

# **Is it fair for God to reward belief and punish disbelief?**

By Paul Almond, 10 February 2009

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## 1 Abstract

Many Christians claim that believers will be rewarded in the afterlife, while disbelievers will be punished. You cannot rationally *choose* to believe what you find unbelievable. God seems unfairly to reward people for irrationality. Many claims might be at least as likely to be correct as Christianity, and it seems that non-believers will be rewarded for choosing the right claim by chance, when nothing suggests that it is right to a non-believer. God seems unfairly to reward good luck. Christians could reply that you are not being asked just to believe – you can test Christianity – however this demands a special investment of time and resources that other claims of equal or greater probability may not receive. This also rewards irrationality and punishes rationality. God as imagined by many Christians is unfair. God is supposedly perfect, and unfairness is imperfect, so such a god does not exist.

## 2 Introduction

Many Christians tell non-believers that they need to believe in God to gain eternal life and some also claim that non-believers will go to hell. You are supposedly rewarded for treating their claims favorably and possibly punished for treating them unfavorably. How ethical and just would it be for God to demand this? Examples will show how demands that Christians claim God makes of non-believers are unethical and unjust.

## 3 Setting the Scene

Imagine that I have been asked by a rich, but reclusive man, who wants to remain anonymous and hidden away in his penthouse with just his dog, to give some of his money away to people who deserve it. He wants to give it away to deserving parents of sick children who cannot afford treatment, and whose children will die if they do not get the treatment but will be saved if they receive the money and can afford treatment. (The particular worthy cause is unimportant here. If you do not like the sick children example, imagine any deserving group of people you want.)

## 4 Example 1

### 4.1 How I Find Deserving People

I put some of the money in a pink, fiberglass penguin and bury it in a field. I phone up some of the parents and tell them that the money to heal their child is in a pink, fiberglass penguin buried in a field and that they just need to go and dig it up. When they ask for

evidence I give none. Most of the parents angrily tell me to stop making prank calls. If any do go and get the money, my position is that they deserve the money more than the ones who did not believe me.

## **4.2 Similarity with Christianity**

Some Christians tell us we must believe to get a reward. Likewise, this method of finding deserving people tests people's ability to believe something. Those that believe it, no matter how outrageous it sounds, are considered deserving.

## **4.3 Discussion**

Anyone who really did this as a way of finding deserving people would be considered unethical and unfair. The approach would seem appalling to most people. If someone telephones you and makes a claim like this, there is no reason to take it seriously. Those that do, and get the money, are not displaying any virtue in believing. They are simply displaying gullibility and happen to be lucky that with all the thousands of prank calls made every day, mine is genuine. They are being rewarded for making an irrational decision.

The obvious response to this is to say that it does not matter how implausible the phone call is: parents who love their children should try anything to save them. This is nonsense. Parents have limited time and resources to try things. Spending the time and money going to dig up fields for money inside pink penguins means that the time and money cannot be spent on some other possibility that ranked higher in probability.

I challenge any Christian to assert, seriously, that they would think it right to tell a parent who did not get the money, "Well you didn't take the telephone call about the penguin seriously, so you don't deserve the money." I have asked Christians why I should believe their claims and many have told me that I should believe "because it is true". The claim in the phone call is true in this example and few people would probably believe it. Even if you could show that it is rational to believe the phone call, that hardly makes a good case for people who believe *deserving* the money. Surely there are better criteria for determining whether or not someone deserves a reward than this.

Some Christians claim that when you believe you will then have all the evidence you need – that the truth of Christianity is self-evident to believers. That also applies in this example. It would still not explain why people should believe me on the phone and why they should take this step before they have any evidence to support what seems a silly claim.

## 5 Example 2

### 5.1 How I Find Deserving People

I have a brain monitoring helmet which can analyze brainwaves and tell me whether or not the wearer believes something. I tell parents of sick children that if they can wear the helmet for an hour, and if the helmet reports to me that they have believed that fish can ride bicycles throughout this time, then I will give them the money. The challenge for parents of sick children is simple: believe that fish can ride bicycles and win the money.

### 5.2 Similarity with Christianity

Many Christians tell non-believers that they *choose* to reject Jesus and deserve not to go to heaven, and possibly to go to hell, for this disobedience. It does not matter if what you are supposed to believe seems hard to believe: you are supposed to *choose* to believe it. In this example, you are also expected to choose to believe something to receive a reward.

### 5.3 Discussion

What I am demanding here is probably psychologically impossible, or at least extremely unlikely to be achieved by most people. I could tell parents who fail to win the money that that they are bad people if they are not prepared to do a little thing such as believing that fish can ride bicycles for just one hour to save their children's lives, but this would be unfair. It does not matter how sick your child is, how much you need the money and how desperate you are to believe. You can concentrate as hard as you like to try to make yourself believe that fish ride bicycles for an hour, but you will probably be unable to do it. You cannot choose to believe something that seems to be nonsense to you if you are a rational person, a point made by Richard Dawkins when refuting Pascal's Wager in *The God Delusion* [1]. Instead you are compelled to believe things that seem true and to disbelieve things that seem false. The only way you could have the ability to choose a belief is if your rationality is lacking in some area, so this kind of challenge is just a way of detecting mentally ill people. Even if any parents did win the money in this way, what would it show? If any money were left over from treating their child they should use it on a psychiatrist.

A Christian could complain that my analogy was flawed because Christianity is true whereas my claim was clearly untrue, or that Christianity must at least be admitted as possible, whereas my claim is clearly impossible. This could all be disputed – I would say that Christianity seems implausible and if this alleged god wants me to believe he should give me some better evidence – but it does not matter which claims are true and which are untrue. All that matters is how those claims *appear* to the person expected to do the believing. I would find the Christian claim hard to believe, just like the claim that fish can ride bicycles, and even if I wanted to cooperate with Christians, just as in the analogy, no amount of trying to believe could actually allow me to believe. If I could force myself to believe something that seemed implausible to me, by some act of will,

this would only show that I am behaving irrationally. What virtue is there supposed to be in this? Why reward *that*? What is supposed to be the point of populating heaven with people who can somehow twist their minds into believing that which seems untrue to them, surely a sign of cognitive dysfunction?

Expecting people to *choose* to believe things that seem untrue to them is unrealistic and *unfair*. No merit would be shown in winning the money in this way.

## **6 Example 3**

### **6.1 How I Find Deserving People**

I put some of the money in a box. I put the box in a warehouse with 999,999 empty boxes. I arrange for a person standing by each box to say, “This is the correct box. I looked inside it and saw the money, so open this one.” One of these people will be telling the truth. The other 999,999 will be lying, or I will have somehow tricked them into thinking that the box by which they are standing is the one with the money. I invite two parents to come to the warehouse and pick a box. If they choose the box containing the money they keep it; otherwise they receive nothing.

### **6.2 Similarity with Christianity**

Christians expect you to believe their claims, but the other religions expect you to believe their claims. You are also expected to believe the claims of many other people and movements who claim all kinds of things with no obvious reason why you should believe them. Receiving the reward, and avoiding punishment, depends on believing the *right* claim, just as receiving the reward in this example depends on selecting the correct box. Some Christians say that you need to have faith and that when you do believe you will have all the evidence you need. Well, when you open the right box you will also have all the evidence you need. Some Christians claim that their personal testimony makes all the difference – that you should believe based on what they tell you because it is true and they are telling you. This situation also involves personal testimony. Standing next to the box is a genuine person who is truthfully telling us that it is the correct box. It is not his fault that each of the 999,999 empty boxes also has someone saying it has money in it.

### **6.3 Discussion**

It does not matter that one of the boxes contains the money, or that someone is giving personal testimony that it is the right box, or that when you open the right box you will know it is the right box: before selecting a box you have nothing on which to base your decision. This would be viewed as unfair and anyone using a method like this to find deserving parents would be seen as unethical. Even if someone chooses the right box it does not mean that they deserve the money. They just got lucky.

## **7 Example 4**

### **7.1 How I Find Deserving People**

I put the money in a box with a three-digit combination lock in a warehouse, along with 999,999 empty boxes with similar combination locks. I arrange for a person to stand next to each box saying that he/she knows that it is the correct box. I invite two parents to the warehouse to try to win money for their sick child. I am not telling them the combinations for any of the boxes, so they may have to try up to 999 different combinations to open a given box. However, I am allowing them a day to open as many boxes as they can. They should be able to open a few boxes in a day.

### **7.2 Similarity with Christianity**

Some Christians will object to the previous examples by saying that you are not expected to make a single, irrevocable decision about what belief system to adopt. They say that you will find out that Christianity is correct if you at least investigate it further. This example is the same. You are not expected to choose a single box irrevocably, with no information, but instead you may investigate as many boxes as you wish in the available time. You have to spend time guessing the combination to open any single box but this matches real life: finding out whether a particular box is the right one takes time, just as finding out if someone's claims, that initially seem unlikely to be true, are correct, also takes time.

The time limit in this situation is not just a contrivance. In real life the total time available to us to investigate all the different possible claims, no matter how unlikely they seem, is limited in a number of ways. The most obvious limit is our finite lifetime. Further limits are imposed by the need for us to work, sleep and do other things. Just as in this example, we do not have an infinite amount of time available to check out any claims that may be offered to us.

Some Christians may think that expecting people to believe in their claims is not as unfair as I suggest, because they are telling us that their belief is correct: we are not expected to grasp at a belief in the dark, but instead have the benefit of their testimony and we can use their experiences and insight to see that they are correct. The example has the same feature: by every box there is a "witness" giving his/her "testimony" that this is the correct box.

### **7.3 Discussion**

The situation in this example is unfair because the probability that any given box is the right one is low, but you will have to waste time on numerous wrong boxes before getting the right one, and the probability that you will find the right box in the time available is low.

Should the parents of a sick child choose the wrong box, which will probably happen, would it really make sense for the “witness” who had been standing by the correct box to say, “It is your fault! You should have chosen *my* box, as I told you to do”? At the time of choosing, nothing distinguished his/her claim, in terms of probability of being correct, from the claims of the people standing by the other boxes: being right is not enough if you think people have a duty to believe you.

Imagine that the parents lose, after not trying to open the correct box, and are told, “You were told by the man standing next to the correct box that it was the correct box, yet you ignored him. You rejected his personal testimony and did not even spend the time it would have taken to look in the box. I was trying to help you to find the correct box by giving you the testimony of this man and you rejected it. Your child will now die and you deserve that.” Would this seem fair? The parents did not spend the time trying to look in the correct box because they had no reason to think that the probability of money being in that box would justify opening it: there was nothing to distinguish it from the other boxes. If they rejected the “testimony” of the man standing next to the box, it is only because that testimony did nothing to increase the probability of the money being in the box. Anyone who created a contest like this would probably be regarded as playing tasteless games with unfortunate people.

Some Christians may say that things are not really like this because there are not a million other major religions from which to choose. In reality, they might say, the chances of Christianity being “the right box” are better than in the example. This would be a flawed argument. For a start, there have been at least thousands of different types of god belief in human history, any of which might be considered equivalent to a locked box waiting to have time spent on opening it. We could also consider belief systems outside religion. Many people and organizations claim to offer some path to “the truth”, each of which is an option. This, however, is not the *real* objection to this argument. The real objection is that what might stop the parents looking in the correct box is not the existence of the other boxes in itself, but rather their estimate of the very low probability that there is anything useful in that box. This low probability happens to come from the existence of the other boxes, but it is the low probability itself that is the issue. When faced with a limited amount of time to search for ways to help their child, all they see are many low probability chances of a prize being offered. The box containing the money was just one of these: there was nothing special about it and no reason to spend time on opening it.

This low probability did not just have to come from the existence of other boxes. It could come from anything – from whatever makes us make that initial judgment about someone else’s claim. If the parents had actually opened the correct box then it could only be because they gave it special treatment – in this case that they just happened to randomly select it as one of the ones that they would try to open for no good reason. Someone who presents us with a claim that seems to have a low probability of being true, yet thinks it is our responsibility to give that claim special treatment, is trying to put us in the same situation. We have limited time and resources and there are a huge number of ways in which we could use our time to the benefit of ourselves and others. If we are asked to

spend time investigating something with a low probability of being a benefit then we are being asked to gamble the time and effort spent investigating it on the chance that it turns out to be worthwhile. In my view, the true situation is probably worse than that of the example with 999,999 boxes described here. I think that the main claims of Christianity are so extreme, so lacking in evidence and so unlikely to be true that the chance of them being true is much less than one in a million. If I were going to spend some resources on “trying Christianity out”, unless I were going to give it special treatment, I would have to spend my time on millions of other claims that nobody has even committed to paper and which seem to me no more fantastic and unlikely than Christianity, and doing this would take many lifetimes. In fact, the example being considered here is *generous* to Christianity because it assumes that the alternatives to the winning box are other boxes with the same probability of being the right one. In fact, a non-believer might view Christianity as so implausible that there are many more claims that are *more* likely to be true and useful. A more realistic analogy would involve a second warehouses with boxes that are more likely to contain the money (for example, by having 100 boxes containing money inside the warehouse instead of just one), and parents being able to look in either warehouse: there would be no reason for parents even to go to the first one.

This is the problem that a Christian faces when suggesting that I should be rewarded for believing his/her claims and punished if I fail to believe them. The claims of Christianity seem to me to have an extremely low probability of being true. I cannot reasonably be expected to believe them for no reason because that is just like expecting me to pick the right box, out of many, with no reason for my choice. Why should I choose Christianity to believe in when it is just one of many low probability claims? A Christian may claim that I do not have to guess because I have the benefit of his/her testimony or that of other Christians, but this assumes that that testimony somehow changes things. My estimate of the probability that Christianity is correct, even with this testimony, is so low that there is nothing to distinguish it from many other possible claims, none of which merit belief. Christians often seem to expect their testimony to make some sort of *qualitative* difference to the situation – to have the claim treated as if it is completely different, in character, to a claim that is unsupported by their testimony. This, however, is a fallacy. Various items of evidence may be offered to support a claim and a testimony is merely one of these. It may make a *quantitative* change – in terms of increasing the probability that the claim is correct – and it could make a large quantitative change, at least in principle, but it does not change the fundamental situation. The way in which a testimony manifests itself is by changing the probability that the claim is correct, and if the new probability does not substantially change the treatment that we should give the claim we would not be rationally justified in doing anything else to take account of the testimony. A non-believer may find Christianity so extreme, and so unlikely to be true, and other ways in which someone could be caused to give the testimony so much more plausible, that the testimony is of little difference. Faced with this, a Christian may use threats and promises of rewards to get the claim special treatment, but all he/she is doing is showing how unfair God would be if he existed. His/her time would be better spent trying to show that the non-believer’s assessment of the probability that the claim is true is wrong on rational grounds.

A Christian could claim that I am not expected just to make the decision to believe in the dark: I should explore Christianity further. Maybe I should read books and research it, or maybe I should try experimentally believing in God, or talking to him for a while to see what happens. The problem with this is that, from the perspective of someone who gives the claim a low probability of being true in the first place, even when the testimony of believers is taken into account, all of this is nothing more than telling me that *their* claim is special and that I should somehow be spending my time and resources on it. A Christian can claim that of course I should check out their claim, *because it is true*. This is the last refuge of the philosophically incompetent. Any claim can be regarded as including an implicit claim of the truth of that claim. The truth, or otherwise, of the claim is not the issue. *It is quite possible to have a claim that is true, yet which could reasonably be assessed as having such a low probability of being true so that there is no rational justification for spending time on it.* Despite this, I have known Christians to say, “Because it is true,” when asked why I should spend time on their claim. We might also ask what I am supposed to do, even if I decide that the claim merits doing something to test it. Some Christians say that if I choose to believe I will have all the evidence I need, yet the example that I gave previously shows how absurd such a requirement for “experimental belief” would be.

What is being demanded of me, then, if I am expected to believe Christianity, or even if I am expected to spend time or resources on investigating it further, is unreasonable. I do not think that there is a god, but if there were it would be unfair for him to invent a game like this where I am expected, with minimal evidence, to believe a low probability claim for no good reason, or to risk time and resources on checking a particular low probability claim when there is no obvious justification for it and when doing this would mean giving that claim special treatment. Even if the Christian god is real, rewarding me for belief would mean rewarding me for irrationality and punishing me for disbelief would mean punishing me for rationality. Only an unethical being would act like this.

## **8 Example 5**

### **8.1 How I Find Deserving People**

I will offer a choice from three tests of thinking ability. Parents win the money if they can solve a Rubik’s Cube in less than two minutes. Alternatively, they can read an attempted proof of Pythagoras’s theorem and decide if the proof is correct: if they are right they win the money. They can also try ten long multiplication problems, without a calculator, in ten minutes: if they get them all right they win the money.

Let us also say that the benefactor who has made all this money available has become angry at nobody having the decency to win the money in the previous examples, but instead of taking his anger out on parents of sick children, because he is decent, he has shot his dog as payback for their horrible behavior. If the parents refuse to win the money this time they are clearly bad people for rejecting the gift of this man giving up his dog so that he does not have to keep being angry with them.

## 8.2 Similarity with Christianity

Some Christians may make the objection that the previous examples assume that people are being asked to believe claims that seem unlikely to be true, and to somehow choose the right claim from an ocean of implausible claims, or to choose the correct claim for special treatment – in the form of further investigation – with no basis for doing this. They may say that Christianity does *not* seem unlikely to be true to people who know what they are doing and only seems implausible to people who misunderstand philosophy, do not know how to reason, lack the sophistication to understand the arguments for it or lack an open mind. The idea is that you are merely being asked to believe a sensible proposition that is obviously true to anyone who can think properly.

I would dispute this. I find Christianity implausible, but I will not use that to argue here. Instead, let us assume that this idea is correct – that belief in Christianity is sensible. Where does that get us? It gets us here – with the test being one of thinking ability.

Even if Christianity is obviously true to a rational person, it would hardly help a non-believer to whom, for whatever reason, Christianity seems implausible. Whether Christianity is true or not, and whether belief in it is sensible or not, it would still be irrational for a non-believer to disregard the appearance of implausibility that Christianity has to him/her and start believing – and he/she would be in the position of someone confronted by all those boxes in the tasteless games that I discussed.

A Christian may reply that it is the non-believers' fault for making the mistake of thinking Christianity implausible in the first place. Many Christians argue that belief in Christianity is justified. Some, like Alvin Plantinga or C.S. Lewis have written apologetic books about it. Some Christians argue that Darwin's theory of evolution is wrong and that, by some tenuous sequence of logic, this establishes that the Christian God exists. To such people, non-believers are not disbelieving an implausible claim, or refusing to investigate an implausible claim further – they are simply making a dreadful philosophical mistake in rejecting the clear truth of Christianity. If this is the case, why should non-believers be punished for making such a mistake and why should believers be rewarded for avoiding it? If sound reasoning leads to the truth of Christianity then believers are being rewarded for having good thinking abilities and non-believers are being punished for not having them – for coming up with the wrong answer to the problem "Find out whether or not there is a God". This is the same sort of situation as in this example, which also tests people on their thinking ability.

Christians believe that Jesus died for our sins, which has some similarity to the man shooting his dog for the crime of not winning the money that people have previously committed.

## 8.3 Discussion

In the example, parents are rewarded for their ability to solve problems: they are tested on their thinking ability. We should be careful how we view this because most people

reading this article will live in some sort of meritocracy, in which people are rewarded in terms of money or position in society based on their ability to think and do other things. Most people would accept that there is a point to that. A brain surgeon is rewarded for the ability to understand brain surgery, for example. An inventor is rewarded for being good at inventing things. We would hardly want to reward people for not being good at inventing things. These sorts of reward, however, have a point. We want to encourage people to invent things or to become good at brain surgery. The example that I gave does not have any such point: rewarding parents of seriously ill children based on their ability to complete Rubik's cube, understand mathematical proofs or do arithmetic is unfair. Nobody would seriously say that doing this would be taking the moral high ground.

Similarly, why should I deserve to be punished for not understanding that complexity needs a designer, for failing to realize that the mere existence of reality demands a creator, or for my inability to understand that the claim that a man rose from the dead is very reasonable and that a few men claiming it happened is good evidence? This would be unfair. It would be just as fair to send people to heaven or hell based on their ability to understand quantum mechanics, to understand which political party had the best economic policies, to do long multiplication problems correctly or to get high scores in IQ tests.

Christians might claim that this is not the case. They might claim that belief is not an intellectual matter. This is contested by many books claiming to justify Christianity using various philosophical and scientific arguments and by all the Christians on the Internet claiming to be able to prove their religion correct. If a valid logical argument can be made for your religion then someone who is good at dealing with logical arguments has an advantage, in terms of being more likely to believe. If the truth of your religion is evident from looking at the world, then someone who is good at looking at the world has an advantage. If evolution is a stupid theory (as Christians continually claim) then someone who is intelligent is less likely to be fooled by this atheistic piece of Satan science and end up in hell. Whether or not you get to heaven depends a lot on your cognitive abilities.

Christians might say that non-believers do not disbelieve just because they are lacking in intelligence, but because of some personality flaw – for example, because they are arrogant, do not want to believe, are biased against religion or too stubborn to open their hearts to Jesus. None of this would help because Christians' attempts at reasoned arguments to persuade non-believers mean that they expect those arguments to play some role. Even if non-believers have personality issues or are mentally ill, Christians expect books proving God and disproving evolution and arguments supporting Christianity in Internet chat rooms to *help* people on the road to a cure: if not, why bother making them? Even if non-belief is caused by personality issues, the fact that Christians try to use logical arguments to persuade people shows that they expect people's understanding of those arguments to affect whether or not they get cured. If Christians did not think this they would never try to prove God's existence or the validity of intelligent design, but would just try to help atheists overcome their arrogance without reference to religion.

This position should seem particularly unfair when we consider that I did not choose my intelligence or cognitive abilities. If I am a non-believer because I am stupid or incompetent at philosophy then any such stupidity or philosophical incompetence comes from my brain – and we should ask whose fault it *really* is. We should also ask how far this goes. If I am to burn in hell for lacking the intelligence to believe in Jesus, what about people with Down syndrome? Are they supposed to go to hell too for lacking the intelligence to understand books about intelligent design? Maybe God makes an exception for them? Maybe someone with Down syndrome is given an exemption, but someone like me who is more intelligent, but still not intelligent enough to understand that the Christians are right is more deserving of hell?

The situation also has more in common with the previous examples involving having to choose from a large number of boxes than might first appear to be the case. If your cognitive faculties are telling you that Christianity is implausible then that is the information you have to work with to try to make a rational decision, which puts you in the situation of having nothing to recommend the choice of Christianity. Even if Christianity is really sensible, and obviously true, this does not help you if it does not have that appearance to you. Christians might think that this is your fault for not investigating the matter further, or doing various things that would prove their religion correct, but that just puts us in a situation like that in the example with the locked boxes.

Faced with all this, Christians may claim that the non-believer lacks an “open mind”, but what does this mean? If it is some defect in how people process claims then everything I have just said still applies and people are being threatened with punishment for limitations in their cognitive abilities. Christians might say that it is not an intellectual issue at all and that non-believers refuse to “open their hearts to Jesus”; however, this just gets us back to the situation with the boxes, where you have to choose one. Are we supposed to go about opening our hearts to *everything*, experimentally, in case it happens to be the meaning of life, or are we expected to *guess* about what we open our hearts to? Christians may claim that belief is not an intellectual issue, but instead is one of *wisdom* or something similar. This does not avoid the fact that whether or not you believe is dependent on whether you get the correct answer for a philosophical question: call it intelligence, thinking ability, philosophical skill, wisdom or what you will – it is an issue of cognitive ability and the large number of attempted proofs of Christianity in books, websites and Internet chat rooms make it clear that being able to get the right results from information gives you a better chance of being saved. Even if non-believers are lacking in wisdom or some similar faculty, what is so bad about this? Should people be tortured for getting the wrong answers in other philosophical problems? What if someone shows a lack of wisdom in some other philosophical matter, but happens to get the right answers about Christianity? Has he/she not just been lucky to have wisdom in the correct area? With all the badness done by people who commit murder, rape, genocide and child abuse, *why should eternal torture be deserved for making a philosophical mistake?*

Against this, Christians might ask about Nazis who “made the mistake” of thinking that they should rule the world and that inferior people should be enslaved or eliminated, or about the serial killer who “makes the mistake” of thinking that God wants him to kill

randomly selected strangers, which he does with the best of intentions – given that he has merely adopted a flawed position – or about the terrorist who “makes the mistake” of thinking that God wants him to commit some atrocity. Could we not make the same argument about all these people – that everything should be fine and we should not be harsh about a little mistake? These situations are not equivalent to what is being discussed. They involve consequences for other people, and are all probably associated with hatred for other people. In some cases like this the defense may actually try mental illness as an excuse, but getting into the issue of how we should approach responsibility in other matters is beyond the scope of this article. (I have previously written an article about it [2].) In any respect, regardless of our views on the abstraction of “responsibility” society may sometimes need to take action to defend itself and ensure its continued existence – hardly something that an omniscient being should need to do. As shown in the example, there are other situations in which people may make mistakes in thinking for which we would consider punishment unfair. In fact, out of all the different mistakes in thinking that someone could make, those that we would consider deserving anything like imprisonment are probably a small minority and generally involve people endangering and hating others. Those mistakes that would deserve eternal torture are probably a smaller number. Why does it make sense to make the philosophical “mistake” of not believing in God one of these mistakes? Who is endangered? Who is killed? Who is hated? (Many Christians say that God is hated, which is nonsense: a non-believer cannot hate something without thinking it exists.) We should ask whether making a mistake about the issue of whether or not there is a god is in the “getting long multiplication wrong” class of thinking mistakes or the “God wants me to do serial killing” class of thinking mistakes. If the latter, it is only because *God feels like making that the case*. There is no serial killing and, even worse for anyone trying to justify Christianity on this, the non-believer’s non-belief can be easily removed by God introducing himself after he/she dies, which should pretty much remove the effects of the “crime” anyway, unless God’s feelings are hurt by all the previous non-belief and he bears a grudge.

Many Christians make it clear that they are happy for people to be sent to hell for their lack of cognitive abilities. Some non-believers reading this will have been told by Christians that they are stupid: I have. The implication of this is that stupid people should be tortured. I expect many of you have had Psalms 14:1 quoted at you, as if it magically refutes any criticism of Christianity:

*Psalms 14:1 (King James version): The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good.*

Every time a Christian gleefully uses this, an ethically appalling statement is made: people deserve to go to hell for being foolish.

I have known Christians to say, when asked why people should believe their claims, “Because Jesus died for your sins,” or “Because your immortal soul is at risk.” Both of these indicate that the speaker really does want special treatment for Christianity’s claims. He/she expects me to disregard my estimate of the very low probability of the

claim being true, and therefore the very low estimate of the probability that anything being said about Jesus dying for my “sins” or my “soul” matters, and go straight to the issue of what the claims are about. The example being discussed here involved something like this: it featured the rich man shooting his dog, so that he did not need to continue being angry with people who previously failed to win his money. In the context of Christianity, people consider this sort of thing beautiful: in this context it should appear horrible and a sign of mental illness.

## 9 An Idealized Way of Approaching Claims

If we followed an idealized claim investigation method, we would consider all the possible claims that we might investigate according to these criteria:

- How likely is the claim to be true, based on what we know *now*?
- What benefits are there of knowing whether the claim is true or false? For example, does it give us a new energy source? Does it seem important to us, from the point of view of curiosity? Would it satisfy something emotional in us?
- How easy will it be to investigate the claim usefully and reduce our uncertainty about its truth?
- Are there any extra benefits from investigating the claim? For example, are there any spin-off technologies which would pay for the investigation? Are we being paid to investigate the claim? Is investigating the claim fun? Would investigating the claim inspire future scientists, etc?

These criteria, and maybe some that I have not thought of, can tell us how desirable further investigation of any claim is. The more likely the claim is to be true, the greater the benefits of the claim being true, the ease with which the claim can be usefully investigated, and the greater any extra benefits of investigating the claim, then the more desirable is further investigation of the claim.

Ideally, we would work out the desirability of further investigation for every possible claim and put all the claims (and ideally, here, we might think that “all claims” means “all possible claims”) in a list, in order of desirability. If we have some time available to investigate claims we should start investigating the claim at the top of the list (the one for which investigation is considered most desirable). As the investigation continues we should continually adjust the desirability for this claim. For example, we should continually take account of what we learn from the investigation to adjust the probability that the claim is true. We continue investigating the claim while it continues to be the one at the top of the list (the one for which investigation is most desirable). The claim may become less desirable in a number of ways. We may reach a situation of diminishing returns where further investigation is not expected to yield much extra information. The probability that the claim is true may decrease, making it less desirable to investigate it. So much time may have been spent on the claim that it becomes boring: the expected fun for immediate, further investigation may be decreased. Whenever another claim ends up at the top of the list we start investigating that instead.

I do not seriously expect anyone to follow such a method rigorously: I do not even claim to do all that myself and it is not provided in any way that would allow it to be used as a practical methodology. The method is a simplification in at least one respect: it ignores the possibility of the same investigation providing information about multiple claims. I suggest though that everyone who is rational follows some kind of informal, messier version of this kind of process. When deciding which claims to investigate we rank them in order of desirability of further investigation and the probability that a claim is true has to make a big contribution to that desirability.

An important point here is that, even if a claim is unlikely to be true, it might get investigated at some point, when there is nothing better to do. That investigation may start to increase the probability that the claim is true, justifying further investigation of the claim.

The examples with the phone call, the boxes and the warehouse involve special cases of this. In a way, the warehouse has now become the entire list of all claims that can be stated. If we are to act rationally, we should have the right to investigate the claim at the top of the list, and if someone wants us to investigate their claim, which is not at the top of the list, we should have every right to wait until it *is* at the top of the list. I think that Christianity is so unlikely to be true that it is way down this list. If a Christian wants me to ignore the desirability of investigating claims and just pick their claim out of its arbitrary place in the list, I am being asked to give their claim special treatment: I am being asked to select a claim, from this list of claims, as the one I want to investigate with no rational basis for such a decision. There are many other claims I could choose to investigate, many of which will be higher in the list and more deserving of investigation, but I am expected to pick Christianity anyway. This is actually *worse* than being expected to select the right box, in a warehouse full of identical boxes, and to try to open its combination lock because in that example any box was as good as any other. Here, Christianity can be viewed as a particularly unpromising box – and if Christians disagree with that I would remind them of Example 4 and its discussion. Christians might complain that this is unfair and effectively rules their claim out from further investigation, but this is not my fault: it is the fault of the claim. In this respect, Christianity is no different from billions of other extreme claims that we could imagine. I do not see many Christians agonizing over whether they should investigate the idea that spirits live in our socks to secretly control our minds via acupuncture points on our feet, and even if I offered them some personal testimony on this I cannot imagine them being impressed enough to go off and research it. Their claim is different, of course.

## **10 Is hell so bad?**

I have known Christians to claim that non-believers “don’t understand” that hell is not a physical place, with physical torture, but is merely eternal boredom, separation from God, non-existence or something similar – or just something vague. This is disingenuous because the person saying it knows that, regardless of whether or not hell is physical or not, and regardless of what he/she thinks it is, going to hell is the worst thing that can happen to someone, and he/she is claiming that non-believers deserve to go there.

Suggesting that people should be consigned to eternal separation from God, or should cease to exist, for failing in the sorts of tests described in the examples in this article, is little better than suggesting that they should be tortured.

If you doubt this, ask yourself if, given the choice between tortured by the Spanish Inquisition for half an hour, or going to hell (whatever it is supposed to be) forever, the sort of Christian who tries to downplay hell like this would choose the Spanish Inquisition or hell. He/she would choose the Spanish Inquisition, showing the absurdity of any attempt to suggest that going to hell is not an extreme punishment and that he/she does not believe that other people deserve something worse than half an hour of physical torture.

## 11 Conclusion

I will not claim that the sorts of attitudes I have described here are universal to Christians. There are many variations on Christian belief. Some Christians may believe that the fate of people after death is beyond God's control. Others may believe that God does not judge anyone and that everyone goes to heaven. Many Christians, however, believe that God rewards belief and punishes disbelief.

If the claims appear implausible to a non-believer, then he/she will be unable to believe them without being irrational, because it is impossible to *choose* to believe something while being rational: you are compelled to believe that which seems true and disbelieve that which does not seem true. Even if God exists, as described by Christians, he is rewarding irrationality, which is unfair.

There might be many claims apparently as likely to be correct, or more likely, than Christianity, and it seems that non-believers will be rewarded for choosing the right claim by chance, when there is nothing to suggest that it is right to a non-believer. Even if God exists, he is unfairly rewarding good luck and punishing bad luck.

Some Christians say that you are not being asked just to believe, because you can test Christianity. They may suggest that you should read the Bible more, read books about Christianity, talk to more Christians, talk to God or try experimentally believing for a while to see what happens. Apart from the problem of how we are supposed to believe something, experimentally, that seems implausible, this demands special treatment for Christianity, in terms of investment of time and resources, that we might not give other claims with equal or greater probability of being true. This also unfairly rewards irrationality and punishes rationality.

Christians might answer all this by saying that Christianity is obviously true and that it is an obvious choice to believe in it. The problem with this is that determining that Christianity is the correct choice would involve intelligence, skill in philosophy or similar cognitive abilities and this amounts to unfairly rewarding or punishing people based on their cognitive ability. Even if Christianity is obviously true, this is no help to someone to whom it appears untrue.

Christians may try to weaken this argument by suggesting that hell is misunderstood by non-believers, but this is irrelevant because hell is generally believed to be undesirable and we should expect an ethical being to be fair about who gets sent there.

If God exists, as many Christians imagine him, he is unfair. God is supposed to be perfect. Unfairness is an imperfection, so such a God does not exist.

This article has been directed at Christianity, but some of the arguments in it might also be directed at other religions. I merely chose to write about one specific religion in this instance, mainly because it was safer to think about a single religion rather than risk over-generalizing about a number of religions or being told by adherents of religions I hardly know that I do not understand their beliefs and because most of my experience of being told to believe “or else” comes from Christians. The main ideas of this article would also apply to Islam and you can consider it aimed at that as well, which might answer people who say, as if it has magic powers to invalidate any criticism, “You’ll talk about my religion, but you wouldn’t dare say that about Islam.”

Some Christians reading this would respond, “If you do not believe in heaven or hell why do you even care about them?” I do not care about them: they do not exist as far as I am concerned. However, I do care about claims made by other people. I can make value judgments about how much I like those claims, whether or not I find those claims offensive, whether or not I find those claims slanderous in suggesting that I deserve eternal torture, and whether or not the claims of what you need to do to go to heaven or hell are consistent with the idea of a just being. All of these issues can matter irrespective of whether or not I think the things in the claims exist. I think that people who suggest that non-believers should not discuss their claims about heaven or hell are merely trying to get a free ride for their religion, without it being subjected to any criticism.

## 12 Note

I have used US English spelling conventions in this article, which is different to my previous practice. This is due to the relative numbers of people likely to be reading it in different geographical regions.

## 13 References

[1] Dawkins, R. (New Edition, 2007). *The God Delusion*. London: Black Swan. Chapter 3, p130. (Originally published: 2006. London: Bantam Press)

[2] Web Reference: Almond, P. (2006). *When Are People Responsible?* Retrieved 9 February 2006 from <http://www.paul-almond.com/WhenArePeopleResponsible.htm>.