

Ask Anything

“Religion is a crutch”

Selected Texts

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INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Today we are finishing off our Ask Anything series. The final question you asked begins with a statement and then asks a question. Here it is: **(SHOW SLIDE 2) Religion is a crutch for humankind. It’s for weak people who cannot think and act for themselves. How would you respond to that?**
 - Well, let’s be clear on what this means. It uses the image of a crutch. Why did human beings invent crutches? To provide comfort and support to people when they are too weak to walk on their own strength.
- Transfer this image to religion. Why is it that billions of people throughout history have believed in the Christian God, or in any god for that matter?
 - One answer is to say that our ancestors invented the idea of God and religion. Why? To provide themselves with comfort and support.
 - Life is filled with difficulties, suffering, and death and so it is said that we invented God to help us walk the treacherous pathways of life but now that we’re advanced as a species we need to throw away those old crutches.
- Today’s most famous atheist, Richard Dawkins, changes the image but makes the same point. He compares religion to a soother, which was invented to provide babies with comfort. He says religion may have been a good invention thousands of years ago when humanity was in its babyish phase but now that we’ve grown up it’s time to put away the soother.
 - As Dawkins says, **(SHOW SLIDE 3) “I do not think it a very dignified or respectable posture for an adult to go around sucking a [soother] for comfort.”¹**
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 4)** So, to say religion is a crutch is to say it is for weak people. It is for people who can’t handle life and need the comfort and support it gives.
 - It says, ***“you believe in Christianity because you want it to be true so you can have psychological comfort, but it’s time to put away the soother and grow up. It’s time to put away the crutch and walk on your own two feet”***
- How should we respond to this? I think the best way is to ask three questions back to the one who asserts that religion is a crutch. In the third question I will take us to one passage of Scripture that sums up the whole Christian answer.

IT DOESN’T PROVE ANYTHING

- When someone says “religion is a crutch” the first question to ask in response is this: **(SHOW SLIDE 5) Who says this proves anything?**

¹ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dawkins-says-religion-is-like-sucking-a-dummy-dc0jj902qf6>

- Simply asserting that Christians are weak people who need a crutch doesn't prove anything. It's a forceful statement. It's very condescending, but it's not an argument. It's like if I said, **"Atheists are idiots who aren't smart enough to grasp that God exists."** That's not an argument. It's just a forceful statement that is very condescending. It doesn't prove anything.
 - Let me show you a few reasons why this is the case.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** First, the "religion is a crutch" statement doesn't prove anything because it is based on one massive assumption.
 - What is the massive assumption under the statement that "religion is a crutch"? It assumes that God does not exist. The person who says "religion is a crutch" is not offering any reasons for why God does not exist. They are simply assuming this to be true.
 - Yet, why should we accept this massive assumption? Oh yes, if God does not exist then it is true that somewhere along the line human beings made up religion, but what if God does exist? If the Judeo-Christian God exists then it's not foolish to listen to what he says and to act as he calls you to act. It's the wisest thing you could possibly do.
 - So right up front, let's be clear that the statement of religion being a crutch doesn't prove anything. It is an emotionally charged statement that assumes God does exist but offers no reasons for this belief.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** Second, the "religion is a crutch" statement doesn't prove anything because everyone (not just religious people) wishes certain things were true.
 - Remember, the accusation here is that Christians wish there was a God who could make them feel better and so they invented him. It's wish fulfillment.
 - But this argument cuts both ways. It could just as easily be said that non-religious people wish to live in a world where there is no God to tell them what to do and so they wish God out of existence.
 - Many atheists have fully admitted this to be the case. For instance, the philosopher Thomas Nagel, wrote: **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** "I want atheism to be true. . . It isn't just that I don't believe in God and naturally hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope that there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that."²
 - So Nagel is admitting that his beliefs are not all based on pure evidence. They are also based on what he wishes to be true.
 - **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 9)** So if it is asserted that Christians made up the idea of God because they are *afraid of the dark* then it might also be said that non-Christians deny the existence of God because they are *afraid of the light*.
 - The point, once again, is that none of this proves anything. Hypothetically speaking, it is possible that Christians wished God into existence. But it could also be true that non-Christians have wished him out of existence. Once again, a big statement is being made but it doesn't prove it one way or the other.

² Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 130.

- **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** Finally, the “religion is a crutch” argument doesn’t prove anything because everyone (not just religious people) uses certain crutches for support.
 - The assertion is that Christians are weak so they invented God as a crutch to support them. The unspoken assumption is of course that non-religious people are strong and don’t need such supports.
 - This is quite a proud thing to say. And it simply isn’t true. As the agnostic author John Humphry’s puts it: **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** “Don’t we all [need support]? Some use booze rather than the Bible. It doesn’t prove anything about either.”³
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 12)** So you see, my first response to the statement that religion is a crutch is to say, “Who says this proves anything?” It is not an argument. It is just a statement that assumes the rightness of its own position.
 - It assumes God does not exist but does not tell us why.
 - It assumes only Christians have biases that wish certain things were true when everyone has biases that make them wish certain things were true.
 - And it assumes only Christians are weak people in need of support when everyone needs support.
 - Who says this proves anything?

WHO SAYS CHRISTIANITY MAKES LIFE EASIER?

- There is a second question that I want to ask in response to those who say religion is a crutch to make life easier and more comfortable? It is this: **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** **Who says Christianity makes life easier?**
 - I will grant that it does in many areas. It gives us comfort in the face of death for we believe that God will raise all those who belong to Christ from the dead. It also gives us peace in our conscience knowing that God forgives our sins because of Christ’s death on the cross.
 - Yet, there is much about it that makes life harder, not easier.
- Jesus said, **(SHOW SLIDE 14)** **“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16:24-25).**
 - Jesus calls us to deny our very selves and to submit to him. And this is not just in a few select areas of life. It is in everything.
- Consider sex. In Jesus’ day the average person in Rome could have their concubines, same-sex lovers, orgies, and, like today, were free to experiment with any form of sexuality they desired. Yet, when people became Christians in Rome, they turned away from all of this. They reserved sex for marriage between a man and a woman. Even more difficult is the fact that Jesus calls us to kill the lustful thoughts in our minds.
 - Make life easier? Far from it. For many people this means a lifelong war against powerful desires that do not die easily.

³ John Humphrys, *In God We Doubt: Confessions of a Failed Atheist* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2007), quoted in John C. Lennox, *Gunning for God: Why the New Atheists are Missing the Target* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2011), 24.

- Author Mary Eberstadt writes the following: **(SHOW SLIDE 15)** **“To put it more bluntly: Do you really want to tithe, in addition to paying your taxes? Do you want your workweek disrupted by the demands of observance, and your social or romantic life circumscribed by rules that many of your friends think ridiculous? Do you want to drag your kids to religious education for years on end, often missing things they’d rather do in the meantime? Do you want to be laughed at in the secular Western public square? . . . Then get yourself to church.”**⁴
 - So you see, the call of Jesus to submit every area of your life to him proves that religion is not a crutch. In some ways Jesus makes life harder, not easier.
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 16)** Nowhere is this truer than in the persecution of Christians throughout the history of the world. For many people, becoming a Christians means losing your family, your job, and even putting your very life in jeopardy.
 - Are we really supposed to believe that all these persecuted Christians took up their crosses because it made them feel good? The idea that religion is a crutch is simply not true. It fails to account for the hard call of Jesus to deny yourself and fails to recognize what is often a high cost for living as a Christian.
 - Who says Christianity makes life easier?
- So there are two initial responses. But all of that was just clearing the way for the last question because now I want to get to the heart of the Christian answer.

WHO SAYS IT’S BAD TO USE A CRUTCH?

- When someone says, “religion is a crutch for weak people” I want to respond in the third place by asking this question: **(SHOW SLIDE 17)** **who says it’s bad to use a crutch?**
 - Of course, it would be ridiculous for a healthy and strong person to use a crutch. Healthy people don’t need crutches.
 - But what if you broke your leg? In that case, there’s nothing wrong with admitting your weakness and using a crutch. It’s wise to do so. In fact, if you refused to use a crutch and tried walking as normal your friends would say, **“Stop being so foolish. Lay down your pride. Admit your weakness and use the crutch.”**
- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 18)** If God does not exist then it is perfectly fair to say religion is a crutch and to call people to get rid of it. But consider the opposite.
 - If God does exist then it is not a sign of psychological weakness to seek his help. It is actually the smartest thing you can do because you have access to an all-powerful being.
 - If God exists, then it is not a sign of intellectual weakness to admit you don’t have all the answers and to submit your mind to what God has said in the Bible. It is actually the wise thing to do, because God is far wiser than you.
- But let’s go even deeper here. When people say religion is a crutch, the ultimate Christian answer is, **“yes, it is!”** To show you what I mean let’s consider some words from Jesus himself.

⁴ Mary Eberstadt, *How the West Really Lost God* (Templeton Press, 2013), Kindle Edition, 64-65.

- Jesus' most famous sermon is called the Sermon on the Mount. It is recorded for us in Matthew chapters 5-7. Here Jesus outlines the heart of the Christian faith. Jesus' sermon is filled with teaching on how to live but it is how he begins that is most shocking.
 - The message of Christianity does not begin with commands. No, it begins with good news. It begins with a message that is so thrilling it makes anyone who truly grasps it say, ***"You've got to be kidding! There's no way this can be true. It's just too good."***
- Listen to Jesus' very first words. (SHOW SLIDE 19) ***"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*** (Mt 5:3).
 - Jesus' message begins with a great pronouncement of blessing. To be blessed means to have God's full and complete approval. Some translate this word "blessed" as "Congratulations!" One man translates it as, "You lucky bums!"
 - Jesus begins by announcing God's great blessing and congratulations on certain people. Because these people have God's blessing they get something from God that is simply astonishing.
- What do these people get from God? (SHOW SLIDE 20) ***"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*** (Mt 5:3).
 - The Bible declares that God is the king and that in Jesus God's kingdom has invaded this earth and will one day fully rule over the earth. What is this kingdom like? In short, it is the world we all long for. It is nothing less than a world where there is no suffering or pain; a world where there is no death; a world that is free of racism and all forms of evil; a world where God dwells with his people.
 - Oh what good news this is! Jesus begins his sermon by congratulating certain people because they have won the greatest prize imaginable – a place in God's kingdom.
- So, what kind of person gets this great gift? Who are these blessed people? Jesus very clearly defines who they are.
 - Look at these words with me: (SHOW SLIDE 21) ***"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*** (Mt 5:3).
 - In the original Greek in which this was written, the pronoun, "theirs" is emphasized. Literally it reads, (SHOW SLIDE 22) ***"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs (and only theirs!) is the kingdom of heaven."***
- So, if only the poor in spirit get the kingdom then Jesus is also saying the opposite.
 - He is also saying, (SHOW SLIDE 23) ***"Cursed are the rich in spirit, for they will never enjoy life in God's kingdom."***
- So being poor in spirit is the condition for receiving the kingdom. Only the poor in spirit get it. So, ***"What does it mean to be poor in spirit?"***
 - This word "poor" does not mean someone who is just struggling to pay their rent or mortgage. It is someone who is so desperate they have to beg to survive. They have nothing, not even the bare essentials.
- But clearly Jesus is not talking about our physical wealth because he adds "in spirit." What does it mean to be poor *in spirit*?

- D.A. Carson defines it like this: **(SHOW SLIDE 24)** **“Poverty of spirit is the personal acknowledgement of spiritual bankruptcy. It is the conscious confession of unworth before God. As such it is the deepest form of repentance”⁵**
 - **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 25)** To use the imagery of the question this morning, it is a person who says, ***“I am not spiritually strong. I am spiritual weak. I have sinned greatly against God. I am broken. I cannot walk on my own. Can God ever forgive and accept someone like me?”***
- And what does God say to the poor in spirit? Does he ridicule them for their weakness? No! ***“Congratulations! You lucky bums! You have my complete approval. I give you the entire kingdom.”***
 - So God does not give his kingdom to the prideful who see no need of God, who think they are good people and don’t need a Saviour. The kingdom is not given to the strong and the self-sufficient.
 - It is given to the beggars in spirit; to those who admit their weakness and sin and call on Jesus to save them.

WILLIAM CAREY’S POVERTY OF SPIRIT

- This makes me think of what is written on William Carey’s gravestone. William Carey gave up everything to serve the Lord as a missionary in India for 40 years.
 - When William Carey died a simple tablet was put on his grave with the words that he requested. It is this inscription that was the secret to this man’s faithfulness and productivity in the kingdom.
 - His grave reads, **(SHOW SLIDE 26)** ***“William Carey, Born August 17th, 1761, Died June 9th 1834. A wretched, poor, and helpless worm, on thy kind arms I fall”***
- Oh listen to the two sides of this phrase. He views himself first of all as a wretched, poor, and helpless worm. He is not saying that as a human being he has no worth. He is saying, ***“When I consider what a sinner I am before God, how little I love him, how much I have failed him, I am know that I am a beggar.”***
 - But do not miss the next line: ***“On thy kind arms I fall.”*** That is the key. He knew the gospel. He knew that because of what Jesus Christ has done he was forgiven and given a place in the kingdom. And he threw himself on the kind and loving arms of Jesus.

I NEED FAR MORE THAN A CRUTCH

- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 27)** You have asked me how I respond to the statement that religion is a crutch. The heart of my response is to say:
 - A crutch does not even begin to show my need. A crutch is for a generally healthy person who has sprained or broken their ankle. But my condition is far worse than that.

⁵ Don Carson, *Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount*, 18.

- A crutch is for someone who can generally walk on their own but just needs a little extra support. But I need far more than a little extra support.
 - Apart from Jesus Christ I stand condemned for my sins. I don't need a little extra help to be a better person. I need my slate wiped clean and to be made new.
 - Apart from Jesus Christ, I will lose the fight against death and will end up in hell. I don't need a little support from God. I need someone to save me. I need someone to do for me what I am totally incapable of doing myself.
- Praise be to God! He has given me far more than a crutch. He has given me a Saviour and his name is Jesus Christ.
 - I lean upon Him far more than a man leans on a crutch. I throw all of my weight on him for he is my only hope.
 - When I die and God says, ***"Where is the perfectly righteous life that you must live to come into my presence?"*** I will point to him and say, ***"He lived it for me. As a man leans on a crutch, I lean entirely on his righteousness."***
 - When God says, ***"And what about the curse of death that is due to you for your sins?"*** I will say, ***"He bore my sin in his body on that tree. He was made sin for me. As a man leans on a crutch, I lean entirely upon him to save me."***
 - The poor in spirit lift their voices and sing, **(SHOW SLIDE 28)**
 - ***Nothing in my hand I bring,
Solely to thy cross I cling,
Foul I to the fountain fly,
Wash me Saviour or I die***
 - The poor in spirit sing, **(SHOW SLIDE 29)**
 - ***My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness.***

CONCLUSION

- **(SHOW TITLE SLIDE 30)** So here we see that there are only two types of people in the world – those who think they are healthy and in no need of a crutch and those who recognize they are weak and unable to walk without one. The rich in spirit believe they are just fine and need nothing from God. The poor in spirit believe they are bankrupt before God.
 - To the rich in spirit God says, ***"You don't get anything because you don't think you need anything."*** But to the poor in spirit who cannot help themselves God says, ***"Congratulations! You are so blessed. You get the whole kingdom. You get forgiveness and you get to share in my kingdom that will soon take over the entire earth."***
 - Lay down your pride. Admit your sin. Confess your need for Jesus to save you. Who says a crutch is a bad thing?
- **(SHOW SLIDE 31)** Lord Jesus, I admit that I am a sinner, and I ask for Your forgiveness. I believe You died for my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite

You to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow You as my Lord and Savior. Amen.