or with belief/disbelief in God seems to lead us into difficulties.
- Love is also hugely significant in human life. Indifference and apathy are probably more significant than hatred as the opposite of love.
- Christians claim that they - Christians - have been transformed by the Holy Spirit and are thereby better equipped than non-Christians to choose good over evil and love over indifference.

- We have tried to evaluate this claim and it appears to be unsupported by the evidence. In fact, it may well be that Christians are less likely than non-Christians to choose good over evil and love over indifference and we've explored reasons why this may be so.
- Of the major religions Christianity probably has the worst track record in relation to good and evil.
- We've noted that Christians' failure to evangelise can be seen as evil. This is perhaps not an obvious or easy conclusion. We arrive at this conclusion through evaluating the failure to evangelise in the light of what Christians say they believe about salvation.
- Christians often claim that they are "turning the world upside down" in the same sort of way as they believe Christians did in the first century. But in practice Christians tend to be conservative and conformist rather than revolutionary.
- Although Christians believe it their duty to be upbeat about Christianity (usually against the evidence) nonetheless Christian leaders and Christian writers are sometimes able to acknowledge the failure of Christianity and their own deep disappointment at this failure.

Chapter 9

Conclusions and final thoughts

If Christianity were true...

We have sought to follow an evidence-based approach in our assessment of Christianity. Some key points:

- If Christianity were true we'd expect to see Christianity having a better track record in healing than is found in other religions and in non-religions techniques but this appears not to be the case.
- If Christianity were true we'd expect to see Christians having conviction about the Christian Gospel - gossiping the Gospel so that all people have the opportunity to be saved. We tend not to see this.
- The subject of faith is surprisingly complex. Should Christians' beliefs be strongly supported by evidence? Or is lack of evidence desirable because it allows faith to flourish? Faith is usually seen by Christians as something good, virtuous and highly desirable. But at other times it's seen as undesirable - *"better to be a Christian than an atheist because being a Christian requires less faith"*.
- Faith in practice is often a state of mind of continuing to hold a belief regardless of the evidence. Faith can therefore be seen, potentially at least, as a mind-set of defiance or a state of rebellion.
- Christians have the luxury of being able to appeal to evidence when it seems to be available and to faith when evidence is lacking.
- There are various issues to be faced in relation to viewing the Bible as the Word of God, especially moral problems and apparent contradictions.

- We have seen that the Trinity doctrine is not Biblical given that there is no passage in the Bible in which the Holy Spirit is worshipped. This is of significance to all Christians but especially those who claim that the Bible alone is their authority for what they believe. Rather than engage with this issue most Christians prefer to bury their head in the sand.
- We've explored "narrative formation" and have seen that almost anything that happens can be made to appear completely consistent with Christianity. (It may even be that the word 'almost' isn't needed in that last sentence). It follows that most of the huge amount of anecdotal evidence (personal testimonies etc) that is seemingly supportive of Christianity is probably of little or no value as evidence.
- A challenge therefore for Christians is to identify an event (a possible event) that it would not be possible to reconcile with Christianity being true.
- Christians make the seemingly impressive claim that they know God - but on examination this claim doesn't seem to mean what it initially appears to mean.
- The evidence in relation to God's existence / non-existence is mixed. My strong impression is that most Christians are motivated by reflections along the lines of what I've termed *Pascal's Wager lite*. In other words, their belief in God is built on the anxiety/fear that everything would be meaningless if there is no God.
- Through the last 2000 years, and including the present time, the track record of Christianity has been, at best, patchy. There seems to be little evidence that Christians are more likely to choose good over evil than their non-Christian neighbours or any more likely to show love rather than indifference. This is despite the claim that Christians have been transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- In fact, it may well be that Christians are *less* likely than non-Christians to choose good over evil and love over indifference and we've explored possible reasons for this.

- Of the major religions Christianity probably has the worst track record in relation to good and evil.
- Christianity and Christians massively over-promise and massively under-deliver.
- There is therefore something tragic about Christianity - we hear extravagant claims and promises in theory but witness a pretty dreadful track record in practice.

Evangelism

The reader will have noticed that evangelism features as a recurring theme throughout the book. Here are the key points:

- Christians believe that salvation is in Jesus alone. This is the Christian Gospel (or good news).
- If Christianity were true we'd therefore expect to see Christians having conviction about the Gospel - proclaiming the Gospel, "gossiping the Gospel".
- We tend not to see this, certainly not in the UK.
- Instead we see Evangelistic crusades (in decades past) and the Alpha course (in more recent years).
- Christians tend to give a variety of reasons for not proclaiming the Gospel and these were explored in the chapter on evangelism.
- These reasons - narratives - often seem to be rather convenient (e.g. "The Lord hasn't called me to evangelise") and may well not be the real reasons.
- The real reasons for not evangelising may well be tied up with anxieties about reputation.

- Within the framework of what they say they believe, Christians' failure to evangelise entails choosing evil over good and indifference over love.

Hot - lukewarm - cold

The following words from the book of Revelation are usually attributed to Jesus:

I know what you are doing; you are neither cold nor hot. How I wish you were either cold or hot! Because you are neither one nor the other, but just lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth. **(Revelation 3: 15, 16)**

For the final time let's revisit two by now familiar scenarios:

(1) We've considered how a Christian may face a dilemma about whether or not to evangelise, whether or not to show conviction about the Christian Gospel. Applying the above passage we can say that if he shows such conviction he is being hot. But if he refuses to do so - perhaps due to fears about his reputation - he is being lukewarm. The authentic option here, surely, is to be hot. In practice most Christians in the UK tend to be lukewarm about the Christian Gospel - it's a theory they assent to but not something they have conviction about. Hence the need for the Alpha course instead.

(2) We've also considered the situation of a Christian who comes to the conclusion that the evidence is massively against Christianity being true. He begins to consider whether to cease to be a Christian but becomes aware of possible consequences such as damage to his reputation and being dropped by his Christian "friends" if he follows that path. Applying the above passage we can say that if he were to cease being a Christian he is being cold but if he remains a Christian he is being lukewarm. The authentic option here, I believe, is to be cold rather than lukewarm. But my impression is that most Christians who face this dilemma choose to remain as Christians - this is the lukewarm option and entails "living a lie".

We may think that if *hot* is best then *lukewarm* must be better than *cold*. What I think the passage from Revelation 3 suggests is that, spiritually, being lukewarm is the worst option of the three.

“Dark night of the soul”

I will say a little here about my “journey”. When I was a Christian the fact of my being a Christian was - I think I can honestly say - absolutely central in my life. What was also very important was a desire for truth and a desire to detect anything I might be believing that was in fact false (that is, for which the evidence was very poor). This perspective is, I believe, related to personality type. I have known Christians of a different personality type than mine who never seem to have any doubts or difficulties over their Christian faith. By way of example: I was as a Christian hugely troubled by the lack of authority in the Bible for worshipping the Holy Spirit - but this is something that just doesn't seem to bother most Christians.

In the fullness of time I reached a point where it seemed that the honest, authentic thing to do was cease to be a Christian. This was agonising, deeply painful.

Christians talk about the dark night of the soul. An unspoken implication tends to be that the only acceptable outcome for a Christian who is in such a dark night is to work through his doubts and difficulties and come out the other side with his Christian faith intact, and perhaps stronger. But I think that a dark night of the soul carries the risk of a different outcome - the possibility of “loss of faith”, the possibility of not remaining a Christian.

A Christian once told me something like this: *“It's OK to have doubts about your Christian faith so long as ultimately the doubts are defeated”*. I profoundly disagree with this. Such a view seems to me similar to a situation where the government announces that there will be a public inquiry into something and then goes on to announce what the outcome will be before the inquiry has even started!

Negotiating a dark night / faith crisis

I now wish to address any Christian who has serious doubts that the truth lies with Christianity (whether as a result of reading this book or for any other reason) and who has entered a faith crisis or dark night. To you I offer the following:-

- This experience of doubt may be one of the most painful experiences you ever go through.
- The need to be authentic is, I believe, more important than other factors such as maintenance of reputation, maintenance of friendships, fear of being rejected or abandoned, fear of loneliness and so on. I do not make this point lightly; I recognise that it's part of our social nature that we are concerned about our reputation and that we have a need to connect with and be accepted by others.
- In your dark night you may want to seek support from a fellow Christian. An issue here is that the Christian will almost certainly be of the view that there's only one acceptable outcome to your dark night - that you defeat your doubts and remain a Christian. His responses to what you say and any guidance he offers will therefore almost certainly be coloured accordingly. There *may* also be an issue here that the fellow Christian is not unconditional in his support and "love" for you - there may be an underlying threat that he will "drop" you if you cease to be a Christian.
- In your dark night you may consider seeing a secular counsellor or psychotherapist. This may be useful but there is an issue here, roughly opposite to the one described in the previous paragraph. Counsellors and therapists tend to be fond of the concept of "personal truth". He/she may therefore be of a view that all "spiritual paths" are equally valid, as in : *"Religious beliefs are a matter of personal preference. If you cease to be a Christian - well that may be the right thing for you, your personal truth. And if in the fullness of time you go on to discover a different spiritual path which suits you better (perhaps Buddhism, for example) well that's absolutely fine as well"*. So, you may be grappling with the question "does the truth lie with Christianity?" and seeking to answer that question in an evidence-based way. But the counsellor, armed with the idea of "personal truth" and seeing all spiritual paths as being equally valid, is thereby on a completely different wavelength. In other words such a secular counsellor may have real difficulty

tuning into and understanding the agonising reality of what you're going through, even if in the vast majority of his work as a counsellor he is competent and effective.

- The last two points suggest that in such a faith crisis seeking help from others can be problematic. There may be no option but to bear it alone, to work through it alone.
- Be kind to yourself.
- Be patient.
- Be prepared to be *very* patient. A crisis like this may well have a life of its own and a timescale that are beyond conscious control.

If you're thinking of becoming a Christian

It may be that you were motivated to read this book because you're contemplating becoming a Christian. To you I offer the following:

- Be extremely wary of Christian propaganda. Although some Christian writers are relatively modest in what they say, others make very extravagant claims - and in practice these claims tend not to be borne out in reality.
- Be somewhat (or very) skeptical of Christians' testimonies. As we saw in the chapter on narrative formation, it's extremely easy for Christians to interpret *anything* that happens in a way that's consistent with Christianity being true.
- Be aware that Christianity has a very patchy track record through the 2000 years of its existence. It's far from clear that Christianity has been or is a force for good in the world.

- If you become a Christian but in the fullness of time come to realise you've been deceived by Christian propaganda and you cease to be a Christian - be aware that there is no comeback. There's no "money back" guarantee, no apology. Nothing apart from the accusation against you that you've turned your back on God.

Finally

Thank-you for reading to the end. I hope it's been an interesting read and I wish you well on your journey.

Appendix 1

"I'm a committed Christian"

Sometimes Christians use the term “committed Christian”, e.g. *I'm a committed Christian* or *He's a committed Christian*. On the face of it this is an unfortunate term in that it implies that it's possible to be an *uncommitted* Christian.

Here's an example of Nicky Gumbel using the term though without an explanation of what it means:

If we are going to dispute the stated view that religion does more harm than good, we should look at the evidence from surveys, which show that committed Christians give more money to charity; engage in more voluntary work; and have higher levels of happiness than those of no religion. (62)

I find myself wondering how the surveys referred to managed to distinguish between committed and uncommitted Christians!

In general I think that what is being conveyed by “committed Christian” is what is felt to be a valid distinction between people who *really* are Christians and people who call themselves Christians but in fact aren't. By way of example, we can think of a Christian in her early 20s who has recently graduated and is applying for her first job. On the application form under “Other information” she writes “I'm also a committed Christian”. In this way (within the framework of what she believes) she is seeking to distinguish herself from, say, people who go to church in their Sunday best as part of a social ritual but who haven't given their lives to Jesus in the way she has done.

Appendix 2

"Christianity is not a religion"

I've sometimes heard Christians make the claim that Christianity is not a religion, as in: *"Religion is man looking for God. Christianity, on the other hand, is God coming to man"*.

I also think of a car sticker I once saw: *"I'm not religious, I just love the Lord"*.

I think an interesting point is being made here though I don't actually buy it myself. Consider the following conversation between Charles, a Christian, and his non-Christian friend, Derrick:

Derrick: So, you're religious?

Charles: No, I'm not religious but I am a Christian.

Derrick: Hang on, let me check this out. How can you say you're a Christian but you're not religious? Do you believe in God?

Charles: Yes, I do

Derrick: And you read the Bible?

Charles: Yes

Derrick: And you go to church each Sunday?

Charles: Yes I do

Derrick: And you pray to God?

Charles: Indeed I do

Derrick: Well, it sounds to me like you're religious.

And I think Derrick's conclusion is a valid one. Most people would I think view Christians as religious and Christianity as a religion. But I wanted here to acknowledge the "Christianity is not a religion" position which some Christians assert.

Appendix 3

"Dear Dr Laura"

The "Dr Laura" referred to here is Dr Laura Schlessinger. The following is the full text of the letter and is taken from <http://www.smart-words.org/dear-dr-laura.html>

Dear Dr. Laura!

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's Law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and I try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind him that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate.

I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the specific laws and how to best follow them.

a) When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord (Lev 1:9). The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?

b) I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?

c) I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual uncleanness (Lev 15:19-24). The problem is, how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offense.

d) Lev. 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?

e) I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?

f) A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination (Lev 11:10), it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this?

g) Lev 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?

h) Most of my male friends get their hair trimmed, including the hair around their temples, even though this is expressly forbidden by Lev 19:27. How should they die?

i) I know from Lev 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?

j) My uncle has a farm. He violates Lev 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton / polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all

the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? (Lev 24:10-16) Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws? (Lev. 20:14)

I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help.

Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.

Your devoted disciple and adoring fan.

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Notes

Chapter 1 - Introduction

- (1) “Alpha - Questions of Life” pp 16, 17
- (2) Sacha Baron Cohen is an English comedian most widely known for his portrayal of three unorthodox fictional characters: Ali G, Borat, and Brüno.
- (3) “God in the dock” pp 67, 68. This is from the essay “Man or Rabbit?” written by Lewis in 1946. The full paragraph (the opening paragraph of the essay) reads as follows:

'Can't you lead a good life without believing in Christianity?' This is the question on which I have been asked to write, and straight away, before I begin trying to answer it, I have a comment to make. The question sounds as if it were asked by a person who said to himself, 'I don't care whether Christianity is in fact true or not. I'm not interested in finding out whether the real universe is more what like the Christians say than what the Materialists say. All I'm interested in is leading a good life. I'm going to choose beliefs not because I think them true but because I find them helpful.' Now frankly, I find it hard to sympathise with this state of mind. One of the things that distinguishes man from the other animals is that he wants to know things, wants to find out what reality is like, simply for the sake of knowing. When that desire is completely quenched in anyone, I think he has become something less than human. As a matter of fact, I don't believe any of you have really lost that

desire. More probably, foolish preachers, by always telling you how much Christianity will help you and how good it is for society, have actually led you to forget that Christianity is not a patent medicine. Christianity claims to give an account of *facts* - to tell you what the real universe is like. Its account of the universe may be true, or it may not, and once the question is really before you, then your natural inquisitiveness must make you want to know the answer. If Christianity is untrue, then no honest man will want to believe it, however helpful it might be: if it is true, every honest man will want to believe it, even if it gives him no help at all.

- (4) "Mere Christianity" p.78
- (5) See the Preface of "Mere Christianity" pp xii - xv
- (6) "Alpha - Questions of Life" p.137
- (7) "Mere Christianity" p.viii
- (8) "Is God a delusion?" pp 86, 87
- (9) These words are often attributed to Voltaire, though there is some controversy over this.
- (10) See, for example, "The God delusion" pp 73, 74

Chapter 2 - Miraculous Healing

- (11) "Alpha - Questions of Life" p.188

- (12) “Saints alive, all this religious tolerance has gone too far” by Minette Marrin in The Sunday Times 20th September 2009
- (13) From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faith_healing as at 19th March 2013
- (14) “Alpha - Questions of Life” p.198 (The whole account starts on p.197)
- (15) “Jesus: the evidence” p.95

Chapter 3 - Evangelism and eternity

- (16) “Alpha - Questions of Life” p.56
- (17) “Alpha - Questions of Life” p.172
- (18) “Alpha - Questions of Life” p.12
- (19) “The God delusion” p. 360 footnote. (Dawkins is quoting from “Godless: The Church of Liberalism” by Ann Coulter 2006)
- (20) “The problem of pain” pp 115, 116

Chapter 4 - Faith

- (21) “The God delusion” p.42
- (22) “The Dawkins delusion?” pp 1, 2
- (23) “Mysterious stranger” p.3
- (24) This line occurs approximately 26 minutes into the film

- (25) “The God delusion” pp 222 - 234
- (26) “Is God a delusion?” p.74
- (27) “The Dawkins delusion?” pp 34, 35

Chapter 5 - The Bible

- (28) “Alpha - Questions of life” pp 71, 72
- (29) "The Gnostic Gospels" pp xxii, xxiii
- (30) "The Gnostic Gospels" p.xxxv
- (31) “Alpha - Questions of life” p.72
- (32) “Alpha - Questions of life” pp 72, 73
- (33) From www.conservapedia.com/Trinity as at 10th November 2015
- (34) “The Holy Spirit” pp 16-23

Chapter 7 - Does God exist?

- (35) “Alpha - Questions of Life” p.36
- (36) See “Mere Christianity” p.52
- (37) “Is God a delusion?” chapter 1 and “The Dawkins delusion?” chapter 2
- (38) “The God delusion” p.77

- (39) “The God delusion” pp 130 - 132
- (40) “The God delusion” p.131
- (41) The anthropic principle (planetary version) is well explained in “The God delusion” pp 162 - 169. There is also the anthropic principle (cosmological version) covered in pp 169 - 180

Chapter 8 - Good and evil, love and indifference

- (42) “Is God a delusion?” p.73
- (43) “Is God a delusion?” p.75
- (44) See, for example, “50 philosophy ideas” chapter 14, especially pp 57 - 59
- (45) From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steven_Weinberg as at 19th March 2013
- (46) “Catholicism” p.939
- (47) “Is God a delusion?” pp 86, 87
- (48) “Alpha - Questions of Life” p.135
- (49) Information in this paragraph obtained from an essay “A mosaic of victims: what about non-Jewish victims of the Nazis?” by Michael Berenbaum in “The Holocaust and the Christian World” p.68
- (50) From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Nazi_Germany as at 19th March 2013
- (51) “The Holocaust and the Christian World” pp 1-2. This is from an essay “A Christian passes through Yad Vashem” by Michael McGarry C.S.P., a Roman Catholic priest.

- (52) “Precarious Living” p.53
- (53) From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tony_Blair as at 19th March 2013
- (54) “The Hubris Syndrome” p.55
- (55) “Alpha - Questions of Life” p.159
- (56) A drama-documentary film was made about this: *Dreams of a life*
- (57) “Summons to Life” p. 85. Martin Israel's use of the word "infinitely" is of course incorrect.
- (58) “Alpha - Questions of Life” pp 219-220
- (59) “Discipleship” pp 16, 17
- (60) “The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?” pp 12, 13
- (61) “Alpha - Questions of Life” pp 138, 139

Appendix 1 - "I'm a committed Christian"

- (62) “Is God a delusion?” p.55