



Can an Intelligent Person Believe in God?

*Can an Intelligent Person Believe in Christianity?*¹



The Real Question

The answer to the above question(s) is, “Yes, of course! We cannot deny that many intelligent people *do* believe in God and Christianity.” So a better question may be, “*How* can an intelligent person believe in Christianity?” or “*Why* would an intelligent person believe in Christianity?”

Defining Terms²

Intelligent – *a*: having or indicating a high or satisfactory degree of intelligence or mental capacity [mentally able]; *b*: revealing or reflecting good judgment or sound thought [sensible, rational].

“Intelligent” is not necessarily equivalent to “knowledgeable.” A person can be intelligent and still lack knowledge in particular areas.

Rational – having reason or understanding [reasonable and sensible: governed by, or showing evidence of, clear and sensible thinking and judgment, based on reason rather than emotion or prejudice]

Logical – *1a*: of, relating to, involving, or being in accordance with logic; *2*: capable of reasoning or of using reason in an orderly cogent (rationally persuasive) fashion [*1*: sensible and based on facts; *2*: able to think rationally: able to think sensibly and come to a rational conclusion based on facts rather than emotion; *3*: ... relating to philosophical logic]

Science – *1*: the state of knowing (*the most basic definition*)

[*1*. study of physical world: the study of the physical and natural world and phenomena, especially by using systematic observation and experiment (*natural science*);

2. branch of science: a particular area of study or knowledge of the physical world;

3. systematic body of knowledge: a systematically organized body of knowledge about a particular subject;

4. something studied or performed methodically: an activity that is the object of careful study or that is carried out according to a developed method;

5. knowledge gained from science: the knowledge gained by the study of the physical world].



Broadly defined, “science” is not limited to natural science, but most modern definitions use natural categories. Within natural science, “the scientific method”³ is considered the most reliable means of ascertaining the truth of scientific theories (though the scientific method is limited to repeatable events). In any case, reality is not necessarily limited to the natural realm. Thus natural science is inherently limited in its ability to explain reality.⁴ The pursuit of knowledge of reality beyond nature is no less rational.

¹ This handout was originally developed for the 2006 International Discovery Retreat for a workshop with this title.

² Unless otherwise noted, these definitions come from either *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1998) or *Encarta* (<http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/features/dictionary>). The *Encarta* definitions are in [brackets].

³ “the” is emphasized to denote the formal “scientific method.” Actually, there are various “methods” in science.

⁴ With the advance of postmodernism, this statement is finding increasing acceptance. However, postmodernism goes too far when it denies any objective knowledge of reality.

Theology – *a*: the science of God or of religion; the science which treats of the existence, character, and the attributes of God, his laws and government, the doctrines we are to believe, and the duties we are to practice (an old definition);⁵ *b*: the study of the nature of God and religious truth; rational inquiry into religious questions.⁶

Scientism – *1*: methods and attitudes typical of or attributed to the natural scientist; *2*: an exaggerated trust in the efficacy of the methods of natural science applied to all areas of investigation.



Superstition – *1a*: a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation; *1b*: an irrational abject (resigned) attitude of the mind toward the supernatural, nature or God resulting from superstition; *2*: a notion maintained despite evidence to the contrary.

Faith – *2a*: belief and trust in and loyalty to God (*Christian sense of term*)⁷

Faith vs. Reason?

For the Christian, faith is based on fact. The Christian must accept that particular things are true, and adequate reason is needed for this belief. For the Christian, the evidence points to Christ. However, Christian belief is not dependent on the conclusions of modern science.⁸ At the same time, science need not conflict with Christian belief (though particular scientists and scientific theories *do* conflict with Christian belief). The bottom line: Christianity is a reasonable faith.

Basis of Christian Belief

For the Christian, belief in God and Christianity is based on “revelation.” God has revealed truth in various ways. Revelation includes “general revelation” and “special revelation.” General revelation is God’s revelation to all persons at all times and in all places. God reveals himself through nature, history, and human consciousness (natural science is a study of general revelation). Special revelation is God’s revelation to particular persons at definite times and places. God has revealed himself in various special ways in human history, ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ. The Bible is the record of, and is, the essential special revelation today. Understanding God’s revelation is not merely an intellectual endeavor; it is also spiritual.

📖 “Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (*1 Corinthians 1:20, NIV*)⁹

📖 “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (*1 Corinthians 2:14, NIV*).

⁵ Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary (1913)

⁶ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000, updated 2003)

⁷ In Christianity, “faith” (Greek πίστις, *pistis*; Latin *fides*) means belief and trust in God as revealed in Christ, evidenced by loyalty and obedience to God. What is the basis for this belief and trust? It is not “blind faith.” The basis of belief is God’s revelation, which provides adequate reason for rational response.

⁸ See Jay’s *Belief in God in the Age of Modern Science*.

⁹ In this context, the Bible contrasts the world’s wisdom with *God’s wisdom in Christ*, particularly the message of Christ’s sacrifice and salvation, which many consider foolish. But “the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom” (1 Corinthians 1:25).



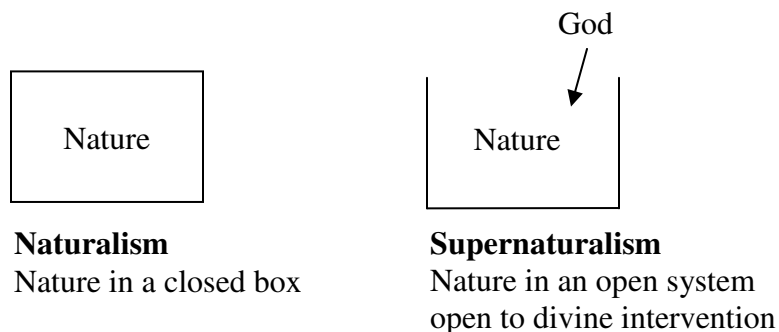
Intellectual Obstacles Named by Some

□ Supposed Conflict between Science and Faith

Is there necessarily a conflict between science and the Christian faith? It is more accurate to say that there is conflict between particular elements of science and faith. For example, there is conflict in the following areas:

▪ Scientism vs. Theism

This is a conflict of *epistemology* (how we know). Scientism puts too much faith in science. Science is limited in its ability to explain reality. There is no compelling reason to rule out other means of acquiring knowledge, including revelation.



▪ Naturalism/Materialism vs. Supernaturalism

This is a conflict of *philosophical presuppositions*.¹¹ While the scientist may want to constrain his/her discipline to the natural realm for practical reasons, there is no compelling reason to deny that the supernatural exists. In fact, the validity of reasoning from a naturalistic foundation is questionable. In summarizing the thoughts of C.S. Lewis,¹² Art Lindsey writes, “Naturalists ... cannot sustain their position because their own assumptions undermine the credibility of their thinking.”¹³ Philosopher Victor Reppert restates Lewis’s argument, taking into account criticisms against it:

¹⁰ Intellectual obstacles are certainly not the only obstacles to belief and acceptance of Christianity. In his book *Intellectuals Don’t Need God & Other Modern Myths* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), Alister McGrath lists the following groups of obstacles: 1) intellectual barriers; 2) historical associations with Christianity (the bad examples of some “Christians,” churches, and “Christian societies”); 3) the problem of relevance; 4) misunderstandings of the nature of Christianity; 5) the hunger for absolute certainty; 6) prior commitment to another belief system (I would add commitment to a worldview, culture, group or family); 7) the problem of personal integrity (reluctance to change one’s mind); and 8) a sense of guilt or inadequacy. It should be noted that even if all of these obstacles are removed, many will still not believe and receive Christ, because the ultimate obstacle is human sin, including an unwillingness to humbly confess our sin, acknowledge our need of God’s salvation, and give our lives to Him (Luke 9:24-25). This ultimate obstacle is overcome only by the grace of God (Ephesians 2:8-9).

¹¹ Of course, many scientists are not philosophical naturalists. But naturalism is prevalent within science.

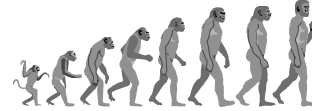
¹² C.S. Lewis wrote several apologetic books, including *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*.

¹³ Art Lindsley, *C.S. Lewis’s Case for Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 114.

1. No belief is rationally inferred if it can be fully explained in terms of nonrational causes.
2. If materialism is true, then all beliefs can be fully explained in terms of nonrational causes.
3. Therefore, if materialism is true, then no belief is rationally inferred.
4. If any thesis entails the conclusion that no belief is rationally inferred, then it should be rejected and its denial accepted.
5. Therefore materialism should be rejected and its denial accepted.¹⁴

▪ Particular Scientific Theories vs. Bible Teaching

In particular, there is conflict concerning evolution (actually naturalistic macroevolution) and creation.¹⁵ See Jay's *Doesn't Evolution Contradict Genesis?*



□ Wish Fulfillment?

It is clear that human belief in God, gods, or some supernatural power is common to all cultures and time periods. Why? Some people say that such beliefs are inventions of human beings to satisfy their need or desire for such powers. This idea was promoted by Ludwig



Feuerbach (1804-1872) and later by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Freud argued that belief in God was an illusion arising out of *wish fulfillment*. Karl Marx (1818-1883), impressed by Feuerbach's thesis, argued that the ruling class invented religion in order to keep the masses of workers content with their unjust situations (i.e., religion was the opiate of the people).¹⁶

- However, could the inclination of people to seek God, gods, spiritual fulfillment, etc. reveal some truth? C.S. Lewis wrote, "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."¹⁷ In other words, human desire for God and spiritual fulfillment may be evidence that God exists and spiritual fulfillment is possible.
- The Bible says it this way: God "has set eternity in the hearts of men" (Ecclesiastes 3:11).
- The accusation of wish fulfillment works both ways. Perhaps the atheist wishes that God does not exist in order to justify his/her autonomy (self-rule) and to escape accountability to a higher power, moral responsibility, and moral guilt and shame.

□ Suffering & Evil

See Jay's *Evil & Suffering*.

¹⁴Victor Reppert, *C.S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 57-58. Reppert defended his Ph.D. dissertation on this subject before a committee hostile to his conclusion, but he still passed because they could not deny his premises and logic.

¹⁵ While the naturalist denies creation, the Christian finds compelling evidence in nature for the existence of God. While naturalists see "the appearance of design," Christians see "design," which points to the Designer and Creator

¹⁶ Lindsley, *C.S. Lewis's Case for Christ*, 123.

¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1980), 121.

□ Religious Pluralism

Some people cannot accept Christianity's teaching that Jesus Christ is the only one way to God. Don't all religions lead to God? Don't all religions serve the same basic purpose?

- What is the purpose of religion? Many religions offer moral and ethical guidance, and promote goodwill toward others. If that were the primary purpose of religion, then many religions would suffice (though some may claim to be better than others). However, while these things are very important to Christianity, the primary purpose of the Christian faith is relationship with God. Thus the central question is not "How can I be a better person?" but "How can I live in right relationship with God?"
- Don't all religions lead to God? All religions don't *claim* to lead to "God" (at least not the personal God revealed in the Bible). Some religions teach that the end of our spiritual journey is absorption (like a drop of water absorbed into the ocean) or extinction. Different religions point us to different goals and destinations by their own teaching. Either all religions are false (or at least partially false), or one religion is true and the others are false (because two contradicting truth claims cannot both be true).
- What is true? Christians believe that finite human beings are unable to determine the truth about an infinite God unless God chooses to reveal the truth to them. Knowledge of God and spiritual truth is based on revelation (see "Basis of Christian Belief" above).
- The Bible. Christians accept the Bible as God's revelation of truth. Is this a reasonable belief? There is reason to say "yes." To say the very least, the Bible is a distinctive book!



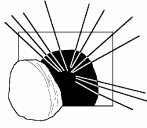
- The Bible is the best-attested text of any ancient writing in the world.¹⁸
 - We have very good reason to believe that today's Bible is "authentic" (consistent with the original text).
- The Bible is rooted in actual historical events.
 - God has revealed himself in "what he has done" in history.
 - The historical accuracy of the Bible is confirmed by both internal and external evidence, including extra-biblical sources and archeology.¹⁹
 - The actual occurrence of particular historical events (e.g., the resurrection of Jesus) is essential to the Christian faith (1 Corinthians 15:7).
- The Bible contains prophecies that were literally fulfilled hundreds of years after they were written (see *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, by Josh McDowell).
- The Bible was written over a period of roughly 1500 years by more than 40 different human authors, but is still remarkably unified.
- The Bible claims to be the revelation of a *personal* God concerning his *relationship* to humankind.



¹⁸ See Jay's *The Reliability of the New Testament*.

¹⁹ There are good reasons to accept the historical accuracy of the Bible. There are many helpful resources concerning this subject. For example, Jeffrey Sheler's book *Is the Bible True?* shows how archeological discoveries continue to confirm the historicity of the Bible. Concerning the New Testament, see Jay's short paper *The Reliability of the New Testament*. Ask Jay about the many other resources on this subject.

❑ Jesus' Resurrection; Miracles



Some people cannot accept the resurrection of Jesus Christ although the historical evidence is remarkably strong.²⁰ Many people cannot accept the historicity of the resurrection because of their philosophical presuppositions (see “Naturalism” above). If something is considered impossible, even strong historical evidence has little force. The evidence is somehow explained away.

However, one should be willing to question their philosophical presuppositions. No one can prove that miracles don't exist. If miracles are not impossible, then miracles are possible. Thus the resurrection is possible, and the historical evidence should be allowed to speak.

❑ Jesus' Divinity (Deity)

Some people cannot accept Christianity's claim that Jesus is “God incarnate” (God in the flesh). In particular, the “Trinity” is hard to comprehend and believe.²¹ However, assuming the Scriptures accurately record Jesus' words and actions, he certainly claimed deity.²² Jesus' deity must be distinguished from pantheism or new age philosophy (in which everyone is god). According to the Bible, Jesus' deity is unique. He is the “One and Only” God-man (John 1:14, 18).

- In response to Jesus' claims, we must conclude one of the following: 1) He is a liar; 2) He is a lunatic (insane); or 3) He is Lord. Christians have sound reason to conclude #3.

❑ Others?

²⁰ See Jay's *The Resurrection of Christ*

²¹ See Jay's *The Trinity*

²² See Jay's *The Deity of Jesus Christ*