

“I Don’t Believe in Jesus, But What If. . .”

I was raised into a liberal, and yet Protestant family. As a child I went to church like any other, and even within the past five years I’ve attended the occasional session. Often people will tell me, “All you have to do is ask God to forgive your sins.”

The problem with this, and one that I’ve seldom been able to ask without feeling alienated, is that within my heart I don’t believe in Jesus. And so even assuming I repented and following the Bible to the word, I wouldn’t have what is called true faith. This is difficult to explain, but while I want to be a part of this religion if it’s real, several parts of it have ill logic. Logic that I can’t convince myself to ignore. Here are some comments and questions that I’d appreciate feedback on.

1. If Christianity is such a good thing, then why has it caused so much death in the past? The Crusades are only one example.
2. When the world is so full of grey, then how can there be a strict set of guidelines that clearly defines right and wrong? If you follow these rules, you’ll go to Heaven where everything’s inexplicably perfect. If you don’t, then you burn in eternal fire. It all sounds a little stretched to me.
3. I’ve been to sermons, and it’s emphasized there that if you don’t stay true to His word, then you’ll burn in Hell. Doesn’t it feel a little selfish to be praying and worshipping a supreme being specifically so that you aren’t punished forever? In a few scriptures, there’s an implication that you must be concerned with anything but yourself. An oxymoron?
4. Gay people are often criticized for their actions in the

world, especially by Christians. I have homosexual friends, and several of them take to it rather naturally. Being hetero myself, I could never have sexual relations with another man and like it. I find it highly unlikely that something like this could be anything but real. Especially given the constant state of harrassment that many of them live in.

5. I've never felt the presence of Jesus Christ in my life. I went to church for years, and the closest thing to divineness for me was hearing women mumble in what I heard as jibberish. Ultimately I would like to believe, but at this point I have absolutely no reason to.

On the other hand, I'm going to tell you why I can't let myself shake the idea that there is no immortal entity.

Christianity has had such a huge influence on so many of the past. The United States of America was founded upon this religion. It's grown to have countless followers now. I inquire to myself, "How could they all have it wrong?"

There are plenty of creative freethinkers who've enveloped themselves deeply into your faith. John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Adolf Hitler (his own perception of it anyway), etc.

Sometimes when I'm thinking about life and how I got here, I become increasingly afraid of what'll happen when I finally die. Possibly because deep down, I know that there's something I need to fulfill that I've yet to. Whether this is knowing God or something else, I have no idea at this point. I'm hoping that you might have some insight to my questions.

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Sounds like a rather simplistic formula, doesn't it? And

there's something in your intellect that rebels that surely, *something* must be missing. And you would be right.

Because true, biblical Christianity is about a personal relationship with a personal God. It's about two beings communicating with each other, and loving each other. It's more than a simple "forgiveness transaction." There are a lot of people who see God as some kind of cosmic vending machine; we put in our coin of "belief" and out comes forgiveness? How hokey is that?>

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I honor you for your intellectual integrity to admit the truth. You are in good company; there are a lot of people who have come into a personal relationship with God through Jesus, who discovered along their journey that the Jesus they didn't believe in was a false Jesus—a too-small Jesus. So I am suggesting that you investigate the REAL Jesus and not the stereotype you may have been exposed to.

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1. If Christianity is such a good thing, then why has it caused so much death in the past? The Crusades are only one example.

Great question. First, please consider that true Christianity is not a belief system or a religion like the rest of the world religions, but a relationship with Jesus. And every single follower of Jesus is a sinful, fallen, imperfect person

who is going to follow Him in varying degrees of sinfulness, fallenness, and imperfection. The validity of Christianity is not the weakness of us Christ-followers, but the strength and truthfulness of Jesus Christ himself.

Many horrible things that were done in the name of Jesus Christ, such as the Inquisition and the excesses of the Crusades, were inflicted by people who were not his followers. Many people have done evil in the name of Jesus, but in the end he will tell them, "Away from me—I never knew you."

While there are mortifying blots on history, I think it's also important to realize that people who understand how to view life and the world from a biblical perspective were world changers. The Christian influence is responsible for the invention and development of hospitals and orphanages. Many schools were founded by Christians. The abolition of slavery and the very foundation of modern science are both based on Christian principles. So I think it's important to see a balance of good and evil, and this is exactly what we would expect from fallen, sinful people trying to live out the principles rooted in the character of a good, loving God.

2. When the world is so full of grey, then how can there be a strict set of guidelines that clearly defines right and wrong? If you follow these rules, you'll go to Heaven where everything's inexplicably perfect. If you don't, then you burn in eternal fire. It all sounds a little stretched to me.

Let's visit the "back story" that explains why it is we live in a world so full of grey. The world God originally created was perfect and sinless, but man made a choice that plunged us into shades of murkiness. You've probably heard the phrase "the fall of man," but it truly was a fall of gigantic proportions. One of the things that fell when Adam sinned was our intellect, our reason. We no longer apprehend things correctly or accurately.

When God speaks truth to us, when he communicates his set of guidelines that explain how to make life work according to his design, there is now a problem. Two, actually. First, our fallen intellect doesn't grasp what he says as well as it would have before the fall. Second, another thing that fell was our will, and we are all rebellious, stiff-necked people who insist on having our own way and being god of our own lives. So between fuzzy minds and rebellious hearts, it can sure seem like the world is full of grey!

Nonetheless, God was never unclear about his intentions for his creation, and he communicated his set of guidelines very clearly. Interestingly, the same set of written-down laws in the Ten Commandments, are also written on the hearts of all people in all places at all times. We all intrinsically know it's wrong to murder and steal and lie and disrespect God.

The rules are clear—it's our hearts that want to excuse them and find loopholes to justify our bad behavior.

The thing is, no one can follow the rules. Nobody. If we break one, we've broken the set. There isn't a single person who is good enough to go to heaven. Rebellious, sinful, wayward people (and that is every one of us), left on our own, will enter life as enemies of God and stay that way. If God hadn't intervened, NO ONE would be in heaven.

But he did.

He reaches out to us and offers us one way, the only way, to have a restored relationship with him. Someone had to pay the penalty for our sins, so he sent Jesus from heaven to live a perfect life, showing us what God is like, and then die on the cross in our place. He was perfect and sinless, so he didn't die for his own sins—but for ours instead. Three days later God raised him from the dead to give his life back, and it's that new, resurrected kind of life Jesus offers to those who trust in him.

Heaven isn't a reward for those who did "good enough" to get there, since no one qualifies. It is a place to enjoy an intimate personal relationship with God. A relationship that is entered into as a gift we don't earn and never could.

Hell isn't the place where people go who didn't do enough good to cancel out their bad. When people have spent their life saying "no" to God (and "yes" to doing life their own way, worshiping themselves, or others, or things), it's where God lets them have their own rebellious way forever.

3. I've been to sermons, and it's emphasized there that if you don't stay true to His word, then you'll burn in Hell. Doesn't it feel a little selfish to be praying and worshiping a supreme being specifically so that you aren't punished forever? In a few scriptures, there's an implication that you must be concerned with anything but yourself. An oxymoron?

All of us here at Probe would disagree with those sermons. There are many people who believe God puts people on a performance standard, requiring us to stay on "the straight and narrow" or we get zapped. It not only overestimates our ability to be good, since we are fallen people, but it underestimates God's ability to hold onto us. When we receive his gift of eternal life by trusting in what Christ did for us, God gives us a new heart and a new source of power to live a life pleasing to him. But He also understands that change is a process and a journey, and as the Bible says, "He knows that we are but dust." He knows how incredibly frail and weak we are. Good thing he is strong and powerful, not to mention amazingly loving! The Bible actually says that we can KNOW we have eternal life, and that God will complete what he starts. We disagree strongly that what God gets started in us, we have the power to wreck forever.

The Bible says that our relationship with God is like that of a lover and his bride. We are God's beloved, and he delights

in us. I don't know if you are married, but I hope if you are, you know what it is for your beloved to have adoring eyes for you. That's the kind of love we receive from God, and when one is loved like that, it's easy and natural to love him back and worship him with joy and surrender.

The idea of praying to and worshiping a supreme being for the sole purpose of avoiding eternal punishment is a cruel hoax and a horrible counterfeit of the real thing. Which is why I suggest you find out who the REAL Jesus is, since apparently the one you've been hearing about is a gross caricature.

4. Gay people are often criticized for their actions in the world, especially by Christians. I have homosexual friends, and several of them take to it rather naturally. Being hetero myself, I could never have sexual relations with another man and like it. I find it highly unlikely that something like this could be anything but real. Especially given the constant state of harrassment that many of them live in.

Their attractions are real, but not chosen. What is not real is the contention that they were born gay, or that God made them gay. There are certain patterns that show up in the lives of those who experience same-sex attractions: a relational deficit with the same-sex parent and with same-sex peers, a sense of gender insecurity, often the ridicule and rejection of peers. Everyone is created with the need to connect in a deep and lasting way with our same-sex parent and peers, and if that need goes unmet, it can become sexualized with the onset of adolescence. Everybody wants to be loved and accepted, but those who are attracted to those of their same sex didn't get the kind of affirmation that would have allowed them to move on to the next step of emotional development, which is connection with the opposite sex.

5. I've never felt the presence of Jesus Christ in my life. I went to church for years, and the closest thing to divineness

for me was hearing women mumble in what I heard as jibberish. Ultimately I would like to believe, but at this point I have absolutely no reason to.

I can well imagine why, given what you have experienced and were taught!

I want to recommend to you a couple of books I think you will find satisfying and challenging. Lee Strobel is a former journalist (he used to be a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*) and atheist, who tracked down credible sources to answer his questions about Jesus and Christianity. *The Case for Faith* and *The Case for Christ* are both really excellent books. A third book, *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis, would also probably appeal to you.

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There are plenty of creative freethinkers who've enveloped themselves deeply into your faith. John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Adolf Hitler (his own perception of it anyway), etc.

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The Bible intriguingly says in one place, "God has set eternity in our hearts." I think this is what you're experiencing, _____. God made you for a purpose, and he made

you to have a relationship with him that is more deeply satisfying than you could possibly imagine. But first you need to find the true God and not the little-bitty false god that is worth rejecting.

I truly respect your position and your intellectual integrity, and I am so glad there are real answers for your important questions.

I do hope this helps.

Sue Bohlin
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“Why I Don’t Believe in God”

Dear Christian Philosopher,

One day I was asked why I believed in God. I had a very hard time coming up with one reason. However, since my faith has disappeared, I have had a relatively easy time coming up with reasons that I do not believe in Him. Here are five:

- I have not perceived God. Everything that I believe exists, I have perceived. As a result, I do not believe in God (since I don’t believe that He exists).
- I have not received reliable testimony that anyone that has perceived God. However, I have received reliable testimony that others have not perceived God. Therefore, since I must perceive something (or at least hear reliable testimony from a perceiver) before I say it exists, I do not believe in God.

- I do not believe in God because he does not exist. God does not exist because everything that exists must take up space and God does not take up space. Therefore, God does not exist.

- It is impossible for spiritual substance to interact with physical substance. The Christian God is composed of spiritual substance and the world is material substance. The Christian God created the world. Since creating the world entails spiritual substance interacting with and manipulating physical substance, the Christian God cannot exist. (If spiritual substance can interact with physical substance, then how?)

- There is no such thing as spiritual substance (Descartes mind or the other realm); i.e., the soul, the devil, angels, hell etc. (If there is spiritual substance, then I would like to hear some reasons why I should believe that there is such a substance.). My reason for saying that there is no such thing as spiritual substance is due to spiritual substance being unperceivable and non-existent (assuming that to exist is to take up space). In fact, spiritual substance cannot be perceived because human-kinds faculties for perception only gather information from material substance. Since all human faculties are material, they cannot gather information from spiritual substance because the spiritual substance would have to interact with the material faculties; and it is impossible for spiritual substance to interact with physical substance.

Like I said, my faith disappeared. I believe that if someone shows me how I have made a mistake, then my faith will come back. I know that these reasons are probably not great in the eyes of a seasoned philosopher (I am just doing my undergraduate work right now), but in my stage of development as a thinker, these are huge roadblocks. Thank you.

Dear _____,

Thanks for your letter. I will respond to each of your five points individually.

1. I have not perceived God. Everything that I believe exists, I have perceived. As a result, I do not believe in God (since I don't believe that He exists).

By perceive, do you mean through the senses? If so, for this reason to be valid you must present a case for a strong empiricism such as that of the logical positivists of the early 20th century. They believed that only that can be held as true knowledge which is empirically verifiable. This has been shown to be self-referentially incoherent, since the theory itself can't be so verified. Consider, too, the things I'm sure you believe exist even though you haven't perceived them by your senses, things such as electricity or love. You can see the effects of these things, but not the things themselves (if love can be called a "thing"). Similarly, we can see the effects or the works of God without seeing Him. If you mean you haven't perceived God in any way, there is nothing I can say to that, except that this is no proof that God doesn't exist. It could be that you have closed off any avenues by which you might perceive Him.

2. I have not received reliable testimony that anyone that has perceived God. However, I have received reliable testimony that others have not perceived God. Therefore, since I must perceive something (or at least hear reliable testimony from a perceiver) before I say it exists, I do not believe in God.

Again, by perceive do you mean by the senses? If so, my first response still stands. If you mean any kind of perception, then millions of people can offer positive testimony. Of course, if you have decided already that God doesn't exist, then you will write such testimonies off to something else. But that would be no argument against God's existence, but rather a testimony of your own philosophical/religious biases.

3. I do not believe in God because he does not exist. God does not exist because everything that exists must take up space and God does not take up space. Therefore, God does not exist.

Here you first need to present an argument to prove that anything which exists must take up space. Materialists have the same obligation as theists to prove their world view.

Here are some reasons I find naturalism untenable. Consider first that if matter is all that exists (since all existing things must take up space), then the universe must be explainable purely in terms of natural laws, including the law of cause and effect. If there is a purely materialistic cause/effect explanation for everything, then even our mental processes are nothing more than the motion of atoms in our brains (whether chemical or electrical) acting in a strict cause/effect sequence. But if this is the case, how can we know whether what we think is true, or whether it is just the result of determined natural processes? How do you know that what you think about the world outside yourself actually obtains? It could all be simply mental images your brain has produced. There must be something in our reasoning abilities which isn't reducible to natural processes.

In addition, such determinism strikes at the heart of free will, which means that you didn't make a free choice to write your letter: it simply happened as a result of the natural, non-mental, processes of your brain and body.

One more note: Those working in artificial intelligence still haven't been able to produce a computer which thinks like a human. If reason were a strictly causal process surely they would have been able to do so already.

4. It is impossible for spiritual substance to interact with physical substance. The Christian God is composed of spiritual substance and the world is material substance. The

Christian God created the world. Since creating the world entails spiritual substance interacting with and manipulating physical substance, the Christian God cannot exist. (If spiritual substance can interact with physical substance, then how?)

Why do you believe it is impossible for spiritual substance to interact with physical substance? Some say that such interaction would negate natural laws. But I see no reason to accept this. We can't deny the interaction of the supernatural with the natural just because it complicates matters.

Just how this happens I cannot say. But my limited understanding shouldn't be an impediment to belief. If we have good reasons to believe God exists and created the universe, and there are no objections significant enough to overcome those reasons, then one is justified in believing in God. Because there are other reasons to believe in God, the burden is on you to prove the spiritual cannot interact with the physical.

5. There is no such thing as spiritual substance (Descartes' mind or 'the other realm'); i.e., the soul, the devil, angels, hell etc. (If there is spiritual substance, then I would like to hear some reasons why I should believe that there is such a substance.). My reason for saying that there is no such thing as spiritual substance is due to spiritual substance being unperceivable and non-existent (assuming that to exist is to take up space). In fact, spiritual substance cannot be perceived because human-kind's faculties for perception only gather information from material substance. Since all human faculties are material, they cannot gather information from spiritual substance because the spiritual substance would have to interact with the material faculties; and it is impossible for spiritual substance to interact with physical substance.

You (again) make your presuppositions very clear: 1) all

existing things take up space, and 2) the spiritual cannot interact with the material. Again, I ask that you present a case for your materialism and for your assumption about the impossibility of spiritual/natural interaction.

Here I have simply tried to respond to your ideas and show where I see weaknesses. For positive arguments to believe, there are numerous resources available. I suggest that you look for copies of C.S Lewis' books *Mere Christianity* and *Miracles*. For a study on mind/body dualism from a Christian perspective, see J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987), chapter 3. Also look through the list of articles on our web site (www.probe.org) under the categories Theology/Apologetics and World View/Philosophy. My articles on atheism and miracles address the issue of naturalism.

Rick Wade

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