



1

Introduction: Why Believe?

‘I can’t believe it. I simply can’t believe it!’

It wasn’t the first time Dr Campbell had encountered such a response from one of his patients, but on this occasion he had yet to discover quite how *literally* this particular patient meant it. Donald had just been told by Dr Campbell that he had been diagnosed with a very aggressive form of cancer that required immediate intensive treatment. Faced with this grim medical opinion, Donald simply refused to believe it.

‘Sorry, Doc. I don’t mean any disrespect. But I’ve never had a serious disease in my life. There’s no history of cancer in my family. What’s more, you need to understand that I have a wife, three children and a thriving career, and I’ve just been appointed chairman



Why Should I Believe Christianity?

of the wine club. I simply can't *afford* to have cancer! No offence, but I'm going to get a second opinion.'

So Donald got a second opinion. And a third, and a fourth, and a fifth. Every doctor ran the same tests and came back with the same diagnosis as Dr Campbell. Nevertheless, Donald repeated his refrain to every physician he consulted: 'I can't believe it!' And he wasn't kidding. He really *didn't* believe it. He believed instead that all the tests must have been mistaken, and so he continued to live his life as though his body was entirely cancer-free.

The reality was that Donald *did* have cancer, just as Dr Campbell had first told him. He didn't believe Dr Campbell's diagnosis. But *should* he have believed it? If so, why? Before you answer that question, take a step back and consider this more general question: *Why should anyone believe anything?*

IT'S ABOUT TRUTH (AND REASONS)

At the most fundamental level, we should believe things because they're *true*. Truth is ultimately what we're aiming for when we believe certain things and disbelieve other things. After all, no one thinks or says, 'I'm going to believe such-and-such, even though it's not true!' We recognize that our beliefs should be *true* beliefs rather than false beliefs. Ideally, Donald should have believed Dr Campbell's medical opinion because it was *true*. Whether or not his opinion was comforting, interesting,





Introduction: Why Believe?

exciting, terrifying, or anything else—none of that was relevant to whether Donald should have *believed* it. Beliefs should be aimed at *truth*.

But of course, that's not the whole story. If I were to make some surprising claim—for example, that there are chess-playing chimpanzees—you'd be entirely within your rights to ask, 'Why should I believe that?' And if I were to reply, 'You should believe it because it's *true*', you'd be thoroughly underwhelmed by that answer!

The problem is that my answer doesn't tell you anything you didn't already know. When we ask, 'Why should I believe that?' we're really asking, 'Why should I believe that's *true*?' And what we're looking for are *reasons*: reasons to believe that it really is true. Reasons usually take the form of information, argumentation, or evidence that connects what we already know with what we don't (yet) believe to be true. So a better reply to your question would have been, 'You should believe it because I read a story about it in the *Daily Mail*.' (Depending on your view of the *Daily Mail*, you might need *further* reasons to believe it, but at least that would be a start.)

The point is this: while truth is *ultimately* what matters when it comes to beliefs, we often can't immediately determine whether our beliefs (or the beliefs of others) are true or not. Normally we have to rely on *reasons*—reasons that point us towards the truth, reasons that





Why Should I Believe Christianity?

indicate whether our beliefs (or the beliefs of others) really are true. In the case of Donald's cancer diagnosis, he had very good reasons to believe what Dr Campbell had told him: the results of the various medical tests that had been performed, along with Dr Campbell's medical expertise and (we assume) his personal trustworthiness. The additional medical opinions Donald received gave him *further* good reasons to believe he had cancer. These served as *confirming* reasons. We can accept that Donald may also have had some reasons to *disbelieve* the diagnosis; for example, his previous good health and lack of any relevant family history. But in this case, as I'm sure you can appreciate, the reasons to believe considerably outweighed any reasons *not* to believe. Donald *should* have believed that he had cancer, no matter how psychologically or emotionally difficult it might have been to accept it.

WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE CHRISTIANITY?

This isn't a book about cancer, chimpanzees, or chess—at least, not directly. As you already know from the title, it's a book about Christianity.¹ But what we've just considered about beliefs, truth and reasons, is just as applicable to the question posed in the title of this book.

Why should you believe Christianity? Ultimately, I want to say, because it's *true*. In the final analysis, what really matters

1. I'll explain in more detail what I mean by 'Christianity' in chapter 3.





Introduction: Why Believe?

is whether the claims of Christianity are true—whether the world really is the way that Christianity says it is. For if Christianity really is true, that affects absolutely everything. The implications cannot be underestimated! As C. S. Lewis memorably put it, ‘Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of *no* importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.’²

But as we’ve seen, it’s not nearly enough for me or anyone else to say, ‘You should believe Christianity because it’s *true!*’ You should want to know what *reasons* there are to believe that Christianity is true. And that’s entirely reasonable! So in this book I want to offer some basic reasons to believe that Christianity is true, as opposed to various other alternatives one might consider, such as Islam, Mormonism, Buddhism, Secular Humanism, Atheistic Darwinism, and so on.

Before we turn to consider those various reasons, however, it’s important to clear away some common misunderstandings about the idea of truth—particularly the idea of *religious* truth.

‘IT’S ALL RELATIVE!’

American academic Allan Bloom opened his bestselling book *The Closing of the American Mind* with these words:

2. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 101.





Why Should I Believe Christianity?

‘There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.’³ Professor Bloom made that statement nearly three decades ago, and, if anything, the view that all truth is relative is even more widespread today. As various surveys indicate, a majority of people believe that truth varies from person to person or from culture to culture. What’s ‘true’ for one person or in one culture needn’t be ‘true’ for everyone or in all cultures. There’s no such thing as truth in any *absolute* or *universal* sense, relativists will insist. For such people, the idea that Christianity is ‘true’ wouldn’t be enough for them to believe it. Christianity might be ‘true’ for *other* people, but that doesn’t mean it has to be ‘true’ for them.

But is it really true that all truth is relative? (When the question is put that way, you can perhaps already see why the claim, ‘All truth is relative’, is very problematic.) There’s a sense in which *some* truth-claims are person-relative (‘Chocolate ice cream tastes great!’) or culture-relative (‘It’s polite to shake hands when you first meet someone’). But the idea that *all* truth-claims are relative is actually quite irrational.

Take for example the claim that water has the chemical formula H_2O . Is that person-relative or culture-

3. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 25.





Introduction: Why Believe?

relative? Surely not. If it's true then it's an objective scientific fact, no matter who makes that claim or what their cultural background. Or consider the claim that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941. That's a true historical claim, because that's what actually happened on December 7th of that year. It's an objective historical truth. It isn't 'true' for some people but 'false' for others. It's just *true*—end of story. The same goes for countless other examples.

Not only is relativism implausible, it's also self-defeating. Just consider: Is the statement, 'All truth is relative', meant to be taken as true? Presumably those who make that claim think it's true. But if it's true, then what it says must apply to the claim itself. If *all* truth is relative, that has to include the truth that *all truth is relative!* It follows that relativism can be true for some people or cultures, but not for other people or cultures. But that makes no sense. How could truth be absolute for some people but relative for others? The problem is this: the claim that all truth is relative appears to be an *absolute* and *universal* claim about the nature of truth. But if it's that kind of claim, then the claim itself cannot be true after all. It's a *self-defeating* claim. It's as self-defeating as sawing off the branch you're sitting on.





Why Should I Believe Christianity?

At this point someone might say, ‘Okay, I agree that some truth is objective. But religious claims aren’t like scientific claims or historical claims. I think all *religious* truth is relative. Religion is basically about personal values, goals and lifestyle choices. And those are obviously person-relative or culture-relative. They aren’t based on objective facts.’

Such a perspective is quite common in our day, but it’s problematic on several levels. Its central flaw is that it’s based on a false view of religion. It may be true that *some* religions are only about personal values, goals and lifestyle choices. But that’s definitely not true for some of the major world religions. Christianity, Islam and Judaism all make significant *historical* claims about what took place in the past. For example, while Christianity and Islam take very different views of Jesus, both maintain that Jesus was a real historical person who lived in Palestine in the first century and performed miracles. If that’s true, that’s *objectively* true. Either there was such a person or there wasn’t. Either He performed miracles or He didn’t. Such claims can’t be ‘true’ for some people but not ‘true’ for other people. They’re questions of objective historical fact.⁴

4. Actually, the phrase ‘true for me’ is ambiguous. It might simply mean ‘what I personally believe’, in which case it would make sense to say, ‘That’s true for me but not for you.’ However, that wouldn’t be *relativism*. It would just be a recognition of the obvious fact that people have different beliefs. Religious relativism is the view that there are no objective facts, no objectively right answers, when it comes to matters of religion.





Introduction: Why Believe?

Let's take this a little further. One of the earliest Christian creeds, the Apostles' Creed, states that Jesus 'suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried', and that 'the third day he rose again from the dead'. The claim that Jesus was executed by crucifixion but then rose from the dead has always been one of the defining claims of Christianity. Islam, on the other hand, denies that Jesus was crucified and resurrected. Could this central claim of Christianity be only *relatively* true? Could it be 'true' for some people (e.g. Christians) but not 'true' for other people (e.g. Muslims)?⁵

It's very hard to make sense of that idea—and that's certainly not how Christians and Muslims have understood their own beliefs. Whether or not Jesus was crucified is a matter of objective historical fact. Either He was or He wasn't. If that central claim of Christianity is true, it has to be true *period*—for everyone, everywhere, no matter who they are or what they happen to believe or feel about it. And the same applies if that central claim of Christianity *isn't* true.

In sum, while the claim that all religious truth is relative has a superficial plausibility, it doesn't stand up to

5. Again, this isn't about whether Christians and Muslims have *different beliefs*. Obviously they do! Rather, it's about which of those beliefs line up with what *actually* took place in first-century Palestine.





Why Should I Believe Christianity?

scrutiny when you consider the actual truth-claims made by the major world religions. Any particular religion, such as Islam or Christianity, could be true or it could be false. What it *can't* be is 'relatively true'—'true' for some people and 'false' for others, all at the same time!

'WHO CAN REALLY KNOW?'

Relativism is one way to dismiss religious truth-claims. Another way is *skepticism*. Whereas the relativist says, 'All religious truth-claims are relative', the skeptic says, 'Even if some religious claims are objectively true, no one can really *know* whether those claims are actually true.' Skeptics are *doubters*. They doubt that anyone can know whether any of the central claims of a religion are true.

I'm convinced not only that Christianity is *true*, but also that it's possible to *know* that Christianity is true. Bold as it may sound, I believe I know that the major claims of Christianity are true, and I believe that you, too—if you're open to considering them—can come to know that they are true. In the rest of this book I'll try to explain how that can be so. But at this juncture I want to say a few words about what it means to *know* something, to clear away a few more misunderstandings.

I often come across people who think that in order to know something you must have absolute, knock-down, drag-out, infallible, irrefutable certainty about it. If there's the slightest room for doubt about something—



Introduction: Why Believe?

the slimmest possibility of error—then you don't really know it. But if that were really so, we wouldn't know most of what we take for granted as knowledge. I think I know, for example, that I have a wife and three children. In theory, there's a remote possibility I'm wrong about that. Perhaps I'm the victim of an elaborate hoax along the lines of *The Truman Show* or I'm inside a virtual-reality simulation like *The Matrix*! But the mere possibility of being mistaken isn't a good reason to deny that I know what I think I know. Likewise, I know what I had for breakfast yesterday and where I parked my car this morning even though I *could* be wrong on both counts. You and I both know that Pearl Harbor was bombed in 1941, even though our knowledge is based on a chain of fallible human testimony.⁶ You don't need to know something *infallibly* in order to know it.

What's more, it can be reasonable to believe something even if you wouldn't say you *know* it's true. For example, I wouldn't say I *know* that it will be sunny tomorrow, but based on the weather over the last few days, and the fact that three independent weather forecasters have made the same prediction, I think it's reasonable to believe that it will be sunny tomorrow.

6. In fact, almost everything we call 'general knowledge' is based on what we've been told by others: parents, teachers, textbooks, newspapers, websites, and so on, any of which *could* be mistaken.



Why Should I Believe Christianity?

Even if we don't know that some claim is true, we can still have good reasons to believe it. Think again of Donald's cancer diagnosis. We might not want to go so far as to say that Donald should have *known* that he had cancer after that first meeting with Dr Campbell, but at least we can say that Donald had good reasons—very strong reasons in fact—to believe that he had cancer.

You may have heard it suggested that we should approach everything with a 'healthy skepticism'. The idea is that our 'default' position should be one of *doubt* towards any beliefs or claims. One problem with such a stance is that it's self-defeating. You'd have to start by doubting the claim that we should start by doubting any claim! You'd also have to doubt other things that a 'healthy skepticism' has to take for granted: your sanity, your ability to reason, even your own existence. There's nothing healthy about that radical form of skepticism. Our goal shouldn't be to doubt whatever we can, but rather to examine our reasons for believing as we do.

As I stated earlier, I think you can *know* that Christianity is true. But even if I'm wrong about that, you can still have excellent reasons to believe that Christianity is true. And that's what this book is all about.

'YOU CAN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH!'

One of my favorite movies is the military-courtroom thriller *A Few Good Men*, which stars Tom Cruise as



Introduction: Why Believe?

Lieutenant Daniel Kaffee, a hotshot navy lawyer, and Jack Nicholson as Colonel Nathan Jessup, the intimidating commander of the U.S. Marine base at Guantanamo Bay. The story centers on the trial of two soldiers charged with ‘conduct unbecoming of a Marine’ because of their direct involvement in the death of a fellow Marine. In the climactic courtroom scene, Kaffee calls Jessup to the witness stand and questions him intensely about how the chain of command works on the base. Increasingly frustrated with Kaffee’s dogged questioning, Jessup barks at him:

‘You want answers?’

‘I think I’m entitled to,’ replies Kaffee.

‘*You want answers?*’

‘I want the truth!’

‘*You can’t handle the truth!*’ explodes Jessup.

Nicholson’s comeback has become one of the most quoted lines in movie history. In the context of the movie’s storyline, the lesson is that there are difficult truths about how the military has to operate in some circumstances to protect our precious freedoms, truths that we would rather not know about or face up to. Yet the exchange between Kaffee and Jessup captures a more universal lesson about how fallible and flawed humans often relate to the truth.



Why Should I Believe Christianity?

On the one hand, many of us like to think we value the truth above all else. When it comes to any important issue of life, we put ourselves with Daniel Kaffee: ‘I want the truth!’ Whatever reality is, we want to *know* it. We don’t want to live with false beliefs. We don’t want to live a lie. Even so, one truth that’s particularly difficult for us to accept is that the truth is sometimes too difficult for us to accept! Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the truth always turned out to be the way we *want* it to be? Reassuring. Comforting. Not disruptive to our lives. Not demanding anything too strenuous from us. Not requiring us to make any radical changes to the way we approach the world. Yet sometimes, as our friend Donald discovered, the truth just isn’t like that. And sometimes—like Donald and Lieutenant Kaffee—we can’t handle the truth.

The reason I mention this is to drive home the main point of this opening chapter. Ultimately what we should be aiming for are *true* beliefs—not beliefs that are merely convenient, comforting, inoffensive, or self-affirming. And when it comes to believing Christianity, what matters above all else is *whether or not it’s true*. If it really is true—and if we have strong reasons to think that it is true—then we should believe it. If it really isn’t true—and if we have strong reasons to think that it isn’t true—then we should believe something else.



Introduction: Why Believe?

No doubt some people believe Christianity simply because they *want* it to be true. They like what Christianity teaches. By the same token, there are people who *don't* believe Christianity simply because they *don't* want it to be true. Neither stance is intellectually responsible. The responsible approach is to consider the *reasons* for and against the *truth* of Christianity, and to draw the most reasonable conclusions we can. My hope is that this book will make a helpful contribution towards that end.

WHAT THIS BOOK DOES AND DOESN'T DO

As I draw this introductory chapter to a close, I want to be clear about what this book aims to accomplish and also what it *doesn't*. The title of the book is *Why Should I Believe Christianity?* and I want to give a basic answer to that question by offering what I think are some very good reasons to believe that Christianity is true. However, I also want to say some important things about *how* one should go about answering that momentous question.

One of the points I'll make in the next two chapters is that Christianity isn't merely a lifestyle, a moral code, a social identity, or a set of abstract theological doctrines. It's much more than any of those things. Christianity is an all-encompassing *worldview* and it needs to be understood and evaluated on that basis. Only once we



Why Should I Believe Christianity?

assess Christianity as a distinctive worldview, alongside competing worldviews, will we be in a position to appreciate why anyone should believe it.

So my overarching goal is to explain, with minimal philosophical mumbo jumbo, what it means to say that Christianity is a worldview and why we should believe that it's the *correct* worldview. This book is a *summary introduction*. It isn't meant to be a comprehensive case for Christianity that goes into great detail on every point. However, at the end you'll find my recommendations for further reading on some of the important issues I discuss.

The other point to underscore is that this book doesn't directly address the various objections and criticisms that people level *against* Christianity (although I do touch on some of them along the way). As I explained earlier, if we're serious about considering the *truth* question—'Is Christianity true?'—then we ought to consider both reasons *for* and *against* believing that Christianity is true. This book focuses on the positive side of the truth question: reasons *for* believing Christianity. People have offered various reasons *against* believing Christianity: the problem of evil, apparent contradictions in the Bible, alleged conflicts between modern science and the Bible, the exclusivist claims of Christianity, the bad behavior of Christians throughout history, and so forth. These are



Introduction: Why Believe?

all important issues, and they deserve a closer analysis than I can provide in a book like this. For that very reason, other books in this series will address such criticisms directly and in detail.

If that sounds a bit like a sales pitch, I suppose I have to admit that it is to some extent! Joking aside, however, my point is that this book isn't meant to stand alone. Be that as it may, I hope you'll find what follows helpful and thought-provoking as you consider for yourself the question, *Why should I believe Christianity?*

