

Book Review: The Reason for God - Belief in an Age of Scepticism by Timothy Keller

afterlife

Near the end of the book it is said that if there is no God or afterlife then why bother trying to better the world for one day something will happen and life will be eradicated here on earth.

Page 183 says that if our good works will help us reach God and stay with him forever when we die then God owes me. There is a limit to what he commands me to do. He cannot let certain bad things or things that are too bad happen to me. The thought that we don't have to love others very much if we can earn a place in God's heart and get into his Heaven is an interesting one. It makes your good works a way to control God so God is not really God to you but just something to be exploited. But Keller would say that if you never loved anybody in your life and turned to God in repentance at death you will go to Heaven so it seems there is no winning either way!

Marx said that if you believe there is a life after death it can lead to you not caring much about people who have to face this life. But the Christians counter that you can say that if there is no life after death you can focus on your earth life and then say there is no reason why you may not enjoy it and refuse to sacrifice for others (page 66, The Reason for God). This is totally silly for it is in making others happy that we find happiness ourselves. So Marx and the maligned unbelievers in God who heed him then cannot be answered. He was right.

What good does God's justice and love do?

Justice and love are summarised in the word morality.

There are three essential ideas of what morality is.

Morality could be only about virtue - being good as a person having good character. But to say it is is to affirm that you have the right to hate the person with a bad character. Please note that when religion says there is no love or justice or morality without God it has virtue/character morality in mind. Concern for love or justice is concern for character. The morality contradicts itself if it forbids you to wish evil on a person of bad character. It makes no sense to think of/treat a person who is good the same as one who is bad. It is not even truly respectful of good people. At least it admits that human nature is prone not to good but to goodish - your own version of good that you want instead of the real deal.

And to say morality is only the greatest happiness of the greatest number is not really morality at all for we are more important than happiness. You don't need a God for this morality - it is clearly all human.

And to say morality is only about good results outweighing the bad gives us too much freedom. You could not be charged with murder if you could give reasons why you killed thinking you had good enough reasons. You can't have a God for this morality for even he can't tell you how to calculate if an action will do more good than bad for it is complex beyond belief - no person is an island and neither is any action or non-action.

Not one of them works on its own. Morality is a human thing which is why it is up to us which theory we think is best at any given time. We change all the time. To turn God into a moral authority and the reason to be moral is a denial of that truth and is thus evil.

If there was a choice between, "I don't know why I should be just but I choose to be" or "I will be just for the reason justice matters is because God is just" it is obvious that the first one is the right choice and the second one is wrong. It is the wrong choice not because it is untrue but because you can only have one. How could God be the ground of morality in that case? He is just an obstacle.

Surely it would be considered good if you were just in spite of not understanding God? It would be better than understanding it because of God. There is a more determined goodness in the person who is good in spite of evil.

The believers say that unless you understand that God is just you cannot get the idea that you must be just too. But focus on the word idea. An idea is a possession. Just like you can make an idol out of your idea of money bringing you happiness so

you can make an idol out of a good idea. It is not the good that is the problem but that it is an idea. An idea about goodness will be a more ingrained and subtle idol than any other. If justice is an idea that is grounded in God then it is only God's opinion. Calling justice an opinion is failing to understand how important and factual it is. If you have the idea of justice and it is good then it does not matter where it came from. It does not matter about God.

does giving all your being to God the secret of happiness and freedom and peace?

God is all-powerful. To seek a relationship with him is inherently one sided, exploitive, dehumanising and unhealthy. A healthy relationship between two persons or two beings requires give and take on each side. There has to be some mutual loss of independence. But God cannot sacrifice independence for us. An all-powerful being can't do that. All powerful really means infinitely independent and needs nothing at all. A God to whom we must adjust and conform to and who does not adjust to and conform to us at all would be an oppressive God and be an invitation to us to be oppressors in his name and for him. This leaves us with the problem of a God who is not worth adoring at all. God is supposed to have free will - some free will when he cannot have a relationship with another God or with anybody!

The Christian answer to this problem is that God became a vulnerable man in Jesus Christ (page 49, The Reason for God). By putting himself in danger from us, God took on our lot. He chose to suffer as we can. But God cannot really become vulnerable. He can only pretend to be vulnerable. Even if Jesus did not use his power as God to protect himself from us he still had it so he was not vulnerable. A man wearing a suit of armour who bares his chest to let the assassin strike is not vulnerable - he has protection and does not use it. You are only vulnerable if you lose your protection.

The atheist conviction that belief in God is bigoted and oppressive is vindicated! Christians want us to oppress us further by urging us to pretend that their solution is any help!

sin

Christians believe that sin is best described as putting good things, rather than bad things, in the place of God (page 171, The Reason for God). They argue for example that if we put family first in our life then we will tend to downgrade and be cold towards the needs of other families (page 168, The Reason for God). They say that if we put God first and are willing to lose everything for him if need be then we will find that we love all families not just our own (page 168, The Reason for God). To be able to do what the Christians ask, we would need to know there is a God. Belief is not 100% certainty. In so far as you suspect that there might not be a God, the more you could put your family before him. The Christian message then cannot help the vast majority even of churchgoers who cannot honour God as required by that faith. And worse, it is not God who is helping. It is faith in God, belief.

The Reason for God makes an interesting point that sin is choosing good things over God. That is true. It is another way of saying that people prefer their own version of good to real good. They want to be God declaring what is good and what is evil. The warning bell rings. It means it is reasonable to assume that religions and saints and popes were putting good in God's place and hiding it. Why should we be impressed by Christians then?

forgiveness

Keller says when somebody hurts you there is a debt - they earn and take the duty to suffer for what they did. But forgiveness is you facing and taking the suffering yourself instead to set them free. To forgive is to carry the burden of evil incurred by another so that they may go free.

His book says that forgiving means you bear the sins of another in order to love them and reconcile which was why God had to go on the cross to forgive us by it. None of that is in the Bible. The idea is just sentimental tripe. The Bible teaches that rather than Jesus suffering to forgive us that way he suffered to forgive us as in having to being punished for our sins.

Keller argues that when somebody hurts you and you say you just want to hold them accountable for it for your sake and perhaps for societies sake "your real motivation may be simply to see them hurt". He says the wrongdoer will sense this and thus they will get more stubborn and refuse to repent or apologise. The use of "may" is telling. He is clearly suggesting that some who say they use vengeance to make others accountable are telling the truth.

Christianity commands you to forgive. Christians say forgiveness requires the refusal to make a person pay for the wrong they have done (page 188, The Reason for God). They say forgiving hurts because it involves refusing to satisfy the need you have to lash out at them and the refusal to have the consolation of making them suffer. To forgive is to love the person who has hurt you (page 189, The Reason for God). But you need to hate them first. To command a person to forgive is to order them to hate the sinner first. Or it judges you as having hated the person if you forgive. So much for the non-judgemental Christian! If you never hate the sinner, you are condoning what they do - not forgiving. If hate is right at all, then how can you be doing wrong if you hurt a sinner or hate her or him?

On the same page we read that it can be agonising to refuse to get revenge on a person for what they did to you. Forgiving is very painful and difficult and hard work. But forgiving is necessary for if you take revenge you empower evil and it spreads and the situation ends up being indescribably worse. Clearly what we have here is the victim being tormented by being forgiving while the offender moves on in life. This is interesting for it suggests that those who forgive quickly and who say it sets them free are not forgiving at all but simulating or even condoning. Condoning means you do not take the evil seriously or really care. We know that most Christians do not really forgive, and now we know that those who say they do are probably lying.

Christians trick people to make them think that they command that they must forgive and they command this so that they will not suffer due to the pain and hatred in their hearts. But you can intend a person to suffer terribly for some evil they did to you without feeling any hatred or anger towards them. Forgiving is one thing. Forgetting the hatred and anger is a totally separate thing.

hell

Many Christians including the author of *The Reason for God*, say that those who go to Hell to suffer forever put themselves there because God is letting them have their own way. They are not yelling to get out (page 79). They are thought to be blaming everybody else and to be so self-absorbed and self-pitying that they will not change. The notion that people are that self-abusive contradicts Christianity's belief that sin is choosing some good over God. The book attempts to prove the view that the damned create their own Hell from the Bible but not one verse can be found to clearly say that this is the reason people stay in Hell forever. Lots of sinners are totally self-absorbed and incapable of love and still change. The idea that sin is banal and stupid implies that a sinner at some point must get sick of it. If dying somehow turns a person into such a permanent pit of bitterness, God could prevent this effect. The effect would mean that some other factor than the person is causing the descent into utter selfishness and obstinacy. It contradicts the Christian need to blame the sinner only for his or her damnation. The doctrine of Hell is an encouragement to violence in the sense that it condones and excuses the violence of Hell. Also those who idolise evil gods become like them!

god alone matters

Keller mentions Alister McGrath saying that the reason why societies that abandon God get so violent is because they need an absolute - that which matters most or is the only thing that matters ultimately - and so something else be it the state or their race takes God's place as absolute. Keller argues that that was why the French Revolution was so violent. This ties in with what Keller wrote elsewhere in the book, "Bitterness becomes neurotically intensified when someone or something stands between me and something that is my ultimate value... If you lose your identity through the failings of someone else you will not just be resentful, but locked into bitterness." His solution is to have your identity built on God and the love of God. The advantage is that you end up with a "self that can venture anything, face anything." See page 164. The problem according to Keller is that to say you will build your self or self-identity on nothing and no one is actually to try and build it on your personal independence. Nobody is as independent as they want to think which is why it backfires and they end up fearing and detesting any threat to it. They end up being feared and hated and prone to violent treatment to boot. So you should get out of your skin and go to God.

If you give all to God it seems you rid yourself of slavery to attachments. Keller says on page 166 that people who cannot forgive are centering themselves on the wrong thing - they feel they are nothing without that thing or things that were "offended" against. Their idol is attacked so they feel attacked for they closely associate themselves with it. He thinks the solution is to get out of your own head and give all to God so that you are not so attached to some transient thing or an illusion that you end up fearful and bitter and unforgiving. But that would imply that if you love God and its the wrong version of God the same thing will happen. Giving up all for a fake version of God to be free of attachment and bondage will not work.

He approvingly quotes C S Lewis who says that Christ wants you to give him all 100%. He does not want a percentage of your time but the whole lot. There is to be nothing at all that is not given to him. He notes that like Soren Kierkegaard, Lewis recognises that sin is not merely doing things that are wrong. It is putting yourself and things in the place where you should be putting God. If you give 99% to God and keep the 1% for yourself you are still not letting God be God and giving him all you are. He approvingly quotes Simone Weil, "One has only the choice between God and idolatry. If one denies God ... one is worshipping some things of this world in the belief that one sees them only as such, but in fact, though unknown to oneself imagining the attributes of Divinity in them." Money can be seen as your friend and saviour and protector - your god. He points out on page 168 that people who make morality their god can feel very hateful and superior towards those who they consider to be immoral. So Keller points out on page 172 that God is supreme and nothing exists without him so if anything can make you happy it is him. But the question is not if he can but if he does!

Keller argues from the Dr Jekyll and Hyde story how Jekyll tried to get rid of his pride and selfishness by doing good

works but that only made him worse for it did not work and trying to hide his true colours with good works only empowered his bad side. It added deception and lies and pretence to his moral flaws. The good works lead to you comparing yourself to others and that is bad because you will hate anybody who seems morally better than you for you think you look like nothing compared to them.

I'd rather somebody tried to deal with their bad side by papering over with good works than that they start to think, "Jesus did all the work for me so I have nothing to do" for that is doing the same thing. It is making out you are good for Jesus did the good for you in your place!

jesus

Page 28, states that Jesus suffered a terrible death on the cross but that Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley who were martyred for their Protestant faith suffered worse. It says that they died with greater confidence and calmness than Jesus. But we read that Jesus was troubled a lot on the night of his arrest and later before he died on the cross yelled, "My God why have you abandoned me?" and that it means his suffering was emotionally worse than theirs. But nothing in the Bible indicates that such an idea is true. The idea that Jesus' suffering was worse than anybody else's is simply insulting to the fact that many mothers in those days endured worse than he did when they gave birth.

science

Science has to assume that everything has a natural cause (page 86, The Reason for God). Christians claim that this methodology does not imply that belief in miracles is unscientific. They say that nobody should say that the methodology means that science has proven that there is no other kind of cause, such as supernatural, apart from natural causes. Suppose a scientist does an experiment to show that lycopene in tomato puree has antioxidant properties. But if there may be supernatural powers in the lycopene that is fighting oxidising then the lycopene does not have antioxidant capabilities. It is the powers that have them. Then the experiment fails. The scientist should not be saying that lycopene is an antioxidant. The scientist indeed should not have the nerve to conduct the experiment and waste time and money. Thus although science does not claim to prove the supernatural never happens, it is unscientific to assume that it does. It is anti-science. It is therefore anti-truth. Miracle claims attack science even when it is claimed that science verifies them. When science is at work it assumes no miracles are happening. That assumption is far more important than any real or imagined evidence for miracles. It is basic to how we learn.

defends bible evil

The Reason for God (page 110) defends the Bible God for saying in Ephesians 6:5 and in other places that slaves must obey their masters. It argues that there was very little difference in those days between slaves and free persons. They looked and dressed like everybody else and were not segregated. Most could earn enough to buy their own freedom. They were not poor. It says slaves in those days were not like the slaves of the New World who were the property of the owner completely and could be cheated by the owner and raped and beaten at will. This is virtually saying that slavery is fine as long as slaves are treated well. Where the Bible allows slaves to be beaten to death as long as they live for a day or two after the beating is clear proof that where it mattered, slaves had no rights.

Christians say 1 Timothy 1:9-11 and Deuteronomy 24:7 forbid trafficking in slaves and kidnapping people to become slaves. The Timothy verses only forbid kidnapping - they only give a general rule but exceptions were allowed. Deuteronomy only forbids the stealing of an Israelite against his will to make a slave of him. The Deuteronomy verse contradicts nothing that God commanded.

The Bible God permitted the beating of slaves. The rule of a tooth for a tooth allowed a slave-owner to knock his female slaves tooth out. In wartime, kidnapping people to make slaves of them was permitted. The Reason for God has such compassion for them that it says nothing about this.

last word

No intelligent unbeliever would be won for Christianity with a book like The Reason for God.

Review posted on amazon.co.uk 1 Dec 2017