Is God Just a Crutch?

*Are you a Christian because you were born in America? Would you be a Muslim if you were born in Iraq? Maybe. But so what?*

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**Quick Summary: A Moment of Truth**

- Many dismiss Christianity by citing the cultural, emotional, psychological, or historical reasons people believe. Yet these tell you only about the Christian. They tell nothing about the truth of Christianity.
- No one can refute an idea by showing, even correctly, the psychological or cultural reasons someone believes it. This is an evasion, the genetic fallacy, not an argument.
- There's a difference between what causes or motivates a person to believe and what justifies the belief. First you must show that a man is wrong before you start explaining why he is wrong.
- Christ may be a crutch, but crippled people need crutches. The real question is, "Can your crutch hold you?"

Sometimes your best "moments of truth" are not opportunities you create, but ones that find you. You don’t have to hunt for them. Dissenters will gladly lay them in your lap.

For example, my niece, Kirsten, emailed me this challenge from a friend:

Uncle Greg,

I have a friend, Aiman, who has really been drilling me on Christianity and what I believe in. It's great because he's forcing me to stay on top of what I believe and keeping me from becoming a lazy Christian. However, I'm finding myself backed into a corner on questions I feel like I should be able to defend easily.

For example, Aiman, thinks I am a Christian because of where I grew up and because of what has happened in history (Christianity would not be as large a religion if it were not for Constantine). I am starting to think this is partly true. I know I made the decision to accept Christ. But the chances are much slimmer that I would be a Christian if I grew up in a Muslim country where I would not know about Christianity. Right?

I've heard this kind of challenge before, many times. It takes a couple of different forms:

- "You believe in God because you need an emotional crutch."
• "The New Testament was written by Christians, and they were biased."
• "You are pro-life because you're a man."
• "Your belief in one true religion is intolerant."
• "You are a Christian because you were born in America."

Each of these trade on the same fundamental error. Do you see it? Find it by asking yourself this question: What are these objections about?

In these examples, the Christian's views are dismissed because a) he has an emotional need, b) he is biased, c) he is a certain gender, d) he has a character flaw (intolerance), d) he comes from a certain social or cultural background.

Did you notice that each of these objections is about the believer, not his belief? This is a clue to the problem with all such attacks. You can never know anything about the truth of a person's beliefs by focusing on anything about the believer. You might learn something interesting about his psychology, his culture, or his social background. But you will never learn anything about the accuracy of his views. To learn that, you must focus on the ideas themselves.

Here's how I responded to Kirsten:

Consider two men, one a pediatrician in New York and another a pygmy in the Congo. Each describe the cause of sickness in different ways. The pediatrician faults germs, the pygmy, spirits. The doctor invokes medicine for healing, the pygmy, magic. Each believes exactly what his culture has taught him and lives as if it were so.

Here is my question: Who is correct, the doctor or the pygmy?

Do you see that you can never know the answer to that question by noting which culture each was raised in, or by pointing to the cultural influences that formed each belief? The cultural, emotional, psychological, or historical reasons people believe tell you only about their cultures, emotions, history, or psychological states. They tell you nothing about whether germs or demons cause disease, whether the earth is flat or round, or whether Christianity (or any other religion, for that matter) is true or false. To get to the answer to those questions you have to look at those things.

Yes, if you grew up in a Muslim country, chances are you'd be Muslim. I agree. But what follows from that? Nothing. Nothing at all. It's merely a curiosity of counterfactuals, of what might have been. In order to get to the truth of the matter about religion, Aiman is going to have to do better than that. To quote Lewis, "You can only find out the rights and wrongs by reasoning, never by being rude about your opponent's psychology." And, I might add, never by making observations about the influence of history on the spread of one's religion.

Aiman has his cart before his horse. He thinks he can discredit you views by citing the historical or psychological influences that shaped them. But he must first discredit your views by reason before it becomes meaningful to ask why you would believe such foolish things (e.g., "She was raised that way," "She needed an emotional crutch," or "It's what her culture believes because Constantine became a Christian in the 4th century").

Examining the motives (or historical influences) of one's view may tell you interesting things about psychology or about history, but it can never tell you anything about the legitimacy of a view itself.
The Genetic Fallacy

Kirsten’s challenger had made a common blunder, one I’m sure you’ve encountered. He focused on the origin of a belief, not its content. Whenever you’re faced with a challenge that focuses on you, your psychological states, your cultural conditions, your personal biases, and not your beliefs, a red flag should go up.

German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach was the first to suggest that God was nothing more than a psychological projection. Religion to him was a universal neurosis. God is merely a placebo, a crutch, a function of religious wishful thinking. Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Karl Marx (“Religion is the opiate of the people”) all traded on this same theme.

When someone disqualifies a belief based on its origin (its genesis), they have blundered into the genetic fallacy. Any challenge put this way is beset with problems because it is fired at the wrong target. There's a difference between what causes or motivates a person to believe and what justifies the belief.

Can someone be biased and still be accurate, or emotionally crippled and still be correct? Certainly. Does it follow that since I want God to exist, then He doesn't exist, that since it comforts me to think He loves me, then I must be fantasizing? This is crooked logic.

How does what we wish to be true influence what actually is true? A non-believer can no more disprove God by citing the emotional advantages of belief than a Christian can prove God exists by citing the emotional motivations for denial (and they are legion). Put simply, psychological motivations give you information about the one who believes, but they tell you nothing about the truth of his beliefs.

No one can refute an idea by showing, even correctly, the psychological reasons a person happens to believe it. Why? Because psychological motivations have nothing to do with whether a belief is true or not. That evidence must come from other sources.

People have all kinds of twisted motivations to believe things that actually turn out to be true. Others have noble motivations to believe things that are false. Therefore, challenging a belief based on its source gets us nowhere.

Someone says that Christians just want a father figure. I say, “Maybe we do and maybe we don't, but what does that have to do with whether God exists or not?” I could be wrong in my belief that God is a protective father, and the critic could be wrong in thinking God is a mere psychological projection. Assessing our psychological condition, however, isn't going to get either of us any closer to the truth.

C.S. Lewis explains why this approach fails:

Suppose I think, after doing my accounts, that I have a large balance at the bank. And suppose you want to find out whether this belief of mine is "wishful thinking." You can never come to any conclusion by examining my psychological condition. Your only chance of finding out is to sit down and work through the sum yourself....If you find my arithmetic wrong, then it may be relevant to explain psychologically how I came to be so bad at arithmetic...but only after you have yourself done the sum and discovered me to be wrong on purely mathematical grounds....In other words, you must show that a man is wrong before you start explaining why he is wrong. (emphasis in the original)
Reasons, Not Desires

Lewis exposes this ruse as an evasion, not an argument. Our question Does God exist? must be answered with reasons first, not dismissed with misleading talk about motives or desires.

Suppose I observe the apparent order and design of the universe and conclude some intelligent Being is responsible for them. How could you refute me? There’s only one way: address the reasons themselves.

It does no more good to say one loves the idea or hates the idea than it does to dismiss his conclusion because he has heartburn. Reasons cannot be chased away by desires, motivations, or upset stomachs.

If my reasons to believe in God are not dependent on my emotions, then assessing my psychological states misses the mark entirely. One can never answer the question, "Is God just a crutch?" by looking at motivations.

The question of motivation only enters in as a psychological curiosity once the hard work of refutation has been done. Give me convincing arguments that God doesn't exist before you ask why I'd believe in such a fantasy.

Many detractors, though, are simply not up to the effort of careful thought. It's easier, instead, to ignore the arguments and fault the feelings. In this kind of intellectual bullying, Lewis points out, "refutation is no necessary part of argument. Assume that your opponent is wrong, and then explain his error, and the world will be at your feet."

Variations on the Theme

The genetic fallacy is the stock-in-trade of political discourse.

A newspaper headline on affirmative action reads, "National Group Says Board Is Motivated by Politics." But what does motivation have to do with the merits of affirmative action?

A presidential candidate’s concerns about embryonic stem cell research are dismissed as "anti-science" or "pandering to the religious right." Neither tell you anything about the morality of ESCR.

Some seem to think that gender makes a difference in the abortion debate. However, since arguments have neither testicles nor ovaries, gender is completely irrelevant. An argument is either a good one or a bad one. The sex of the person voicing it makes no difference. Note, by the way, that the Blackmun court of Roe v. Wade fame was comprised of nine men, no women.

Yes, a pro-lifer might be a man. He might also be uncaring, unloving, and insensitive to the plight of women. He might have a host of other unspecified character flaws, as some claim. But none of these factors bears on the question of whether it's moral to take the life of an innocent, unborn human being.

Sadly, Christians are often guilty of this error. I’ve frequently heard the content of modern psychology dismissed as bogus simply because it came from irreligious people who hated God. Would these same ideas magically morph into truth when tumbling from the mouth of a Christian?
A prominent Christian talk show host dismissed the work of homosexual scientist Simon LeVay in search of a "gay gene" with the remark, "But he's gay." Just because a person may have a motive to deceive, though, doesn't mean his research is deceptive.

Never forget Lewis’s rule: First you must show that a man is wrong before you start explaining why he is wrong.

**God in Man's Image?**

If men were to invent a god, what would he be like? If we fashioned a god of our choosing, would we create a god like the one in the Bible?

A god formed by human hands would mirror human sensibilities and human proclivities. He would think and act, more or less, like we do. As our invention, his morality would reflect our desires. When we erred, he'd cluck his disapproval and dismiss our frailties with an affectionate kids-will-be-kids shrug. After all, nobody's perfect. And this is the kind of god many people believe in. Not Christianity, though.

The curious thing about the God of the Bible is how unlike us He is. His wisdom confuses us; His purity frightens us. He makes moral demands we can't live up to, then threatens retribution if we don't obey. Instead of being at our beck and call, He defies manipulation. In His economy, the weak and humble prevail and the last become first.

Is the Christian God the kind of god men would create if left to our own devices? Or have we seen the true God and trembled, closed our eyes, hid our faces, and turned our backs with distracting talk about motives and psychological states?

If someone insists that Christ a crutch, I guess I'd have to agree. Crippled people need crutches. Is He just a crutch? No. Thoughtful Christians can give reasons to show that God is real regardless of their motivations for accepting Him. The truth of Christianity doesn't rest on our feelings.

But I'd press a further point. I'd want to know about their crutch. We're all crippled in some way; we're all leaning on something. What are they putting their trust in?

More to the point, can their crutch hold them? That's the real question. And focusing on feelings can't answer it.

**Putting Your Knowledge into Action**

- Next time someone says, "God is an emotional crutch," or "You'd be a Muslim if you were born in Iraq," tell them, "You're probably right." Then ask them to explain what that has to do with the truth of your beliefs.
- Offer the illustration of the doctor and the pygmy. Ask them to explain how they would know whether medicine or magic is the best way to deal with disease.
- Ask yourself the question: What is this objection about? If the challenge to Christianity focuses on the Christian, his feelings, motives, fantasies, conduct, culture, etc. a genetic fallacy may be lurking in the background.
- Flush the fallacy into the open with questions. Make your challenger deal with your beliefs, not any subjective factors that distract him from the main issue: truth.
For the Kingdom,

Gregory Koukl
President, Stand to Reason