



# Deconstructing Defeater Beliefs: Leading the Secular to Christ

By Tim Keller

# DECONSTRUCTING DEFEATER BELIEFS:

## Leading the Secular to Christ

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### A. THE IMPLAUSIBILITY STRUCTURE OF A CULTURE

#### 1. Defeater beliefs

Every culture hostile to Christianity holds to a set of 'common-sense' consensus beliefs that automatically make Christianity seem implausible to people. These are what philosophers call "defeater beliefs". A defeater belief is Belief-A that, if true, means Belief-B *can't* be true.

Christianity is disbelieved in one culture for totally opposite reasons it is disbelieved in another. So for example, in the West (as we will explore below) it is widely assumed that Christianity can't be true because of the cultural belief there can't be just one "true" religion. But in the Middle East, people have absolutely no problem with the idea that there is just one true religion. That doesn't seem implausible at all. Rather there it is widely assumed that Christianity can't be true because of the cultural belief that American culture, based on Christianity, is unjust and corrupt. (Skeptics ought to realize, then, that the objections they have to the Christian faith are culturally relative!) So each culture has its own set of *culturally-based doubt-generators* which people call 'objections' or 'problems' with Christianity.

When a culture develops a combination of many, widely held defeater beliefs it becomes a cultural 'implausibility-structure.' In these societies, most people don't feel they have to give Christianity a good hearing – they don't feel that kind of energy is warranted. They know it just can't be true. That is what makes evangelism in hostile cultures so much more difficult and complex than it was under 'Christendom.' In our Western culture (and in places like Japan, India, and Muslim countries) the reigning implausibility-structure against Christianity is very strong. Christianity simply looks ludicrous. In places like Africa, Latin America, and China, however, the implausibility structures are eroding fast. The widely held assumptions in the culture make Christianity look credible there.

#### 2. Dealing with the implausibility structure today

Many books on reaching post-moderns today give the impression that people now need virtually no arguments at all. The 'apologetic' is a loving community, or the embodiment of social concern. I couldn't agree more that post-modern people come to Christ through process, through relationships, through mini-decisions, through 'trying Christianity on'. They are pragmatic rather than abstract in their reasoning, etc. But the books that are against any arguments at all seem to miss the fact that the extreme pragmatism of non-Christians today *is* part of a non-Christian world-view. Our post-enlightenment culture believes what has been called *expressive individualism*. That is – *it is true if it works for me.* This obviously is based on the view that truth and right-or-wrong is something I discover within my own self and consciousness.

What then of the claim that "post-modern people don't want arguments – they just want to see if it works for them"? All right – as with any form of contextualization, let us as evangelists enter – adapt partially – to the culture of expressive individualism. Let us show them the reality of changed lives. Let us use narratives rather than long strings of logic. But at *some* point you must also challenge the sovereignty of individual consciousness. Jesus is Lord, not my personal consciousness. At some point, the idea that *"it is true if and only if it works for me"* must be challenged. We have to say: "Ultimately that is correct – in the very, very long run, obeying the truth will 'work' and bring you to glory and disobeying the truth will 'not work' and bring you to ruin. But in the short run (like – even throughout all the rest of your life!) obeying the truth might lead to ostracism, persecution, or other suffering.

There have been many times in New York City that I have seen people make professions of faith that seemed quite heart-felt, but when faced with serious consequences if they maintained their identification with Christ (e.g. missing the opportunity for a new sexual partner or some major professional setback) they bailed on their Christian commitment. The probable reason was that they had not undergone deeper 'world-view change'. They had fitted Christ to their individualistic world-view rather than fitting their world-view to Christ. They professed faith simply because Christianity *worked* for them, and not because they grasped it as true whether it is 'working' for them this year or not! They had not experienced a 'power-encounter' between the gospel and their individualistic world-view. I think apologetics *does* need to be 'post-modern.' It does need to adapt to post-modern sensibilities. But it must challenge those sensibilities too. There do need to be 'arguments.' Christianity must be perceived to be true, even though less rationalistic cultures will not demand watertight proofs like the older high-modern western society did.

### B. A 'SANDWICH' APPROACH TO SHARING THE GOSPEL

#### 1. Two parts to sharing the gospel

What this means now is that there are two parts to sharing the gospel in a particular culture – a more 'negative' and a more positive aspect.

a) The more negative aspect has to do with 'apologetics' – it consists in **deconstructing the culture's implausibility structure**. In short, this means you have to show on the culture's own terms (that is, by its own definitions of justice, rationality, meaning) that its objections to Christianity don't hold up.

b) The more positive aspect of sharing the gospel is to **connect the story of Jesus to the base-line cultural narratives**. In short, you have to show in line with the culture's own (best) aspirations, hopes, and convictions that its own cultural story won't be resolved or have 'a happy ending' outside of Christ.

## 2. A sandwich of three layers

But I think the overall best way to 'present the gospel' is a kind of 'sandwich' approach to these two parts. The following assumes there is a process and a series of conversations between you and the person who doesn't believe.

a) **Brief gospel summary.** First, the gospel must be presented briefly but so vividly and attractively (and so hooked into the culture's base-line cultural narratives) that the listener is virtually compelled to say "*It would be wonderful if that were true, but it can't be!*" Until he or she comes to that position, you can't work on the implausibility structure! The listener must have motivation to hear you out. That is what defeaters do – they make people super-impatient with any case for Christianity. Unless they find a presentation of Christ surprisingly attractive and compelling (and stereotype breaking) their eyes will simply glaze over when you try to talk to them.

b) **Dismantle plausibility structure.** Alvin Plantinga wisely asserts that people avoid Christianity not because they have really examined its teachings and found them wanting, but because their culture gives huge plausibility (by the media, through art, through the expertise and impressive credentials of its spokespersons) to believe a series of defeater beliefs that they *know* are true, and since they are true, Christianity can't be. The leading defeaters must be dealt with clearly and quickly but convincingly. Defeaters are dealt with when the person feels you have presented the objection to Christianity in a clearer and stronger way than they could have done it.

c) **Longer explanation of the person and work of Christ.** Now, if people find you have at least undermined the defeaters in a listener's mind, you can now return to talking at greater length about creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. If you try to do apologetics before you pull off a quick, attractive presentation of Christ, people's eyes will glaze over and they will become bored. But if you try to do a very lengthy explanation of the meaning of Christ's cross and resurrection before you convincingly deal with the defeaters, they won't listen to you either.

### Summary of the approach:

1. **The attractive gospel** – Brief gospel connected to baseline narratives
2. **Why Christianity can be true**- Dismantling doubts and defeaters
3. **The Biblical story of the gospel** – A more thorough telling

## C. THE PROCESS

### 1. The gospel connected to baseline cultural narratives

The doctrines of creation, sin, grace, and faith must be presented in connection with 'baseline cultural narratives' – Jesus must be the answer to the questions the culture is asking. Don't forget – *every* gospel presentation presents Jesus as the answer to *some* set of human-cultural questions, like 'how can I be forgiven?' (Western moral individualism) or 'how can I be free?' (post-modern expressive individualism) or 'how can we overcome evil forces in the world?' (contemporary Africans) etc. Every gospel presentation has to be culturally incarnated, it must assume *some* over-riding cultural concern, so we may as well be engaged with the ones that we face! Christianity must be presented as answers to the main questions and aspirations of our culture. Two of the over-riding concerns are:

a) **Cultural concerns.** First a concern for *personal freedom and identity*. Contemporary people ask: Who am I? I'm not completely sure – but I do know I have to be free to create my own identity and sense of self. Whatever spirituality I have, it must leave me free to experiment and seek and not be a 'one size fits all.'

Second, a concern for *unity in diversity*. Contemporary people ask: How can we get past exclusion and exclusivism? How can we live at peace in a pluralistic world? How can we share power rather than using power to dominate one another? How can we embrace the 'Other' – the person of a sharply different viewpoint and culture?

b) **Gospel resources.** *Gospel resources for personal freedom*. Kierkegaard's depicts sin in *The Sickness unto Death* – as 'building your identity on anything but God' which leads to internal slavery and narrowness of spirit. This is a gospel presentation that connects well today. (Kierkegaard, like Nietzsche and other great thinkers, was a good century 'ahead of his time.') Kierkegaard also deconstructed mere religion and moralism and contrasted them with the gospel. (See his Three ways of life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the spiritual.) Building your identity on any finite created thing besides God leads to the idolization of that factor and the demonization of anyone who lacks it.

*Gospel resources for living at peace*. If you build your identity mainly on your class, or race, or culture, or performance you will necessarily vilify and disdain anyone who lacks what you consider the cornerstone of your own



significance. Therefore, building your identity on God leads to hatred of the other, to social conflict and oppression. Jonathan Edwards (again, a man ahead of his time) recognized that if your highest love and greatest is your nation, your family, your career, even your religious performance, then you will disdain other nations, families, classes of people, and other religions. If anything but God is our "highest good" (i.e. if we make anything an idol) then we have to demonize or at least exclude some part of creation. But if God is our ultimate good, then we are free to develop deep love for (what Edwards calls) "*Being in general.*" If we truly made the Lord our ultimate beauty and Savior and good – we would have an equal love and joy equally in all creation, all individuals, all people groups, even in all nature and created things.

In any case, there is no religion with a more powerful ground-motif for accepting enemies and the 'Other' than Christianity. We are the only faith that has at its heart a man dying for his enemies, forgiving them rather than destroying them. This must be presented to our culture as an unparalleled resource for living in peace in a pluralistic society.

### Summary

As we said above, people's eyes will 'glaze over' if you start your presentation with 'reasons Christianity is true'. Christianity must be attractive to people before they will sit still for a presentation of intellectual credibility. A person must come to the point where he or she says, "that would be great if it were true – but is it?" Then and only then will they sit still for a discussion on why Christianity is true. So Christianity has to first be presented attractively and compellingly. We must show post-modern western culture – with its aspirations for personal freedom and unity in diversity – that its 'Story' can only have a 'happy ending' in Jesus Christ. Then we can deal with the main objections (the 'defeaters') in our culture that make it hard to believe that Christianity is true.

#### Here is an example of a brief gospel presentation:

**Why we are here.** The one God is a community – a Trinity of three persons who each perfectly know and defer to one another and love one another and therefore have infinite joy and glory and peace. God made a good, beautiful world filled with beings who share in this life of joy and peace by knowing, serving, and loving God and one another.

**What went wrong.** Instead, we chose to center our lives on ourselves and on the pursuit of things rather than on God and others. This has led to the disintegration of creation and the loss of peace – within ourselves, between ourselves, and in nature itself. War, hunger, poverty, injustice, racism, bitterness, meaninglessness, despair, sickness, and death all are symptoms.

**What puts the world right.** But though God lost us he determined to win us back. He entered history in the person of Jesus in order to deal with all the causes and results of our broken relationship with him. By his sacrificial life and death he both exemplifies the life we must live and rescues us from the life we have lived. By his resurrection he proved who he was and showed us the future — new bodies and a completely renewed and restored new heavens and new earth in which the world is restored to full joy, justice, peace, and glory.

**How we can be part of putting the world right.** Between his first coming to win us and his last coming to restore us we live by faith in him. When we believe and rely on Jesus' work and record (rather than ours) for our relationship to God, his healing kingdom power comes upon us and begins to work through us. Christ gives us a radically new identity, freeing us from both self-righteousness and self-condemnation. This liberates us to accept people we once excluded, and to break the bondage of things (even good things) that once drove us. He puts us into a new community of people which gives a partial, but real, foretaste of the healing of the world that God will accomplish when Jesus returns

## 2. Deconstructing the implausibility structure

What are the dominant defeaters in contemporary Western civilization? These are the dominant defeaters discovered in a recent survey I did of young under 25 year olds in NYC who are not Christian. Below six 'defeaters' are stated and answered in a nutshell. Why Christianity *can't* be true – because of:

**a) The other religions.** Christians seem to greatly over-play the differences between their faith and all the other ones. Though millions of people in other religions say they have encountered God, have built marvelous civilizations and cultures, and have had their lives and characters changed by their experience of faith, Christians insist that only they go to heaven — that their religion is the only one that is 'right' and true. The exclusivity of this is breath taking. It also appears to many to be a threat to international peace.

**Brief response:** Inclusivism is really covert exclusivism. It is common to hear people say: "No one should insist their view of God better than all the rest. Every religion is equally valid." But what you just said could only be true if: First, there is no God at all, or second, God is an impersonal force that doesn't care what your doctrinal beliefs about him are. So as you speak you are assuming (by faith!) a very particular view of God and you are pushing it as better than the rest! That is at best inconsistent and at worst hypocritical, since you are doing the very thing you are forbidding. To say "all religions are equally valid" is itself a very white, Western view based in the European enlightenment's idea of knowledge and values. Why should that view be privileged over anyone else's?

**b) Evil and suffering.** Christianity teaches the existence of an all-powerful, all-good and loving God. But how can that belief be reconciled with the horrors that occur daily? If there is a God, he must be either all-powerful but not good enough to want an end to evil and suffering, or he's all-good but not powerful enough to bring an end to evil and suffering. Either way the God of the Bible couldn't exist. For many people, this is not only an intellectual conundrum but also an intensely personal problem. Their own personal lives are marred by tragedy, abuse, and injustice.

**Brief response:** If God himself has suffered our suffering isn't senseless. First, if you have a God great and transcendent enough to be mad at because he hasn't stopped evil and suffering in the world, then you have to (at the same moment) have a God great and transcendent enough to have good reasons for allowing it to continue that you can't know. (You can't have it both ways.) Second, though we don't know the reasons why he allows it to continue, he can't be indifferent or un-caring, because the Christian God (unlike the gods of all the other religions) takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he is willing to get involved with it himself. On the cross, Jesus suffered with us.

**c) The ethical straitjacket.** In Christianity the Bible and the church dictate everything that a Christian must believe, feel, and do. Christians are not encouraged to make their own moral decisions, or to think out their beliefs or patterns of life for themselves. In a fiercely pluralistic society there are too many options, too many cultures, too many personality differences for this approach. We *must* be free to choose for ourselves how to live — this is the only truly authentic life. We should only feel guilty if we are not being true to ourselves — to our own chosen beliefs and practices and values and vision for life.

**Brief response:** Individual creation of truth removes the right to moral outrage. 1) Aren't there any people in the world who are doing things you believe are *wrong* that they should stop doing no matter what they believe inside about right and wrong? Then you *do* believe that there is some kind of moral obligation that people should abide by and which stands in judgment over their internal choices and convictions. So what is wrong with Christians doing that? 2) No one is really free anyway. We all have to live for something, and whatever our ultimate meaning in life is (whether approval, achievement, a love relationship, our work) it is basically our 'lord' and master. Everyone is ultimately in a spiritual straitjacket. Even the most independent people are dependent on their independence and so can't commit. Christianity gives you a lord and master who forgives and dies for you.

**d) The record of Christians.** Every religion will have its hypocrites of course. But it seems that the *most* fervent Christians are the most condemning, exclusive, and intolerant. The church has a history of supporting injustices, of destroying culture, of oppression. And there are so many people who are not Christian (or not religious at all) who appear to be much more kind, caring, and indeed moral than so many Christians. If Christianity is *the* true religion — then why can this be? Why would so much oppression have been carried out over the centuries in the name of Christ and with the support of the church?

**Brief response:** The solution to injustices is not less but deeper Christianity. 1) There *have* been terrible abuses. 2) But in the prophets and the gospels we are given tools for a devastating critique of moralistic religion. Scholars have shown that Marx and Nietzsche's critique of religion relied on the ideas of the prophets. So despite its abuses, Christianity provides perhaps greater tools than the other religions do for its own critique. 3) When Martin Luther King, Jr. confronted terrible abuses by the white church he did not call them to loosen their Christian commitments. He used the Bible's provision for church self-critique and called them to truer, firmer, deeper Christianity.

**e) The angry God.** Christianity seems to be built around the concept of a condemning, judgmental deity. For example, there's the cross — the teaching that the murder of one man (Jesus) leads to the forgiveness of others. But why can't God just forgive us? The God of Christianity seems a left-over from primitive religions where peevish gods demanded blood in order to assuage their wrath.

**Brief response:** On the cross God does not demand our blood but offers his own. 1) All forgiveness of any deep wrong and injustice entails suffering on the forgiver's part. If someone truly wrongs you, because of our deep sense of justice, we can't just shrug it off. We sense there's a 'debt.' We can then either a) make the perpetrator pay down the debt you feel (as you take it out of his hide in vengeance!) in which case evil spreads into us and hardens us b) or you can forgive — but that is enormously difficult. But that is the only way to stop the evil from hardening us as well. 2) If we can't forgive without suffering (because of our sense of justice) it's not surprising to learn that God couldn't forgive us without suffering — coming in the person of Christ and dying on the cross.

**f) The unreliable Bible.** It seems impossible any longer to take the Bible as completely authoritative in the light of modern science, history, and culture. Also we can't be sure what in the Bible's accounts of events is legendary and what really happened. Finally, much of the Bible's social teaching (for example, about women) is socially regressive. So how can we trust it scientifically, historically, and socially?

**Brief response:** The gospels' form precludes their being legends. The Biblical gospels are not legends but historically reliable accounts about Jesus' life. Why? 1) *Their timing is far too early for them to be legends.* The gospels, however, were written 30-60 years after Jesus' death — and Paul's letters, which support all the accounts, came just 20 years after the events. 2) *Their content is far too counter-productive to be legends.* The accounts of

Jesus crying out that God had abandoned him, or the resurrection where all the witnesses were women — did not help Christianity in the eyes of first century readers. The only historically plausible reason that these incidents are recorded is that they happened. The 'offensiveness' of the Bible is culturally relative. Texts you find difficult and offensive are 'common sense' to people in other cultures. And many of the things you find offensive because of your beliefs and convictions, many will seem silly to your grandchildren just as many of your grandparents' beliefs offend you. Therefore, to simply reject any Scripture is to assume your culture (and worse yet, your time in history) is superior to all others. It is narrow-minded in the extreme.

### Two final notes on dealing with 'doubts' and 'defeaters.'

It is critical to state these defeaters in the strongest possible way. If a non-Christian hears you express them and says, "that's better than I could have put it" then they will feel that they are being respected and will take your answer more seriously. You will need to have good answers to these defeaters woven in redundantly to everything you say and teach in the church.

Our purpose with these defeaters or doubts is not to 'answer' them or 'refute' them but to *deconstruct* them. That is, to "show that they are not as solid or as natural as they first appear" (Kevin Vanhoozer). It is important to show that all doubts and objections to Christianity are really *alternate* beliefs and faith-acts about the world. (If you say, "I just can't believe that there is only one true religion" — that is a faith-act. You can't prove that.) And when you see your doubts are really beliefs, and when you require the same amount of evidence for them that you are asking of Christian beliefs, then it becomes evident many of them are very weak and largely adopted because of cultural pressure.

### 3. Steps into faith

What about the positive? If you are ready to move toward the exploration of faith in Christianity, you must be –

**a) Deconstructing doubt.** Your doubts are really beliefs, and you can't avoid betting your life and destiny on *some* kind of belief in God and the universe. Non-commitment is impossible. Faith-acts are inevitable.

**b) Knowing there's God.** You actually already believe in God at the deep level, whatever you tell yourself intellectually. Our outrage against injustice despite how natural it is (in a world based on natural selection) shows that we already do believe in God at the most basic level, but are suppressing that knowledge for our convenience. The Christian view of God means world is not the product of violence or random disorder (as in both the ancient and modern accounts of creation) but was created by a Triune God to be a place of peace and community. So at the root of all reality is not power and individual self-assertion (as in the pagan and post-modern view of things) but love and sacrificial service for the common good.

**c) Recognizing your biggest problem.** You aren't spiritually free. No one is. Everyone is spiritually enthralled to something. 'Sin' is not simply breaking rules but is building your identity on things other than God, which leads internally to emptiness, craving, and spiritual slavery and externally to exclusion, conflict, and social injustice.

**d) Discerning the difference between religion and the gospel.** There is a radical difference between religion — in which we believe our morality secures for us a place of favor in God and in the world — and gospel Christianity — in which our standing with God is strictly a gift of grace. These two different core understandings produce very different communities and character. The former produces both superiority and inferiority complexes, self-righteousness, religiously warranted strife, wars, and violence. The latter creates a mixture of both humility and enormous inner confidence, a respect for 'the Other', and a new freedom to defer our needs for the common good.

**e) Understanding the Cross.** All forgiveness entails suffering and that the only way for God to forgive us and restore justice in the world without destroying us was to come into history and give himself and suffer and die on the Cross in the person of Jesus Christ. Both the results of the Cross (freedom from shame and guilt; awareness of our significance and value) and the pattern of the Cross (power through service, wealth through giving, joy through suffering) radically changes the way we relate to God, ourselves, and the world.

**f) Embracing the resurrection.** Because there is no historically possible alternative explanation of the rise of the Christian church than the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. And if Jesus was raised from the dead as a forerunner of the renewal of all the material and physical world, then this gives Christians both incentive to work to restore creation (fighting poverty, hunger, and injustice) as well as infinite hope that our labors will not be in vain. And finally, it eliminates the fear of death.