

Deadly Questions - Isn't Christianity Only Psychological?

Mark Pickering and Peter Saunders continue our series on tricky apologetics issues [1]

'If God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him.'

This quote, from the 18th century French philosopher, Voltaire, sums up the thoughts of many non-Christians. Weak human beings feel the need for a higher power to make them feel secure in an uncertain world, so they invent a God who loves them unconditionally. Isn't that the basis of Christianity?

It is easy to feel threatened by this notion - our faith is central to our lives and, as such, is accompanied at times by intense feelings; feelings of being loved and forgiven, of joy and peace. But are those emotions the basis of our belief, or a result of it? Which came first - the chicken, or the egg?

Hard questions like this should always make us stop and think. Is there any objective reason why I am a Christian? Or am I basing my faith on feelings alone? Sadly, a significant number of Christians go through life without thinking too hard about why they are Christians, and at the end of the day for some it may come down to largely emotional reasons.

The importance of emotion

We need to be sure that our personal faith is not based solely on emotion. We must ask ourselves: if our feelings were to fade, would we still have any reason to believe? Unless we do this, when times are hard or we face opposition, we may not feel quite so positive about being a Christian, and our faith may falter. Alternatively we may meet someone from another religion who is just as convinced of his or her faith as we are. Even though Christianity is not merely emotional, it is quite possible for an individual to have a faith that is nothing more than this.

Having said this, emotions are very important. God gave them to us and, whilst in our fallen state they may often be unreliable, they are not to be denied or ignored. Life would be very boring if we were without feelings of joy, acceptance and love. They are gifts from our loving Father and indeed we are commanded to 'be joyful always'.^[2] We should give thanks for our emotions and use them appropriately, but not be ruled by them, as they can be misleading. Scripture tells us that 'there is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death'.^[3] Furthermore, 'the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?'^[4] We are not to say, 'it feels so right, it can't be wrong', as it most certainly can be!

The basis of our faith: fact, not feeling

Christianity is based on objective, historical reality. Jesus actually lived on this earth, doing and saying the things that are recorded in the New Testament. The Gospel accounts have been verified as trustworthy both historically (through archaeology and the testimony of other ancient writers) and through manuscript analysis. The historical accounts in the Old Testament can be analysed in a similar way.^[5] Our conviction that Jesus died for us, rose from the dead and offers forgiveness

and eternal life to all who put their faith in him, is therefore based on what he said, and not on our emotions.

Hence our feelings are in one sense irrelevant, for they are simply a response to the reality of God's offer of forgiveness and our acceptance of this offer. It is reasonable to feel peace, joy and security if we have been forgiven. But the absence of these emotions does not negate the reality of the forgiveness. Doubt and depression may play havoc with our feelings, but they do not of themselves change our relationship with God. This is why our security in Christ is not necessarily in jeopardy just because our feelings change. If our doubts lead us actively to turn away from God and disobey him, that is another matter, but Christians can sometimes be plagued unnecessarily if they do not feel forgiven.

Another situation that can cause confusion and disturbance in sincere Christians is when those of other faiths appear to have peace of mind and conviction that their way is equally right. As Jesus' claims to be the only way to God are verifiable, then it follows logically that other religions cannot be alternative routes to God, even if they do contain some truth.[6] Peace and certainty in non-Christians does stem from a false sense of security, as the teaching it is based on is not true. The fact that a person sincerely believes something, or even dies for it, does not make it true - it is possible to be sincerely wrong.

It's just the way you were brought up!

A large number of Christians have been brought up in Christian families. It could be assumed, therefore, that the only real reason we are Christians is because our parents were. The implication of this is that if we had been brought up in a Hindu culture, we would have been Hindus. There is certainly a measure of truth in this, as being brought up in a particular religious tradition makes us much more likely to follow it ourselves. Most Hindu children in India will go on to be Hindus themselves, most Muslim children in Pakistan will go on to be Muslims in later life. This is what we would expect, for the effect of our upbringing is very strong in shaping who we become.

However, this alone can never invalidate Christianity. Many come to Christ from profoundly non-Christian backgrounds, including other religions, often facing tremendous opposition. There are now Christians who originate from virtually every language group, cultural background and religious tradition in the world. The only thing they have in common is their love for Christ. Secondly, many who are brought up as Christians later turn away from him. The effect of upbringing is never absolute.

Still, those of us from Christian families need to be sure that our faith is our own and not simply a hand-me-down from our parents. Faith cannot be inherited and if we do not own our faith it will be far more easily shaken and jettisoned if it is challenged. It is vital that we cultivate our own relationship with God and don't leave the job to someone else.

You're only in it for what you can get out of it!

Christians believe that they will escape Hell and go to Heaven as a consequence of their faith. Surely this is an emotional incentive to believe if ever there was one! So is Christian belief essentially selfish, a way of getting what we want? This can be another form of the original question, as it assumes that Christian belief is based on a subjective desire to avoid judgment (a judgment usually assumed to be a myth anyway), and not on any objective reality.

Of course there are advantages to being a Christian - it would be pretty pointless otherwise. It will often be these advantages that are instrumental in us becoming Christians - there is nothing wrong with a healthy aversion to eternal suffering! But it doesn't follow that these advantages are the only reason that we are Christians. Nor does it mean that following this path guarantees an easy life. Millions of Christians across the world face daily hardship and persecution because of their faith. They can lose jobs, be cast out from their family and sometimes be killed for their faith. Even in the apathetic West, the misunderstanding of friends and family can be hard to bear. It often seems easier to go with the flow of those around us and stay quiet about our Christian faith.

Indeed, we are promised a measure of persecution for our faith: 'In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.'[7]

Again, we need to come back to the real basis of our faith - the claims of Jesus Christ, that he died for our sins. If these convince us then there is no other option but to live as a Christian, accepting both the advantages and the disadvantages. The apostle Peter put it well, when many other disciples were deserting Jesus:

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.[8]

CS Lewis, the famous Christian author, tells of his own conversion experience, as he gradually became convinced of the truth of Christianity whilst working as a professor at Oxford University. Far from seeing it as a selfish way of getting what he wanted, he initially felt weighed down by the inevitability of a decision that he did not want to make, but could not avoid:

You must picture me alone in that room at Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.[9]

There is of course the perfect answer to any non-Christian who suggests that we only believe for selfish reasons. This is to reply that perhaps the only reason they refuse to become a Christian is for selfish reasons: perhaps they are not prepared to 'count the cost' of admitting that God is the Lord of creation and prefer running their own lives, or perhaps they do not want to face opposition from friends and family.

You're nothing but...

Another tack critics may take is to try and explain away our beliefs using some psychological theory of behaviour. For example they may take the view that our beliefs are programmed in our genes. They may refer to B.F. Skinner's theory of operant conditioning, that behaviour is determined by punishment and reward as a consequence of previous actions - that we learn to do what seems to bring the most reward. Or perhaps they will quote Sigmund Freud, who taught that behaviour stems from the interplay of subconscious drives.

We first need to acknowledge the element of truth in these ideas. Man is a complex being, and each of these models does explain his behaviour, emotions and beliefs to some extent. However it is over-simplistic to say that man is 'nothing but' a clever monkey, a stimulus response machine, a bundle of repressed drives or a complex chemical reaction. This reductionist attitude is sometimes called 'nothing buttery', as it boils us down to our constituent parts and seeks to explain us by those alone. The problem in this way of thinking is that it excludes free will and independent consciousness, which are a part of our everyday experience. Man's thoughts and behaviour are not all mechanically predetermined. If this were so we could not make objective judgments about anything. If our friends insist that everything we do or think is predetermined then this includes their thought that everything is predetermined, which therefore cannot be objectively true!

Neither is this the same as the Christian doctrine of predestination, since biblical predestination allows for human free will and responsibility.

A Hidden Agenda?

There is often a hidden agenda behind the question 'isn't it all psychological?' We need to be sensitive to this and pray for wisdom to answer in the most effective way. A person may feel that, as they were not brought up as a Christian, then it is not for them. In this case we need to emphasise Jesus' words that, 'whoever comes to me I will never drive away'.[10] We may go further, reminding them that, 'whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life'.[11] We can also point out biblical examples of believers who came from diverse religious backgrounds, such as the Roman centurion[12] or the Samaritan woman.[13]

Conclusion

Christianity is based on objective reality. In addition to this, there are often psychological factors operating that may make us more likely to be Christians, such as the support of other Christians or feelings of acceptance. Whilst it is true that some Christians will be guided more by the psychological factors (and we must guard against this in our own lives), once all of these are taken away, Christianity stands firm.

On the other hand, there are several psychological reasons why people might refuse to become Christians. These include a desire to avoid persecution and a refusal to acknowledge God's authority in our lives and accept a Christian lifestyle, but none of these are sufficient. The only proper response to the claims of Christ, once properly investigated, is to accept him as our Lord, along with the forgiveness that he freely offers.

References

1. Based on the Confident Christianity course www.cmf.org.uk/evang/conf/intro.htm
2. 1 Thes 5:16
3. Pr 14:12
4. Je 17:9
5. Pickering M, Saunders P. Deadly Questions - Isn't the Bible Full of Errors? Nucleus 2002; April:32-38
6. See Pickering M, Saunders P. Deadly Questions - Is Jesus the Only Way? Nucleus 2001; October:29-33
7. 2 Ti 3:12. See also Jn 15:20
8. Jn 6:66-69
9. Lewis CS. Surprised by Joy. Glasgow: Fount, 1977:182
10. Jn 6:37
11. Jn 3:16
12. Lk 7:1-10
13. Jn 4:4-42