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IS THE BIBLE ANTI-INTELLECTUAL?

Remember that God is a rational God, who has made us in His own image. God invites and expects us to explore His double revelation, in nature and Scripture, with the minds He has given us, and to go on in the development of a Christian mind to apply His marvelous revealed truth to every aspect of the modern and post-modern world.¹

John Stott

Culture has been compared to a river that we are all floating in. The only real question is if we are aware of where we are drifting and are going to do something about it. One of the prevailing currents today is an overemphasis on emotion and a devaluing of reason. Our culture worships at the altar of sound bites, slogans, and quick updates. This makes sustained thought and critical reflection challenging, to say the least.

Couple this with the fact that our lives are overscheduled and hurried, and that is a recipe for superficiality. I don't say this to be mean or with a holier-than-thou attitude; I fight these tendencies as well. What has happened, however, is that both the broader culture and the American church have become shallow. We exalt the trivial and dismiss the meaningful.

This has consequences in many areas of life, but especially when it comes to religion and spirituality. How does the Bible—if it really is the Word of God—speak within such a culture? What cultural assumptions keep us from hearing and considering its message?

Claims are never made or heard in a cultural vacuum. The conversation about the Bible today is heard in a cultural backdrop that includes a lot of misunderstanding of religion in general and Christianity in particular. The goal in this chapter is modest but important. We need to expose some of these misperceptions about how to find spiritual truth, and then allow the Bible itself to inform our understanding of key words like *faith*, *truth*, and *reason*.

THREE SPIRITUAL DEAD ENDS TO AVOID

As I talk to people in the local church or the students I teach, I run into three common misunderstandings about God and spirituality. Whether or not you are ultimately convinced that Christianity is true, these are three dead ends you will surely want to avoid in your quest for truth.

“People are free to believe whatever they want about God”

Yes and no. If all that is meant here is that people should not be coerced or forced to believe something or follow a certain religion—then I wholeheartedly agree. Religious liberty and freedom of conscience are extremely important principles to defend. The Manhattan Declaration captures this well: “No one should be compelled to embrace any religion against his will, nor should persons of faith be forbidden to worship God according to the dictates of conscience or to express freely and publicly their deeply held religious convictions.”² In his excellent book *The Case for Civility*, Os Guinness articulates a vision of what we should be after in public discourse about our various religious beliefs:

The vision of a civic public square is one in which everyone—people of all faiths, whether religious or naturalistic—are equally free to enter and engage public life on the basis of their faiths, as a matter of “free exercise” and as dictated by their own reason and conscience; but always within the

double framework, first, of the Constitution, and second, of a freely and mutually agreed covenant, or common vision for the common good, of what each person understands to be just and free for everyone else, and therefore of the duties involved in living with the deep differences of others.³

This is an example of what true tolerance is. True tolerance is where we extend to each other the right to be wrong.⁴ False tolerance, on the other hand, naïvely asserts that all ideas are created equal and this must be rejected. Not only is this obviously false, it's unlivable. Unfortunately, "The ideal of religious tolerance has morphed into the straitjacket of religious agreement."⁵ Contrary to what is commonly believed, the height of intolerance is not disagreement, but rather removing the public space and opportunity for people to disagree.

However, true tolerance is usually not what people have in mind when they say people should be free to believe in whatever God (or no god at all) they want to. Here is the simple, but profound point to grasp—*merely believing something doesn't make it true*. Put differently, people are entitled to their own beliefs, but not their own truth. Belief is not what ultimately matters—truth is. Our *believing* something is true doesn't *make* it true. The Bible isn't true simply because I have faith. Truth is what corresponds to reality—telling it like it is.

The bottom line is that we discover truth; we don't create it. Reality is what we bump (or slam!) into when we act on false beliefs. Spending a few minutes fondly reflecting on your junior high, high school, and college years will bring this principle vividly and painfully to life.

"All religions basically teach the same thing"

Let's be honest . . . we don't like to offend people and we want people to like us. Because of this, we let some pretty silly ideas go unchallenged in our culture today. One perennial offender is the notion that all religions basically teach the same thing. If anyone is to find the truth about God or ultimate reality, then this myth has to be dispensed with quickly. *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat hits the nail on the head:

The differences between religions are worth debating. Theology has consequences: It shapes lives, families, nations, cultures, wars; it can change

people, save them from themselves, and sometimes warp or even destroy them. If we tiptoe politely around this reality, then we betray every teacher, guru and philosopher—including Jesus of Nazareth and the Buddha both—who ever sought to resolve the most human of all problems: How then should we live?⁶

It is out of a sense of false tolerance that we think we are actually loving one another if we never challenge ideas that we believe to be false. In addition to this liability, we often lack the courage to (respectfully) say what needs to be said.

With that in mind, the first thing to do when encountering this claim is simply ask a question—“That’s interesting; in what specific ways are all religions basically the same?” And then wait for a response. Fight the temptation to answer for them. Often, this will be enough to expose the superficial slogan so that you can have a more productive spiritual conversation. In his book *God Is Not One*, Boston University professor Stephen Prothero observes, “No one argues that different economic systems or political regimes are one and the same. Capitalism and socialism are so obviously at odds that their differences hardly bear mentioning. The same goes for democracy and monarchy. Yet scholars continue to claim that religious rivals such as Hinduism and Islam, Judaism and Christianity are, by some miracle of the imagination, essentially the same, and this view resounds in the echo chamber of popular culture.”⁷ Chart 1 points out key differences among the four major religions.

Chart 1

HOW FOUR MAJOR RELIGIONS DIFFER IN CORE BELIEFS

<i>Buddhism</i>	<i>Hinduism</i>	<i>Christianity</i>	<i>Judaism</i>
no God	thousands of gods	one God, triune in nature	one God
—	(impersonal)	(personal)	(personal)
<i>different teachings on</i> God, reality, sin, salvation, heaven, hell			
<i>similar teachings on</i> ethics			

Many imagine God to be waiting at the top of a mountain and eventually, all paths will get to the top. But who's waiting for you at the top?⁸ Which God? The Christian God—the one true God who is a trinity? No God at all? Thousands of gods? Those are very different peaks! Admittedly, you will find similarities in the foothills in terms of basic ethics, but the farther you go up the mountain, the more pronounced the differences become because you are dealing with the nature of God, eternity, redemption, heaven, and hell.

A simple thought experiment makes this clear. Imagine you were at a table about to eat dinner and you have two bowls of white powder in front of you. Do you put them on your food? After all, they look pretty similar. But what if I told you that one was ordinary table salt and the other was cyanide? The differences matter far more than the similarities! So it is with religion and its path for your eternal future.

Finally, the fact that the religions of the world make exclusive and mutually contradictory claims means they can't be the same. Take Jesus of Nazareth as an example: either Jesus was not the Messiah (Judaism), was the Messiah (Christianity), or was a great prophet (Islam)—but not all three (cf. John 14:6).

“God is a psychological crutch humans invent to feel better”

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Sigmund Freud wrote that religious beliefs are “illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind. . . . As we already know, the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection—for protection through love—which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life.”⁹ In short, we project the existence of God based on a human need for Him.

Sean McDowell and I spent a whole book (*Is God Just a Human Invention?*) addressing various angles of this issue, but let me highlight just two reasons this is not a helpful way to think about the God question. First, it begs the question against God. Freud's argument is, essentially, since we know that God doesn't exist, what are the most compelling psychological explanations of this belief? His

argument assumes from the outset that no object of belief—namely God—exists.¹⁰

And second, the projection theory logic cuts both ways. If it can be argued that humans created God out of a need for security or a father figure, then it can just as easily be argued that atheism is a response to the human desire for the freedom to do whatever one wants without moral constraints or obligations. Perhaps atheists don't want a God to exist because they would then be morally accountable to a deity. Or maybe atheists had particularly tragic relationships with their own fathers growing up, projected that on God, and then spent most of their adult lives trying to kill a "Divine Father Figure"?

New York University psychologist Paul Vitz helps us prioritize the right question: "Since both believers and nonbelievers in God have psychological reasons for their positions, one important conclusion is that in any debate as to the truth of the existence of God, psychology should be irrelevant. A genuine search for evidence supporting or opposing the existence of God should be based on the evidence and arguments found in philosophy, theology, science, history, and other relevant disciplines."¹¹

THREE THINGS ABOUT CHRISTIANITY THAT MAY SURPRISE YOU

Whenever people use the word *Christian* in a conversation, I don't assume they are using the term correctly (i.e., something that the founder of Christianity, Jesus of Nazareth, would recognize). Again, I'm not being critical here; we just live in a postChristian culture today. There's simply too much misinformation out there. Moreover, people tend to repeat commonly used slogans or embrace a vision of Christianity that sounds curiously like twenty-first-century American values. In light of that, I have found that when I share what the New Testament actually teaches, people are genuinely surprised. In fact, many Christians I encounter also are surprised (and even resist) what I am about to share.

1. Christianity Rises to the Level of True or False

It's always best to begin at the beginning. If Christianity does not rise to the level of being true or false, then it has been completely removed from the cogni-

tive realm. If something can't be false, then it can't be true either. And rational investigation becomes impossible. Please don't mishear me, I think there are very good reasons to believe Christianity is actually true and best explains reality. But Christianity is the kind of thing that could be false. It's at this point in my talk when people tend to get nervous (along with those who invited me in to speak!). My point is simply this: In a culture that relativizes (everybody has their own truth) and then privatizes (my spiritual truth is personal and therefore off-limits) religious belief, we must reintroduce Christianity to our culture with its very public truth claims and let the best ideas win. To use a football analogy, we have to take the red practice jersey off of Christianity so it can take some hits.

Nancy Pearcey puts her finger on the problem: "When Christians are willing to reduce religion to non-cognitive categories, unconnected to questions of truth or evidence, then we have already lost the battle."¹² When it comes to Christianity, the most important question we need to help people ask is not will it work for them or help them feel better, but rather is it true?

And that leads us to another important but often misunderstood concept—truth. As we hinted at above, truth is simply telling it like it is. A more philosophically precise definition is that truth is what corresponds to or matches up with reality.¹³ For example, if you have the belief that it is raining outside and it actually is raining outside, then that belief is true. This is the classical and commonsense view of truth we all use every day. However, at this point it will be helpful to make a distinction between objective and subjective truth claims. For something to be *objective* simply means that it is not dependent on what anyone believes, thinks, or agrees on. (Objective claims refer to reality as it is "out there," is fixed, and discoverable.) On the other hand, to say something is *subjective* is to affirm that it is dependent on what someone believes, thinks, or agrees on. (Subjective claims are not fixed, i.e., can change, and refer to the beliefs and opinions of the person.) Greg Koukl offers a helpful illustration on the differences between ice cream and insulin:

Forgive me for stating something so obvious, but there is a difference between choosing an ice cream flavor and choosing a medicine. When choosing ice cream, you choose what you like. When choosing medicine, you have to choose what heals.

Many people think of God like they think of ice cream, not like they think of insulin. In other words, they choose religious views according to their tastes, not according to what is true. The question of truth hardly even comes up in the conversation.¹⁴

In this illustration, the ice cream claims are *subjective* and insulin claims are *objective*. While many think religious claims are ice cream kinds of claims, this is incorrect. Biblical Christianity is making an insulin kind of claim, as we will see below.

Before concluding this section, we need to briefly say a word about why truth even matters anymore. To put it simply, truth matters because ideas have consequences for people. What you think is true is the map you will use to try to navigate reality—spiritually, morally, relationally, and intellectually. Wasting a few minutes because Google Maps led you down yet another dead end is one thing, wasting your life because you have sincerely believed a lie is another. God’s position as stated in the New Testament is clear, “This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:3–4).

2. Biblical Faith Is Not Blind Faith

When it comes to the word *faith* there is mass confusion both inside and outside the church. Faith has come to mean anything and everything. Unfortunately, the most common assumption is that faith is a blind leap in the dark and opposed to reason and evidence. Former *Newsweek* religion editor Lisa Miller put it this way: “Reason defines one kind of reality (what we know); faith defines another (what we don’t know).”¹⁵ Prominent Harvard cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker says essentially the same thing but mixes in some disdain for effect. “Universities are about reason, pure and simple. Faith—believing something without good reasons to do so—has no place in anything but a religious institution, and our society has no shortage of these.”¹⁶ Is that true? Does the Bible encourage blind faith? The short answer is no, it does not. And to make my case I will call three biblical witnesses to the stand—Moses, Jesus, and Paul.

First, God (through Moses) did not require “blind faith” of the Israelites in Egypt.

But the Lord said to Moses, “Put out your hand and catch it by the tail”—so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand—*“that they may believe that the Lord . . . has appeared to you.”* . . . Israel *saw* the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the Lord, and they *believed* in the Lord and in his servant Moses. (Exodus 4:4–5; 14:31, *italics added*)

Notice that God knew the Israelites would need some evidence and he graciously provided it. As humanity’s creator, God has perfect insight into how he created us to function and relates accordingly.

Next, Jesus did not demand “blind faith” of those who questioned if he was the Messiah.

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you *hear* and *see*: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.” (Matthew 11:2–5, *italics added*)

In this passage, Jesus does not scold John the Baptist for his inability to believe without evidence. Rather Jesus tailors evidence that would be helpful to him because John knew the prophecies concerning the Messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Finally, Paul did not appeal to “blind faith” when discussing the resurrection of Jesus. “If Christ has not been raised, *your faith is worthless*; you are still in your sins. . . . If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied”. (1 Corinthians 15:17–19 NASB, *italics added*)

In this passage, Paul clearly established the historical nature of Christianity. This distinguishes Christianity from every other world religion by making its central claim testable. Pearcey observes, “Biblical Christianity refuses to separate historical fact from spiritual meaning. Its core claim is that the living God has acted in history, especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.”¹⁷ As a historical claim, the resurrection can be investigated with eyes wide open.

In summary, if you can get Moses, Jesus, and Paul saying essentially the same thing, then I think you can consider this question settled: biblical faith is not opposed to reason and evidence. As Gordon Lewis put it, “Spirituality without understanding is not faith; it is superstition.”¹⁸

What is faith then? There is the general kind of faith we all use in our daily lives. For example, we use faith when we take a prescription from the doctor, hop on a plane, hire an employee, or get married. In this sense, faith is active trust in what you have good reason to believe is true. Sincerity is not enough; faith is only as good as the object in which it is placed. Biblical faith just narrows the focus. In the everyday circumstances of life, biblical faith is active trust that God is who he says he is and will do all that he has promised to do (see Psalm 9:10; cf. Hebrews 10:19–23; 11:1). In the Bible, faith is always pointing toward a future reality (i.e., things that have not yet happened). The contrast is with sight, not with reason (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:7). God’s past and present faithfulness is the basis for our faith in an unseen future. This insight also helps us understand how faith relates to knowledge—faith acts on knowledge; it’s not a substitute for knowledge. The more we know of and about God, the more faith we will be able to exercise. And it is this kind of faith with which God is pleased (cf. Hebrews 11:6).

3. Christians Are Commanded to Defend the Faith

Defending the faith is not optional. The Bible makes this clear: “In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense [*apologia*] to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15; cf. Philippians 1:7). From this passage we learn that apologetics involves responding to objections (defense), making a case (offense), and giving hope (Christ-centered). In addition to Peter, the book of Acts repeatedly records Paul reasoning with people about Christianity (Acts 14:15–17; 17:2, 4, 17–31; 18:4). Luke records that Paul “entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in

the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:8–10). For hours each day, Paul sought to persuade the intellectuals of his day that Christianity was true!

When discussing the importance of apologetics, three common objections are often raised. *First, people claim that apologetics is not practical.* Isn’t apologetics only for academics and intellectuals? The short answer is no. Here’s why. Everyone has questions—you do, your kids do, your friends and neighbors do, your family does, and our culture certainly does. It’s that simple. We will either think carefully or poorly about these questions, but the questions themselves cannot be avoided. By the way, Christianity welcomes tough questions!

Next, people say you should just preach the simple gospel and not worry about all of that intellectual stuff. Pearcey’s observation is critical here: “The ultimate goal is to preach the gospel. But the gospel is not simple to those whose background prevents them from understanding it. Today’s global secular culture has erected a maze of mental barriers against even considering the biblical message.”¹⁹ Apologetics serves evangelism and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20).

Finally, some Christians object that too much knowledge leads to arrogance. I would suggest that the remedy for arrogance is not ignorance, but humility. John Stott is right on target: “I am not pleading for a dry, humorless, academic Christianity, but for a warm devotion set on fire by truth.”²⁰ Dallas Willard observed that part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ and love others well is to think clearly. “Bluntly, to serve God well we must think straight; and crooked thinking, unintentional or not, always favors evil. And when the crooked thinking gets elevated into group orthodoxy, whether religious or secular, there is always, quite literally, hell to pay.”²¹ Engaging our minds as Christians is an act of worship and part of loving God with all of our minds (Matthew 22:37).

CHRISTIANITY IS NOT A FAIRY TALE FOR GROWN-UPS

If Christianity is relegated to the realm of fairy tales, which may provide personal significance or meaning but not knowledge, then people will continue not taking

the claims of Jesus or the Christian worldview very seriously. If, however, people are invited to rationally consider the claims of Christianity as a knowledge tradition, then chances are good that they might come to know the living God and live life according to the knowledge provided in His Word.

I hope this chapter has cleared away some of the cultural debris so that we can better explore tough questions about the Bible and in doing so, discover the truth.



Three Big Ideas

1. We called three witnesses (Moses, Jesus, and Paul) to demonstrate that biblical faith is not blind faith. Faith is active trust in what you have good reason to believe is true. Moreover, while people are entitled to their own beliefs, they are not entitled to their own truth. Simply believing something doesn't make it true.
2. True tolerance occurs when we extend to each other the right to be wrong. False tolerance, on the other hand, happens when we naïvely assert that all ideas are created equal; and this must be rejected. Not only is this obviously false, it's unlivable.
3. Defending the faith is not optional. Apologetics—based on 1 Peter 3:15—involves responding to objections (defense), making a case (offense), and giving hope (being Christ-centered). This gives Christians confidence and offers nonbelievers something to think about.

Conversation Tips

Since there is such a widespread assumption that the Bible (and Christianity by extension) is anti-intellectual, you will need to work hard at showing people this is not the case.

- The best way to show that the Bible is not anti-intellectual is to talk about reality and not religion. In today's culture, religion is understood as a personal and private feeling that is not accessible by everyone else. You can't question, challenge, or investigate it; you must simply be tolerant of it (false tolerance). That's why having a conversation about Christianity as a religion is a dead end. It's a nonstarter. We need to talk about Christianity in the context of reality where terms like truth, knowledge, reason, and evidence apply.
- The key here is to use rational language (i.e., I think) rather than emotional language (i.e., I feel).
- When you have the opportunity, define faith the way Moses, Jesus, and Paul did in the Bible.

Digging Deeper

- J. P. Moreland. *Love Your God with All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul*. Updated edition. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2012.
- Sean McDowell and Jonathan Morrow. *Is God Just a Human Invention? And Seventeen Other Questions Raised by the New Atheists*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010.