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# I CAN'T HELP WHAT I BELIEVE: THE MORAL CASE AGAINST RELIGIOUS EXCLUSIVIST DOCTRINES

**Kenneth Himma**

*Christianity and Islam subscribe to a doctrine of* salvific *exclusivism, according to which only the adherents of the one true religion will escape divine punishment – usually conceived of as an eternity of torment. In this article, I argue that salvific exclusivism is inconsistent with ordinary intuitions about fairness and justice, together with certain facts about belief formation. In particular, I argue that what one believes is sufficiently beyond one's capacity to choose that persons cannot fairly be punished for what they believe. It seems unfair, and inconsistent with God's moral perfection, to base the difference between an eternal reward and an eternal punishment on something that one can't control.*



## Introduction

Although each of the classical theistic religions subscribes to a doctrine of *descriptive* religious exclusivism holding it to be the one true religion, Christianity and Islam subscribe to a doctrine of *salvific* exclusivism, according to which only the adherents of the one true religion will escape divine punishment – divine punishment usually being conceived of as an eternity of torment. Salvific exclusivism entails something about how God treats those adherents of the one true religion, while descriptive exclusivism does not. These doctrines of divine punishment and salvific exclusivism, as we will see, are difficult to reconcile with ordinary intuitions about God's moral perfection and perfectly loving nature.

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It is worth noting that these two doctrines, taken together, have a chilling contemporary relevance. The idea that only believers of some particular faith are spared the eternal torments of divine punishment can have dangerous psychological effects that, all too frequently, culminate in violence towards other persons. These two doctrines can depersonalize or 'otherize' non-believers, making of them 'infidels' or enemies of God. As infidels or enemies of God deserve an eternity of torment, one might begin to think that there is nothing bad that can be done by other humans to these enemies of God that would be sinful or undeserved. It is a short step for persons inclined to think this way to attempt to direct violence at perceived enemies of God. These doctrines are not only morally questionable, but working in tandem can be downright dangerous – another reason, beyond theoretical coherence, to regard them with some concern.

In this article, I challenge salvific exclusivism, arguing that it is inconsistent with ordinary moral intuitions about fairness and justice, together with certain facts about belief formation. In particular, I consider the role of luck, socialization, evidence, and certain emotional influences in conditioning what views one holds about the existence of God, arguing, ultimately, that what one believes is sufficiently beyond one's capacity to choose that persons cannot fairly be punished for what they believe. It seems unfair, and inconsistent with God's moral perfection, to base the difference between an eternal reward and an eternal punishment on something that one can't control.

## The Immediate Implications of Exclusivism and a Traditional Doctrine of Hell

Exclusivism is an explosive doctrine in one respect; the implications of, for example, Christian exclusivism with respect to religious diversity are downright nasty. Of the world's more than 6 billion persons, no more than 2 billion

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are Christians. If assent to the Christian creed is a necessary condition for salvation, at least 4 billion currently living persons will not achieve salvation – simply in virtue of not believing certain propositions. As traditionally conceived, the consequence of Christian non-belief is eternal torment unmatched in severity by anything we can experience in this world.

It would be helpful to cite one representative verse from the Bible to get a sense for this all-too-familiar conception of how much suffering is experienced in hell:

> He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. *As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.* (Matthew 13:37-42)

The conception of hell described here is that of an eternity spent being burned alive causing the kind of suffering that can be expressed only by the 'wailing and gnashing of teeth'.

In any event, the important point for our purposes is this. Under the doctrine of Christian exclusivism, this terrible outcome is not just the fate of agnostics and atheists; it is also the fate of *billions* of pious Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists – and without any regard to whether those persons are morally good or bad. The mere failure to have the correct beliefs is enough, on this disturbing doctrine, to result in a person's consignment to eternal torment. And the same, of course, would be true of other classically



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theistic religions, like Islam, that subscribe to an exclusivist doctrine and a doctrine of divine punishment involving eternal torment.

## The Moral Concern: Religious Belief is Not Freely Chosen

**A. The Evidence For and Against the Existence of God and the Unique Truth of Christianity:** The first point of concern with salvific exclusivism is that there is no argument for the existence of an all-perfect God so persuasive that any rational (or even any reasonable) person must accept it on pain of irrationality. It should be quite obvious from the continuing debates on the arguments that there is no consensus among an authoritative community that any of the arguments epistemically justifies its conclusion. There is simply no argument for God's existence that succeeds in doing the work it purports to do.

What I long understood from having engaged the literature on the question of God's existence was also confirmed by my teaching experiences at an evangelical university. I taught 60- to 70-student sections of philosophy of religion and philosophical theology, twice a year, for seven years. The vast majority of students were evangelical Christians, and many of these were fundamentalists who adopt a literalist interpretation of Genesis and hence were 'young-earth creationists' who must deny, not only the theory of evolution, but also cosmological theories in physics estimating the age of the universe at 12 to 15 billion years – a great deal of science.

As part of the course, we surveyed the arguments for and against God's existence. Nearly all students denied that they would – or should – be convinced, if they were agnostic or atheist, by either the ontological argument or the Kalam Cosmological Argument. Intriguingly, many denied that they would, or should, be convinced, if they were agnostic or atheist, either by the Intelligent Design

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argument or by the fine-tuning argument, which purport to be 'scientific'. And this was before I would give any counterarguments.

Things got worse when it came to arguments attempting to show that Christianity is the one true classically theistic religion – which is a stronger claim than the classical theistic claim that an all-perfect God exists. Indeed, in the absence of any sufficiently persuasive argument for theism, any argument for the unique truth of Christianity must do double duty: (1) it must succeed in establishing the existence of God; and (2) it must succeed in showing that Christianity is the correct story about the nature of God.

Perhaps the most plausible argument for the truth of Christianity is William Lane Craig's historical argument. The argument purports to infer the truth that Jesus was resurrected from the tomb, in seeming violation of the physical laws of the universe, as the best explanation of a number of premises that, on Craig's view, are *uncontested* by historians. On Craig's view, the 'facts' that Jesus was killed and buried in a tomb, which was discovered by women to be empty, and that many people claim to have seen Jesus alive, despite reasons for scepticism, are best explained by the claim that Jesus was resurrected from the dead.

To my surprise, most of my students – again, primarily evangelical and fundamentalist students – said they were unconvinced by the argument. The general sense was that the argument illegitimately assumed the veracity of the Bible, which implies a denial of Craig's claim that his premises are uncontested by historians. Why they would assume this, without argument, is a bit of a mystery to me. But, truth be told, I couldn't help but be impressed by the students' view that the argument was circular.

I had naively assumed that my Christian students would reflexively accept any argument supporting their views, but they did not. But what might seem intuitively surprising really isn't so surprising at all: as we will see, the most important predictor of a young adult's religious views is, far and away, the views of her parents, suggesting the



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socialization process is the most important determinant in the formation of a person's religious beliefs.

In fact, I do not think that, for what it is worth, I have ever met a person who became religious because of the evidence (with the exception of people who became religious because they believe they had religious experiences). Religious belief is conditioned, to a disturbing extent, by factors having to do with luck and socialization.

**B. Salvific Luck: The Role of Luck in Conditioning Belief:** The role that luck plays – construed simply to mean events involving a person beyond her direct control – cannot be denied in conditioning what beliefs a person has or does not have. Whether or not luck is the most important factor conditioning what beliefs a person has, it would be silly to deny that luck plays a substantial role.

In *Mortal Questions*, Thomas Nagel identifies three types of luck that are quite important for our purposes. The first concerns where a person is born. If, for example, someone who is a Christian had been born in, say, a village in Afghanistan, the probability of her becoming a Christian would be negligible. And it doesn't seem to matter whether she has been exposed to the gospels. She will have grown up in a culture of persons who are nearly all Muslims, and Islam will seem, from the standpoint of her intuitions, the most natural and plausible of the classically theistic religions.

The second type of luck concerns the religious beliefs of the parents. Christian Smith has shown that 83 per cent of *young adults* who are born to Christian parents share their religious beliefs. Such a high correlation leads Smith, a devout Christian, to believe that being born to Christian parents is nearly 'determinative' of a young adult's religious beliefs.[1] Of course, one no more chooses one's parents than one chooses one's place of birth. Both of these factors tend to show that what religious belief one has is, to a significant extent, conditioned by luck.

This suggests that the most important conditioning factor in leading a person to become a Christian is the

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socialization process – and how we are socialized, which depends on where and to whom we are born, also depends critically on luck. Of course, this should not be surprising because we assume that how well a child is parented will profoundly condition what kind of person she will become and what beliefs she will have upon reaching adulthood. There is simply nothing controversial about this, as far as our shared intuitions are concerned.

And whether the socialization process is itself successful in inculcating a child with his or her parents' religious view will also depend on how skilful and caring the parents are – again, a matter of luck. Consider the notorious case of Robert Alton Harris.[2] Harris murdered two boys after he and his brother jumped into their car in the parking lot of a fast food restaurant and commanded the driver to drive them to a place of comparative safety. Instead of letting the boys go at the specified location, as Harris promised, he shot both point blank in their heads, leaving the cockpit of the car a horrific mess of scattered blood, skull, and brain. Harris's brother, stunned by the murder and sickened by the interior's appearance, crawled out of the car and started vomiting. As for Harris, he ridiculed his brother for his lack of masculinity and sat in that blood-and-brain covered cockpit and calmly ate the sandwiches the victims bought but hadn't had a chance to eat.

Harris was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to death – despite evidence of profoundly mitigating circumstances. Neurologists testified at trial that Harris was born with foetal alcohol syndrome, which caused significant damage to the part of the brain that activated the capacity for empathy with other people. The neurological damage, alone, guaranteed that Harris's life would not go well.

But there was more. Harris was born when his father kicked his mother in the stomach, causing her to deliver before the pregnancy went to term. There was also evidence that Harris was both psychologically and physically abused by family members from a very young age. Clearly, Harris was about as unlucky as he could be with respect to the quality of the parents to whom he was born.



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Of course, both forms of luck can go the other way: a person can be very lucky with respect to both his or her place of birth and the quality of his parents' emotional capacities and genetic characteristics. Bill Gates is an example of someone who got lucky in both respects. Had Bill Gates been born in sub-Saharan Africa or to parents with the native intelligence or parenting skills of Robert Harris's mother and father, there is no significant chance that Gates would have become one of the richest people in the world. Luck with respect to place of birth, his genetic inheritance, and his parents' childrearing skills seems, taken together, to play a nearly decisive role in what kind of person Gates became.

**C. The Stubborn Quality of Beliefs about the Existence of God:** Devout religious belief tends to be extremely stubborn in the following sense: it is extremely difficult to induce a person devoutly committed to one faith to convert to another faith.

To see this, consider a religious person's reactions to two events: (1) she sees flames across the sky clearly forming the words 'Jesus of Nazareth is Lord and Saviour'; (2) same as (1) but the flames form the words 'It is not the case that Jesus of Nazareth is Lord and Saviour'. If the person is a Christian, and like most Christians with whom I have discussed these examples, she will almost certainly regard (1) as confirming her faith, while maintaining scepticism about (2), thinking it is highly likely to be caused by human agency or, depending on how radical her views are, demons.

A devoutly religious Muslim, of course, would very probably have the opposite reaction to these cases. Whereas the devout Christian sees (1) as a divine validation of her faith, the devout Muslim is likely to see it as a hoax of sorts. Likewise, whereas the devout Christian sees (2) as a hoax of sorts, the devout Muslim is likely to see it as a divine validation of her faith.

If it is unlikely that a religious person would change her views in response to the disconfirming flames, it is even

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less likely that she would change them in response to the conversion efforts of other human beings. If I was asked what someone could tell me that would change my mind on whether the death penalty is permissible, I could give a sketch of what would be relevant. If, in contrast, a Muslim were to ask what she could tell me that would lead me to convert to Islam, I would not know how to begin to answer her. Even if she were able to produce compelling evidence that Jesus was not resurrected from the dead, it is unlikely this would change my views if I were a Christian.

There are a number of psychological and logical considerations that help to explain why religious belief is so profoundly resistant to change. First, parents are typically quite passionate in their desire to transmit their moral views to their child; accordingly, rejection of these views or behaviour inconsistent with them typically results in some kind of punitive response that might convey to a child that her parents are disappointed in her. This kind of training would seem quite likely to culminate in the child's resolute adoption of the relevant views that become so stubbornly rooted in the child's belief system in the form of gut-level intuitions that they are nearly impossible to give up.

Second, religious beliefs are distinct from moral views in one important respect: unlike moral views, religious views form the foundation for a world-view that grounds many other beliefs about the world. Here it is important to note that religious views, unlike moral views, contain not only normative views about what one should do from the standpoint of morality, but also descriptive views, among other things, about how the universe came to be. A comprehensive set of views about morality is too narrow a set to form the foundation of a world-view that includes descriptive claims about the world and how things work.

Accordingly, the central tenets of a devout person's religious faith provide the framework within which she structures her deepest convictions about morality; the meaning of life; the ordering of her own priorities in life; and even the existence of the universe itself. To give up these tenets



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would require rethinking the entire system that rests on those framework claims – something people are deeply reluctant, and sometimes even psychologically unable, to do.

Third, accepting a shared system of descriptive and moral beliefs is conducive to being able to function smoothly in a culture – and is sometimes even essential when, as is all too frequently true, intolerance for diverse views is pervasive. Imagine, for example, being an atheist trying to thrive in a community of fundamentalist Muslims or Christians. Or imagine being a Muslim trying to get along in a secular society, such as France, which has enacted legal restrictions on what religious clothing can be worn in certain public settings. Common world-views are a highly effective social lubricant.

**D. The Absence of Free Choice in Belief Formation:** The issue of whether we have direct volitional control over belief is a difficult one from the perspectives of both psychology and the neurosciences, since what is at issue here is whether we have free will with respect to what we believe. To begin, it is difficult to imagine what kinds of observations a neuroscientist or psychologist could make that would tell us that a person's beliefs are, or are not, freely chosen.

Further, the problem of free will is, to an important extent, a philosophical problem involving a concept that requires philosophical explication. Each of the competing conceptions of free will is in tension with ordinary intuitions about the necessary conditions for moral responsibility. But, even with a working conception of free will, it would still be difficult to specify what observations a psychologist or neuroscientist could make that would answer the question whether we have free will.

Accordingly, the argument of this section will appeal to intuitive considerations that arise in connection with possible cases. To begin with some very simple examples, there is nothing I can do to make myself believe that $1 + 1 = 3$. I simply could not choose to believe that no matter what depended on it or what I did. I simply don't have the

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capacity to choose to believe that – though I could pretend and say that I did – and neither do you.

This is true not only of what appear to be necessary truths about arithmetic, but also ordinary factual claims. Today, it is cloudy outside my window in Seattle where I am currently writing this sentence. I simply cannot efficaciously choose to believe that it is really sunny outside and that I am merely hallucinating. I can bring myself to doubt this proposition only in a purely Cartesian sense, which involves no more than apprehending that the proposition could be false.

The point is intuitive enough that we can see it percolating into discussions about Pascal's wager. Pascal argued that it is a very bad bet, from the standpoint of self-interest, to bet against the existence of God: a bet against God risks an infinite cost with a small finite benefit, while a bet on God risks a small finite loss with an infinite benefit. Intriguingly, the argument assumes, as Pascal himself noticed, that grounding the argument in self-interest presupposes, implausibly, that one can freely choose which option to bet on – in this case, what to believe.

Pascal anticipated the objection and responded that one can, at least, put oneself in a position more likely to result in religious belief by doing things with religious people and doing the things that religious people like to do. But this hurts more than helps with respect to the point that one can freely choose belief. In essence, Pascal argues that you should use your free capacity to choose actions that are more likely to result *in some of the other conditioners of belief being correctly oriented.* If you put yourself in a position where you are socialized by religious folk and in a position where you need to believe a particular set of religious claims in order to reap more of the benefits of social cooperation, you are more likely to believe those claims. Pascal, then, is arguing that you should choose your actions so that they result in your own causally efficacious indoctrination of religious claims.

I do not claim that the environmental conditions fully determine belief, but this is not necessary to challenge



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exclusivism on moral grounds. It might be that, as a logical matter, one can freely choose against a belief that all the social conditioners seem to support; of course, even if this were true, there would still be a fairness issue with respect to divine enforcement of an exclusivist doctrine because people have little objective evidence for God's existence. But it is nonetheless interesting to note that Pascal's response evinces profound scepticism with respect to the claim that religious belief can be freely chosen.

When we take into account our ordinary experience, which is really all we have to go on here, It seems pretty clear that beliefs are not subject to direct volitional control: no matter how hard I try, I cannot bring myself to believe that there is one God, Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet, or that there is one God consisting in three divine persons. Nor can I will in myself a desire to believe either of those views. I would not know how even to begin to do that.

As we have seen, there are a variety of conditioners of religious belief. All of these discussed are social in character because it seems fairly clear that there simply is no evidence, one way or another, that should persuade any reasonable person of the truth of some claim about whether God exists or not.

But, it is worth noting that in most cases where evidence is available and operative in determining the content of an agent's belief, whether that agent believes any given proposition will be determined by how the evidence strikes that agent – and this is subject to social influences, such as the ones discussed above. How educated one is, for example, makes a difference with respect to what arguments one finds persuasive. Less educated people know less about what distinguishes sound from unsound reasoning, so they are less able to distinguish good from bad arguments. What one's early socialization looks like will condition one's intuitions against which one evaluates the premises of an argument. My socialization led me to take science as authoritative over any seemingly conflicting claims that are made in some religion's scripture; obviously,

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the proliferation of young-earth creationists suggests a different socialization process intended to produce very different results. In any event, belief formation seems disturbingly beyond our volitional control, no matter what vantage point one starts from.

Notably, these social influences include warnings from religious texts themselves, admonishing believers of the dangers of listening to people with dissenting views. These texts frequently urge believers to disregard disconfirming arguments and evidence. Christianity, for example, not only demands that believers disregard disconfirming evidence, but also warns that there is evidence that 'if it were possible ... shall deceive the very elect' (Matthew 24:24). Indeed, Jesus explicitly warns of false Christs (Mark 13:22). The maintenance of belief in the face of strong disconfirming evidence and without regard to confirming evidence is regarded as a cardinal virtue and perhaps even a touchstone for genuine Christian faith.

And this core religious doctrine is frequently imparted to the child as part of her religious upbringing and encourages inelasticity in two ways: (1) by building it into the very structure of the religious world-view; and (2) by establishing a normative standard by which other people will evaluate the quality of the child's faith. As should be readily evident, these considerations are the doctrinal foundation for an ongoing social pressure to resist disconfirming evidence that begins in childhood and continues into adulthood. Even if religious belief were something that could be chosen to begin with, these texts attempt to discourage believers from even listening to alternative views – suggesting that believers who entertain dissenting views are likely to be endangering their souls.

## Conclusions

It should, by now, be quite clear that whether one holds a particular religious tradition is influenced, to a disturbing extent from a moral point of view, by factors beyond one's



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control. It is difficult to see how it could be morally just to deny salvation to devout people of other faiths if religious belief is determined by such factors; it seems *unfair*, and incompatible with God's moral perfection, that the difference between going to hell and not going to hell is determined by factors that are not within a person's direct volitional control. The implications of a doctrine of religious exclusivism, together with a conception of hell that involves eternal torment, get quickly into deep moral trouble, from the standpoint of ordinary moral intuitions.

One might reply (and this is a common response among Christians) that there is no fairness problem here because every person deserves divine punishment. On this reasoning, salvation is a matter of divine grace that no human being can claim to have earned. Thus, no issues of fairness arise in connection with a dispensation of an undeserved good through God's infinite grace.

The problem with this response is that there are clearly moral limits on the dispensation of grace. Grace is properly extended only for considerations that are morally relevant. It is morally permissible for a judge to reduce punishment for someone because she is deeply remorseful, but morally impermissible to do so because she has red hair. If we are not accountable for what we believe because belief is beyond our control, then it would be morally impermissible to spare devout ethical believers of Christianity from eternal punishment while not sparing equally devout and equally ethical believers of other faiths. Given the social determinants of belief, together with the facts about salvific luck, it would be morally arbitrary for God to punish non-belief of the favoured tradition with eternal torment.

*Kenneth Himma is an American philosopher, author, lawyer, academic and lecturer.* *This study was supported by The Tomsk State University Academic D. I. Mendeleev Fund Program in 2015.* *himma@uw.edu*

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## Notes

[1] See David Briggs, 'The No. 1 Reason Teens Keep the Faith as Young Adults', *Huffington Post*, 29 October 2014, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-briggs/the-no-1-reason-teens-kee_b_6067838.html>.

[2] See, e.g., Dan Morain, 'From Birth to Death Row, Violence Surrounded Harris History', *Los Angeles Times*, 21 April 1992, <http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/doane/RobertAltonHarris.htm>, p. 18.



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