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# CAN CHRISTIANS PLAUSIBLY EXPLAIN VIRTUOUS NON-CHRISTIANS?

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**ABSTRACT:** It is a plain fact – obvious to any minimally perceptive person familiar with an adequate cross-section of humanity – that rationality, erudition, and moral goodness are to be found among both secular people and religious people alike, including followers of Christian and non-Christian religions. Can Christians plausibly account for this? Can they plausibly account for the fact that many non-Christians (whether religious or not) are not only morally good in many respects but also morally better than many Christians? More specifically, if they think salvation is for Christians rather than non-Christians, must they think (implausibly) that all Christians are morally better than all non-Christians? If not, must they think that (if not everyone is saved) God is unfair in saving some who are morally worse rather than others who are morally better? In this paper, I will defend a negative answer to these last two questions and (at the same time) a positive answer to the title question.

**KEYWORDS:** culpable unbelief, divine fairness, religious disagreement, religious epistemology, universalism

## Introduction

It is a plain fact – obvious to any minimally perceptive person familiar with an adequate cross-section of humanity – that rationality, erudition, and moral goodness are to be found among both secular people and religious people alike, including followers of Christian and non-Christian religions. Can we (whether we are adherents of some religious tradition or not) plausibly account for this? In particular, can we plausibly account for the fact that those who disagree with us deeply on religious matters of great importance are people we respect as intelligent, well-informed, and morally upstanding (where these features are understood in an ordinary

commonsense sort of way)? If we cannot do so while maintaining our controversial views, this can cast doubt on those views, or so many people think.[1]

The challenge of answering this sort of question is an important one for philosophers (and, really, all thoughtful humans) given how common it is for intellectually and morally admirable people to disagree with our views on religious matters, whether we support religious perspectives or oppose them. Thoughtful people often find themselves mulling over uncomfortable questions such as this one focused on *intellectually* virtuous opponents of their views: "Given that some of those with whom I disagree on religious matters seem to be at least as intelligent and well-informed as I am, how can it be *rational* for me to continue holding my views?" One way to handle this situation is by *demoting* those who disagree with you, concluding that they aren't your epistemic peers after all, and viewing them instead as your inferiors when it comes to things such as intelligence, rationality, and moral virtue. This approach seems to be adopted sometimes by apologists – whether for atheism or for some version of theism. However, because this sort of demotion denies the plain fact noted at the outset of this paper, it is not very plausible.[2]

Is there a way to avoid this implausible approach while rationally maintaining one's religious or irreligious views? Applied specifically to Christians, one version of this question (again, focused on *intellectually* virtuous naysayers) asks:

**Q1**. Must Christians think that they are *rationally* better than all non-Christians?

I'll be touching briefly on this sort of question in this paper, in part to provide some context for the question I'll mention next. But my main focus will be on a slightly different and perhaps even more uncomfortable question, one that focuses not on how those who disagree with you compare with you in terms of things like *intelligence* and *rationality* but on how they compare with you *morally*. The question I have in mind (applied to Christians) focuses on morally virtuous naysayers and asks:

**Q2**: Must Christians think that they are *morally* better than all non-Christians?[3]

Q2 and questions like it (i.e., those applied not to Christians but to those endorsing non-religious or non-Christian religious perspectives) challenge those faced with the evidence that many who disagree with them (on religious topics) are morally better than many who agree with them. Q2 presents Christians with a dilemma:[4]

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[1] See, for example, Goldberg (2014), Hick (1997), Kitcher (2014), and Schellenberg (2007).

[2] As we will see in Section 2, there are other kinds of demotion that *are* plausible (i.e., kinds of demotion that don't deny the plain fact noted at the beginning of this paper).

[3] Obviously, both Q1 and Q2 are asking whether Christians must do these things *in order to be consistent with their allegiance to Christianity*.

[4] Or at least it does if Christians think that to receive salvation one must be a Christian – in belief and practice. Christians typically think that in order to receive salvation, one must *eventually* endorse Christian belief (before or after death) so that those who never accept it are those who never receive salvation. This isn't to say that there is no Christian faith without outright belief in Christian teaching; it's just to say that all who are saved will eventually have outright belief in Christian teaching.

**Q2-inspired Dilemma for Christians**

- If Christians say 'yes' to Q2, then it seems they're both arrogant and blind to the plain fact that many non-Christians (whether religious or not) are not only morally good in many respects but also morally better than many Christians.
- If Christians say 'no' to Q2, then it seems they must think that God gives and withholds salvation in ways that are unfair.

To elaborate on the second horn of the dilemma: if Christians answer Q2 negatively, it seems that they must think that God withholds salvation from those who are morally no worse than (and in some cases, it seems, morally better than) some of the Christians who receive it. And, this seems unfair given the Christian teachings that the benefits of salvation (including an experience of the beatific vision, which involves direct vision of and union with God) are our greatest goods, that being denied these goods is among the greatest deprivations we can suffer,[5] and that the primary reason someone is denied these goods is that person's moral failure. After all, in light of these things, it would seem that the only fair basis for a perfectly loving God to withhold this supreme good from some people while giving it to others would be a kind of blameworthy moral failure in those who don't receive it, a moral failure not found in those who do receive it.[6] Thus, according to those objecting to Christianity on the basis of this dilemma, because the implications of either a positive or a negative answer to Q2 seem objectionable, Christians seem unable to plausibly explain the apparent virtue of non-Christians, in which case the answer to the question in the title of this paper is 'no'.[7]

My aim in this paper is to defend a negative answer to Q2 – while avoiding the objectionable implications just mentioned, thereby avoiding the dilemma in the previous paragraph – and, in doing so, to defend an affirmative answer to the title question. In Section 1, I'll say something about the version of Christianity with which

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[5] Even if those who do not receive salvation go out of existence altogether (i.e., are annihilated) and, for that reason, don't experience an afterlife without the goods associated with salvation, they still have suffered the deprivation entailed by an existence that never included their greatest good.

[6] On one way to think about fairness, it requires that people aren't kept from getting benefits they deserve. Giving *undeserved* benefits to some but not others needn't violate fairness so understood (since no deserved benefits are being withheld from anyone). However, the notion of fairness employed in this objection adds something that is slightly different. The thought here is that if God lovingly gives *some* deeply needy people undeserved salvation (from severe harms caused by their own moral failures) and doesn't do the same for others, then, *unless this differential treatment is due to some relevant difference between the saved and the unsaved*, God is displaying a kind of unfair and arbitrary partiality. The partiality manifested in this uneven distribution of love and kindness by God (who has the ability to be loving and kind in these ways to *all* people) is viewed as unfair because, even if no created person deserves salvation, each one has an equal claim on their creator's love – a claim that ought not to be arbitrarily ignored in some cases and not others (just as each of a parent's children has an equal claim on that parent's love – a claim that ought not to be arbitrarily ignored in the case of one child but not another).

[7] Nathan King (2021) deals with a dilemma in the neighborhood of the dilemma I've identified here. But King's paper differs from this one insofar as (i) he focuses on a dilemma faced by certain religious people in virtue of their being *apologists* for their faith, something I don't discuss here, and (ii) he merely gestures in the direction of a few solutions to his dilemma that are similar to the solution I offer here – see especially King (2021, p. 168) – without developing any of them at any length or in precisely the way I develop the solution I offer here.

I'll be operating, because the options one has for dealing with Q2 depend in part on which version of Christianity one has in mind. In Section 2, I'll discuss Q1 because responding to that similar question provides a helpful context (in ways that I'll make clear at the end of that section) for developing a response to Q2. I'll argue in that section that Christians can have better evidence than non-Christians, even if they aren't more rational than those non-Christians. Then, in Section 3, I'll answer Q2 (and the title question), working with the version of Christianity identified in Section 1 and in light of the response to Q1 given in Section 2. I'll argue in that section that those who never become Christians can be blameworthy for this, even if they are morally better than many Christians. In the last section, I'll close by mentioning two important things to keep in mind when thinking about these matters.

## Section 1: Which Version of Christianity Do I Have in Mind?

Following Plantinga, I will be thinking of generic Christian belief as consisting, first, of the theistic belief that there exists a supreme and perfect personal being, God, who created, sustains, and providentially guides the entire universe and, second, of belief in the more specifically Christian teachings that:

> we human beings are somehow mired in rebellion and sin, that we consequently require deliverance and salvation, and that God has arranged for that deliverance through the sacrificial suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who was both a man and also the second member of the Trinity, the unique son of God. (Plantinga, 2000, p. vii)

For the purposes of this paper, I'll think of Christians as those who (a) endorse generic Christian belief so understood (or something very much like it),[8] (b) repent of their sin, and (c) receive God's gift of salvation by putting their trust in Christ to save them in the way described in the above statement of Christian teaching. Among those who endorse generic Christian belief so understood, there are differences of perspective that will affect how one can respond to Q2. I'll mention *five* such points on which Christians disagree and, in connection with them, I'll specify the version of Christianity I'll be working with in explaining my answer to Q2.

The first relevant point of difference among Christians has to do with the claim that:

**(1) Moral Equality:** There are no significant moral differences between humans.

[8] As for what counts as "something very much like" these teachings, that's hard to say (just as it's hard to say who counts as a Christian). I won't try to be more precise than this. As for what sort of *endorsement* of these teachings is required to count as a Christian (whether it must involve outright belief or whether something less than belief – such as acceptance – would do as well), that too is hard to say. I won't try to be more precise about this either. See Alston (1996) and Audi (2008) for some discussion of whether religious faith should be understood in terms of belief or acceptance.

Those Christians endorsing (1) typically do so because they believe that humans are, one and all, incredibly sinful in ways we cannot fully comprehend, at least not without having this revealed to us by means of Christian faith, the teaching of the Church and the Bible, or the work of the Holy Spirit. So the appearance that some humans are good and decent while others are wicked and vile is an illusion. The fact is that we're all basically on a par, morally speaking, and we're all more wicked and vile than we realize (apart from divine revelation). Those who emphasize (1) might hold that the answer to Q2 is that Christians needn't think they're better than all non-Christians, but neither do they need to think they're worse because there are no significant moral differences between humans. Thus, according to this view, the appearance that some non-Christians are significantly morally better than some Christians is an illusion. By asserting (1), these Christians escape the dilemma (from the penultimate paragraph of the introduction) because they can answer 'no' to Q2 without being committed to the view that God withholds salvation from those non-Christians who are *significantly morally better* than Christians who receive it (since they aren't significantly morally better).

The version of Christianity I'll be working with denies (1). Of course, it's part of generic Christian teaching, as given above, that we are all somehow "mired in rebellion and sin"[9] and that we consequently require deliverance and salvation. Likewise, humans are similar in their extreme inferiority, morally speaking, to God. Moreover, it's entirely plausible (from the perspective of generic Christian teaching and from what we know about humans) that humans are very often blind to their own faults and the faults of those dear to them or with whom they strongly identify. Lastly, it's entirely plausible that humans are limited in many ways in their ability to judge others deeply and accurately, morally speaking; there is often much below the surface in other people that is morally relevant and to which we're oblivious. Nevertheless, we needn't conclude from all of this that the appearance of significant moral differences between humans is entirely illusory. In particular, we needn't conclude that, when it appears that some non-Christians are significantly morally better than some Christians, this is an illusion. Or so says the version of Christianity with which I'll be working.[10]

The second relevant point of difference among Christians has to do with the claim that:

**(2) Moral Superiority:** Each Christian is morally better than every non-Christian.

One possible basis for (2) is the view (plausibly derived from the New Testament) that

[9] For an eloquent and convincing elaboration and defense of this pessimistic characterization of humanity as mired in rebellion and sin—an elaboration and defense that, as Hudson (2021, p. vii) rightly says, is "well grounded, quite independently of any particular religious orientation" – see Hudson (2021, Ch. 1)

[10] The Bible seems to endorse the view that behaving morally matters to God and that there are important differences between humans, morally speaking. See, for example, Matthew 25:31–46, Romans 2:7–11, and James 1:19–27.

**(2*)** In virtue of miraculously sharing in some way in the righteousness of Christ, all Christians have a kind of righteousness that all non-Christians lack.[11]

If (2*) is true and it implies (2), then Christians can answer 'yes' to Q2 and simply deny the charge in the first horn of the dilemma from the penultimate paragraph in the introduction, insisting that a 'yes' answer is not problematic but is instead perfectly plausible given Christian teaching.

The version of Christianity with which I'll be working denies (2) and that (2*) implies (2) when 'morally better' in the latter is understood in standard ways. Even if there is a way to interpret 'morally better' in (2) so that (2) is implied by (2*), that sense of 'morally better' is an unusual one and is neither the only one nor the standard one.[12] Thus, Christians needn't conclude that when it appears that some non-Christians are morally better in important respects than some Christians, this is an illusion. For those who find it implausible to think it is an illusion that some non-Christians are morally better in important respects than some Christians, it is a virtue of the version of Christianity with which I'll be working that it attempts to answer Q2 while rejecting both (1) and (2).

The third relevant point of difference among Christians has to do with the claim that:

**(3) Not Responsible:** Christians can do absolutely nothing that contributes in any way to their receiving salvation; whether a person is saved is entirely up to God and God's decision to save people does not depend on anything fallen humans do (whether morally good or bad).

It might be tempting to infer (3) from the view (also plausibly derived from the New Testament) that:

**(3*)** Salvation is given freely by God, because of God's grace, to those who (like all fallen humans) do not deserve it and are unable to do anything that makes them deserving of it, which means that those who are saved are without grounds for boasting about being saved.[13]

If (3*) is true and implies (3), then Christians can answer 'no' to Q2 and insist that:

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[11] See Romans 4:6, 1 Corinthians 1:30, and 2 Corinthians 5:21. A view similar to (2*) is:

(2**) Because they receive infused theological virtues by divine grace, all Christians have a kind of moral goodness that all non-Christians lack.

For reasons similar to those mentioned in the main text, where I explain why we can accept (2*) while denying (2), my view is that we can accept (2**) while denying (2).

[12] I'm not here saying what the standard sense of 'morally better' is; I'm only saying this isn't it. As I suggested in the opening paragraph of the paper, I'm focusing on an ordinary and commonsense usage of 'morally better'.

[13] See Ephesians 2:8–9, Romans 3:20–28, and Romans 6:23.

(a) it wouldn't be unfair for God to withhold salvation from all fallen humans given that none of us deserve it, so it isn't unfair to withhold it from non-Christians;

(b) salvation isn't given to anyone even partly on the basis of their doing anything or their being morally good enough to deserve it, so the fact that it is withheld from some who are morally better in important respects (in virtue of what they've done) than those who receive it is not unfair.

Thus, Christians who endorse (3*) and think that (3*) implies (3) might conclude – in light of (a) and (b) – that it is not unfair for God to withhold salvation from those non-Christians who are morally better than Christians who receive it.

The version of Christianity that I have in mind denies (3), and that (3*) implies (3). Moreover, it does not attempt to defend God's fairness by appealing to (a) or (b). Instead, the version of Christianity that I have in mind insists that even though salvation is an undeserved gift due to God's grace and even though Christians have been drawn by God toward the reception of this gift and empowered by God to be able to freely receive it, Christians are at least partly responsible for their free choice (which is a morally good choice) to *receive* the gift of salvation and they had the power not to receive it. Moreover, without their free choice to receive this gift of salvation, they would not be saved. It is important to recognize that this position is consistent with rejecting both Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism.[14] The thought behind denying (3) is just that God doesn't *force* the gift of salvation upon us but instead respects our autonomy by allowing us to freely receive it (thereby satisfying a necessary condition of our being saved) or reject it. God is the one who offers the gift, woos us to want it, and gives us the power to repent and receive it.[15] But we still must make the choice to receive this gift; no one is coerced into receiving it.[16] Moreover, although this free choice is a morally good choice, it is also something about which it makes no sense to boast. For Christians to take pride in their choice to receive such a gift would be at least

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[14] Semi-Pelagianism, which was condemned in 529 at the Second Council of Orange (https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/councilorange.html), teaches that "the first steps towards the Christian life were ordinarily taken by the human will and that grace supervened only later" (Cross & Livingstone, 2005, p. 1491). This is denied by the version of Christianity I have in mind, which insists that God's grace draws people toward receiving the gift of salvation and empowers them to be able to freely choose to receive it. The version of Christianity I have in mind is also arguably consistent with rejecting *synergism*, if the latter is understood as saying that God and humans work together to cause our salvation. For while the version of Christianity I have in mind agrees that unforced free human choices to receive God's gift of salvation (choices for which humans are at least partly responsible) are necessary for our being saved, it doesn't say that these human choices even partially *cause* our salvation. It may be that our free choices are necessary as conditions God freely chooses to use as the basis for *God's* unilateral causing of our salvation. However, the version of Christianity I have in mind *accepts* synergism, *if* the latter requires only that our unforced free choice to receive God's gift of salvation is a necessary condition of our being saved.

[15] This position can be thought of as a development of Revelation 3:20, according to which Jesus says "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me."

[16] As already noted, in making this choice, we will be taking advantage of God's grace empowering us to make such choices, even if we don't recognize that we are benefiting from God's grace in this way.

as foolish and unreasonable as a stubborn drowning man taking pride in his choice (which would also be a good choice) to finally, after much coaxing, receive and not reject the life preserver that is being placed in his hands to save him.[17]

The benefit of denying (3) and affirming the view just presented is that it opens up the possibility that people are saved only if they freely receive the gift of salvation that has been made available to all humans. Of course, there are further questions concerning whether this gift really has been *made available* to all humans. But the point is that if it has been made available to all and their being saved depends at least in part on their choice to receive this gift, then questions of fairness can be more plausibly addressed. For those who think this way of approaching the fairness question has more promise than appealing to (a) and (b), it is a virtue of the version of Christianity with which I'll be working that it attempts to answer Q2 while rejecting (3) and making no appeal to (a) and (b).

The fourth relevant point of difference among Christians has to do with the claim that:

**(4) No Post-mortem Conversion:** People who die without first becoming Christians cannot be saved.[18]

If (4) is true, then (given that there are some non-Christians who appear to be morally better than some Christians and who seem not to become Christians before they die) the dilemma mentioned in the introduction can make people feel pressure to endorse (1) or (2) or (3) given the pathways they open up for avoiding the horns of that dilemma – pathways that are viewed by many as implausible, for the reasons noted above. But if (4) is false then Christians can avoid endorsing (1)–(3) and their problematic ways of escaping that dilemma.

The version of Christianity I will be working with says that (4) is false. In support of this denial of (4), consider the following:

- it is a common Christian teaching that many of the people in the Old Testament who died before Christ was born (and, as a result, never became Christians or endorsed generic Christian teaching before they died) will receive salvation;
- it is plausible, from a Christian perspective and in light of the point just mentioned about people in the Old Testament, that theists who (before they die) recognize and confess their sin, asking God for forgiveness for and rescue from their sin and its consequences – but who don't (before they die) endorse generic Christian teaching (perhaps because they've never heard it) – will receive an

[17] Why is receiving the gift of salvation a *morally good* choice? It's a morally good thing to acknowledge one's need to be rescued from one's state of severe moral failure, to be willing to give up one's self-sufficiency in this regard, and to humble oneself enough to receive God's offer to be so rescued. (See Luke 18:9–14.) It's because receiving this gift involves all of these things that it is morally good; and yet it is still absurd to boast about it, just as in the case of the drowning man receiving the life preserver.

[18] Some Christians might endorse (4) with the qualification that it applies only to those who have lived as cognitively competent adult humans and not to very young children or those who are severely mentally disabled and have never had the cognitive abilities of a typical adult human. The version of Christianity I have in mind denies (4) even in this qualified form.

opportunity after they die to accept generic Christian teaching and to be saved;[19]

- it's implausible that the "rules about salvation" changed at the time of Christ, so that people living in the Americas in 200 BCE could (like the saved people mentioned in the Old Testament) be saved without becoming Christians whereas people living in the Americas in 200 CE couldn't be saved in this condition (this is implausible because their ignorance of and lack of contact with the Christian message remained unchanged during that period);
- in light of the Christian teachings that "all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved" and "a broken and contrite heart God will not despise,"[20] it seems implausible that people who repent and seek to become Christians after they die (if there are any such people) will be told that there was a deadline for making that decision (i.e., the moment of their death) and they failed to meet it.

These considerations don't make it impossible to defend (4) or something close to it. But they lend plausibility to a version of the Christian faith that denies (4).

The fifth relevant point of difference among Christians has to do with the claim that:

**(5) Universalism:** All humans will eventually receive salvation.[21]

If (5) is true, then many of the concerns behind Q2 evaporate. For if all humans will eventually receive salvation, then the worries about God's unfairness in doling out salvation aren't pressing. After all, one of the main things driving those worries is that it seems unfair that some people receive salvation whereas other people who are morally on a par with them or better don't – and this won't be the case if (5) is true. For the purposes of this paper, I will be assuming that (5) may well be false. This makes the challenge posed by Q2 more difficult and more interesting. If (5) is false (for all we know), the challenge posed by Q2 is not so easily addressed.[22]

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[19] See Sections 3.2 and 3.3 of this paper for further discussion of ideas in this neighborhood.

[20] See Romans 10:13 (quoting Joel 2:32) and Psalm 51:17.

[21] Keith DeRose defends this position here: http://campuspress.yale.edu/keithderose/1129-2/ and gives citations of Biblical passages that seem to support (5). The 19th-century Scottish author and minister, George MacDonald, also endorses this view. See MacDonald (2022 [1867/1885/1889]) – in particular, the sermons called "The Consuming Fire" in Series I and "Justice" in Series III. The full texts of these sermons are also available here: https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9057. See also the four papers by Thomas Talbott in Parry and Partridge (2004).

[22] Of course, by allowing that (5) may well be false and that not all humans will be saved, this version of Christianity faces the difficulty of explaining how a perfect God could permit some humans either to be permanently annihilated or to exist forever in hell. I can't fully address these concerns here (and I'm not myself committed to denying the universalism that (5) endorses), but I'll briefly mention a few considerations that might help in addressing the problem of God permitting an everlasting hell for some humans. (The following thoughts, especially the second point, constitute a rough first stab at the ideas for a paper on hell that I hope to write someday.) *First*, as C.S. Lewis says (Lewis, 1962 [1940]: 127), it may be that "the doors of hell are locked [everlastingly] on the *inside*" (for oneself) by the choices one makes for as long as one is there. As Lewis puts it: "Without that self-choice there could be no Hell" (Lewis, 1977 [1946], pp. 66–67). His short book, *The Great Divorce* (Lewis, 1977 [1946]), presents a narrative that is intended to help readers see how it could be realistic and plausible that some people

Perhaps you think that a version of Christianity according to which (5) is true is much more plausible than a version according to which it is false or may (for all we know) be false. In that case, you might think it's best to focus on a version of Christianity that endorses (5) and easily takes care of the problem this paper is addressing, rather than on the (allegedly less plausible) version of Christianity I'm focusing on in this paper. In light of this, what reason is there (other than the reason already mentioned – namely, to take seriously a more interesting and difficult challenge to Christianity) – for focusing on a version of Christianity according to which (5) is or may well be false? One reason is that a major traditional strand of Christian teaching, from its inception up until the present, explicitly refrains from endorsing (5) and, instead, endorses its denial.[23] At the very least, then, it's worthwhile to consider how proponents of a widely held version of traditional Christianity might respond to a challenge it faces.[24]

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would persistently make such self-harming choices. *Second*, it may be that in considering whether to create humans (and, perhaps, angelic beings) whom God knows would eventually choose (in effect) to exist forever in hell, God chooses (with perfect love) to create them only if it would be better *for such creatures* if they were to exist everlastingly under those conditions in hell than not to exist at all. Of course, this seems to imply that common understandings of hell are mistaken (e.g., the picture of hell as an everlasting torture chamber). *Third*, one might take inspiration from Eleonore Stump (1986, pp. 194–198) and think that, although those in everlasting hell have chosen to reject their highest good (i.e., being united with God in love, which involves surrendering to God and repenting of one's sin), God can provide them with the *best of the possible* (but much inferior) everlasting lives that they would freely choose—lives that are still worth having, in the sense that it is better to have them than not to exist at all. *Fourth*, even though these lives might be good in that way, New Testament claims characterizing hell as a place of unquenchable fire, weeping and gnashing of teeth, etc. might still be apt (even if non-literal) descriptions of that sort of existence, especially by comparison with the highest good for humans involving the beatific vision (which could be theirs if they chose to repent and receive salvation). These New Testament descriptions might *accurately convey* (in a non-literal way) the negative aspects of having a hugely inferior substitute for one's highest good even if they don't highlight any of the positive aspects of the lesser goods that would make one's existence in hell better than not existing at all. *Fifth*, although it makes good sense to wish and hope that no one will everlastingly and freely choose to resist salvation from hell, it's not clear that it makes good sense to wish that God had never created those God knew would everlastingly and freely choose to resist salvation from hell (since it may be that, although such an existence has many negative features, it also has some positive features making it better than not existing at all).

Some of the points in the previous paragraph arguably take for granted that Molinism—the claim that God's providential control works by way of God's middle knowledge—is true. I don't have the space in this paper to discuss what Molinism is or whether it is true. But see Flint (1998), Bergmann (2023), and the papers by Thomas Flint and Trenton Merricks in Perszyk (2011).

[23] Many of the papers in Parry and Partridge (2004) – other than those by Thomas Talbott – are aimed at emphasizing this point.

[24] Another reason for not limiting our focus to a (5)-endorsing version of Christianity, is that it's not clear that Christianity *is* more plausible if it endorses (5) than if it rejects (5) or says that (5) may well be false. How plausible it is to insist that (5) is true (if Christianity is) depends in part on how plausible it is that *it would be better for God not to create people whom God knew would never receive salvation*. On that question, see note 22 – especially the second, third, and fifth considerations enumerated there. Although note 22 is talking about some people being forever in hell and not about some people being permanently annihilated after death – both of which are possible alternatives to (5)'s claim about everyone eventually receiving (eternal) salvation—the second, third, and fifth considerations mentioned in note 22 could be modified to apply to the annihilation view.

In short, then, the version of Christianity that I will have in mind (in answering Q2 and, in doing so, trying to escape the dilemma mentioned in the penultimate paragraph of the introduction) endorses the following views:

**(6) Moral Inferiority:** Some Christians are significantly morally worse than some non-Christians – in which case (1) and (2) are false.

**(7) Partly Responsible:** Christians are at least partly responsible for their free choice (which is a morally good choice) to *receive* the gift of salvation, they had the power not to receive it, and without their free choice to receive this gift of salvation they would not be saved – in which case (3) is false.

**(8) Post-Mortem Conversion:** People who die without first becoming Christians can be saved in part because of a later post-mortem decision of theirs to receive the gift of salvation – in which case (4) is false.

**(9) Doubts About Universalism:** For all we know, not all humans will eventually receive salvation – in which case (5) may well be false.

A version of Christianity that endorses (6)–(8) allows for a more plausible way of answering Q2 and escaping that dilemma, insofar as it rejects (1) through (4), which are problematic in the ways indicated in this section. And a version of Christianity that endorses (9) faces a more interesting and challenging form of that dilemma. Before addressing Q2, let's first consider in the next section a similar question (Q1), the response to which will be useful to have in mind when considering Q2.

## Section 2: Thinking About the Rationality of Others

As I noted earlier, our focus in this section will be Q1, although I'd like to begin with a more general version of Q1.[25] Let's say that an X-ist is someone who endorses religion or worldview X. The more general version of Q1 asks:

**Q1***: Must X-ists think that they are *rationally* better than all non-X-ists?

Anyone who endorses a controversial religion or worldview faces a more specific version of Q1*. We can ask whether Muslims or atheists or agnostics must think they are *rationally* better than non-Muslims or non-atheists or non-agnostics (respectively).[26] In dealing with such questions, Muslims, atheists, agnostics, and others face a dilemma that is similar in some respects to the one noted in the introduction. If X-ists answer 'yes,' then it seems they're both arrogant and blind to the fact that many non-X-ists are rationally much better than many X-ists. If they answer 'no,' then it seems they face

[25] Points similar to those made in this section are developed at greater length in Bergmann (2009), Bergmann (2015), Bergmann (2017), and Bergmann (2021, Ch. 12).

[26] I'm thinking of agnostics as *principled* agnostics (about God's existence) – i.e., those who explicitly withhold judgment on whether God exists *and* think that this is what rationality requires of us.

pressure to cease endorsing X given that people who are at least as rational as them deny X, which puts the reliability of the X-ist's endorsement of X in doubt.

One common way forward in these cases is to make two points. The first is to grant the epistemic principle that:

> **(EP)** *If* certain people – i.e., those who (i) are roughly as intelligent, thoughtful, and sincere in their truth-seeking as you are, (ii) have roughly the same sort of evidence you have, and (iii) have roughly the same competence at responding to evidence that you have – disagree with you about your controversial religion or worldview, *then* you face rational pressure to give up that position.

The second point is to insist that, despite agreeing about EP and that (i) from EP is satisfied by those who disagree with you, it's not the case that both (ii) and (iii) from EP are likewise satisfied. Responses of this sort can seem plausible to adherents of many different religions or worldviews all of whom will agree with EP and that (i) from EP is true of many who disagree with them even though either (ii) or (iii) from EP is not.

For example, people might think that their own evidence is different from the evidence of those who disagree with them. Those taking this line will often focus on a phenomenal conception of evidence, according to which evidence consists not of things like objects presented in court or propositions that make other propositions probable but of conscious mental states on which beliefs are based.[27] And they will insist that, in addition to shared evidence, there is also private evidence.[28] Thus, a Christian might think that non-Christians (many of whom, when compared to Christians, satisfy (i) from EP) seem to lack private evidence of a sort Christians have – both first-order evidence for Christian belief and second-order evidence about the evidential value of that first-order evidence.

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[27] As I explain in Bergmann (2021, pp. 11–12), evidence in the other two senses just mentioned can be accommodated in terms of the phenomenal conception of evidence.

[28] When working with the phenomenal conception of evidence (as I am in this paper), *shared evidence* is not literally shared, since even when you and I have equally good eyesight and are standing next to one another looking at a nearby tree in good lighting, you will have your mental state consisting of your sensory experience of the tree and I will have my own distinct mental state consisting of my sensory experience of the tree. What makes our experience "shared evidence" is that we each have evidence (consisting of mental states) that is of the same qualitative type. *Private evidence* on the other hand will consist of evidence (consisting of mental states) that one person has in a set of circumstances while another person in similar circumstances lacks evidence of that qualitative type. For example, suppose that two 19-year-old first-year college students (one logically adept and the other logically inept) hear and observe a somewhat difficult logical proof carefully explained by a professor. Both might be in the same circumstances (i.e., working hard to attend well to the same careful explanation given) but the logically adept student might have evidence (consisting of clear logical intuitions in support of the validity of the inferences as they're explained) that the logically inept student lacks. That's a case where the logically adept student has evidence that is private rather than shared (vis-à-vis the logically inept student) whereas their sensory experiences of what the instructor says and writes on the chalk board is shared (perceptual) evidence the two students have. With shared evidence, it's usually easier to guarantee that another has it by putting them in similar circumstances to receive it; with private evidence, this is typically not as easy to guarantee in this way.

The *first-order* evidence Christians have could consist of things such as how the overall case for Christianity strikes them based on (a) their impressions of the sum total of the arguments they know of for and against theism and Christianity and (b) the way Christianity seems to enable them to make good sense of so many things (e.g., the purpose of human life, the great intrinsic value of humans, the moral despicableness of human behavior, their own temptations to do what they know is wrong, the beauty and majesty of the natural world, the way their own lives and the lives of others have unfolded, etc.). The first-order evidence might also include seemings of various kinds that Christians may have about God.[29] It could include seemings about God's power and possible openness to rescuing them (seemings they have when they feel fear and are inclined to pray for help). Or seemings about God's knowledge and disapproval of our moral wrongdoing and God's demand that we repent (seemings they have when they feel guilty and are inclined to ask God for forgiveness). Or seemings about God's being deserving of our gratitude and admiration (seemings they have when they are overwhelmed with awe by the beauty and majesty of the ocean or mountains or sunrise or starry night sky and are inclined to thank God for these things and to proclaim God's greatness in creating them). It could also include seemings in response to hearing or reading (or otherwise learning of) certain kinds of testimony endorsing Christian teaching, whether from the Bible or from Christian leaders now and throughout history – seemings about the wisdom or reliability or divine inspiration of these testifiers who are treated as trusted authorities or seemings about the plausibility of the things they teach.[30]

The Christian's *second-order* evidence concerns the evidential value of the first-order evidence mentioned in the previous paragraph. This second-order evidence consists of epistemic intuitions, which are seemings about rationality (either about what is rational or about what is required for rationality). For example, it can seem to a Christian that her Christian beliefs are rational and epistemically appropriate in her circumstances. Non-Christians often have very different epistemic intuitions about the rationality of distinctively Christian beliefs. [31]

There are many good questions that can be raised about the quality and adequacy of the first- and second-order evidence just recounted and how helpful it is in responding to objections based on peer disagreement. But we don't have the time here to discuss those questions, so I will just assume that something like this account of the evidence on which rational Christian belief depends is right.[32] The main point I want to make, in light of that assumption, is this: given that many non-Christians lack much of the first- and second-order evidence that Christians have, Christians can

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[29] A seeming is the mental state one is in when it seems to one (or strikes one) that something is the case. For more on how to understand seemings, see Bergmann (2021, pp. 131–145).

[30] See Plantinga (2000, pp. 173–183, 259–265), Plantinga (2011, pp. 236–264), and Bergmann (2017, pp. 21–24, 35–38) for some discussion in support of this account of the first-order evidence for Christian belief.

[31] See Bergmann (2017, pp. 38–43) and Bergmann (2024) for some discussion in support of this account of the second-order evidence for Christian belief. And see Bergmann (2021, pp. 123–126, 131–145, 213–214) for further discussion of seemings and epistemic intuition.

[32] But see the discussions mentioned in the previous two footnotes as well as related discussion in Bergmann (2015) and Bergmann (2021, Ch. 12).

consistently and sensibly think that many non-Christians are, in a general way, at least as rational – often more so – than many Christians. The difference in religion or worldview isn't explained by differences in rationality or intelligence so much as by differences in evidence. The religious person's situation is similar to one in which (i) you are on trial and falsely accused of a crime, (ii) the shared public evidence highlighted in court very strongly supports your guilt (either due to your being expertly framed or to incredibly bad luck or both), and (iii) you have no good alibi (corroborated by someone else) but only the private evidence consisting of your compelling memory impressions of being alone elsewhere at the time of the crime.[33] In such a situation, you might think that the judge and jurors are highly rational and intelligent people and that the sensible thing for them to conclude, given the evidence available to them in court (including what you claim are your reports of your memory impressions), is that you are guilty. But you know you are innocent because you have private evidence you can tell them about but you can't give to them (so that they have it in the way you do) – namely, your very clear and strong memory seemings about the truth of your account of what you were doing at the time. In a similar way, although non-Christians won't be demoted by Christians in ways that conflict with the plain fact mentioned at the beginning of this paper, they will be demoted evidentially in the sense that they'll be viewed as having evidence that is inferior to the Christian's evidence.[34]

This situation where you are falsely accused in a courtroom is, of course, different in many ways from the religious person's situation. But the similarities I want to highlight are these: in each case, a person can rationally continue holding a belief in the face of disagreement with highly intelligent and rational objectors; and in each case, this is because (i) the person has sufficiently strong additional evidence that they can report but cannot give to others and (ii) this evidence isn't something one gets by being more intelligent and rational than those with whom one disagrees.

So, in response to Q1, the answer could sensibly be 'no': the Christian needn't think Christians are more rational than all non-Christians any more than you (in the courtroom example) would need to think you are more rational than the jurors who think you're guilty. Nor will the Christian face pressure to give up her Christian beliefs, on the grounds that people who are at least as rational as her think otherwise (any more than you would face pressure to give up your belief in your innocence, on the grounds that the jurors, who are at least as rational and intelligent as you, think

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[33] This example is inspired by similar examples in Plantinga (1986, p. 310) and Plantinga (2000, pp. 450–451).

[34] Why will the Christian think the non-Christian's evidence is inferior, given that (despite the fact that the content of the non-Christian's seemings conflicts with Christian teaching) the non-Christian's seemings might be similar to the Christian's seemings,in terms of how strong and compelling they feel to those who have them? Mainly because the Christian will (i) *lack* with respect to the non-Christian's evidence what she has with respect to her own evidence – namely, higher-order evidence supporting the reliability and epistemic goodness of the non-Christian's seemings (that are opposed to Christian teaching) and (ii) *have* with respect to the non-Christian's evidence what she lacks with respect to her own evidence – namely, evidence that the non-Christian's seemings (that are opposed to Christian teaching) are *misleading*. For some discussion of these points, see Bergmann (2015, pp. 42–53) and Bergmann (2017, pp. 39–43). See also Bergmann (2009, pp. 344–350) and Bergmann (2021, pp. 243–253) for similar points made concerning disagreements about non-religious matters.

otherwise). For although those others, who are at least as rational as you, disagree with you, their evidence isn't as good as yours.[35]

With this explanation in hand for why Christians needn't think they are *rationally* better than all non-Christians,[36] I want to turn next (in Section 3) to an explanation for why Christians needn't think they are *morally* better than all non-Christians. But first, recall that I said in the introduction that addressing Q1, as I did in this section, provides a helpful context for developing a response to Q2 in Section 3. We can now see three ways in which that's true. *First,* the response I gave to Q1 (which says that non-Christians might lack evidence for Christian belief—evidence that Christians have) seems to exacerbate some of the fairness concerns raised by the negative answer I plan to give to Q2. After all, if non-Christians lack evidence for Christian belief, it seems unfair to penalize them for not being Christians. We need to keep this in mind in addressing Q2. *Second*, the response I gave to Q1 helps us to see that an important difference between Christians and non-Christians might be a difference in evidence, which could explain not only how Christians can view some non-Christians as *rationally* superior despite being mistaken but also how Christians can view some non-Christians as *morally* superior, despite being mistaken. After all, crucial evidence for important beliefs needn't be available always and only to those who are rationally or morally superior. *Third*, the response I gave to Q1 provides an example of how a person can have beliefs that are *epistemically* better in one crucial respect (in virtue of being based on better evidence) than the opposing beliefs of those who are more intelligent and rational overall. Seeing this can enable us to be more receptive to the thought that, in a similar way, a person's beliefs and actions can be *morally* better in one crucial respect than the beliefs and actions of those who are morally better overall.

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[35] An agnostic might respond differently. She might say that her overall impression of the evidence for and against theism and Christianity is very different from the Christian's. And not only does the agnostic lack most of the Christian's first-order evidence, she may also have very different second-order evidence when she considers the epistemic value of the Christian's first-order evidence and what the rational response to it should be. For unlike the Christian, she might think it is *not* rational to respond to it in the way the Christian does.

But the agnostic might (without realizing it) not have a good grasp of the Christian's first-order evidence, which will be the case if she thinks of it as having features it doesn't in fact have. (It is no easy matter to know exactly what the evidence of another person is like. Even those who used to identify as Christians can't be sure that the evidence they had then was of the kind that other Christians around them had then or have now—or whether they are correctly recalling what their own evidence was like then.) And this might mean that the agnostic's second-order evidence is not actually in conflict with the second-order evidence the Christian has, since the agnostic and the Christian might not have conflicting epistemic intuitions about the same first-order evidence but, instead, compatible epistemic intuitions about different first-order evidence.

[36] Must agnostics, atheists, Muslims, etc. think they are more rational than those who disagree with them? I suspect that they can employ a strategy similar to the one just outlined for the Christian – one that enables them to think that *those who disagree with them are mistaken* without claiming that those who agree with them are always more rational than those who don't.

## Section 3: Escaping the Dilemma Q2 Poses for Christians

In this section, I will explain how Christians can escape the dilemma that Q2 poses for them – a dilemma explained in the penultimate paragraph of the introduction. In Section 3.1, I'll explain a way in which certain Christians might feel pressure to think that *all non-Christians who, in the end, lack sufficient evidence for Christian belief are culpable for lacking this evidence* (and I'll suppose that Christians can allow that there may be such non-Christians). Then, in Section 3.2, I'll lay out a possible Christian story that is true for all we know, given the version of Christianity outlined in Section 1. Finally, in Section 3.3, I'll explain how that story makes it plausible, for Christians, that *all non-Christians who, in the end, lack sufficient evidence for Christian belief are culpable for lacking this evidence*, even if the plain fact noted at the outset of this paper is true and the answer to Q2 is 'no'. In doing these things, I will defend a negative answer to Q2 (one that avoids the dilemma noted in the introduction) and, at the same time, an affirmative answer to the question posed in this paper's title.

### *Section 3.1: Culpably Lacking Evidence*

Let's begin with the first point, from the final paragraph of Section 2, about how my answer to Q1 provides a helpful context for answering Q2. There I drew attention to this question: if a person is doing the best she can to rationally believe in accord with the (insufficient) evidence she has and this leads her to refrain from believing generic Christian teaching, how can it be fair to withhold salvation from her while giving it to Christians?

What matters, it seems, is *why* such non-Christians lack the relevant evidence for generic Christian belief. Here are two possibilities:

> **Option A**: non-Christians who lack evidence for generic Christian belief *are* in some way morally to blame for lacking this evidence.
>
> **Option B**: non-Christians who lack evidence for generic Christian belief *are not* in some way morally to blame for lacking this evidence.

If a Christian takes Option A, saying these non-Christians are to blame in some way, then that Christian is claiming that all non-Christians who lack this evidence are morally inferior in at least one way to Christians who have this evidence (i.e., in being blameworthy for lacking evidence for Christian belief). But this claim seems implausible, given that (i) some people never have a chance to hear and consider the claims endorsed in generic Christian teaching, (ii) some who do have such a chance don't have compelling evidence for believing it (evidence of the sort described in Section 2, which includes its *seeming* to one that generic Christian teaching is true), and (iii) it seems that, in at least some of the cases mentioned in points (i) and (ii), those who lack this information and evidence are not blameworthy for lacking it (or at least it's not obvious that they are blameworthy for lacking it). Given this implausibility, the Christian might be inclined to take Option B. But if the Christian takes Option B,

saying some non-Christians *aren't* to blame for lacking such information and evidence, then it might seem that the Christian is implausibly claiming that a fair and perfectly loving God will exclude non-Christians from salvation, despite the fact that, due to no fault of their own, they don't have the information and evidence required to make Christian belief – which is a part of God's provided pathway to salvation – rational.[37] Either way, according to this complaint, the Christian must say something implausible.[38]

However, it's important to ask *what* must be believed *when* (according to Christian teaching) in order to receive salvation. If (4) is false (so that people can make a post-mortem choice to receive the gift of salvation), Option B doesn't have the implausible consequence that God will exclude from salvation all those who *at this time*, due to no fault of their own, lack the evidence required to make generic Christian belief rational. For it may be that all such people will eventually get the required evidence, either before or after death; and they may, at that point, respond to it as Christianity recommends.

In order for an option in the neighborhood of Option B to have the sort of implausible consequence noted above, we need to revise the manner in which we lay out the available options, so that they are stated in something like the following way:

> **Option A***: those who never steadfastly endorse generic Christian belief and never have sufficient evidence for it *will ultimately be* in some way morally to blame for lacking this evidence.[39]
>
> **Option B***: those who never steadfastly endorse generic Christian belief and never have sufficient evidence for it *won't ultimately be* in some way morally to blame for lacking this evidence.

Of course, there is the question of whether there will be any people who never steadfastly endorse generic Christian belief and never have sufficient evidence for it. Perhaps everyone will eventually get such evidence, in which case there won't be such people. If everyone eventually gets sufficient evidence for generic Christian belief (and, moreover, gets wooed by God and enabled to repent and receive God's offer of

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[37] Some people think that even if Christian *faith* is part of the pathway to salvation, faith needn't involve belief, so Christian *belief* is not a part of the pathway to salvation. But even if Christian faith needn't involve belief, it is plausible that (according to Christian teaching) the pathway to salvation (which includes the beatific vision) will *eventually* include Christian belief. See note 4.

[38] See note 6 for some discussion of the notions of fairness and unfairness at work here.

[39] To steadfastly endorse generic Christian belief is to endorse it without giving it up. To never steadfastly endorse it is to never endorse it or to always give it up after endorsing it. The reason for adding the qualifier 'steadfastly' in this claim about endorsement of Christian belief is that Christian teaching seems to insist that an endorsement of Christian belief that is later forsaken forever is insufficient for salvation (see Hebrews 6:4–6). So what matters is that one eventually steadfastly endorses it.

salvation), then it's more plausible that those who (despite these benefits) choose not to repent and receive salvation are not being treated unfairly by God.[40]

But in order to give this objection a chance (which I think it deserves), let's assume that, from the Christian perspective, there may well be people who never have sufficient evidence for believing in generic Christian teaching (evidence of the sort that makes it seem true to them). The objector to Christianity can then sensibly argue that those Christians who take Option B* (and who think, as Christians tend to think, that all who are saved will eventually steadfastly endorse generic Christian belief) are implausibly claiming that a fair and perfectly loving God will exclude from salvation all those who through no fault of their own *never* get sufficient evidence for Christian teaching and, presumably in part for that reason, never steadfastly endorse it. This objection to Option B* is more plausible than the earlier objection to Option B and it provides a motivation for Christians to adopt Option A*. But this gives rise to the question: is Option A* implausible in the way Option A is? It's true that Christians who take Option A* are saying that *all people who never steadfastly endorse generic Christian teaching and never get sufficient evidence for it will ultimately be in some way morally to blame for lacking this evidence*, suggesting that in this one respect at least their behavior will be morally inferior to those who eventually endorse generic Christian belief. Is this italicized restatement of Option A* implausible (especially if there *are* some people who never steadfastly endorse generic Christian teaching and never get sufficient evidence for it)? And is it compatible with what we know through experience about many who seem to reject generic Christian belief right up until death and yet seem to be more morally upstanding than many who are Christians?

### *Section 3.2: A Possible Christian Story*

In what follows, I will defend Option A* by telling a possible Christian story – i.e., a story that is compatible with the version of Christianity described in Section 1 and that for all we know is true (given that version of Christianity). This story has the following two features: (i) if true, it explains how the italicized restatement of Option A* (from the previous paragraph) could be plausible and (ii) it is compatible with the plain fact that some non-Christians are more morally upstanding than many who are Christians.[41] The aim, in designing this possible story, is to come up with a way to combine three key elements of Christian teaching – God's perfection, universal human

[40] The assumption here is that one can be enabled by God to repent and receive the gift of salvation (if one chooses) while choosing not to do those things. Being enabled to do a thing involves having an ability to do that thing; but one can have an ability to do a thing without doing that thing.

[41] Thus, this story is similar to the kind of story that Peter van Inwagen (1991, pp. 141–142) calls a 'defense' insofar as both are stories that (i) include a religious thesis along with some plausible claim alleged to be inconsistent with that thesis and (ii) are true, for all anyone knows (given the truth of that religious thesis).

sinfulness,[42] and salvation provided for Christians but not non-Christians[43] – with the fact that many non-Christians seem to be overall more morally upstanding than many Christians.

According to the possible Christian story I'm telling, the strong human tendency to sin can be understood on analogy with addiction to alcohol. (For our purposes, we can think of sinning as thinking, speaking, and acting in ways that are infected by wrongful selfishness or pride.) The analogy isn't perfect of course. The key point of similarity is that addiction (to sin or to alcohol) involves a strong and nearly impossible-to-resist desire to return repeatedly to particular thoughts, words, or actions for perceived short-term benefits, even when, in one's clearer moments, one has at least some sense that doing so is ultimately very harmful to oneself.[44] This possible Christian story also says that the only or most promising way of escape from this addiction to sin involves *acting* and *believing* in the ways specified in the first three of the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), modified so that they apply to addiction to sin, not alcohol:

> **Step One**: Believe and admit that one is powerless over sin – that one's life has become unmanageable.
>
> **Step Two:** Believe that there is a Power greater than oneself that could restore one to soundness.
>
> **Step Three**: Make a decision to turn one's will and one's life over to the care of God as one understands God.[45]

I will call believing and acting in the ways one must believe and act in order to take these three steps (or something like them) a 'proto-conversion' to Christianity.[46] This sort of proto-conversion to Christianity can occur in a person who doesn't even know

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[42] Of course, Christians think Christ was human (as well as divine) and is an exception to this generalization. Some Christians think that Jesus' mother Mary is another exception.

[43] Keep in mind that the thought here is that, *in the end*, all and only those who receive salvation will be Christians. But humans can be moving appropriately along the pathway to salvation even if they are not yet Christians. What is required for moving appropriately along the pathway to salvation is to act and believe in something like the ways specified in the three steps outlined in the next paragraph.

[44] The latter part of Romans 7 gives this kind of account of the attraction humans have to sin.

[45] The first three of the original twelve steps as used in Alcoholics Anonymous (see: https://www.aa.org/the-twelve-steps) are:

> STEP 1: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
> STEP 2: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
> STEP 3: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

[46] According to the version of Christianity I have in mind, God's wooing and God's enabling power are required for such proto-conversions to occur. In calling this a 'proto-conversion to Christianity', I'm not denying that it might also be sensible for adherents of some other religion X to think of taking these three steps as undergoing a proto-conversion to religion X. But from the Christian perspective, it makes sense to think of this process as a proto-conversion to Christianity.

about generic Christian teaching (and so isn't a Christian as defined in the first paragraph of Section 1).

It's plausible that if God exists, God will judge humans by what they do with the resources they have been given.[47] Some humans may not currently have the resources to make them blameworthy for not taking the three steps involved in that proto-conversion to Christianity. For example, they may lack evidence to believe or reasons to act in the ways those steps recommend. But according to this possible story I'm telling:

(a) all humans will eventually (either before or after they die) have evidence to believe and reasons to act in something like the ways one must believe and act if one takes those three proto-conversion steps;

(b) all who do believe and act in something like the ways one must believe and act if one takes those three steps will eventually get more evidence and reasons to believe and act in similar ways;

(c) all who repeatedly continue to go along with the process described in (b) will eventually get evidence to believe in generic Christian teaching and reasons to repent and receive God's gift of salvation (i.e., they'll get evidence and reasons for becoming a Christian).

The evidence and reasons that – according to (a) – all humans will eventually get will be such that those who get it will be morally blameworthy if they fail to take those three steps, or something like them. Likewise, the evidence and reasons that – according to (b) and (c) – all humans who take those three steps (and continue to do so) will eventually get will also be such that those who get it will be morally blameworthy if they fail to eventually get evidence for generic Christian teaching. Thus, according to this possible Christian story, the only people who never steadfastly endorse generic Christian teaching and never get evidence for it are (as Option A* says) in some way morally to blame for lacking this evidence.

Moreover, this possible Christian story also includes the following additional claim:

(d) for all those who never steadfastly endorse generic Christian belief and who are also to blame for never having sufficient evidence for it, God will have guaranteed that they have had the opportunities that are the *best for them* in the sense that no other opportunities would give them a better chance of taking the three proto-conversion steps and eventually becoming Christians.

Thus, given (d), it won't be the case that someone is blameworthy for failing to become a Christian and yet God could have led them down a different pathway – of getting evidence and reasons of the sort mentioned in (a) through (c) – where they wouldn't have culpably failed to follow the path all the way to Christian belief and salvation. On the contrary: all such people will have been given their *best* chance at proto-

[47] This independently plausible thought about what a fair God would do is suggested in Luke 12:47–48 and Luke 21:1–4.

conversion leading to their becoming a Christian.[48] Therefore, anyone who never steadfastly endorses generic Christian belief and never has sufficient evidence for it will be blameworthy for this, just as people who have sufficient evidence and reasons to take those three steps but don't are blameworthy for not taking them. For they will, at some point (before or after death), have failed to respond (in belief or action) as they morally should have responded, in light of the evidence for belief and reasons for action they had.[49] All of this is, as far as we know, compatible with the version of Christianity described in Section 1. Moreover, given the truth of that version of Christianity, we have no good reason for thinking that this possible Christian story is false.[50]

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[48] Adding (d) to the possible story suggests that those who never have sufficient evidence for generic Christian belief wouldn't be more likely to become Christians if they did get that evidence. This could be so either because (i) if they got that evidence, they'd be *less* likely to proto-convert and become a Christian or because (ii) if they got that evidence, they'd be *just as* likely (or unlikely) to proto-convert and become a Christian (though perhaps if they did get that evidence, but never became a Christian, they'd be worse off overall). I take it to be true, for all we know (given the truth of Christian belief), that either (i) or (ii) is true.

[49] Some of the characters observed by the narrator in Lewis (1977 [1946]) are examples of people who (i) are non-Christians who are morally better than many Christians, (ii) don't (it seems) have the sort of evidence that makes Christian teaching seem plausible to them (at least not at the point at which the narrator observes them), and yet (iii) are *culpably* failing to believe and act in ways that would take them further along the path towards Christian belief and conversion (and these culpable failures seem to be of the same kind as the moral failure that is involved in having sufficient evidence and reasons to take the three proto-conversion steps and yet refusing to take them).

[50] *Objection*: The possible Christian story I've laid out says that all humans will eventually get evidence making it rational for them to believe as indicated in the three proto-conversion steps. But consider those who (through no fault of their own) have undergone religious trauma, thought of as an extremely negative experience of religion (e.g., horrific sexual abuse by someone viewed as a representative of Christianity) that produces in them deep-seated psychological obstacles to appreciating religion. As a result of these obstacles, even if these people come to have some evidence E1 – where E1 would have resulted in them having evidence E2 (consisting of its *seeming to them* that a loving God exists) had they *not* suffered religious trauma – something in their psyche prevents their experience of E1 from resulting in their having evidence E2. For that reason – contrary to the possible Christian story I've laid out – it is impossible for these people to ever get the evidence (consisting of seemings like E2) required to make it rational for them to believe as indicated in the three proto-conversion steps.

*Reply*: I don't have the space here to give this objection the space it deserves. Briefly, though, it is certainly plausible that it might be *extremely difficult* (especially in this earthly life) for victims of religious trauma to come have evidence consisting of its seeming to them that a loving God exists. But it's not plausible to think that *we can see* that it is literally impossible, despite the time and resources available to God in the afterlife, for God to arrange for such people eventually to be healed of the harms of their religious trauma and to come to have such evidence. Perhaps such people can come to feel deeply loved by – and come to trust – *some person or persons* who show spectacularly insightful understanding of their hurt and who eventually lead them through a healing process whereby they come to view God as existing and perfectly loving, despite God's permitting them to undergo religious trauma in their past. We simply don't have enough evidence about human psychology (especially in light of how it could be gradually enhanced or healed in an extended afterlife) to make it plausible for us to think that it is *literally impossible* for it to ever come to seem to victims of religious trauma (through a process that, to them, feels coherent and true to who they are) that a loving God exists. See Adams (1989, pp. 305–310) and Stump (2022, pp. 295–309) for some relevant discussion of how God might help humans to appreciate God's love despite the harms they've been permitted to endure.

Non-Christians might be tempted to challenge the claim that this possible Christian story is compatible with what they know of themselves. They can acknowledge that they can't now see, by observation and memory, that that story does not accurately describe how things will in fact unfold if Christianity is true (at least not in the way they might be able to see now, by observation and memory, that this is not how things have in fact unfolded *so far in their own case*). But perhaps some non-Christians would happily commit now to (1) *believe rationally* in response to any sufficient evidence they ever get for holding the beliefs involved in taking the three proto-conversion steps mentioned above and to (2) *behave rationally and morally* in response to any sufficient reasons they ever get for acting as recommended in those three steps. Of course, they may add that they don't expect to ever get sufficient evidence or reasons of this sort (especially not after death, if they are among those who think there is no life after death). Their point is just that if they were to get such evidence or reasons, they would respond to it as indicated. But the possible Christian story is compatible with this. It allows that these skeptics might keep these commitments (and other commitments like them), adding only that if they did so persistently, they would eventually become Christians and be saved. It's true that it's a part of Christian teaching that humans are frail creatures, morally speaking, which raises doubts about their ability to keep their commitments. But it's also a part of the Christian story that although assistance from God is needed to keep such lofty commitments, this assistance is available for all those willing to receive it.

For my purposes in this paper, it's not important that this story is in fact true. Nor is it important that this story is falsifiable in this life.[51] What matters is that, at present, we don't have a good reason to think that this possible Christian story is false, given the truth of the version of Christianity described in Section 1. As I will explain in Section 3.3, this is enough to undermine the objection to Option A* that this possible Christian story was intended to address.

### *Section 3.3: How this Possible Christian Story Helps*

This possible Christian story has the first of the two features mentioned above: if true, it explains how it could be plausible to think (in accord with Option A*) that *all people who never steadfastly endorse generic Christian teaching and never get sufficient evidence for it will ultimately be in some way morally to blame for lacking this evidence* (so in this one respect at least their behavior will be morally inferior to those who eventually endorse generic Christian belief). This possible Christian story also has the second of the two features mentioned at the beginning of Section 3.2: it has no problem accommodating the fact that some who are non-Christians are morally better overall than some who are Christians. To see why, consider the fact that some alcoholics are much better at managing their alcoholism than others. To the casual observer and even to themselves, they don't seem to be very damaged by or mastered by their addiction. These "high-functioning" alcoholics are often unwilling to take the first three steps of the AA

[51] It may be falsifiable in the afterlife – if there is one and we are able to discern why people at that time continue to resist endorsing generic Christian belief (if any do).

program, in part because they don't think their lives are unmanageable on their own. Those who *are* willing to take the first three steps of the program are often those whose lives are much more obviously impacted in a negative way by their alcoholism, making it more difficult for them to deny their addiction. Thus, those who take the first three steps of AA may have lives that are much more obviously under the control of and harmed by alcohol.

In a similar way, those who take the first three steps for dealing with addiction to sin may have lives that are much more obviously under the control of and harmed by that addiction. As a result, they may be less morally good (overall) than those who don't take those three steps. Sincere Christians have taken those first three steps.[52] This doesn't make them morally better overall than those who haven't taken those steps. But if they persist in their Christian faith, it does make the following good thing true of them: they haven't done the bad and blameworthy thing that (according to the possible Christian story above) all who never steadfastly believe and act as Christians will do, namely, refrain from continuing to take those three proto-conversion steps (or something like them) despite the eventual availability of adequate evidence and reason for doing so.[53]

Notice that endorsing Christian belief and the possible truth of the story presented above does not involve judging anyone for anything in particular. At most, it endorses the general claim that all humans are mired in rebellion and sin from which all require deliverance. Jesus said, "Judge not lest ye be judged."[54] It's not difficult to think of excellent reasons for us not to judge others. One such reason is that, as noted above, we will be judged by what we do with the resources we have been given. And it is very difficult for us to know what resources others have received and how well they're doing with those resources. (We aren't even that good at determining these things with respect to ourselves.) We often can't tell exactly what evidence others have – e.g., what seemings have been rationally triggered in them by their experiences. Nor is it easy to tell exactly what resources they have for dealing with the moral choices they face. We typically don't know what moral choices they are facing now (given their histories), what evidence they have pertaining to a particular moral choice, how difficult that moral choice is for them given the abilities and assistance they have, or how clear it is to them what the right thing to do is.

Thus, the possible Christian story I laid out doesn't encourage or provide grounds for any speculation about how well those around us are doing with the resources they have. A Christian who accepted the possible truth of that story above could quite sensibly acknowledge that we can't tell how best to judge those who reject generic Christian belief—even if they do so on their deathbed. Christians simply don't know

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[52] And, as noted above, some who aren't Christians (perhaps because they've never become familiar with generic Christian teaching) might also have taken these three steps (thereby undergoing proto-conversion to Christianity).

[53] Keep in mind that one shouldn't read too much into this comparison between alcohol addiction and sin addiction. The comparison made in this paragraph and the previous one is intended mainly to illustrate how (a) a person can be doing morally worse in one respect while being morally better overall and how (b) being morally better in one respect can be more important in some ways than being morally better overall.

[54] Matthew 7:1.

what resources these non-Christians have available. So Christians usually aren't able to determine (i) whether at this point in time these non-Christians have the required evidence for belief or reasons for acting in accordance with the Christian invitation to receive God's gift of saving grace through generic Christian belief and (ii) if they don't, whether they're to blame for this. Of course, Christians think that these people may have rejected an extremely important truth. But whether they are blameworthy in doing so typically isn't something Christians can discern. That they've done so in a blameworthy way may even strike Christians as being implausible in a particular case, though even that positive evaluative judgment about another person should be made only cautiously, given the difficulties already noted with judging others.

In response to Q2, therefore, the answer I am defending is 'no': Christians needn't think they are morally better than all non-Christians. Christians typically don't know whether those non-Christians around them – the ones who seem to be at least as morally good as, if not morally better than, many Christians – non-culpably lack evidence that would provide a rational basis for becoming a Christian. If they do non-culpably lack such evidence, then there may well be no reason to think their being non-Christians makes them morally worse than Christians. However, those who think that the possible Christian story told in Section 3.2 may be true, for all we know, can sensibly also think that all those who never endorse generic Christian belief (before or after death) might ultimately be doing morally worse in at least one way than those who do eventually endorse it, namely, they'll ultimately be culpably failing to respond properly to the reasons and evidence they've received (reasons and evidence leading them along the most promising path for them to proto-conversion and to becoming a Christian). It's true that doing morally worse in that way has significant negative consequences. But doing morally worse in that way (at a certain time) is compatible with being morally better overall (at that time) than some of those who don't do worse in that way – just as a "high-functioning" alcoholic's doing morally worse (at a certain time) by not acknowledging his alcoholism or seeking help in dealing with it is compatible with him being morally better overall (at that time) than some alcoholics who have severely damaged their lives and relationships but are now in AA dealing with their problem.[55]

This explanation of how a negative answer to Q2 can be plausible shows how one can escape the charge in the second horn of the dilemma from the introduction. It shows that it needn't be unfair for salvation to be withheld from those who are (overall) morally better in this earthly life than some of the Christians who receive it. It needn't be unfair because, despite being given (before or after death) their best chance to be saved, these non-Christians culpably resist the beliefs or actions that they must take in order to be saved. The points made in this paragraph and the previous one *also* show (in response to the question in the paper's title) that Christians *can*

[55] The points I've been making here fit well with Jesus's parable (Luke 18:9–14) of two men praying – one who is a morally impressive person (a Pharisee) and the other who is a morally pathetic person (a tax collector). The former thanks God that he isn't failing morally in the way that others, such as the tax collector, are; the latter, too ashamed to look up to heaven, beats his breast and says, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Jesus concludes by saying that the tax collector "rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

plausibly explain virtuous non-Christians, and they can do so in a way that is compatible with the plain fact noted at the outset of this paper.

## Two Concluding Remarks

I'll close with two final comments that are worth keeping in mind.

First, according to Jesus, not all who call him their Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of his Father in heaven.[56] This suggests that not all who call themselves 'Christians' *are* Christians. This is important to remember as one looks around the world and throughout history and sees many self-proclaimed Christians whose behavior *fails* to reflect a commitment to following in the footsteps of Jesus. It may be that this sort of failure is due to the fact that these people are not his followers, despite what they claim. Of course, even here, we must remain cognizant of the difficulty of judging how others are doing with what they've been given.

Second, I obviously think it can be beneficial to speak (as I have in this paper) about whether and why we lack evidence for Christian belief and about the benefits of responding properly to the evidence we have. But this shouldn't make us think that Christianity teaches that the primary reason that people miss out on the benefits of salvation (assuming that some do) is their failure to have the right evidence or to believe rationally in accordance with the evidence they have. Instead, Christianity teaches that the primary reason that people miss out on the benefits of salvation (again, assuming that some do) is that they are mired in rebellion and sin. And it teaches that the primary means by which we are saved is not by having access to evidence or by rationally responding to evidence we have but by God's grace through Christ's atoning work on the cross. This isn't a way of taking back point (7) from Section 1, according to which the free choice to receive God's grace – a choice for which Christians are at least partly responsible – is a necessary condition for salvation. It's just to clarify what is of primary importance in human salvation, according to Christian teaching, and what is not.[57]

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[56] See Matthew 7:21. How does this view of what it is to be a Christian fit with the view mentioned at the beginning of Section 1 according to which Christians are those who endorse generic Christian belief, repent of their sin, and put their trust in Christ to save them? That's a question for another time, but one possibility is that the two views are coextensive in terms of who they identify as Christians.

[57] An ancestor of this paper was the *William Alston Lecture*, which I presented at the Society of Christian Philosophers session at the Central Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in February 2019. Thanks to audience members on that occasion as well as to those who participated in discussions of this paper at the University of Notre Dame's Center for Philosophy of Religion in September of 2018, at the "Epistemology of Theism" seminar in Nancy, France in June of 2019, and at a University of Notre Dame graduate student discussion group in June of 2024. For helpful conversations and comments on earlier drafts of this paper, I'm especially grateful to Nathan Ballantyne, Jeff Brower, Laura Callahan, Paul Draper, Hud Hudson, Patrick Kain, Noah McKay, JP Messina, Cyrille Michon, David Moore, Mark Murphy, Sam Newlands, Katie O'Dell, Meghan Page, Michael Rea, Eric Sampson, Spencer Smith, Johnny Waldrop, and two anonymous referees for this journal.

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