**Pascal’s Challenge**

**Or, The Lazy Gambler’s guide to picking a Religion**

“Pascal’s wager” is an argument contained in and reconstructed from a passage in Pascal’s *Pensées*, an incomplete work of Christian apologetics, projected and begun but never finished, by the seventeenth century mathematician, scientist, and religious controversialist Blaise Pascal. The exact nature of the argument is controversial as well as its role in the overall project of the *Pensées*. It is this that I wish to focus on here.

In my view, the argument is neither a proof for the existence of God, nor an argument for the rationality of belief in God, nor even intended simply as pragmatic motivation/justification for theistic belief. Instead, the force of the argument is rhetorical and simply intended to motivate a serious and hopeful consideration of the evidences for Christianity as collected in the *Pensées* or some other work of Christian apologetics. Pascal puts the argument in the form of a wager because the audience that he has uppermost in his mind are his libertine gambler friends, for whom self-interesting reasoning in terms of the probabilities of outcomes is a familiar mode of assessing risk, gain and loss, and so the rationality of wagering.

On this interpretation, the way in which Pascal’s argument functions as a rhetorical appeal avoids most of the standard objections to the argument. Surely, there can be no rational objection to the mere investigation of the claims on behalf of Christianity, even if motivated by a hope grounded in an appeal to self-interest. This will especially be the case if the choice is, as Pascal argues, forced and unavoidable, and the refusal to inquire itself tantamount to a choice to reject belief in Christianity. Nor does the investigation require that one actually comes to believe, only that one sincerely inquires with an open mind. The strength of the apologetic arguments and the grace of God have to do the rest – more on this below.

I will begin by briefly stating the argument, then turn directly to the main remaining objection to the argument, which I call the Lazy Objection. I will then conclude with some remarks about what this all means.

 **Pascal’s Challenge**

Pascal’s intended audience consists of some tough customers, hard-bitten sinners who lack any sort of natural spirituality or religious inclination and profess indifference to religious ideas and practices. As such, it’s no good assaulting them with apologetic arguments in their current state. They first need to be softened up and the religious view of things made attractive in a way that meets them “where they currently are” and so arouses their interest. Pascal thus puts his challenge in the form of a wager. Christianity offers an afterlife of infinite bliss for those who believe – an infinite payoff. Those who forego belief must also forego that infinite reward, since belief is a necessary condition for entering into it. On the other hand, the loss involved in belief is a finite loss, one otherwise consistent with a happy, “successful” life in this world. More than this, the gain offered by unbelief is not only finite, but very often deleterious to us as even immoralists, drunks, and gamblers (however hopelessly addicted they may be) can see, at least in their lucid moments. To risk the loss of these impure pleasures in the hopes of attaining an infinite payoff is not irrational, given that there is some reasonable prospect of attaining it. This, of course, is something that we cannot know without looking into the matter. By the same token, that there is *no* reasonable prospect of attaining that infinite payoff is something we can know only after we have seriously and sympathetically investigated the claims on behalf of Christianity. As such, it would be the height of folly to categorically reject those claims without a due and fair examination of that evidence.

The fact remains, however, that many do not *feel* the force of Pascal’s challenge or, rather, do feel it but as something threatening rather than attractive and to which they are likely to react in a visceral, negative manner. The traditional sort of Christianity espoused by Pascal has a ready explanation for this, however. We are all of us sinners and, due to original sin, come into this world sworn enemies of God who, left to our own devices, would have no inkling of the Christian truth and, for the most part, can take no savor in it. For this reason, we are bound to resist the Christian message, especially if it conflicts with our self-interest or our “druthers,” such as a life of sexual immorality, drug-induced euphoria, and entertainments that pander to our basest appetites. It is only the grace of Christ, received by us and not resisted, that can replace our heart of stone with a heart of flesh that beats with love of God and neighbor. It is here that Pascal’s appeal to “masses and holy water” becomes intelligible. Jansenist heretic though he was, Pascal was Catholic enough to believe that the sacraments and sacramentals are primary sources of Christ’s healing grace and so an essential element of Christian practice. It is not simply a matter of “getting in the swim” of living the Christian life by mimicking the practices of those who are already believers. Instead, participation in the liturgy, prayer, and so on produce a change in one’s heart through the influx of divine grace by means of which we acquire the infused virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

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 **The Lazy Gambler’s Objection**

Nevertheless, at least one of the traditional objections to Pascal’s Wager still needs to be faced. According to this objection, there are many other religious systems besides the Christian one, and each of these can issue their own challenge, demanding that we give them equal consideration prior to opting for the Christian alternative. In that case, given the large number of alternative religions available for our consideration, the course of study involved will be much greater than we initially bargained for. Indeed, if we grant the antecedent equiprobability of all systems of religion, the task seems daunting, or even insurmountable. This appears to provide someone, call him or her the Lazy Gambler, a pretext to opt out once again and evade Pascal’s challenge.

Pascal, of course, did not consider any religion but Christianity as the object of inquiry in response to his challenge. For Pascal, only Christianity was a Jamesian “live option.”
 However, it will be contended that Pascal was simply either being dogmatic, or made his challenge in ignorance of other religions, which like Augustine he probably dismissed as the products of demons trying to mislead and sow confusion among human beings. My contention, contrary to these claims, is that Pascal was right about this. Christianity is the only religion that can make this challenge in such a way that it becomes one that we can evade only at serious risk of loss. To put it another way, only Christianity meets all of the conditions necessary for a challenge made on its behalf to possess the urgency necessary to make that challenge indeclinable without genuine risk of serious loss of an infinite good. I shall now go on to argue this by a comparison of Christianity to other religions, with the intent of eliminating them as competitors to Christianity in this respect, capable of generating an indeclinable challenge of the sort offered by Pascal to his gambler libertine friends. I will conclude that the same challenge applies to us all.

 **Reducing the Alternatives[[1]](#footnote-1)**

We may begin by eliminating the God of Fristianity, the Side-Walk Crack God, a perverse God who punishes those who believe in him, and so on. These after all are philosopher’s inventions, not gods in whom anyone actually believes or are willing to make any sincere, serious apologetic case. They remain merely epistemically possible, possessing only very low intrinsic probability. By contrast, Christianity is the living faith of millions, a religion with a long history and proof of its appeal to men and women of every historical age, social class, race, ethnicity, and economic condition. Far from being addressed to or predominant among one people, Christianity finds adherents everywhere in the world. It can hardly be *assumed* to possess the same intrinsic probability as these alternatives, merely invented for use as philosophical examples.

We may next eliminate the folk religions of the world, a class to which the great majority of the world’s religions, both ancient and modern, belong. Transactional fork-religion, to which almost all these religions belong, are decidedly religions of *this* world, predominantly concerned with such matters as the acquisition of good fortune, many sons, a good crop-yield, protection from the forces of darkness, and so on, all of which are to be secured by prayer and sacrifice to the gods. This sort of religion is a straightforward transaction between the gods and men in which devotion and worship is exchanged for divine favor. It includes most of the ancient popular religions (Egypt, Ancient Greece and Rome) and many widely practiced religious systems such as traditional Chinese religion, Shinto, and the thousand religions of the African subcontinent. While it is far from clear to me, Judaism as traditionally understood may be a transactional folk-religion of this sort, with no inkling of the need for salvation or strategy for achieving it. These religions have no system of salvation and only very vague ideas about the afterlife as a realm where everyone goes, regardless of how they lived, where life goes on much as it does in this world. Obviously, these religions are not competitors with Christianity in the respects that give rise to Pascal’s challenge.

This leaves the religions of salvation, the great religious productions of the Axial Age, and the world religions that have emerged since the dawn of Christianity, such as Islam, Ba’hai, and the LDS religion. Each of these is a religion of salvation, intended to show us how to achieve releasement from the realm of suffering and attain a blissful future life. All of them, then, meet the threshold condition for a religion capable of issuing something like Pascal’s challenge. However, the resemblance ends there, with no challenge possible that need trouble our Lazy Gambler.

Let us begin with Buddhism and Hinduism, the great religions of the East. Neither of these makes any sort of claim to be the exclusive vehicle of salvation, at least in any sense that rules out the acceptance of Christianity in preference to them. Both of these religions offer, in strikingly different forms but with the same soteriological result, a doctrine of reincarnation or rebirth that guarantees that we will have as many further chances as we need in order to get it right and achieve salvation. Traditional Christianity, by contrast, contends that we have only a single life and must make our choice for or against God in the life we are living now – no second chances, no potentially infinite series of tomorrows that allow us to defer Pascal’s challenge and let everything come out in the wash. Given that we have only one life and only one chance, it behooves the Lazy Gambler to consider the case for Christianity before bothering about these other religions, if at all, simply on grounds of self-interest. Pascal’s challenge has a certain urgency that similar challenges made by others would lack and which would invite evasion on the part of the Lazy Gambler. In that case, he has other things to do.

However, he cannot make a similar move in relation to Pascal’s Challenge, which is literally a matter of (spiritual) life and death. Like the man in James’s essay “The Will to Believe,” who must decide today whether to join the expedition or stay home – no second chances – the Lazy Gambler is faced with an equally ineluctable choice that cannot be put off indefinitely. The pragmatic necessity of inquiry into the truth of Christianity, viewed from the self-interested point of view, is patent and obvious. By the same token, to choose Christianity in preference to Hinduism or Buddhism is not to close the door on these religions altogether, or to risk the loss of truth if one of them turns out to be true. There will be other lives, other chances, and one’s error in embracing Christianity will not, after all, be the irrevocable sacrifice of the ultimate good. It will be at most a detour on the road to enlightenment.

Now let us turn to two other religions that emerged in their modern forms in the Axial Age – Zoroastrianism and Judaism understood as a religion of salvation. Like Christianity, these religions teach that there is only one life and that the choice for or against God needs to be made within this life. However, these religions do not propose anything like Pascal’s challenge as a gauntlet to be thrown down before unbelievers. The reason for this is that both of these religions see membership in their community of faith as limited primarily to members of a particular ethnicity. Being a Parsee or a Jew is not merely a matter of religion but of ethnicity, and membership in the Chosen people is considered a matter of birth, not personal inclination or divine election. For this reason, Zoroastrianism does not accept converts at all and, while some Reform congregations will accept converts to Judaism under some conditions, they do not seek or encourage them. In line with this, both religions teach that it is possible for those who are not eligible to be members of that faith to go to Heaven, provided they choose good over evil, their good works outweigh their bad ones, and they show due deference and respect to adherents of the True Faith.

Once again, adherence to Christianity does not seem contrary to any of these proscriptions and thus is no barrier to a heavenly inheritance. The exclusivism maintained by these faiths is not soteriological as it is in some versions of Christianity, according to which only a formal, public declaration of faith in Christ as savior is acceptable to God and is necessary for salvation, in which case no non-Christian has the proverbial snowball’s chance of attaining eternal life. I will have more to say about this sort of exclusivism below. For now, looking at it from the Lazy Gambler’s point of view, since most of us are ineligible to belong to these faith-communities anyway and such membership is not required, even according to the teachings of these faiths in order to realize the infinite payoff, there seems no reason to inquire further into these systems prior to investigating Christianity. Nor is there any reason to believe that embracing Christianity carries with it any significant risk of missing out on the infinite benefit of eternal life, since for the most part the ethical teachings of these three great monotheistic faiths overlap, so that a Jew or Parsee would be free to acknowledge that some Christians at least qualify for eternal life. To put it colloquially, in this context the Lazy Gambler will find that his rear end is covered in the event that either of these systems is in fact the True Faith.

 **Christian Exclusivism**

Before we turn to Islam (of which Ba’hai is an offshoot) and the LDS religion, we need to consider the form of exclusivism that is embraced by some, but certainly not all, Christians, one which has notable soteriological implications. According to this form of exclusivism, only those who have accepted the Christian faith, usually by a sincere, public profession of Jesus Christ as one’s personal savior, are eligible for membership in God’s eternal kingdom. Christians of this stripe disagree about whether such a profession is sufficient, or only necessary, for “being saved,” but all agree that salvation is possible only for Christians and that all non-Christians are *eo ipso* excluded from eternal life with God. More than this, those who fail to make this profession will suffer the pains of Hell, something they have earned through their sins and, just as the heavenly reward is eternal, so too will be the punishments of the damned.

Such an idea must give the Lazy Gambler pause. While there are some minority sects in the other great religions that make exclusivist claims for their chosen faith, the mainstream teaching of all of them, including Islam, Ba’hai and LDS, is that a formal profession of faith in or membership in their particular religious body is not necessary for salvation. To the contrary, an almost blowsy tolerance bordering on relativism seems characteristic of these other faiths – “there are many equally good paths to God/Enlightenment/Nirvana,” etc., a view touted to advantage by many western adherents of eastern religion, such as Alan Watts. While not all Christians hold strong exclusivist positions, Christian exclusivism lies much closer to the core of Christian teaching than do similarly exclusivist claims in other faiths, due to some key texts in the Scripture that easily lend themselves an exclusivist interpretation.[[2]](#footnote-2) For this reason, Christians like John Hick, who embrace religious pluralism are often criticized for this, and even regarded as heretics by many within the Christian fold. In Christian theology, it is the inclusivist or pluralist who carries the burden of proof, not the exclusivist - every mainstream Christian who wants to avoid commitment to a hardline, uncompromising Christian exclusivism must accommodate his or her view to the scriptural texts that, on a causal reading at least, seem to require it.

A standard, natural response to the exclusivist claim, prior to the examination of the evidence for it, is that for God to deal thus with His creatures is unfair or unjust. This claim, it seems to me, is hard to sustain. After all, eternal life is a gift from God, not something that belongs to us by right. As such, God can put any conditions on possessing or exclude anyone he wishes from that gratuitous good without formal injustice or unfairness to anyone. Nor, given the centrality of the crucifixion in salvation history and the position of Christ as sole mediator between God and man, is this condition – belief in Christ – merely arbitrary or inappropriate for God to demand from us. More than this, the pains and punishments of Hell are directly the result of our sins and only indirectly the result of lack of faith. From this point of view, God does not “send us to Hell” for failing to believe, we send ourselves there by our sinful actions, the fruit of our lack of faith. God merely gives us our head, lets us have our own way, and leaves us to take the consequences.[[3]](#footnote-3) Even the suggestion that there may be those who never even hear the Christian message or, having heard it in the grips of “invincible ignorance” are incapable of accepting it can be given some sort of answer.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In particular, neither mainstream Islam, Ba’hai nor the LDS church teach that only Muslims or Mormons go to Heaven. Mainstream Islam teaches that Islam (“submission”) is a verbal noun and that all who submit to the divine will are Muslim (“submitters”), even if they do not formally profess the Muslim faith. More than this, they have (at least until recently) privileged Jews, Christians, and Sabeans (the last surviving Gnostic sect) as “people of the Book” exempt from overt religious persecution. The LDS church excludes only those who commit the “unforgivable sin against the Holy Ghost” from eternal life. It seems, then, that only Christianity in some of its forms embraces the sort of soteriological exclusivism that asserts that only Christians can be saved.

It is to be noted in passing that the Catholic Church is not exclusivist in this sense. Although affirming that all salvation comes through the grace of Christ, maintaining that all non-Christian religions are false, and that only those who belong to the church founded by Christ can be saved, the Catholic Church nevertheless maintains that all men, not just those who have made some sort of formal profession of the Catholic faith, receive grace sufficient for salvation. As such, even non-Christians who, having received the grace of Christ, cooperate with it can be saved. Indeed, in principle, even atheists can be saved if they live good lives through the instigation of and cooperation with the grace of Christ operating in their lives in an occult or inchoate manner. Since the other great religions largely overlap in their central moral teachings, the grace of Christ will find a natural ingress into the lives of sincere, devout non-Christian religionists and much in their devotional practices will reinforce the living of a holy life. The case of the atheist is more problematic, since atheists, ancient and modern, typically reject much of traditional morality along with belief in God and the practice of religion, so that there is little likelihood that the inspiration or prompting of the grace of Christ will bear fruit. In their case, then, salvation is much more of a theoretical than a genuine possibility and atheists ought not to be too sanguine about their prospects in this regard.

Although Christian exclusivism is far from universally accepted nowadays, it could still turn out to be true, and this has important strategic implications for the Lazy Gambler. Obviously, if soteriological exclusivism is true and only Christians are eligible for the infinite payoff possible through religious belief, this adds additional self-interested motivation to investigate the claims on behalf of Christianity in preference to those of other religions. Since none of the other “live options” available to us at the religious smorgasbord wholly exclude the possibility of the getting the infinite payoff, we have less self-interested motivation to examine their claims; they are less urgent. Once again, Christianity has priority in our search. At the same time, since only an atheist whose moral life is pretty much indistinguishable from that of a convinced, devout Christian ought to have any confidence that he or she is in good standing with God, atheism does not present itself as the easy path to Heaven that will get us the infinite reward without all the hard work incumbent on believers, just so long as we live according to our own lights and up to our own principles, which may in the end be pretty dim and amount to having no principles at all.[[5]](#footnote-5) From this perspective, then, only a Christian can evade the risk that obtains if Christian soteriological exclusivism is true. This will hold even if one ultimately comes to believe, as I do, that Christian soteriological exclusivism is not likely to be true after all.

Islam and the LDS church come later in time than Christianity as such, and just as Christianity claims to supersede Judaism while being continuous with it, so too do these religions claim continuity with traditional Christianity while superseding it in some respects by means of a perfected revelation in the former case or an additional revelation in the latter. For reasons we have already seen, Judaism is not really an option for any Lazy Gambler who is not ethnically Jewish. However, these alternatives to traditional Christianity are open to all, just as Christianity is. Does this provide any strong incentive for the Lazy Gambler to go on to examine the claims and evidence on behalf of these religions, perhaps after looking at the claims and evidence for the traditional Christian faith?

It seems not. Giving priority to the examination of the apologetic case for traditional Christianity on the self-interested grounds I have already mentioned, the Lazy Gambler will either find these persuasive or not persuasive. In the former case, he will have been persuaded that the Good News of Christianity presents a plausible and sufficient scheme of salvation in which the Lazy Gambler can rest his confidence and upon which he can base a reasonable hope that, through the operation of the grace of Christ, he will experience a new outlook, achieve amendment of life, and receive the gift of eternal life. In that case, it seems unnecessary to bother about any further systems of religion. If the latter, then one may have reason to inquire further, though this savor may be blunted by the fact that these other religions, being continuous with and sharing a good deal of the metaphysical, ethical, and religious content to be found in traditional Christianity will also share in whatever defects or deficiencies that one finds in Christianity just as such. This will depend on the individual case, but I suspect that, if traditional Christianity is not good enough for us neither will be Islam or the LDS church. In neither case, then, does the Lazy Gambler have much incentive to consider the claims of these faiths to any great degree prior to the consideration of Christianity itself.

I conclude, then, that the Lazy Gambler has good reasons to investigate the claims on behalf of the Christian religion prior to considering those of any other religion, and not much incentive to consider the claims on behalf of these other religions in any case. As such, the task of responding to Pascal’s challenge is much less daunting than the Lazy Objection makes it appear. In fact, the Lazy Objection appears to provide no grounds whatsoever for claiming that the sheer number of religions, whether merely possible or claiming actual adherents in history, is so great as to make Pascal’s challenge impracticable for anyone, even our Lazy Gambler. As such, I think we can conclude that the Lazy Argument has no force against Pascal’s challenge and will not serve as a legitimate excuse for failing to rise to it.

 **Responding to the Challenge**

Objections like the Lazy Argument show, on the one hand, that people understand Pascal’s challenge and feel its force *so far forth*, due to the fact that they feel the need to find excuses for evading it. More seriously, however, the fact that people feel the need to evade Pascal’s challenge raises a question of some interest in its own right. The challenge, after all, only invites one to investigate – it does not require than one actually believe. It does so on the basis of the offer of an infinite good that is available to believers and that, even under the most fortunate circumstances, is available only to those whose lives are largely indistinguishable in their attitudes and actions from those of believers. Further, it does so at comparatively low risk of loss to those who actually respond to the challenge and make the trial of faith, even if their initial motivation is merely self-interested and even quite tentative. Given these terms, we ought to find the offer attractive and even hopeful – we ought to *want* it to be true and hope that it is so, approaching the prospect of faith *receptively* – with hopeful expectation and an open mind.

An analogy may help here. A college student comes home from school and finds his roommate in a state of high excitement.

“Dude!” he says, “While you were out you had a phone call!”

“Yeah, so?” asks the student.

“You may have inherited a million bucks!” says the roommate. “All you have to do is

 visit the lawyers, answer some questions, fill out some forms, show them your ID, and if

 you are the closest surviving relative, the dough is yours!”

“May have?” “IF?” asks the student.

“Well,” says the roommate, “there may be other claimants. That’s why the lawyers need

this info, so they can settle the estate.”

“Skip it,” says the student, “There’s no guarantee that I’m the heir and if I’m not, then

 I’ve just wasted my time.”

Given the possible payoff, most of us would undoubtedly say that the small inconvenience involved in filing the claim with the lawyers is well worth undertaking given the potential payoff, even if it is not guaranteed. Certainly, if one missed out on the million dollars one might have claimed as a consequence, it would surely seem like a lame excuse to shrug and say, “I couldn’t be bothered, it just wasn’t worth the trouble.” Most of us would surely say that it was eminently worth the trouble and that only extreme laziness could constitute filing the claim as “not worth it” in relation to a potential million dollars to which one might and in this case did, have a successful claim.

In a similar vein, one could say the same thing with regard to Pascal’s challenge. The prospect of eternal, unending bliss – an infinite payoff in exchange for foregoing a finite gain – *ought* to motivate us to seriously consider the claims of Christianity at least enough to make some hopeful study of the matter. After all, if Christianity is true and one fails to believe this, then one must forego the infinite payoff that accrues to believers as a result of their belief. Indeed, given the nature of the payoff and the relatively minor cost involved in qualifying for it, one really ought to *want* the Christian message to be true. In that case, it will sound equally lame to say, “Yeah, well, I couldn’t be bothered” as it did in the earlier case.

Now it is true, of course, that many people will say just this. Many others, in fact, would prefer that the claims of Christianity *not* be true and thus both dread Pascal’s challenge and have a strong, antecedent aversion to the consideration of Christian apologetic arguments in a neutral, rational sort of way. Such persons will likely do whatever they can to avoid that challenge and try to convince themselves that they need not face it.

If Christianity is true, however, it is the height of folly to take this course. Since this, again, is something that one can know only after having investigated the claims of the Christian faith, one runs the almost certain risk of the permanent loss of the infinite good as a result. Since one cannot know that this is the case without responding to the challenge and considering the apologetic case, once again one has no excuse for failing to do so. From the point of view of self-interested rationality, then, one has no alternative but to face Pascal’s challenge and undertake an inquiry into the truth of the Christian faith.

It is through these internal changes in one’s attitudes, desires, and motives to act rather than in changes in one’s fortunes, life circumstances, or worldly success that one finds the “substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”[[6]](#footnote-6) These, in turn, will become manifested in our thoughts, words, and deeds and thus made obvious to all, at least in those areas that we do not hold back from the influence of God’s grace in order that we may continue to secretly indulge our sinful inclinations. That evidence, as well as knowledge of our own resistance to the operation of God’s grace in our lives, is available only to the believer in the quiet of his or her own heart, but it is compelling nonetheless and capable of resisting every external attack with the solid conviction of faith aborning, even when one cannot answer every objection to the faith or successfully model its mysteries.

 **Evaluating the Evidence**

Since many people are reluctant to face Pascal’s challenge, they will evade it by any means at their disposal, not stinting to appeal to “reason” to justify this policy. Even if they finally accept the challenge, their prior antipathy to the message of the Gospel will often express itself in a prior negative attitude toward apologetic evidences incompatible with an objective consideration of those evidences. The claims of Christianity are constituted as “extraordinary” in some epistemically significant sense, a presumption in favor of their falsity is assumed, and consequently we find that “reason” demands much higher standards of evidence for Christian religious claims than for other factual, historical claims.[[7]](#footnote-7) These unreasonable demands have been critiqued many times, but are hard to dislodge because they correspond to what many people would like to be true prior to the examination of the evidence. For this reason, they are prevented from making an objective examination of that evidence.

How then should the evidence for Christianity be assessed? First of all, given the prospect of an infinite good resulting from believing the claims of Christianity, one ought in the first place to find the truth of Christianity an attractive prospect, one that we ought to want to be true. Again, nearly all of us would find the prospect of a million dollar inheritance an enticing one, one that we would like and would hope we may actually attain. Acting under the aegis of this prospect and the hope it engenders we ought to be willing to invest time in a serious investigation of the evidence with an open mind, putting aside our “druthers” and making an effort to consider the case for Christianity on its merits.

Of course, one also needs to guard against credulity, especially in the case where an infinite good is on offer, since one may be too easily swayed by self-interest. What is “too good to be true” often is. However, in this context, this is much less of a danger than *a priori* skepticism. In the first place, few of us find the Christian message so intrinsically attractive that they feel no major resistance to accepting it. Christianity offers us an infinite reward for believing, but it also paints a picture of human beings, ourselves included, as fallen, sinful, and in desperate need of salvation, something that we cannot attain apart from the grace of Christ, a picture of ourselves that, whatever our faults, we are loath to apply to ourselves. Again, traditional Christianity with its doctrine of original sin explains why we should expect this resistance (“I don’t need to be born again – I was born O.K. the first time.”) and the many consequent evasions by means of which people try to justify refusing to acknowledge it. At any rate credulity, even in the face of a potentially infinite reward for believing, hardly seems to be typical or even very common among those first introduced to the Christian system. Nevertheless, many people continue to employ the specter of “credulity” as yet another reason to evade Pascal’s challenge.

The primary evidences for Christianity are historical and, putting aside long-exploded *a priori* claims to the effect that historical evidence could never justify the “extraordinary” claims of Christianity, the appropriate standards for the evaluation of those claims are those that we would use to evaluate any other empirical historical claim. If a criticism of Christian historical evidences are given on a basis that would undermine any or all historical claims based on testimony or ancient writings, such as conjectures about authorial context or speculative attributions of a personal bias, a covert agenda, or other questionable motives, then it ought to be put aside. The sort of “critical” history that calls all ancient texts and authors into question or treats them as merely the products of culturally limited points of view unconcerned with the factual accuracy of what they report, is ultimately self-refuting. In the end, our only sources of information about the human past are on narratives that terminate in the authority of eye-witness testimony. We can only call these narratives into question so far before we have no basis for history other than our own contingent, historically limited scholarly prejudices and ultimately undermine whatever objective historical grounds we might have supposed we have for thinking that our historical sources are corrupt or unreliable. In that case, we set ourselves up as the measure of what is historically “credible” and history becomes just an ungrounded story we tell ourselves for contingent, mostly cultural reasons of no interest to anyone interested in the historical truth about what actually happened in the past.

In reading ancient texts, especially those that have been received as being of central importance, preserved with great care, and propagated as true and factually accurate through many generations, it is reasonable to adopt Swinburne’s principle of credulity, which is not witless gullibility but simply a recognition that there is a natural presumption in favor of eyewitness reports generated by sincere, competent witnesses and repeated by a continuous community of “ear-witnesses” before being preserved in writing. Such a presumption is only *prima facie* and consistent with human fallibility and the possibility of one’s revising one’s initial judgment. The fact that Christian belief manages to survive every attempt to undermine its evidences, however, goes a long way toward relieving the consciences of those who, having made the trial of faith and found it satisfactory, do not continuously live in fear that some, as yet undiscovered historical fact will refute the historical basis for Christian belief, or obsessively examine every new challenge to the faith. This can be left to professional apologists who, in virtue of talent, training, and interest are competent to make the best defense of the faith.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Even so, the fact that the historical evidences for Christianity fails to provide intellectual certainty for the believer commensurate to that resulting from the gift of faith need not trouble anyone. Historical claims do not require the sort of absolute certainty that philosophers are likely to think appropriate or to demand in order to be credible – reasonable to believe on the basis of historical evidence. Indeed, history is one of many fields in which the credibility of a claim is not expressible either in terms of deductive certainty or even probability as expressed using the mathematical theory of probability. One may well be justified in embracing Christianity on the basis of the historical evidences in its favor just so long as there is enough such evidence to make it reasonable to believe it, even if it is not the only reasonable position one could adopt after reviewing the evidence or even if, from some point of view, the evidence appears to favor a different judgment. In contexts such as these there is a certain amount of leeway available to those who have investigated the question enough to have a credible opinion about the matter. In the same way, so long as ongoing challenges to the faith do not altogether discredit it, one’s initial judgment need not be revised despite the fact that others in possession of the same evidence continue to resist the faith.

I am suggesting, then, that the evidence will not compel assent even if one recognizes from a rational point of view that it is sufficient to justify the belief of anyone who, in fact, is willing on the basis of that evidence to make the trial of faith. One also has to *want* to believe and, on the traditional Christian view, only the grace of Christ can effect this. God gives to all men and women grace sufficient for salvation. All of us must, and will, make our choice for or against God, which choice will not necessarily come to us in an intellectual context provided by philosophical argument or Christian apologetics, though this is one context in which that choice may manifest itself to some. Further, the fact that not all are convinced on the basis of even the best, most sophisticated presentations of those evidences does not necessarily prove that those evidences are insufficient. As I have already noted, we are all of us (yes, even confirmed believers) subject to inclinations that might well make us wish, at least on some occasions, that Christianity was not true or even to doubt its truth.

Even so, the judgment that the claims of Christianity are reasonable to believe – at least minimally credible on the basis of the objective historical grounds presented to us – can play an important role in the conversion of at least some people, such as Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, Sir Arnold Lunn, Peter Geach, and Michael Dummett. Perhaps this occurs in many other cases unknown to us as well. At the same time, there are notably other far from improper motives that may make one want Christianity to be true and to want this enough to make the trial of faith. These more powerful and dramatic sources of conversion, such as existential despair, personal emptiness, or a desire for something more, better, and greater than the material world has to offer even at its best, may also lead us to raise our eyes toward Heaven to seek the face of God.

What, then, of a desire and hope for the infinite reward offered by God for which (at least implicit) belief in Christ is a necessary condition?[[9]](#footnote-9) Supposing that one has done one’s homework and is persuaded that belief in Christianity is reasonable for anyone to embrace, *what is wrong* with embracing it in the hope that the promises of Christ are true and that the infinite good of eternal life with God is available to us? Nothing that I can see. Indeed, given that such belief is reasonable, the prospect of such a good can serve as an incentive of a sort that powerfully motivates not mere, tentative and tepid belief but the whole-hearted embrace of the Christian faith, Christian virtue, and the Christian way of life. It does so by giving us a strong personal stake in the truth of Christianity, one which is not merely self-interested or which, even if this is initially the case, will soon cease to function in this way as the committed believer advances in the Christian life. In that case, love of God and neighbor becomes the primary motive for action and the chief source of our earthly joy in anticipation of the life to come.

More than this, the authentic Christian life arguably promotes everything that is noble, good, and perfective of the authentic human life both of the individual and of society. Deep down, regardless of what we are or how we live, we wish that our children would possess and exemplify these attitudes and virtues in their lives even, and perhaps especially, if we don’t. At any rate, for most if not all of us, what holds us back from making the trial of faith (and concerning which a concentration on intellectual difficulties can be another mode of evasion and deflection from the real issue one needs to face) is *sin*, which is realized in a disordered motivational structure that addictively attaches us to sensual pleasures to a degree far out of proportion to their proper role in a complete human life in such a way that we cannot conceive ourselves as being happy apart from them. So much is this so that for many of us a life in which these things are no longer possible for us seems empty and not worth living.

There is room for the enjoyment of pleasure and amusement in any life, including the Christian life, insofar as these pleasures can be integrated into other worthwhile activities and the pursuit of worthwhile goals. However, pleasure must never be pursued as an end in itself and, more than this, when the pursuit of pleasure carries us away from the pursuit of the human ideal, a life in accordance with reason, or into activities and practices inconsistent with proper regard for our dignity as rational beings, such pursuit is both categorically morally wrong and sinful. Regardless of how the prospect of life without these things may seem to us from our current point of view, from the point of view of those who have been liberated by the grace of Christ and whose reason has been enabled to judge these things aright, what we sacrifice by accepting Pascal’s challenge and making the trial of faith is negligible and we are well rid of it.

In our lucid moments we can see that the degree to which our happiness is invested in the pursuit of sensual pleasure, material wealth, the accumulation of possessions, and constant sensory stimulation and entertainment is, from a rational point of view, way out of proportion to the actual value of these things for us. More than this, these bad habits, attitudes, and activities are, at least in their general tendency, deleterious to us, undermining our health, corrupting our character, wasting our time and, despite our best efforts to brazen it out, destructive of one’s self-image. In the end, we lose respect first for ourselves, then for others, then for everything genuinely moral, good, and worth possessing. At some level, we know that we need to change and perhaps, in some indirect way, are even willing to admit this to ourselves and even to desire this change. Still, we find ourselves mired in habits, attitudes, and activities that make any serious commitment to Christianity impossible for many of us. We desperately cling to whatever it is that is destroying us – food, drink, drugs, promiscuous sex, gambling – as though it were its very opposite, our savior.

In the end, there is only one Savior, ready to embrace us with the open arms that died for us on the cross. We cannot meet that embrace, both receiving and returning it, until we have ceased to cling to the world that offers us at best the life lived by the inhabitants of the city depicted in *Logan’s Run* – a life of material ease and plenty containing a surfeit of empty pleasures and shallow amusements designed to distract us for the nonce from the specter of impending and inescapable death. This is a life and a world in which the question “What was it all about?” cannot be raised only because no one survives to ask it, one from which we recoil in horror only to find ourselves sucked back into it due to the seemingly irresistible promptings of our disordered motivational structure. Despite our feeble efforts to resist them or change ourselves through our own efforts, if we were to look at ourselves unflinchingly from an objective point of view, we would have to admit that we are largely out of control and scarcely human, even as we cling to the belief that deep down we are really good after all. We are a mass of contradictions, incomplete, needy, our lives tinged with sadness even in our happiest moments, stressed, depressed, and bound to lose every seemingly good thing on which we have irrevocably founded our happiness. We have set ourselves up for failure, but would still rather fail on our own terms than surrender to the One who can lead us to true and lasting joy.

Still He waits – expectant, hopeful, compassionate and forgiving, ready to lavish the Father’s love on us and prepare a home for us in his heavenly kingdom. It is never too late – where there’s life, there’s hope.

Accept the challenge. Enter the embrace. Live and die no more.

1. In this section I am following the strategy and adopting many of the arguments presented in Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *A Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, Downers Grove, IN, IVP Academic,1994, 341-361. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For example, John 14:6 - “I am the way, the truth, and the light. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Of course, how we understand this passage depends on how we understand the manner in which one comes to the Father through Christ. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Calvinists notoriously go beyond this, insisting that God positively and eternally reprobates those who fall into sin and perdition. However, I have discussed this view elsewhere and will not take this up here. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. William Lane Craig, "'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ," Faith and Philosophy 6 (1989): 172-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “If it feels good, do it” is a principle exemplifying an approach to life that, given what typically feels good to human beings, is not likely to get one into heaven. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jonathan Edwards, “The Nature of True Religion,” in Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson, *Jonathan Edwards: Representative Selections*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1968 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. These claims are all made, for example, by Hume in his famous *Dialogues* *Concerning Natural Religion* (1777) and repeated my many others since that time. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. C. S. Lewis, “On Obstinacy in Belief,” in *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays*, New York, Harper One, 2017, 11-30. (Originally published 1955). On the appropriateness of subjective certainty with regard to the articles of faith despite that fact that its foundational historical claims are both contingent and revisable in principle, see Dom Mark Pontifex, *Religious Assent*, London, Constable and Company, 1927, and Dom Illtyd Trethowan, *Certainty: Philosophical and Theological*, London, Dacre Press, 1945. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I don’t have a well-worked out account of implicit faith, beyond saying that it is a cognitive state such that, if it was revealed to one that Christ is one’s true savior one would not be disappointed on that account and would see this as complementary to and the completion of all that is positive and worthwhile in one’s life, regardless of one’s prior beliefs. A case of such faith is exemplified in an interview given by George Bickford, father of animator Bruce Bickford, in the documentary film *Monster Road*. In direct response to the question whether he believed in heaven, the elder Bickford answered “No.” When he later talked about the importance of getting to heaven, the interviewer reminded him that he didn’t believe in such a place, to which Bickford replied, “Well, no, but I could be wrong about that...I’d like to qualify.” More recently, self-help author Jordan Peterson, who refuses to say whether or not he believes in God, nevertheless says that he lives as though God existed – and is terrified by the prospect that he does. This is quite distant from the traditional notion of “Fear of the Lord,” but we’ll take it an a symptom of implicit faith. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)