

Religious truth in the light of the book, *The Reason for God - Belief in an Age of Scepticism* by Timothy Keller

Let us examine a popular book, *The Reason for God*, that aims to show that the Christian faith is a good thing. If we can refute this book then there is no reason for anybody to consider Christianity.

relativism

Relativism tells you that the truth is whatever you want to believe so your truth is not my truth. He warns about relativism and how it is hypocritical in that it says the rule is that nothing is really right or wrong so it takes a razor to the throat of those who say morality is real. "Relativists exempt themselves from their own razor" by claiming and acting as if they are right. "Relativity relativises itself" says Berger who notes that we cannot be relativist all the way and of course relativists cherry-pick relativism and often do believe in morals after all. It is a concern that relativism could be a symptom of people refusing to do the hard work in getting at moral truth. As we progress through our examination of Keller, he is himself relativist for his morals do not make any sense. What would you expect if he is a real Christian?

However at least it is good that he says truth is truth whatever we want to think. There is no point in worrying about religion being true if relativism is true! Let us see how he sees affairs of the spirit!

religion

Noting that many today think religious faith is dangerous and silly, Keller says that a sceptic may have faith in some form or another lurking away behind their reasoning. He says that sceptics see themselves as unbiased when they reject religious faith as untrue but in fact they are talking from a belief or faith position. They have faith that the experts have informed them right that the religion lacks credibility. Keller says they already have faith that there cannot just be one religion that is right. He points out that those who say that each one has to decide moral truth for himself is an statement of faith for not a agree with it and you cannot prove to anybody that they should guide themselves instead of taking guidance.

If Keller is right then surely it warns us how faith can block you from seeing the truth whatever that is!

Keller agrees with critics of religion 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." He goes on to say that they think they are right and that leads to them working against and dividing themselves from those who think differently and soon they spiral down even to oppression or violence against them. He goes on to say that any attempt to outlaw religion, condemn religion as bad, or to pretend they are all as good as one another are not solutions and indeed only make it worse. His argument is that religion still is a better option than secularism or anything else even though it has a dark side for the simple reason that religion does not and cannot just go away. The persistence of religion is not a reason to keep out of secularism. It is a reason to get involved. The plague had to be battled against no matter how persistent or powerful or prevalent it was.

Christians claim that the worst intolerance and warmongering and persecuting ever, was carried out by people who believed that religion necessarily led to bigotry. They say that the idea that religion and bigotry and intolerance all went together hand in hand led unbelievers to persecute religion (page 5, *The Reason for God*). But if religion really and necessarily leads to such evils then is it intolerance and warmongering to outlaw religion? Not in principle but in practice it is unnecessary to ban religion. Had those who persecuted religion been more confident in their own philosophies and adept at popularising them they would not have needed to persecute religion. It was because they didn't believe strongly enough in their own secularism and naturalistic philosophy and were scared religion might be true that they persecuted. When one religion contradicts the other in fundamental matters, it is clear that it is religion more than unbelief that should lead to insecurity and doubt and violence.

Belief in God certainly and necessarily implies that intolerance is a duty in relation to sceptics and unbelievers. If there is no God looking after people, then it is plainly evil and wrong to hurt them. It isn't so bad if there is a God who can intervene and mend things. Religionists claim that unbelievers can reason that it is okay to hurt people - that because there is no God they can do what they want even if it hurts others. But can the unbelievers reason that way? If they do they are being twisted. They are actually unreasoning. If there is no God we have to step in and help. We have to either help or not help so why not help? We are still involved anyway.

He also writes, "If we get our identity from our ethnicity or socioeconomic status, then we have to feel superior to those of other classes and races" (page 168). So the real culture war as he says is inside us - in our hearts. He should mention religious identity. Religion really should disappear for it is something extra to cause identity troubles over as if there is not enough already.

one true faith?

Some Christians claim that Christianity is not a religion for it is based on obeying God out of gratitude whereas in religion you obey God out of fear (page 180, *The Reason for God*). But even those who deny that we must do good works and obey God to earn salvation and say we have his love just the way we are fear reprimands and chastisements from him if they do not live as he asks. They argue that sin has hideous consequences other than punishment so it is all very daunting.

Is it arrogant to teach that your religion is right and to try and convert others to it? John Hick would say yes. He would say this because there are people just as clever as you who believe different things and who will never convert. He would say that you are arrogant for insisting that you are right when others as clever as you if not more believe that you are wrong.

Christians reply as follows. They say that if you assume you can't tell which faith is true, you are making a religious act of faith that God has not established any true faith or that he has let the evidence disappear if he has (page 12, *The Reason for God*). But it is not necessarily religious. It is not religious or an act of faith if you think there is no God. You put faith in persons not in facts. Also, it is more in tune with tolerance to hold that there is no faith that can be known as true. But Christians will reply that if a faith is the one true faith, it is hardly tolerant to it to say that there is no one true faith. But the fact remains that we consider things true based on what experts say. This is true of religion as in everything else.

Christians say that it is intolerance to accuse people of arrogance for saying they have the one true faith. Christians say that if we can't call our faith the true faith because there are others who say it is wrong who are smarter than us or as smart, then we contradict ourselves if we say that there is no true faith when others as clever as us if not more say there is.

Consider this. We have to say there is a true faith or there is not. The assumption that there is not is the least narrow. The assumption that there is not is the least dangerous for we clearly cannot depend on religious experts to correctly inform us what the true faith is.

Religion says that if you assume that there is no true faith, that is an act of religious faith. Many religionists that say that it is faith, hope to persuade us that since we assume a religious faith no matter what we do, we ought to assume what they assume. They indicate that we should assume that there is a true faith and that this true faith is their version of faith or both.

If we want a true faith, we should pick the one that is the most tolerant. And this would naturally be the view that the true faith is that there is no true faith only human strivings towards truth and that all faiths have value.

is evil pointless and therefore proof against God?

One reason truth matters is that without it we are at the mercy of evil and may not know what it is.

Another complaint made by Christians against unbelievers in the existence of a loving God is that they assume that much evil and suffering is pointless. The unbelievers contend that a God who can stop pointless evil but who lets it happen would be evil. So the Christian response is that just because we see evil and suffering or some of it as pointless does not mean that it really is pointless (page 23, *The Reason for God*).

Some Christians say that evil is not proof that God is a fiction but it can be considered evidence that he is not real. Other Christians often claim that evil and suffering isn't evidence against the existence of an all-powerful and all-loving God (page 23, *The Reason for God*). Keller points out how some worry about God and evil co-existing or not as a philosophical question while others take it very personally and consider it offensive if anybody says God has the right to let their baby suffer. Some people I would add look at the question if evil can happen if there really is a good God both philosophically or personally.

Keller objects to those who think some evil is pointless and thus makes God unlikely to be real that they are assuming it is pointless when they cannot know that. I would object to people saying that evil can be pointless and then saying that makes God unlikely. It does not make him unlikely it makes him impossible. The word unlikely is itself evil for it is watering down the evil. It makes no sense to say, "If all evil were pointless that would refute God." The quantity is not what matters. It is the principle. It is cruel to worry about quantities and it is simply clinical and psychopathic.

Evil looking pointless does not mean it is. So Keller observes. But evil looking pointless COULD mean it is. And what can we do but assess it by how it looks? If a baby suffers pointlessly you are being unfair to that baby by saying it may have a

point. You are not the one suffering so nothing gives you the right to say that or even think it. It is really up to the experiencer to judge and those who say their suffering is pointless should be respected and they need you to agree with them. That is part of rapport and compassion and empathy.

But think of it this way. Should you look at it as pointless? Those who say yes are really telling you not to notice or see if evil is pointless but to think it has a point and then try to bring good out of it. Do not be mistaken: they are advocating that you be manipulated. It is right to work to bring good about in spite of evil. It is wrong to only do this because you think good comes out of evil or can do. There is more courage and commitment in doing the right thing. The person who can create good in spite of evil is stronger than the person who thinks evil produces good with some help.

Those who say evil refutes God may say that if you look inside a kennel and don't see a dog then it is reasonable to assume there is no dog inside. Evil is the kennel and God is the dog. The kennel is empty of God. But Keller says it depends on what you expect. If you are looking for a small insect and don't see one then it is unreasonable to assume there is none inside (page 24, The Reason for God). God could be a small part working away within the evil to give it flaws so that it will die away and let good come back.

But the analogy doesn't apply. It indicates that evil and suffering are minor things like the insects so their existence would not refute the love of God. The analogy is evil when applied to God. To honour God it is necessary to have some degree of coldness towards human suffering. Those who do not develop the coldness are acting in spite of their religion and not because of it. Religion based on God is evil.

If evil is not pointless it still looks pointless. Our senses are programmed to make that perception the natural one and its a struggle to see it differently. God can give us light to prevent us perceiving evil as pointless. In other words, he could remind you that you don't know it all so it may not be as pointless as it looks. Perceiving evil as pointless is a pointless evil!

Religion says God can bring good out of evil. But that still makes the evil pointless. Just because somebody can work to bring good out of evil does not mean that the evil is in some sense valuable. It is because the evil is vile and shouldn't happen that it is necessary to turn it to good. However it seems wisest to say it never is turned to good but good is made stronger than it.

If we have the right to see evil as pointless, if we have the right to our opinion at all we have this right, then clearly we have the right not to believe in God. Christianity is clear that it is a duty to believe in God. That by default makes it a bigoted religion and it is morally dubious.

To teach that evil has a point is to teach something really silly. Evil by its nature can't be useful. Evil by its nature is a Trojan Horse so its good results could be in fact evil. It is not good to get cured of terminal cancer if you can now blow up the world in a nuclear war. To teach that evil has a point is to condone the evil. If God is right to hurt or let somebody hurt Amy then hurting her was not evil but good. We should follow God's example.

Free will's importance is blown out of all proportion by believers in God so that they see it as a gift from God and the reason we can see there is a God despite how rife evil is. They blame evil on the misuse of free will by man. But free will only matters now this moment for we cannot change the choices of the past or know what we will choose in the future. It is not worth the destruction it causes for in the big picture it amounts to very little relevant or practical free will. It is not free will then that does evil except in the present moment. It is how we have no free will to undo it. It is too minor to help with the contradiction between God and God's making evil or letting us be evil.

Incredibly Keller quotes CS Lewis with approval when Lewis said that evil refuting God and supporting atheism was just too simple to be believable. One reason Lewis said that is that God letting suffering happen does not mean God thinks suffering ought to happen - in fact it is because we know God is love that we should see suffering as that which ought to be stopped and healed. There is nothing too simple about saying that evil is so bad that it refutes the love of God.