PART 1

THE LEAP OF DOUBT

ONE

There Can't Be Just *One* True Religion

'How could there be just one true faith?' asked Blair, a twenty-four-year-old woman living in Manhattan. 'It's arrogant to say your religion is superior and try to convert everyone else to it. Surely all the religions are equally good and valid for meeting the needs of their particular followers.'

'Religious exclusivity is not just narrow – it's dangerous,' added Geoff, a twenty-something British man also living in New York City. 'Religion has led to untold strife, division, and conflict. It may be the greatest enemy of peace in the world. If Christians continue to insist that they have 'the truth' – and if other religions do this as well – the world will never know peace.'[1]

DURING my nearly two decades in New York City, I've had numerous opportunities to ask people, 'What is your biggest problem with Christianity? What troubles you the most about its beliefs or how it is practised?' One of the most frequent answers I have heard over the years can be summed up in one word: *exclusivity.*

I was once invited to be the Christian representative in a panel discussion at a local college along with a Jewish rabbi and a Muslim

imam. The panellists were asked to discuss the differences among religions. The conversation was courteous, intelligent and respectful in tone. Each speaker affirmed that there were significant, irreconcilable differences between the major faiths. A case in point was the person of Jesus. We all agreed on the statement: 'If Christians are right about Jesus being God, then Muslims and Jews fail in a serious way to love God as God really is, but if Muslims and Jews are right that Jesus is not God but rather a teacher or prophet, then Christians fail in a serious way to love God as God really is.' The bottom line was – we couldn't all be equally right about the nature of God.

Several of the students were quite disturbed by this. One student insisted that what mattered was to believe in God and to be a loving person yourself. To insist that one faith has a better grasp of the truth than others was intolerant. Another student looked at us clerics and said in his frustration, 'We will *never* come to know peace on earth if religious leaders keep on making such exclusive claims!'

It is widely believed that one of the main barriers to world peace is religion, and especially the major traditional religions with their exclusive claims to superiority. It may surprise you that though I am a Christian minister I agree with this. Religion, generally speaking, tends to create a slippery slope in the heart. Each religion informs its followers that they have 'the truth', and this naturally leads them to feel superior to those with differing beliefs. Also, a religion tells its followers that they are saved and connected to God by devotedly performing that truth. This moves them to separate from those who are less devoted and pure in life. Therefore, it is easy for one religious group to stereotype and caricature other ones. Once this situation exists it can easily spiral down into the marginalisation of others or even to active oppression, abuse, or violence against them.

Once we recognise how religion erodes peace on earth, what can we do about it? There are three approaches that civic and cultural leaders around the world are using to address the divisiveness of religion. There are calls to outlaw religion, condemn religion or at least to radically privatise it.[2] Many people are investing great hope in them. Unfortunately, I don't believe any of them will be effective. Indeed, I'm afraid they will only aggravate the situation.

1. Outlaw religion

One way to deal with the divisiveness of religion has been to control or even forbid it with a heavy hand. There were several massive efforts to do this in the twentieth century. Soviet Russia, Communist China, the Khmer Rouge and (in a different way) Nazi Germany were all determined to tightly control religious practice in an effort to stop it from dividing society or eroding the power of the state. The result, however, was not more peace and harmony, but more oppression. The tragic irony of the situation is brought out by Alister McGrath in his history of atheism:

> *The 20th century gave rise to one of the greatest and most distressing paradoxes of human history: that the greatest intolerance and violence of that century were practised by those who believed that religion caused intolerance and violence.*[3]

Going hand in hand with such efforts was a widespread belief in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that religion would weaken and die out as the human race became more technologically advanced. This view saw religion as playing a role in human evolution. We once needed religion to help us cope with a very

frightening, incomprehensible world. But as we become more scientifically sophisticated and more able to understand and control our own environment, our need for religion would diminish, it was thought.[4]

But this has not happened, and this 'secularisation thesis' is now largely discredited.[5] Virtually all major religions are growing in number of adherents. Christianity's growth, especially in the developing world, has been explosive. There are now six times more Anglicans in Nigeria alone than there are in all of the United States. There are more Presbyterians in Ghana than in the United States and Scotland combined. Korea has gone from 1 per cent to 40 per cent Christian in a hundred years, and experts believe the same thing is going to happen in China. If there are half a billion Chinese Christians fifty years from now, that will change the course of human history.[6] In most cases, the Christianity that is growing is not the more secularised, belief-thin versions predicted by the sociologists. Rather, it is a robust supernaturalist kind of faith, with belief in miracles, scriptural authority and personal conversion.

Because of the vitality of religious faith in the world, efforts to suppress or control it often serve only to make it stronger. When the Chinese Communists expelled Western missionaries after the Second World War, they thought they were killing off Christianity in China. Instead, this move only served to make the leadership of the Chinese church more indigenous and therefore to strengthen it.

Religion is not just a temporary thing that helped us adapt to our environment. Rather it is a permanent and central aspect of the human condition. This is a bitter pill for secular, non-religious people to swallow. Everyone wants to think that they are in the mainstream, that they are not extremists. But robust religious beliefs dominate the world. There is no reason to expect that to change.

2. Condemn religion

Religion is not going away and its power cannot be diminished by government control. But can't we – via education and argument – find ways to socially discourage religions that claim to have 'the truth' and that try to convert others to their beliefs? Couldn't we find ways to urge all of our citizens, whatever their religious beliefs, to admit that each religion or faith is just one of many equally valid paths to God and ways to live in the world?

This approach creates an environment in which it is considered unenlightened and outrageous to make exclusive religious claims, even in personal conversations. It does so by stating and restating certain axioms that eventually achieve the status of common sense. Those who deviate from them are stigmatised as foolish or dangerous. Unlike the first strategy, this approach to the divisiveness of religion is having some effect. It cannot ultimately succeed, however, because at its heart is a fatal inconsistency, even perhaps a hypocrisy, that will eventually lead to the collapse of this way of thinking. What follows are several of these axioms and the problems with each.

'All major religions are equally valid and basically teach the same thing.'

This assertion is so common that one journalist recently wrote that anyone who believed that 'there are inferior religions' is a right-wing extremist.[7] Do we really want to say that the Branch Davidians or religions requiring child sacrifice are not inferior to any other faith? The great majority of people would almost certainly agree that they are.

Most people who assert the equality of religions have in mind the major world faiths, not splinter sects. This was the form of the

objection I got from the student the night I was on the panel. He contended that doctrinal differences between Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism were superficial and insignificant, that they all believed in the same God. But when I asked him who that God was, he described him as an all-loving Spirit in the universe. The problem with this position is its inconsistency. It insists that doctrine is unimportant, but at the same time assumes doctrinal beliefs about the nature of God that are at loggerheads with those of all the major faiths. Buddhism doesn't believe in a personal God at all. Judaism, Christianity and Islam believe in a God who holds people accountable for their beliefs and practices and whose attributes could not all be reduced to love. Ironically, the insistence that doctrines do not matter is really a doctrine itself. It holds a specific view of God, which is touted as superior and more enlightened than the beliefs of most major religions. So the proponents of this view do the very thing they forbid in others.

'Each religion sees part of spiritual truth, but none can see the whole truth.'

Sometimes this point is illustrated with the story of the blind men and the elephant. Several blind men were walking along and came upon an elephant that allowed them to touch and feel it. 'This creature is long and flexible like a snake' said the first blind man, holding the elephant's trunk. 'Not at all – it is thick and round like a tree trunk,' said the second blind man, feeling the elephant's leg. 'No, it is large and flat,' said the third blind man, touching the elephant's side. Each blind man could feel only part of the elephant – none could envisage the entire elephant. In the same way, it is argued, the religions of the world each have a grasp on part of the truth about spiritual reality, but none can see the whole elephant or claim to have a comprehensive vision of the truth.

This illustration backfires on its users. The story is told from the point of view of someone who is not blind. How could you know that each blind man only sees part of the elephant unless *you* claim to be able to see the whole elephant?

> *There is an appearance of humility in the protestation that the truth is much greater than any one of us can grasp, but if this is used to invalidate all claims to discern the truth it is in fact an arrogant claim to a kind of knowledge which is superior to [all others] . . . We have to ask: 'What is the [absolute] vantage ground from which* you *claim to be able to relativize all the absolute claims these different scriptures make?'*[8]

How could you possibly know that no religion can see the whole truth unless you yourself have the superior, comprehensive knowledge of spiritual reality you just claimed that none of the religions have?

'Religious belief is too culturally and historically conditioned to be "truth".'

When I first came to New York City nearly twenty years ago, I more often heard the objection that all religions are equally true. Now, however, I'm more likely to be told that all religions are equally false. The objection goes like this: 'All moral and spiritual claims are the product of our particular historical and cultural moment, and therefore no one should claim they can know the Truth, since no one can judge whether one assertion about spiritual and moral reality is truer than another.' The sociologist Peter L. Berger reveals the serious inconsistency in this common assumption.

In his book *A Rumor of Angels* Berger recounts how the twentieth century had uncovered 'the sociology of knowledge', namely

THE REASON FOR GOD

Belief in an age of scepticism

Timothy Keller

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To Kathy, the Valiant

About the Author

Timothy Keller was born in Pennsylvania and educated at Bucknell University, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and Westminster Theological Seminary. He became a Christian at university, was ordained by the Presbyterian Church in America and worked as a pastor for nine years.

He was asked to start Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan in 1989, and under his leadership the church's congregation experienced unprecedented growth from 50 to 5000 members. His target audience consists mainly of urban professionals, whom he believes exhibit disproportionate influence over the culture and its ideas.

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PART 2: THE REASONS FOR FAITH

Foreword

I'm delighted with this opportunity to address the British readers of this volume. I have had the chance to visit and minister in the UK nearly annually for three decades, and the material in this book reflects to some degree my experiences here.

In recent years I have had the opportunity, in both cities and on university campuses of Great Britain, to spend three extended periods speaking about the Christian faith to those who are highly sceptical of it. It became clear that people in our western societies are becoming both less informed about the content of Christianity and less interested in it. I came to see that, to even crack open a not-particularly-short book like *The Reason for God* required that you thought the subject relevant enough to be worth your time.

My experience in the UK in the last few years was one of the reasons I wrote *Making Sense of God,* a book that, as it were, starts further back. Christianity seems implausible to people largely because they have imbibed a set of cultural beliefs about how faith and reason work, how identity is formed, how moral values are arrived at and the nature of freedom. These beliefs are so deeply held and so taken for granted that they do not appear to people *as* beliefs, but just as 'the way things are'.

Nevertheless, they are indeed tenets of faith, though not usually very well thought out or grounded. It is only fair that sceptical

people should provide as much justification for their beliefs as they ask of Christians for theirs. If you believe that reason without faith gives you an accurate view of reality, or that moral values such as universal human rights exist, the question is, *why* do you believe in those things? And why should anyone else believe what you believe? It's not enough to say, 'That's just the way things are'. Secular people today, like everyone else in history, have beliefs about how meaning is discovered, how suffering is faced, how identity is developed and how hope is maintained. Yet often their own beliefs about the universe don't give them very good resources for those inevitable human needs, while Christianity, I would argue, provides unparalleled ones.

If you are not convinced at all that Christianity has much to offer, you might want to look at *Making Sense of God*. But in any case, there's no way for a person to arrive at a stable Christian faith without thinking out the positive reasons to believe it, as are laid out in *The Reason for God*. In days past, Christianity was assumed to be 'just the way things are'. It was quite possible to hold a Christian faith through all the ups and downs of life without answering the question 'Why should I believe it?' since everyone you knew believed it, too. But of course those days are long over, and no one will be able to enjoy the astonishing resources of Christianity for meaning, satisfaction, identity and hope unless they are convinced in mind and heart that it is true, despite the many assertions to the contrary.

The Reason for God is an effort to help the thoughtful person arrive at that point. It is by no means the only or ultimate book to look at both the objections to and the evidence for the Christian faith. No book is for everyone and, if you find *The Reason for God* less than convincing, I'd urge you to read at least one more such presentation. Other good volumes are cited in *The Reason for God* and also at the end of *Making Sense of God*.

In the end, it may be that the best way to understand both the

content and the attraction and relevance of Christianity is to read the accounts in the gospels about Jesus. To hear Jesus' actual teaching, and to see him with the mind's eye, is the most profound way to understand why Christianity has had the power to not only transform the old pagan Roman world, but still to be growing much faster than the population across the Global South. In any case, anyone who wants to understand the world today needs to understand Jesus. And innumerable people who began such exploration have discovered personally way why he is so supremely compelling.

Some may naturally ask if we can trust the reliability of those accounts. I believe that we can, and that the there is more scholarly evidence for that today than at any point in my lifetime. Books like Paul R. Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition*, and Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* give formidable arguments and supplement older works. Bauckham's little book, *Jesus: A Very Short Introduction*, for example provides a good critique of the older, too-sceptical approach that refused to give any historical credence to the New Testament accounts. (See chapter 2, pp. 6–17)

So I appreciate this opportunity to keep readers from thinking that *The Reason for God* or any book could stand alone as a way to come to Christian faith. I urge readers to consult other works that will supplement this one, and, above all, to read the New Testament accounts of Jesus and engage with him directly. That is, of course, because I do not think he is merely a religious figure but a living power, and my sincerest hope is that you will encounter him for yourself.

Timothy Keller
New York, 2017

Introduction

I find your lack of faith – disturbing.

—Darth Vader

The Enemies Are Both Right

There is a great gulf today between what is popularly known as liberalism and conservatism. Each side demands that you not only disagree with but disdain the other as (at best) crazy or (at worst) evil. This is particularly true when religion is the point at issue. Progressives cry out that fundamentalism is growing rapidly and non-belief is stigmatised. They point out that politics has turned toward the right, supported by mega-churches and mobilised orthodox believers. Conservatives endlessly denounce what they see as an increasingly sceptical and relativistic society. Major universities, media companies and elite institutions are heavily secular, they say, and they control the culture.

Which is it? Is scepticism or faith on the ascendancy in the world today? The answer is Yes. The enemies are both right. Scepticism, fear and anger towards traditional religion are growing in power and influence. But at the same time, robust, orthodox belief in the traditional faiths is growing as well.

The non-churchgoing population in the United States and Europe is steadily increasing.[1] The number of Americans answering 'no religious preference' to poll questions has skyrocketed, having doubled or even tripled in the last decade.[2] A century ago most US universities shifted from a formally Christian foundation to an overtly secular one.[3] As a result, those with traditional religious beliefs have little foothold in any of the institutions of cultural power. But even as more and more people identify themselves as having 'no religious preference', certain churches with supposedly obsolete beliefs in an infallible Bible and miracles are growing in the United States and exploding in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Even in much of Europe, there is some growth in church attendance.[4] And despite the secularism of most universities and colleges, religious faith is growing in some corners of academia. It is estimated that 10 to 25 per cent of all the teachers and professors of philosophy in America are orthodox Christians, up from less than 1 per cent just thirty years ago.[5] Prominent academic Stanley Fish may have had an eye on that trend when he reported, 'When Jacques Derrida died [in November 2004] I was called by a reporter who wanted to know what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion.'[6]

In short, the world is polarising over religion. It is getting both more religious and less religious at the same time. There was once a confident belief that secular European countries were the harbingers for the rest of the world. Religion, it was thought, would thin out from its more robust, supernaturalist forms or die out altogether. But the theory that technological advancement brings inevitable secularisation is now being scrapped or radically rethought.[7] Even Europe may not face a secular future, with Christianity growing modestly and Islam growing exponentially.

The Two Camps

I speak from an unusual vantage point on this two-edged phenomenon. I was raised in a mainline Lutheran church in eastern Pennsylvania. When I reached my teens in the early 1960s, the time came for me to attend confirmation class, a two-year course that covered Christian beliefs, practices and history. Its aim was to bring young people into a fuller understanding of the faith, so they could publicly commit to it. My teacher for the first year was a retired minister. He was quite traditional and conservative, speaking often of the danger of hell and the need for great faith. In the second year of the course, however, the instructor was a new, young cleric just out of seminary. He was a social activist and was filled with deep doubts about traditional Christian doctrine. It was almost like being instructed in two different religions. In the first year, we stood before a holy, just God whose wrath could only be turned aside at great effort and cost. In the second year, we heard of a spirit of love in the universe, who mainly required that we work for human rights and the liberation of the oppressed. The main question I wanted to ask our instructors was, 'Which one of you is lying?' But fourteen-year-olds are not so bold, and I just kept my mouth shut.

My family later found its way to a more conservative church in a small Methodist denomination. For several years this strengthened what could be called the 'Hellfire Layer' of my religious formation, although the pastor and people there were personally as gentle as could be. Then I went off to one of those fine, liberal, smaller universities in the Northeast, which quickly began to throw water on the hellfire in my imagination.

The history and philosophy departments were socially radicalised and were heavily influenced by the neo-Marxist critical theory of the Frankfurt School. In 1968, this was heady stuff. The

social activism was particularly attractive, and the critique of American bourgeoisie society was compelling, but its philosophical underpinnings were confusing to me. I seemed to see two camps before me, and there was something radically wrong with both of them. The people most passionate about social justice were moral relativists, while the morally upright didn't seem to care about the oppression going on all over the world. I was emotionally drawn to the former path – what young person wouldn't be? Liberate the oppressed and sleep with who you wanted! But I kept asking the question, 'If morality is relative, why isn't social justice as well?' This seemed to be a blatant inconsistency in my professors and their followers. Yet now I saw the stark contradiction in the traditional churches. How could I turn back to the kind of orthodox Christianity that supported segregation in the South and apartheid in South Africa? Christianity began to seem very unreal to me, though I was unable to discern a viable alternative way of life and thought.

I didn't know it at the time, but this spiritual 'unreality' stemmed from three barriers that lay across my path. During my college years, these three barriers eroded and my faith became vital and life-affecting. The first barrier was an intellectual one. I was confronted with a host of tough questions about Christianity: 'What about other religions? What about evil and suffering? How could a loving God judge and punish? Why believe anything at all?' I began to read books and arguments on both sides of these issues and slowly but surely, Christianity began to make more and more sense. The rest of this book lays out why I still think so.

The second barrier was an interior, personal one. As a child, the plausibility of a faith can rest on the authority of others, but when we reach adulthood there is a need for personal, firsthand experience as well. While I had 'said my prayers' for years, and while I sometimes had that inspirational, aesthetic sense of wonder at the sight of a sea or mountain, I had never experienced God's presence