

Monday, 11 October 2021

## **Soothing abstractions and evasive professions of ignorance**

It is a bad habit of Christians (under tough questioning and the stress of pervasive modern evil) when it gets down to *specifics*; to take refuge in soothing abstractions and professions of ignorance.

It is a habit that is pretty obvious to atheists (of whom I was one until 2008), and which certainly looks like evasiveness and manipulation.

It is actually worse than that - because for too-many Christians the tough questions are, even At Root, unsure and imprecise, and for unclear reasons - so that their understanding gets fuzzier and weaker the closer they get to fundamentals.

This is no basis for a tough and real Christian faith.

For instance - *Heaven*. Christianity is 'all about' going to Heaven after we die biologically; so you would assume that Christians could answer straightforward and basic questions such as: 'What is Heaven like?'

After all, how could anyone know that he wanted to dwell in Heaven *forever*, unless he had a pretty clear idea of what Heaven was like?

Who is in Heaven - what kinds of people? How is Heaven 'organized'? And what kinds of thing do resurrected people actually Do in Heaven, on a day to day basis?

What we want *and need* are simple, concrete, but general answers that avoid incomprehensible abstraction and eschew evasions. Answers that explain clearly what detail is knowable and why, and what is *not* knowable and why.

But Christians are much too eager to open the escape hatches, and avoid the embarrassment of properly-answering such questions (or avoid revealing, and to themselves, their own ignorance) by stating that Heaven is beyond human comprehension and too great to be expressible; or to reach for vast, soaring but uninformative abstractions about light, space, oneness, communion...

Or to take refuge in 'negative theology' by saying what Heaven is Not: such as Not angels with wings playing harps and singing hymns to old man with a beard on a golden throne...

Yet none of this is helpful in answering the question.

Another example concerns the two big criticisms of Christianity: the problems of free will and evil.

The problem that if God created everything from nothing and is omnipotent, then ultimately God is and does everything; so there is no space for free will, and God is responsible for all evil as well as all good.

Christians know that it is essential for their faith to include free will, or else nobody could choose to follow Christ; nor could evil

originate from anywhere except God. But they also regard it as essential to state that God created every-thing and is omnipotent.

If, after 2000 years, Christians still can't explain clearly (without soothing abstractions and squirming evasions) how evil happens in a good world made by one good God; or how a God that supposedly controls everything allows the most extreme evils; then this is a pretty damning indictment.

Faced with stark contradiction, Christians often seem perceptibly uncomfortable (squirming) - and 'explain' by reaching for abstraction. Yet abstraction is usually trying to answer an easy question by introducing a difficult (perhaps impossible) answer.

How can we suppose that we have answered a simple and honest question by pointing-at something so difficult to comprehend that it requires further and more-difficult explanation?

The psychological effect is that the answer is not given into order to clarify understanding, but with the effect of obscuring the problem by soothing it away...

There are several of these soothing abstractions given prominence in Christianity - such as the orthodox, mainstream doctrines of the Holy Trinity.

The tough *question* is that if Christians claim that there is *one* God, how can Jesus also be fully divine? Surely that is *at least* two Gods? And then, what about the Holy Ghost?...

And if Jesus is God, how can he be a Man? If he is a Man, how can he be God? Such obvious questions arose very early in the history of Christianity.

The 'answer' is a bunch of soothing abstractions or incantations, with the actual effect of hypnotizing the problem away - by restating the problem as a mystery of three in one, and one in three etc. This is an explanation that is not an explanation at all - it is to answer an easy question with an impossibly difficult answer.

Yet, after 2000 years, this is become a creedal matter, a necessary article of faith; something that is supposed to have been a decisive and final clarification of a problem so obvious a child can see it.

There is a sense that Christians hope that the problem will go-away if they declare it solved - and for many centuries this was actually true. Christianity held-together, despite the feeble answers...

But it is not true now.

So, most Christians (for 2000 years) have done this kind of thing *all the time* - resorting to abstraction and ignorance - and about some of the most *fundamental* matters of faith.

And this is another deep and debilitating weakness of Christianity - which I am sure has *contributed to the catastrophic collapse of the past 18 months* (i.e. the worst and most rapid reversal of institutional Christianity since its foundation - and if you have not noticed this, then you are in deep trouble).

It has become very obvious that most 'Christians' do not believe what they say they believe; and have *actually* abandoned their faith...

By contrast, these same 'Christians' are utterly credulous-of, slavishly obedient-to and defensive-concerning... ***whatever latest lying garbage is being spouted by government officials, advertisers and the mass media.***

But Christianity is true and real, and there are clear and simple answers to all the tough and simple questions.

But none of the churches will tell you this - and certainly no other institutions will do so.

Indeed **you will need to work the answers out for yourself** - because why should you - *how* should you - trust anybody else in such times?

In such a situation, old style Christian evangelism - pushing the same old abstractions and evasions - is pitiful; and apparently counter-productive with most people.

In these end times; conversion is a matter of sorting things out *for* yourself and *by* yourself to attain answers that satisfy yourself.

All we can realistically do is provide an example of whatever sort can be managed; and encourage others really to *think* - for and from them-selves.

And if you get it wrong, you will soon know; because your un-rooted faith will be swept-away like a bubble in the burgeoning torrent of lies and manipulations; and you will be gathered-into the thundering main-stream, heading down the steepening slope towards Hell.

But if you get it right, you will be separated and poised calmly amidst the maelstrom; realities will glow out from among the filth and be drawn to you (and you to them)... You will inwardly be sustained, energized and en-couraged.

When you have answered the vital questions to your tested-satisfaction; you can navigate *irresistibly* through this bedeviled world.

You can navigate towards a Heaven that you already understand well-enough to desire; eternally to participate in divine creative work that you yearn to join-with; following a Jesus whom you know sufficiently to love.

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Posted by [Bruce Charlton](#) at [Monday, October 11, 2021](#)



## 25 comments:

### **Bruce Charlton said...**

@JR - You are missing the point here. I am not arguing for any solution; but I am saying that the standard solutions are Very Obviously inadequate - we see that over the past 200 years, but now more than ever.

My point is that each of us has particular problems, that we must solve to our own satisfaction; because the failure to solve them is the mass apostasy we have seen for several generations, and we now see everywhere about us

proceeding with astonishing rapidity and completeness.

The examples I gave were vital For me; and I reached solutions that are effective for me. I had to give examples in order to make my point clear.

But the point of the argument is not to re-hash old theological controversies but to urge a complete honesty and rigour upon people. You must satisfy yourself, not some external arbiter - because all external arbiters are corrupt (except for those which you have by you own discernment discovered Not to be corrupt).

Clearly, millions, billions of people are not satisfied - at the deepest level they have reached, which may be very shallow indeed - with Christianity.

Some, because they know what is 'on offer' and do not want it; others because they are stuck by what they regard as unsatisfactory, evasive, incoherent explanations of what Christianity is, and what it offers, on what conditions. Many because they operate entirely at the level of public discourse - which is external and to which we are passive and by which we are substantially manipulated.

(In the past, many of the masses were passively manipulated by net-good Christian churches - but not any more. Anyone who is being passively manipulated Now is on the side of evil, regardless of self-labelling and membership.)

We need to get away from the ingrained - centuries long - practice and habit of arguing to convince 'other people'.

(Ultimately, I don't care much about convincing you - who are just a name to me, and who I don't know from Adam. I don't care what you think or what you think about me - and you don't care about me. We need to get real about such matters when it comes to times like these.)

One we understand that it is our-selves we need to convince, by whatever means our self may be convinced - then life becomes an extraordinary spiritual quest and adventure, and everything takes on a new aspects and clarity; and this is what gives strength and courage.

Of course this 'process' involves God, but it is begging the question to state that until after we our-selves have satisfied our-selves as the the real nature and motivations of God.

Don't argue with me; argue with yourself. That is what matters.

11 October 2021 at 09:59

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**roo\_ster said...**

The questions of evil and free will have been answered many times by Christian theologians. I recall my old small catechism had a large back section answering a whole bunch of these and similar questions. And this was in 6th grade.

So the big problem Christianity has with evil and free will is ignorant folks who have not made the effort to read the multitudinous writings on the topics Christians have amassed these last 2000 years.

11 October 2021 at 12:20

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**Poppop said...**

I am very thankful that I have recently stumbled into your blog and the writings of several others in your cyber-circle. You speak with laser precision about many of the things I have similarly discerned in the past two years. (Or are we all naturally gratified by those telling us what we want to hear and amplifying what we already believe?)

There is a Mormon folk belief (or perhaps was taught at some point) which I have heard before from family members that God has sent the most valiant spirits into the end times in order that they might be competent to rise to the occasion. On the contrary, living through the past two years has convinced me that He knew I personally am so tone-deaf and obdurate it would take having these creeps rubbing the Great Tribulation in my face to wake me up.

Or putting into other words -- I don't consider myself any great shakes spiritually by any means, yet I find myself bewildered how few people see through all of this puscht / ruse.

A minor cavil:

"Ultimately, I don't care much about convincing you [...]"

And yet, John 13:34.

Isn't that pragmatic indifference and consequent tendency toward solipsism, carefully nurtured by "pop culture" / media, in no small measure



what empowered the enemy to advance to status quo 2021? Just sayin' -- and not without a beam in my own eye, I can assure you...

11 October 2021 at 12:52

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**jorgen said...**

All of this is because the religion was never well thought out but hodge-podged together from scraps of divergent jewish sects. When Peter said "for we have not followed cunningly crafted fables" the key words are "cunningly" and "crafted" because there was no cunning and no crafting, just copy and paste of random, arbitrary, contradictory ideas. So if one holds the New Testament as their source of doctrine, they can't answer the basic questions you have proposed and back up their answers from their source.

11 October 2021 at 13:03

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**jorgen said...**

"Theological hostility to God's total sovereignty" (John Reynolds)

If you want Calvinism taken to its ultimate conclusion, join Islam. It makes no sense in even a pseudo-christian framework. If God is micromanaging everything, he would NOT die on a cross, period. Absolute predestination clearly works better with a works-based system where (as the Koran literally says) if God wants someone damned he can make them live righteously their entire life only to fall to exteme sin in the end (because he predestined them to damnation).

11 October 2021 at 13:07

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**Bruce Charlton said...**

@r - You are kidding yourself! Kicking the can, declaring 'a mystery' (or expressing personal obedience to your chosen external authority) is not a clear and comprehensible answer to questioning a fundamental metaphysical contradiction; it is just a distraction.

It is lucky for Christianity (and the world) that people were happy with non-answers for 1800 years - and this is fair enough, because Christianity in its real essence is true and good, regardless-of and despite the unsolved problems of its philosophical conception.

But either way, why are you wasting your time arguing with examples that (supposedly) do not apply to you? Stick to the point of the post!

11 October 2021 at 13:08

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**Bruce Charlton said...**

@Poppop - If 'care' is to have any real meaning (rather than manipulative 'virtue signalling'), then I care about my family and a small circle of friends.

For these I would make significant self-sacrifices - for some, unto death.

But pseudonymous and unfamiliar unknowns on the internet... well No, I don't care! Stick around and interact over some months/ years - then maybe I will start to care...

11 October 2021 at 14:02

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**Bruce Charlton said...**

@jorgen - Actually, I think that post-Jesus but already-existing Greek and Roman philosophy has been the main problem - since there is not much metaphysics in the Old Testament.

11 October 2021 at 14:04

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**Chent said...**

Although I disagree about other topics, the topic of heaven has always puzzled me. In the 1200 pages (approx) of the Bible, there is no description of heaven, the main goal of the Christian faith. There are some few vague hints here and there but it is difficult to feel passion to go to a place that you don't know how it is. A place for which you must give up many concrete and pleasurable things in life. It lacks motivation.

In my Catholic tradition, there are some private revelations of heaven to saints. (Catholics are not required to believe in private revelations) Heaven does not seem very attractive: like an eternal Mass. But hell scares the hell out of you. Maybe this is the motivation: avoid hell instead of gaining heaven.

11 October 2021 at 14:04

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**Bruce Charlton said...**

@jorgen 2 - I agree.

<https://charltonteaching.blogspot.com/2018/02/the-christian-dilemma-failure-to.html>

11 October 2021 at 14:09

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**Bruce Charlton said...**

@Chent - I think this idea that Heaven is not described much in the Bible comes from the systematic de-emphasis on the Fourth Gospel (which ought to be primary) since a good deal of that book is descriptive of Heaven.

But in a way that to modern consciousness seems 'merely' poetic or metaphorical; however, at that times and in that tradition (and the way that language worked then), these descriptions would have been experienced as clear and comprehensible:

<https://lazaruswrites.blogspot.com/>

11 October 2021 at 14:17

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**Lucinda said...**

My son asked me the other day what heaven was like. I said it was eternal life, so my best idea is that it's like this life, without all the people motivated by bad, ugly, false things. He was thrilled with the idea. I am too.

11 October 2021 at 14:55

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**JWM said...**

If we believe in an eternal resurrected life in an actual "place" called heaven, then we must believe that that place is *somewhere*. It is obviously not here in our physical universe (on some distant planet, for example) This implies the Creator creates, ex-nihilo, a separate universe in a separate dimension, that operates on different physical laws (eternal living) than the universe we now inhabit.

God, being all-powerful, is certainly capable of such a thing. Nonetheless it strains mortal credulity past the breaking point.

What is heaven like?

I haven't read any description that goes much past the little "Rainbow Bridge" story that we see on posters in the veterinarians' office: There is a cool, green pastoral heaven, and our beloved pets are there waiting to greet us upon our arrival.

There are things we must be comfortable in simply not knowing. I can accept that such a thing as a heaven exists, but I also have to accept that, like many other things, my mortal brain simply does not stretch far enough to comprehend it. It has to be taken on pure Faith. Just let the mystery be.

JWM

11 October 2021 at 15:52

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### **Bruce Charlton said...**

@JWM - Well I would say (from your analysis) that you haven't just thought about Heaven hard enough, have not examined your assumptions. Perhaps because you don't take it seriously or regard it as unimportant? That's what is sounds like - sophomoric mockery on one side, and on the other mere shoulder shrugging...

Yet what could be more important than Heaven if we intend to spend eternity there?

How can a Christian be satisfied with such vague advice as just to 'accept'... what exactly?

How can that attitude help each of us to live this mortal life dedicated to following Jesus to Heaven?

Either you must do better; or else you won't long remain a Christian - especially not in face of the endemic, pervasive and increasing pressures to corruption and apostasy.

11 October 2021 at 16:37

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### **buckyinky said...**

Your prodding of traditional Christians here reminds me of (in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*) the agnostic Charles Ryder's scoffing at the Marchmain children's inability to give him a concise, succinct, and consensual answer to his challenge of why they are pressing for the dying

Lord Marchmain to be anointed. None could give him an answer that satisfied his criteria, and he took it as evidence that they either didn't believe in the doctrine in the first place or were attached to some pie-in-the-sky unreality. Obviously Waugh as the creator of the story was sympathetic not to the agnostic Ryder (who ends up converting to the Catholic faith in the end), but to the tongue-tied and bumbling Catholic Marchmain children. One gets the impression that the latter's inability to meet the demands of Ryder is not the weakness that most in our "scientific" modern age think it is.

To address one of your examples, that of Heaven, I find it very desirable, comforting and satisfying to know that, whatever specific details can be said otherwise about it, it is that eternal state for which our loving Father God created us. I know this tells us nothing about the specific qualities of this state - whether it has specific coordinates in the universe, whether it can even rightly be described as a "place" as we know the term. But if God loves me as I believe He does, and this is the end He desires for me, has created me for, I don't see at all what is evasive or ignorant of such a description, lacking in simple detail though it be.

11 October 2021 at 18:08

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### **Evan Pangburn said...**

Thank you, I have been looking for a question to answer that I believe it is possible to answer, and should be answered, and this may very well end up being the work of a lifetime.

My preliminary answer is that heaven is a place and/or state of creation, motivation and love where we co-create with God, we become creations promoted to creators. We as unique souls get the opportunity to participate in creation seamlessly with the creator with unlimited motivation to do so. We add the unique intuition of our souls (made unique partly by our unique experiences of mortal life) into the well of creation.

These creations do not conflict with God nor other souls because of love, and of course the absence of sin.

And they do indeed effect the mortal world, many miracles in this world may indeed come primarily by the creations of souls in heaven rather than directly from God.

Of course this gives rise to many other questions, hence the work I must now do.

11 October 2021 at 18:55

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**Evan Pangburn said...**

I may have gotten ahead of myself, to clarify I mean specifically the question of what Heaven is like, because I find it the most important.

11 October 2021 at 19:00

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**Bruce Charlton said...**

@Evan - It is, I think, one of the great joys of life to have discovered a question of major importance to oneself; on which one will continue to work until a fully satisfying answer can be found or created - or until death supervenes.

11 October 2021 at 19:12

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**Evan Pangburn said...**

@BC - The funny thing about that, is that the last bit is almost superfluous, when death comes the answer will be found!

But it is my hope to find a (roughly) accurate answer to this question on this Earth, because to answer this most important question will be far more hopeful and motivating to the demotivated and hopeless souls of today than to answer, for example, "where does God come from?".

Not to say that questions like that aren't important, but what would a modern soul do, even if he had the exact answer to that question? I don't believe it would be especially helpful to the miserable and alienated modern Christian.

11 October 2021 at 19:54

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**Restitutor Orbis said...**

Bruce - another excellent post. You are fast becoming my favorite theologian on Earth!

With regard to the problem of evil, I am increasingly persuaded that (in some way) evil or chaos predates creation. Perhaps in the Zoroastrian

manner of an anti-God, perhaps in some Mesopotamian Leviathan. Perhaps the reason that there is Entropy is because of the work of evil, and God must thus continuously sustain existence against it. I cannot prove this of course, nor does the weight of Christian theology support it, but on deepest meditation I continuously return to this as necessarily true.

It seems to me that Evil would be most highly motivated to have us believe God is responsible for all of its calamities and horrors, and also that we are powerless to fight against it and must wait for God. The contemporary Christian dogma is a recipe for blaming the Lord and engaging in helpless apathy!

11 October 2021 at 21:51

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### **Lady Mermaid said...**

The problem of suffering can be addressed by discovering what is our purpose for this life on earth. If it is simply to avoid suffering and be as comfortable as possible, than transhumanism is the path we should set upon, not Christianity. We could probably use technology to eliminate traces of sorrow or pain if we truly set our minds to it. If you believe that suffering in of itself is a great evil, than no God will do regardless of omnipotence. If suffering is evil, than God is either a monster who will not stop it or a pathetic wizard of oz who is ultimately unable to help His creation.

William Wildblood posted this excellent blogpost a few months back that ultimately describes what our purpose for this life is: to become a (lower case g) god and co-create w/ God. Francis Berger made a point that Christianity took a wrong turn by underemphasizing theosis and focusing primarily on salvation as a legalistic escape from hell. I grew up Protestant, but Chent's experience about heaven seeming like an eternal church service and having a mostly negative motivation to avoid hell was quite similar to mine. To be honest, the gospel didn't seem like Good News. Missionaries were to be supported b/c if someone did not literally "ask Jesus into his heart" he would automatically be thrown in hell, no questions asked, even if he never heard of Jesus.

I don't believe the dissatisfaction w/ Christianity is primarily about the Trinity or omnipotence. Rather, the traditional emphasis of fire insurance w/ no positive purpose in this life makes the gospel to seem like bad news. My mother would tell me stories growing up in Spain about how people seemed to view God as a policeman and their job was to avoid acquiring tickets. My grandmother would time going to Mass to arrive on just on time

to meet the Sunday obligation and leave soon enough once the obligation was met. It was not surprise that church attendance collapsed after the death of Franco. Fear can be a motivator, but it only lasts for a while. People must genuinely want to follow Jesus.

Don't misunderstand me, I'm not saying that we should downplay Jesus' warnings about damnation. Your last post about the Gerontocracy was far more terrifying than any traditional fire and brimstone sermon. However, the Great Commission talked about making disciples, not simply offering fire insurance. Anyone can get saved at the last minute like the thief on the cross, however, his opportunity for theosis is limited if he waits until the moment of death before making a decision.

I will leave these two beautiful posts about the purpose of salvation and life on earth. The way to make sense of the suffering that we endure is to believe that it is for the purpose of spiritual transformation into sons and daughters of God.

<https://www.francisberger.com/bergers-blog/freedom-for-is-not-freedom-for-materialism-individualism-and-liberalism>

<http://meetingthemasters.blogspot.com/2021/05/the-fork-in-road.html>

12 October 2021 at 00:17

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### **Days of Lot said...**

There are many accounts of near death experiences that describe what heaven and hell are like, if they are to be trusted....Personally, I doubt they are all hallucinations or lies, as an atheist acquaintance of mine believes (though some might be). Most NDE descriptions sound like traditional concepts of heaven and hell as depicted in artwork, literature, etc.

12 October 2021 at 00:30

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### **Bruce Charlton said...**

@RO - I've written a fair bit about entropy and chaos recently:  
<https://charltonteaching.blogspot.com/search?q=entropy+chaos>

12 October 2021 at 05:44



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**Bruce Charlton said...**

@LM - I think you are correct that the two big alternatives are transhumanism and the replacement of humans, dedicated to reducing/eliminating suffering -- or Christianity which conceptualizes the purpose of this life as to choose and prepare for Heaven.

Before deciding whether God is either evil or pathetic, we need to be clearer on the origins of evil. By my understanding, evil is a consequence of the primordial selfishness of beings - and Heaven is God's solution to evil. God is working from Chaos towards Heaven - which is based on Love and wholly creative.

There is suffering in this world because it is inhabited by beings that are having experiences towards helping them decide yes or no to Heaven; and also from they may learn lessons of value in Heaven.

And God is working-towards raising Men to become like God (wholly loving and a creator) - which we see in Jesus. Thus Heaven is a place of many creative 'gods', living and working in the primary creation made by God.

12 October 2021 at 05:54

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**Restitutor Orbis said...**

Bruce - Your post of May 13 2021 is exactly what I was looking for, ty!

12 October 2021 at 17:33

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