

THE SIX BIGGEST OBJECTIONS

By Terran Williams

Recently, Tim Kellar, who leads a church of thousands in New York City, did a survey of young under 25 year olds in NYC who are not Christian. He asked them, “why do you think Christianity is not true?” Six answers surfaced most commonly. In this article, we will look at all six and provide a brief response to each.

1) The other religions

Christians seem to greatly over-play the differences between their faith and all the other ones. Though millions of people in other religions say they have encountered God, have built marvellous civilizations and cultures, and have had their lives and characters changed by their experience of faith, Christians insist that only they go to heaven – **that their religion is the only one that is ‘right’** and true. The exclusivity of this is breath taking. It also appears to many to be a threat to international peace.

Brief response: Inclusivism is really covert exclusivism. It is common to hear people say: “No one should insist their view of God better than all the rest. Every religion is equally valid.” But what you just said could only be true if: First, there is no God at all, or second, God is an impersonal force that doesn’t care what your doctrinal beliefs about him are. So as you speak you are assuming (by faith!) a very particular view of God and you are pushing it as better than the rest! That is at best inconsistent and at worst hypocritical, since you are doing the very thing you are forbidding. To say “all religions are equally valid” is itself a very white, Western view based in the European enlightenment’s idea of knowledge and values. Why should that view be privileged over anyone else’s?

2) Evil and suffering

Christianity teaches the existence of an all-powerful, all-good and loving God. But how can that belief be reconciled with the horrors that occur daily? If there is a God, he must be either all-powerful but not good enough to want an end to evil and suffering, or he’s all-good but not powerful enough to bring an end to evil and suffering. **Either way the God of the Bible couldn’t exist. For many people, this is not only an intellectual conundrum but also an intensely personal problem. Their own personal lives are marred by tragedy, abuse, and injustice.**

Brief response: If God himself has suffered our suffering isn’t senseless. First, if you have a God great and transcendent enough to be mad at because he hasn’t stopped evil and suffering in the world, then you have to (at the same moment) have a God great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can’t know. (You can’t have it both ways.) Second, though we don’t know the reasons why he allows it to continue, he can’t be indifferent or un-caring, because the Christian God (unlike the gods of all the other religions) takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he is willing to get involved with it himself. On the cross, Jesus suffered with us.

3) The ethical straitjacket

In Christianity the Bible and the church dictate everything that a Christian must believe, feel, and do. Christians are not encouraged to make their own moral decisions, or to think out their beliefs or patterns of life for themselves. In a fiercely pluralistic society there are too many options, too many cultures, too many personality differences for this approach. We must be free to choose for ourselves how to live – this is the only truly authentic life. We should only feel guilty if we are not being true to ourselves – to our own chosen beliefs and practices and values and vision for life.

Brief response: Individual creation of truth removes the right to moral outrage. 1) Aren't there any people in the world who are doing things you believe are wrong that they should stop doing no matter what they believe inside about right and wrong? Then you do believe that there is some kind of moral obligation that people should abide by and which stands in judgment over their internal choices and convictions. So what is wrong with Christians doing that? 2) No one is really free anyway. We all have to live for something, and whatever our ultimate meaning in life is (whether approval, achievement, a love **relationship, our work**) **it is basically our 'lord' and master. Everyone is** ultimately in a spiritual straitjacket. Even the most independent people are dependent on their **independence and so can't commit. Christianity gives you a lord and master who forgives** and dies for you.

4) The record of Christians

Every religion will have its hypocrites of course. But it seems that the most fervent Christians are the most condemning, exclusive, and intolerant. The church has a history of supporting injustices, of destroying culture, of oppression. And there are so many people who are not Christian (or not religious at all) who appear to be much more kind, caring, and indeed moral than so many Christians. If Christianity is the true religion – then why can this be? Why would so much oppression have been carried out over the centuries in the name of Christ and with the support of the church?

Brief response: The solution to injustices is not less but deeper Christianity. 1) There have been terrible abuses. 2) But in the prophets and the gospels we are given tools for a devastating critique of moralistic religion. Scholars have shown that Marx and **Nietzsche's critique of religion** relied on the ideas of the prophets. So despite its abuses, Christianity provides perhaps greater tools than the other religions do for its own critique. 3) When Martin Luther King, Jr. confronted terrible abuses by the **white church he did not call them to loosen their Christian commitments. He used the Bible's** provision for church self-critique and called them to truer, firmer, deeper Christianity.

5) The angry God

Christianity seems to be built around the concept of a condemning, judgmental deity. For example, **there's the cross** – the teaching that the murder of one man (Jesus) leads to the forgiveness of **others. But why can't God just forgive us? The** God of Christianity seems a left-over from primitive religions where peevish gods demanded blood in order to assuage their wrath.

Brief response: On the cross God does not demand our blood but offers his own. 1) All forgiveness of any deep wrong and **injustice entails suffering on the forgiver's part. If someone truly wrongs you, because of our deep sense of justice, we can't just shrug it off. We sense there's a 'debt.'** We can then either a) make the perpetrator pay down the debt you feel (as you take it out on his hide in vengeance!) in which case evil spreads into us and hardens us b) or you can forgive – but that is **enormously difficult. But that is the only way to stop the evil from hardening us as well. 2) If we can't** forgive without suffering (because of our sense of justice) it's not surprising to learn that God **couldn't forgive us without suffering** – coming in the person of Christ and dying on the cross.

6) The unreliable Bible

It seems impossible any longer to take the Bible as completely authoritative in the light of modern **science, history, and culture. Also we can't be sure what in the Bible's accounts of events is** legendary and what really happened. Finally, much of the Bible's **social teaching (for example, about women)** is socially regressive.

So how can we trust it scientifically, historically, and socially?

Two brief responses: The gospels' form precludes their being legends. The Biblical gospels are not legends but historically reliable accounts about Jesus' life. Why? 1) Their timing is far too early for them to be legends. The gospels, however, were written 30-60 years after Jesus' death – and Paul's letters, which support all the accounts, came just 20 years after the events. 2) Their content is far too counter-productive to be legends. The accounts of Jesus crying out that God had abandoned him, or the resurrection where all the witnesses were women – did not help Christianity in the eyes of first century readers. The only historically plausible reason that these incidents are recorded is that they happened. The 'offensiveness' of the Bible is culturally relative. Texts you find difficult and offensive are 'common sense' to people in other cultures. And many of the things you find offensive because of your beliefs and convictions, many will seem silly to your grandchildren just as many of your grandparents' beliefs offend you. Therefore, to simply reject any Scripture is to assume your culture (and worse yet, your time in history) is superior to all others. It is narrow-minded in the extreme.