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A Few Questions About the Question

Before trying to answer the question, ‘If Christianity is so good, why are Christians so bad?’ it’s fair to ask a few questions about the question itself.

GENUINE OR RHETORICAL?

First, is it genuine or rhetorical? On the one hand, an inquirer could ask it quite sincerely out of puzzlement. On the other, it could come as a combative challenge, a put down, a reduction to absurdity—something along the lines of ‘Take that!’ You get this sort of thing in addressing the aforementioned Problem of Evil. On the one hand, a Christian parent who just lost a child might ask with tears, ‘How can an all-powerful, all-loving God let this happen?’ But from the skeptic, the very same question could come out as a taunt, meant to embarrass the faith of the believer.

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We'll address both of these challenges, as well as the anxious who've been challenged, offering a defense of both the faith and the faithful. Within this model, it's an exercise in pastoral encouragement for believers, as well as an effort to push back against the critic's charge – a work of 'apologetics,' if you will. (The word is based on the Greek for verbal/legal defense, *apologia*.) In contemporary English, an apology is more a matter of saying, 'I'm sorry,' of admitting wrong and seeking absolution. To do otherwise is often called 'being defensive,' as if you won't own up to your transgressions. Well, of course, there's a place to acknowledge misdeeds, but there is a difference between 'being defensive' (failing to give the critic a fair hearing) and 'defending what warrants defending' (the purview of apologetics), and I hope we can avoid the first without abandoning the second.

That being said, we should recognize that the behavior of those professing to be Christian can be a source of puzzlement and grief among believers, agnostics and even sympathetic atheists. They really want to know what's going on here. Perhaps unbelievers were counting on better performance by the Church, say, as co-belligerents in a great cause, such as the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Perhaps there are 'seekers' who've just about given up on their skepticism, but aren't so sure they want to ally themselves with a faith group whose track record is suspect. And, of course, there are the Christians who are embarrassed, even mortified, at

what they see in Church history, and perhaps within their own congregations. They know, trust and cling to Jesus, their salvation sure, their walk improving as they grow spiritually. But how are they to wrap their minds around the wickedness done by those bearing Jesus' name, and also come to terms with some of the bad things done in Jesus' name? So we will address that as well.

A COMPLEX QUESTION?

Logic teachers speak of 'informal fallacies,' whose use may charm the unwary or sympathetically predisposed, but whose validity is wanting. This isn't to say that their deployment is necessarily and utterly without merit, or that their use proves that the user's claim is false; rather, it might simply mean that the fallacious case is insufficient, that it needs more to make it go. Perhaps the most famous one is *argumentum ad hominem*, attacking the person rather than his or her claim or his or her reasoning, e.g. 'Why should we listen to you? You're just a kid (or an old coot).' Another is *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, claiming that something that regularly precedes something else must be its cause, e.g. 'All heroin users began on milk. I'm just saying.' Well, there are scores of these so-called fallacies, some with Latin names (e.g. *ad misericordiam*, 'appeal to pity'; *ad baculum*, 'appeal to force'), some with plain old English labels (slippery slope; false dichotomy). Again, application of a fallacy does not

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kill your cause. You may still be right. But to press your case, you've turned to something that is inadequate (if not downright illicit) but is parading as decisive, and it needs to be questioned. So we cry 'Foul!' and demand something better. Just because you take a cheap shot at a defendant doesn't mean they're innocent. You just need to clean up your act and come at him or her in another way.

The fallacy at issue here in this book is called 'complex question', whereby the query is so loaded as to put the respondent in an impossible fix. For instance, if I ask you, 'Have you stopped beating your wife?' an answer of either 'Yes' or 'No' implies that you have, indeed, beaten your wife. Similarly, the book's question, 'If Christianity is so good, why are Christians so bad?' is loaded. To offer a solution to this mystery implies that you acknowledge that 'Christians are so bad,' so we at least have to consider whether we're being led into a trap.

CRUCIAL DEFINITIONS

It's always fair to ask what someone means by their terms. When, as a Baptist, I'm asked if I'm a Calvinist, I might press them to clarify the concept. Are they asking whether (following John Calvin's reading of the Bible) I believe that Jesus died only for those He had chosen in advance for salvation, or that, once you are saved, you cannot lose your salvation? Or could it be something more, like the

practice of baptizing infants or of avoiding visual portrayals of members of the Trinity? Tell me what you mean, and I'll tell you if I fill the bill. Similarly, we should ask, 'How are you using "Christianity" and "Christian"? And what about "good" and "bad"? Furthermore, what makes something *so* good and *so* bad?'

We'll take a look at these terms down the way, but let's note some angles right off. For instance, is someone a Christian if, despite his or her avowals, a court of law couldn't find enough evidence to convict him or her of being one? Also, is Christianity a system of beliefs, a demographic set, a way of life, or essentially a relationship with a person, namely Jesus ... or a combination of some or all of these things? And what of the moral and value terms, 'good' and 'bad'? Ethicists of every stamp have struggled with the 'Euthyphro Dilemma' since Socrates pressed it upon a young man around 400 B.C. In that encounter, the philosopher asked, in effect, 'Is something good because God says so, or does God say so because it's good?' In other words, what ultimately defines moral worth and rectitude? What's the basis for declaring something deplorable or admirable, for judging one thing in bounds and another out of bounds?

Then, there's the matter of degree, the presupposition that warrants the use of the modifying word 'so.' Take the case of the lifetime batting average of Ted Williams, who's enshrined in the Baseball Hall of Fame. Someone familiar

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with the game might marvel, ‘What in the world made him so great at the plate, with a cumulative .344 average?’ (This means he got a hit that put him on base 344 times out of a 1000.) An outsider might ask, ‘How could he be so bad with a bat, failing to reach base with a hit 656 times out of a 1000?’ It all depends on realistic expectations. And so it’s fair to ask if the critic is utopian, imposing unreasonable standards on a group of people.

To put it another way, what is the ‘standard meter bar’ they’re using to judge goodness? Do they want us to hold a given Christian up to Nelson Mandela for comparison? Immanuel Kant? Mother Teresa? Socrates? Some Platonic Form? Should we go with WWJD (‘What Would Jesus Do?’) or something more along the lines of WWGD (‘What Would Gandhi Do?’), or, in defining badness, WWHD (‘What Would Hitler Do?’)? Of course, if there were broad agreement over the rightness of genuinely Christian deeds, then this would be a merely academic exercise. But take, for example, the word ‘proselytize.’ For critics of the faith (and even some who call themselves Christian), it’s a dirty word. But for believers following Jesus’ ‘Great Commission’ in Matthew 28:19-20 (to ‘make disciples of all nations’), it’s a mandate. And just think of the number of instances where Bible quotation from the Gospels and Epistles would be condemned as ‘hate speech’ on the modern university campus.

It's important to note that Christians are not, themselves, unified on many moral matters, holding their consensus against a hostile world. For we/they disparage one another's pronouncements and behavior on everything from Halloween observance to social drinking to how one votes in presidential elections.

Finally, in this connection, it's fair to ask if the critics are suffering from a form of hypersensitivity (with overweening concern for the slightest slights and inconveniences) or hypochondria (habitually reading grave medical omens into the slightest symptoms).

VARIATIONS ON THE SAME QUESTION

Again, the structure of the question suggests a range of other book titles: 'If atheism (or socialism, Hinduism, agnosticism, academia) is so good, why are atheists (socialists, Hindus, agnostics, academics) so bad?' Or, more charitably, 'If atheism (etc.) is so bad, why are atheists (etc.) so good?' As a group, these questions strike the ear as a bit strange or carelessly assembled. They make sweeping generalizations, perhaps trading in stereotypes, and one wonders if they're going to try to make their case with anecdotes.

Also, we shouldn't limit ourselves to ideologies. What about the question, 'If book publishing is so good, why are books so awful?' or 'If education is so good, why are schools so bad?' Fair is fair.

CALLING THE BRIDE UGLY

Yes, perhaps I'm being fragile and prickly in raising such questions about the question. But in a number of passages, the Bible speaks of the Church as if it were the bride of Christ. (For instance, Ephesians 5:22-24 teaches that wives should submit to their husbands as the Church submits to Jesus.) With that imagery in mind, let me suggest that the lead question of the book, when read as a challenge, implies that the Lord's spouse is ugly. And so I hope you'll indulge me a bit of indignation.

This being said, let's get down to work on particulars.

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- It's important to begin by taking a close look at the framing of the question itself: 'If Christianity is so good, why are Christians so bad?'
- Some will ask this question rhetorically as a challenge; others will ask it out of genuine puzzlement.
- The question is 'complex' or loaded, in that it contains dubious assumptions.
- Definitions are crucial to clear thinking: in this instance, we need to nail down what is meant by 'Christianity' and 'Christian,' 'good' and 'bad,' ... and even the word 'so.'
- By substituting other groups and institutions (e.g. agnosticism or book publishing) for 'Christianity' in

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the central question, we can better judge its tenor and fairness.