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Why I am not a Christian

What makes people today repudiate Christianity and shun the Churches ? How does organised Christianity appear to people outside the Churches? The "C.E.N." has invited a young man, David Pollock, to give his personal views on these matters. Readers' comments are also invited.

CHRISTIANITY, like other religions, provides a world-view - that is, a particular way of explaining and interpreting experience. But so does science, and so do political theories such as Marxism ; so does our very humanity. Such world-views are only partial. Science provides a purely descriptive view, with no values ; but combined with the view derived from our humanity, which does have values, it gives the most satisfactory available world-view - scientific humanism. But this article is about Christianity, not humanism, and in particular about the (to me) rather marginal question of why I am not a Christian.

The Christian world-view was once the best available. Now it is woefully inadequate. Like the phlogiston theory, Christianity explained a great deal by a not-too-incredible hypothesis. But different, better explanations are now given by science. Phlogiston has long since been rejected. God, however still clings on. Christianity is stretched this way and that to accommodate new knowledge - Copernicus and Galileo, Darwin and Einstein - and these distortions cause it to fragment.

Some try to reconcile science and Christianity. The Bishop of Woolwich has discovered how difficult this is. "Ultimate Reality" simply *is not* personal. "To call the world 'God' is not to explain it; it is only to enrich our language with a superfluous synonym for the word 'world'." (Schopenhauer). If the Bishop were honest with himself, surely he would renounce such mystical self-indulgence and label himself "atheist."

Others reject either science (fundamentalists) or else religion (atheists). The latter at least generally experience an enormous relief. They are released from the considerable intellectual strain of not allowing their religion to be confronted by common-sense or a scientific scepticism.

For God finds no place in scientific thought. No one can explain in scientifically defined terms the nature of Heaven, Hell, the soul, the Trinity, or God. Christians generally try to make a virtue of this failure. "That's the great mystery!" they exclaim, as if this were compelling proof, or, "It's all a matter of faith," conveniently forgetting the "faith" and sincerity of Moslem, Hindu and Nazi. The scientific attitude confines such vagueness and emotional mysticism to its proper sphere, i.e., poetry and analogous activities, and rightly refuses it any influence elsewhere.

Scientific enquiry is probing not only outward towards "Heaven," but inward towards the "soul." It has found no evidence for the existence of either. The "mystery of life" itself has been explained in terms of bio-chemistry. Human behaviour also is coming under scrutiny; sociology and psychology have already, for example, shown how wrong present penal theory is.

Retribution serves no other end than to give vent to indignation. Slowly we are realising that emotion is a bad guide to action. Reform must replace retribution. The Church therefore finds embarrassing the unequivocal retribution explicit in its cosmology. "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord." Admittedly, mercy is shown to all who repent and have faith, i.e., to those simple-minded or intellectually dishonest enough to place complete reliance on the Bible.

For what proof is there of the truth of its claims? Most Christians admit "None; first you must have faith; then you will know it is true." But "know" here is equivalent to "believe." "Believe and you will believe," is not proof but nonsense.

Moreover, the Christian God is surely a hateful one. The argument is old, but it is cogent: omnipotent, omniscient, and yet the creator of a world of so much sorrow, evil and hate - such a god *cannot* be Love personified. Was it the fault of Adam? Yet God made Adam - made him too weak to resist temptation (or should one say "not enough of a child to obey for ever the bare word of command"?)

The same argument applies to the Devil. God is ineluctably responsible for the evil of this world. Omniscient, he knew his creation would be deformed; omnipotent, he nevertheless created it. Would we not condemn human parents who deliberately and knowingly brought deformed children into the world? Should not God be infinitely more strongly condemned?

There are further objections to Christianity on moral grounds. The Christian attitude to society is appallingly reactionary. The remark about "the Tory party on Sunday" is not only witty but accurate. The Church's vast wealth cannot be reconciled with Christ's advice to the rich man.

It is still news for a bishop to speak out against the legal persecution of male homosexuals. The Church was slow in the extreme to oppose capital punishment, being as usual forced in the end to follow the lead of its individual members, who were motivated therefore not so much by their Christianity as by their humanity.

When the Church does give a lead, it is in the wrong direction. The Roman Catholics talk hypocritically of feeding the hungry while abetting the doubling of world population by the end of the century. They not only forbid their own followers to practise birth-control, but try to impose their views on the rest of the world by walking out of W.H.O.

The Church of England is no better - witness its recent vigorous opposition to Leo Abse's bill concerning divorce. Let the Church preach to its dwindling congregations that divorce is a sin save for adultery - why this exception even? - but let it stop seeking to impose its own

morality on the non-Christian majority of society; certainly let it not stand in the way of a merciful and overdue reform of our anomalous divorce laws that would release thousands of blameless people from the legal hold of their embittered, bigoted or spiteful spouses.

To sum up: (I) It is unreasonable to believe in God: personal experience, however intense, is invalid because it is paralleled even in artificial psychological experiments, let alone in other religions; the reasons for the Church's survival for 2,000 years are historical, not supernatural; and the evidence for the relevant events in the New Testament, which would not be enough to prove even ordinary happenings, is *a fortiori* inadequate to bear out the fantastic claims made.

(ii) Further, Christian doctrine does not allow of commonsense exposition, but has to resort to a language of mystical abstractions and the intellectual dishonesty inevitably concomitant with this.

(iii) Christian teaching is not in itself especially notable - merely a collection of disparate sayings, most of which had already been said elsewhere. The Christian God, made in the image of the absolute rulers of ancient times. shows no evidence of deserving the epithets "loving" or "merciful"; and the history of the Church is likewise one of bloodshed and debauchery, self-righteousness and vicious persecution punctuating a bitter resistance to all new knowledge and social reform.

(iv) The Christian religion is merely one of many, and has no unique recommendations. It is a force for the good only where it reinforces ordinary human feelings. It involves an enormous wastage of energy and idealism and too often results in a life of negation and meretricious self-denial. All such religious world-views are now outmoded and inadequate. The progression from animism through polytheism to monotheism must find its inevitable conclusion in atheism.

The humanist world-view is now the fullest and most accurate available. Its empiricism enables it readily to accommodate new theories and discoveries. Its morality is no mechanical application of the Word to circumstances undreamt of when the Word was spoken, but a responsible, adult decision-making in individual circumstances according to certain general principles. Above all, it is about men and women living in the world today.

Whereas Christianity is irrelevant.

