

JESUS AMONG OTHER GODS

You can narrow down religious categories using major criteria. These criteria are not ‘airtight proofs’ of Christianity. People tend to desire certain things, though, and the Christian faith comes out looking great after asking these questions. It is good to get a non-Christian to say, ‘Okay, you Christians aren’t stupid...’

1. Is there a victory over evil in this story? A happy ending?
2. Where is the evil located? How can it be solved?
3. Is this just ‘hero worship’ where we have to live up to an ideal on our own strength?
4. Is the scope of the story universal or parochial/nationalistic?
5. Is this faith internally consistent?
6. Is the claim externally validated? Can you evaluate this faith before stepping into it?

Explanations:

1. Is there a victory over evil in this story? A happy ending?

Yes, linear story

No, circular story

Judaism

Hinduism

Christianity

Buddhism

Islam

Atheism

Will evil be defeated? What do the different faiths say? In Hinduism, you cycle through various lives by being reincarnated. Eventually, if you’re ever good enough, you reach some other state, perhaps. But it’s about individual attainment. Evil doesn’t go away per se. Buddhism was a reaction to the suffering caused by Hinduism. Perhaps you can attain Nirvana and transcend suffering by eliminating your own desires. But this is also individual. Evil per se doesn’t go away here either. There are only cycles, or circles.

If you have a belief in a good God, though, then a direct corollary is that this good God will eventually be victorious over evil. Good and evil are not co-equal, or eternal principles locked in eternal combat (Zoroastrianism, or yin-yang type thinking). Hence, the three monotheistic faiths have a sense of a linear story. God promises something, then fulfills that promise. That gives rise to a sense of history moving in a direction. Ultimately, God promises to triumph over evil.

In Atheism, most will claim that the story is linear, since Darwin said that life is getting more complex, and many people are still ‘social Darwinists’ of the sort that says that life is therefore getting better. I think the evidence shows, however, that the Atheist story is circular with respect to evil and suffering. Just look at the fact that more people were killed in war in the 20th century due to organized Atheism than in the previous 19 centuries combined due to organized religion. Are we really getting better?

The question is, ‘What kind of story do you want to live in?’ I would rather live in a linear story where one day a good and loving God will vanquish evil.

2. Where is the evil located? How can it be solved?

In humanity

In bad ideas

In bad structures

No solution/no problem

Christianity

e.g. education

e.g. democracy, marxism

e.g. Buddhism

A question that people discuss in the academic field of International Relations is, ‘What is the origin of war?’ One of the options is Classical Realism. Classical Realism says that war originates from something evil in humanity. Although I’m not endorsing the ‘national interest’ policy stances that flow out of it, I do think the basic insight into human nature is not given much serious consideration. Other theories are offered and explored with much more depth: a few mad dictators, bad power structures and policies,

natural disasters, and other circumstances. While I think it is very important to pay attention to those factors, I believe that people would rather think of war – or other evils – as the result of things external to human beings. Why? It seems easier to reduce war down to something we could plan against, at least in theory, because if humanity itself were the problem, then what is the solution? What tradition claims to be able to transform humanity itself?

William Golding's 1954 classic, *The Lord of the Flies*, tells a story about evil rising out of the human heart. A group of young British schoolboys survive a shipwreck and get stranded on a jungle island. An older boy named Ralph becomes their leader. They find a conch shell on the beach, and it becomes Ralph's symbol of authority and a prized possession. At first, everything is fine. The boys build a fire as a signal to anyone searching for them. They try to keep the fire going, but some of them want to just hunt on the island, as if they could settle there forever. Another older boy named Jack challenges Ralph. He is the best hunter; so then comes a mutiny: Jack leads some of the boys away to just hunt. Jack wins over almost all the boys and sets up another tribe where he is the chief. Then, as they get caught up in emotion, surround and kill one of their own, a boy named Simon. It was an accident; it was nighttime; there was thunder, so they couldn't hear Simon's cries. But the next victim is a chubby boy named Piggy. Piggy confronted the savage hunter boys: "Which is better -- to have rules and agree, or to hunt and kill... Which is better, law and rescue, or hunting and breaking things up?" Then another boy named Roger dislodges a huge rock from up a hill, which strikes Piggy and knocks him off a cliff. From that point on, lone Ralph becomes the hunted prey in a life and death struggle. Roger takes a stick and sharpens it at both ends, intending to put Ralph's head on it. But British sailors from a battle cruiser appear just in time to rescue all the boys from the island, and themselves.

That story raises some puzzling questions. What went wrong with the boys in the book? Why did they become violent and deliberately evil? And what about the evil in the real world, the world beyond the island? What does this story tell us about ourselves? Who will rescue the adult? Americans asked that question on Tuesday, April 20, 1999, when two teenage boys, high school juniors at Columbine High School in Denver, Colorado, opened fire on their schoolmates and threw pipe bombs. Many made the parallel that at the time, the U.S. was bombing Kosovo, Yugoslavia. Who will rescue the adult?

In the middle of his book, Golding shares his view with us. A rotting pig's head, impaled on a spear, buzzing with flies, speaks to Simon in a hallucination. The 'lord of the flies' says: 'There isn't anyone to help you. Only me. And I'm the Beast... Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!... You knew, didn't you? *I'm part of you? Close, close, close!* I'm the reason why it's no go. Why things are what they are?' (p.130 – 131, emphasis mine) In other words, Golding sees no hope for the adult world because the problem is inside them, too. It's not a surprise that Golding wrote his book after World War II, because that was the most devastating war in human history, and human beings couldn't blame religion like they had done before; religion had precious little to do with World War II, or any of the wars of the 20th century for that matter. So humanity's true colors came shining through, and it was not impressive.

I believe that the uniquely Christian contribution to discussions about 'evil' is to maintain that humanity is the source of much of the evil in the world. It's not that at every moment, human beings are as bad as we could be. But at every moment, human beings are not as good as we should be. Human beings are not thoroughly evil. There remains in us the image of God, however tarnished. Yet human beings are certainly partly evil; the problem is *ontological*, concerning our very being. It's not simply educational, as if we just needed to educate people in the correct way. It's not simply structural or political, as if we just needed to change structures. Education and redistributing political power might help in many ways, but Jesus said the fundamental problem is *ontological*. It is in our hearts, at the very center of our will.

That is a challenging thought to many, because there is no philosophy or viable political theory that even claims to deal with humanity ontologically, in our very being. To my understanding, on the theoretical level alone, only the Christian story goes this deep and claims to have a God who heals *humanity* itself. The Old Testament pointed the Jews towards the necessity of heart transformation. Throughout Israel's long relationship with God, those with prophetic insight pinpointed the reason for Israel's repeated failures: the human heart. Hence, Moses, David, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel said: 'The Lord will circumcise your heart' (Dt.30:6). 'Create for me a clean heart' (Ps.51:10). '[The Lord] will write [His] law upon their hearts' (Jer.31:31 – 34). '[The Lord] will give you a new heart' (Ezk.36:26 – 36). The reason for Israel's subordination to Gentile powers in the first place was Israel's sinfulness. Yet if Israel needed the same heart level transformation as the rest of the Gentile world, and if Israel's prophets had also foreseen the Gentile world benefiting from the transformation of Israel when Israel's God finally acted in

such a way as to bring that heart level transformation about, then the Jews would have to look hard at their past attitudes towards the Gentiles and completely reevaluate what it meant to be ‘separate’ from them. It’s not that such a distinction would no longer exist, but that the way it was defined would be reoriented fundamentally. With Jesus, it would be reoriented around himself and redefined by him. For Jesus was the one bringing about the radical heart transformation that the Scriptures longed for. He was transforming the human heart he had, perfecting that process through his death and resurrection, in order to share his new heart with his followers by his Spirit. There and only there is a remedy possible for our humanity, for all humanity.

3. Is this just ‘hero worship’ where we have to live up to an ideal on our own strength?

<i>Empowerment through Connection</i>	<i>Hero Worship</i>
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Christianity	Buddhism Judaism Islam

This may be important for anyone who tends towards depression, or asks the question, ‘How is this much just a bunch of idealistic principles?’ In ‘hero worship,’ you just have to imitate the hero. But the greater the distance between you and the hero you worship (Buddha, etc.), the greater the dissonance, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. The hero becomes the ‘unattainable ideal.’

In Christian belief, the believer is joined to Jesus in a real spiritual connection (by the Holy Spirit being within the person). Through this connection, we are empowered by Jesus himself in a lifetime process of change. We can never ‘copy Jesus’ on our own strength!

4. Is the scope of the faith story universal or parochial/nationalistic?

<i>Universal</i>	<i>Semi-Universal/Semi-Parochial</i>	<i>Parochial/Nationalistic</i>
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Buddhism	Islam	Egyptian gods, Greek gods, etc.
Christianity	Judaism	(anything location specific is parochial)
Atheism	Hinduism	Black Nation of Islam

The parochial/nationalistic category is usually easy for most people to dismiss. It seems obvious that the motivation for having Egyptian gods was to serve Egypt alone. The Nile River was worshiped as a god in Egypt, but why would you worship the Nile if you’re far away from it???

The semi-parochial category can be touchy, but is often the perception of people anyway. Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism have a vision for world-wide influence, but for some reason, have a very obvious preference for one culture or ethnicity.

- Rabbinical Judaism is obviously Jewish. Though the Old Testament prophecies a Messiah or Messianic age that involves the Gentile world, in Judaism the thought is that that period will be God’s doing. It is debated whether Jewish responsibility involves being culturally and ethnically inclusive.
- Similarly, Islam is centered on Arabs and Arab language and culture. For example, in Islam, one should read the Torah in Arabic. And at least a few variants of Islamic hope involve the Arab countries becoming unified first and then Islam spreading over the world.
- Hinduism attempts to philosophically absorb other ‘prophets’ like Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed into itself by reinterpreting them; in that sense, Hinduism claims to be universal. However, Hinduism is deeply intertwined with Indian culture because of the caste system. It is hard for it to be practiced outside of its original context, unless the whole world became a caste system. It is also very difficult (impossible?) to reconcile the Hindu view of beginningless time with the scientific view of a beginning. Thus, Hinduism tends to founder in the face of Western science.

Of these, Buddhism, Christianity, and Atheism are the traditions that are intellectually universal in scope and expression. It seems reasonable to think that a tradition should be *truly universal* as part of its claim to be *true*.

5. Is this faith internally consistent on the intellectual level?

This is another touchy question. Obviously each faith sees itself as internally consistent. There are several questions to ask, however, in a polite and respectful manner.

- Is Islam internally consistent with respect to peace and violence? The Muslim story of Mohammed is similar but different to the Christianity story of Jesus. It's similar in the sense that the Koran traces the pattern of God's prophet being rejected first and vindicated second. That much is accurate. Joseph is rejected first, vindicated second. Moses is rejected first, vindicated second. Jesus is certainly rejected first, vindicated second. But the Koran changes Jesus' story so that it's not actually him who dies, but someone else. So in the Koran, Jesus is not resurrected. Then the Koran points to Mohammed as the greatest and final prophet. In typical prophetic fashion, Mohammed is rejected first – by being kicked out of Mecca. But he is then vindicated when he returns with military victory over Mecca. So what resurrection is to Jesus, military victory is to Mohammed. What resurrection is to Christians, military victory is for Muslims. I know there are peace-oriented Muslims, but I think they have to do things to their texts to get there. Is it internally consistent? Or does the wide variety of opinions in the Muslim world about jihad vs. peace a reflection of the inconsistency in the text of the Koran? That is one of the differences that concern me most.
- Is Judaism internally consistent with respect to the way it handles prophetic passages about the Messiah, like Isaiah 53? Many rabbis viewed Isaiah 53 as Messianic, that the Messiah would suffer and die. How can that be denied? What about the suffering implied by Genesis 3:15 (God says to Satan, 'you shall bruise him on the heel'), Daniel 9:26 ('the Messiah would be cut off'), Zechariah 13:6 ('[wounds] with which I was wounded in the house of my friends'), and the pattern of suffering prophets and deliverers like Joseph, Moses, David, Elijah, Jeremiah, etc.?
- Is Buddhism internally consistent in the sense that on the one hand, you're supposed to rid yourself of all desires, but on the other hand, you're supposed to do good? Is there a consistent approach to the person?
- Is there such a thing as a 'kinder, gentler Hinduism' as some very moderate Hindus say? The Hindu caste system is vicious and countless poor people and women suffer for it. The caste system does not seem to be a deviation from Hinduism, but a faithful expression of it. Gandhi turned away from standard Hinduism because he recognized it promoted war. The warriors have their own caste, right under the Brahmins; they are the second highest form of person in Hindu thought. Yet Gandhi later persecuted Bishop Azariah, an Indian Christian who evangelized dalits (untouchables), for turning them away from a nationalistic form of Hinduism Gandhi promoted.
- Is Atheism internally consistent with regards to story and meaning? Many Atheists want to find personal meaning for life and a real foundation for relationships, but they have to look somewhere besides the Atheist story itself:

Atheistic Evolution Story (especially Enlightenment individualism)	Christian Story
Unexplained origin of universe, earth, life	God created universe, earth, life
Human beings are merely physical, chemical beings; our souls really don't factor in	Human beings are both physical and spiritual
Life's goal is the survival of species; relationships are important, but social constructs	Life's goal is honoring God; relationships are given and ordered by God
Sex is pleasurable individually but ultimately functional, for the survival of the species.	Sex takes its meaning from being located in God's original ideal for human marriage: monogamous, heterosexual, loving, with no pre-marital sex, adultery, desertion, or divorce

Individual rights were finally developed in the European Enlightenment, providing a 'firm foundation' for justice	Individuals have responsibilities to God concerning how to treat others.
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6. Is the claim externally validated? Can you evaluate this faith before stepping into it?

Sometimes a faith will claim that you need to step inside it in order to evaluate it. The thought is: 'Try it and you'll see.' Christians can certainly do this, too, but it's important to be able to evaluate a faith from the outside, externally. Otherwise, it seems like a form of salesmanship without scholarship.

The philosophical religions (Hinduism and Buddhism) must be evaluated more in terms of their corroboration with science and history. Hinduism and most forms of Buddhism hold to the idea of reincarnation happening infinitely, backwards and forwards in time. But how is that consistent with the idea from western science that the universe had a beginning? Judaism, Christianity, and Islam do not have a conflict with western science in terms of the universe having a beginning.

The Christian faith is fundamentally anchored in history. It can and should be evaluated from the outside, from history. The resurrection of Jesus is the point from which we should start. The historicity of Jesus as a person is also, of course, part of that. So is the historical nature of the Bible, once we properly understand the cultural and literary factors that went into it. This would include the patterns of prophecy and fulfillment in the Bible, which are historical.

Judaism and Islam have historical claims. It should be noted that Jesus has fared much better in 'the quest for the historical Jesus' (see N.T. Wright's *The New Testament and the People of God, Jesus and the Victory of God, The Resurrection of the Son of God*), than Mohammed has fared in 'the quest for the historical Mohammed' (see Ibn Warraq, *The Quest for the Historical Mohammed*).

Though Atheism also claims to be historical and scientific, there are some key missing pieces that have stayed beyond the reach of experimental science (e.g. big bang, origin of life, macroevolution).