

WHY WE'RE CATHOLIC



OUR REASONS FOR FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE

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Why We Believe in Truth

WHEN SOMEONE WALKS toward you with clenched fists, it's normal to become nervous. When I saw a student approach me in this way at a Texas university, I feared for the worst. Fortunately, he just wanted to beat me up with words.

When my presentation on the subject "Why Be Catholic?" was finished, he came up to me and said, "You are one of the most arrogant people I've ever met. You think you're right and everybody else is wrong." I was surprised by how angry this man was, and as I began to respond to him several students came over to see what was happening.

"You're saying it's arrogant for me to think I'm right about a religious truth and everyone who disagrees with me is wrong?" I replied.

"Yeah!"

"Okay," I continued, "I think a few people here would probably disagree with you about me being arrogant. Are you right and those people who disagree with you are wrong?"

The young man looked confused for a few seconds before asking, "What are you getting at?"

By now the few students watching had turned into a crowd of dozens. I explained what I meant.

“You’re right. It is bad to be *arrogant*, but it’s not bad to be *accurate*. If we possess the truth about something, then those who disagree with that truth will be wrong. That doesn’t make us better than them, it just means we have to be willing to listen to one another so that we can avoid error and find the truth.”

“But there is no absolute truth!” he fired back. “Everybody decides what’s true for themselves.”

The nineteenth-century French novelist Gustave Flaubert once said, “There is no truth. There is only perception.” Is this statement true, or is it just Flaubert’s perception?

WHAT IS TRUTH?

Here’s the problem with saying “there is no absolute truth”: this statement is an absolute truth. It claims, “It is true in all times and all places that no statement is true in all times and all places.” But that is as contradictory as saying, “I can’t speak a word of English.” It makes no sense to claim it is *true* that there are no *truths*.

But what is truth? When we say a statement is true, we mean it “corresponds to reality.” It describes the way the world really is. Any statement that describes the world contains either a *subjective* truth or an *objective* truth.²

A truth is subjective if it is only true for the person who is making the statement. If I say, “Mint chocolate chip ice cream tastes great,” I am telling a subjective truth. When people disagree about such truths they usually say, “That’s true for you, but not for me.” It may be true for *Trent Horn* that ice cream tastes great, but a person who is allergic to ice cream may say that’s not true for *him*. This isn’t contradictory because sub-

jective truths describe people's *feelings toward the world* rather than *facts about the world*.

GETTING OUR TERMS RIGHT

- ◆ **Subjective truth:** Statements that describe opinions and are only true for the person who makes the statement.
 - ◆ **Objective truth:** Statements that describe reality and are true for all people.
-

A truth is *objective*, however, when it does not merely describe how a person feels, but describes a fact about reality that is true for everyone. Whether you love or hate ice cream, for example, it is *objectively* true that ice cream begins to melt when left out at room temperature (provided the room isn't an igloo). Objective truths cannot be true only for some people. They are true or false for everyone because they describe reality, and reality is something everyone has to accept, like it or not.

So what does this have to do with religion or with being Catholic?

ICE-CREAM TRUTH OR MEDICINE TRUTH?

Some people think choosing a religion or a church to attend is like choosing a new pair of shoes or a flavor of ice cream. If it tastes good or feels great, it doesn't matter which one you pick. They think religious truths are *subjective*, and so they aren't true for everyone. This means if something feels right to you, it's as good as any other set of beliefs.

That's why it can seem arrogant if someone says his religion is right and everyone should belong to it. That would be like saying everyone should only wear sandals or eat mint

chocolate chip ice cream (though I admit it is a delicious afternoon treat). In both cases we would say, "That may be true for you, but it's not true for me."

But religious truths describe basic, important features of reality, which makes them *objective* rather than *subjective*. Claims about religion are more like "medicine truth" than "ice-cream truth."

Imagine if we chose medicine like we chose ice cream. We might say, "Mmmm, this pill tastes like strawberries . . . I'll have three." You could get hurt or killed by doing that. You might also stay sick or get worse because you didn't take the right medicine. In this case, what matters is not the subjective truth of how the medicine tastes, but the objective truth of what it will do to your body.

The same is true when it comes to religion. Even if you don't believe in religion at all, that belief should be grounded in facts about reality and not just feelings toward religion. The bottom line is that we should choose a church or faith not because of how it makes us feel, but because it is objectively true and objectively good for us.

RELIGION, RAJAHS, AND ELEPHANTS

Have you ever heard the story about the three blind men and an elephant? The first blind man touched the elephant's tail and said it was a rope. The second man touched its large ears and said it was a fan. The third blind man touched the animal's massive side and said it was a wall.

Then, a wise king called a rajah told the three men, "An elephant is a large animal. You each have a part of the truth, but all the parts must be put together in order to find the whole truth. So it is with your religions. Each has part of the truth, but you must put them together in order to find the whole truth."

But combining contradictory and false religions no more produces a true religion than combining rope, fans, and a wall produces a true description of an elephant.

This parable also assumes that someone does have all of the truth—the rajah. How do skeptics who deny there is one true religion know whether they are like the rajah and not like one of the blind men? Is it possible some religions contain more truth than others, and God has given one religion the fullness of truth?

But isn't it arrogant for someone like me to say I am a part of the "right religion" and everyone else is wrong? If I had been born in India, wouldn't I be writing a book called *Why We're Hindu* instead of *Why We're Catholic*? Maybe, but if I had been born in ancient China I might have written a book called *Why We Believe the Earth Is Flat*. Being born in a time or place that is far from the truth doesn't disprove the existence of the truth.

When it comes to believing in a religion or any other basic truth about reality (like the shape of the earth), we all think that we're right and that those who disagree with us are wrong. Even people who ignore religion think they're *right* that religion should be ignored. They also think that those people who tell them they should convert are *wrong*. This isn't a sign of arrogance; it's a sign of a genuine desire to find the truth.

A person, or even lots of people, can be kind and loving and at the same time be mistaken about religion. The loving thing to do is not leave someone in ignorance, but to help him find the truth. In fact, some people have to be right when it comes to religious truths, because in many cases there are no other options. For example, either religious people are right and God exists or atheists are right and God does not

exist. There is no third option, and both can't be right because that would lead to the contradiction of God existing and not existing at the same time.

As a Catholic I don't claim that every other religion is 100 percent wrong. Starting with the most basic questions about the world (which means they deal with objective truths), I try to see which religion best answers my questions: Is there a God? What can we know about God from reason? Did God ever reveal himself to man? Which religion has the best historical claim to being the recipient of God's revelation? Does that religion still exist today?

More than one religion is capable of correctly answering some of these questions. For example, if there is only one God then Christians, Jews, and Muslims would all be correct. If God became man, however, then only one of these religions would be correct. As we answer these questions, you'll see that while many belief systems truthfully answer some of them, only one religion consistently and correctly answers all of them. If we care about truth, then shouldn't we find out which religion has these answers?

PROPOSING RATHER THAN IMPOSING TRUTH

In a video he posted online, atheist and magician Penn Jillette described how a Christian approached him after one of his shows and gave him a Bible. Instead of being offended, Penn said the Christian was "a good man." If Christians actually believed their faith was true, he continued, then they should always share it with other people. Jillette said, "How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much would you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?"³

WHY WE BELIEVE: TRUTH

- ✧ It is contradictory to say it is true that there is no truth.
- ✧ Objective truth describes reality and so it is true or false for everyone.
- ✧ Since religion describes reality, its central claims are objective and can be investigated.

Endnotes

Introduction: Why We Believe . . . Anything

¹ Thessalonians 5:21.

Chapter 1: Why We Believe in Truth

² Only a few statements are *absolutely* true, or true in all times and all places. These include statements about logical contradictions like “there are no square circles” or “there are no married bachelors.”

³ “Penn Jillette gets the gift of a Bible.” Available online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=6md638smQd8

Chapter 2: Why We Believe in Science

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1:64.

⁵ P. B. Medawar, *Advice to a Young Scientist* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 31.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Meeting of the Holy Father Benedict XVI with the Clergy of the Dioceses of Belluno-Feltre and Treviso, July 24, 2007, www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2007/july/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070724_clero-cadore_en.html.

⁷ Sheila Rabin, “Nicolaus Copernicus,” in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2010 ed., plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/copernicus/.

⁸ This is found in Niccolini’s February 13 and April 16 letters in 1633 to the king of Tuscany.

⁹ Pew Research Forum, “Scientists and Belief,” November 5, 2009, www.pewforum.org/2009/11/05/scientists-and-belief/.

¹⁰ J. L. Heilbron, *The Sun in the Church: Cathedrals as Solar Observatories* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 3.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) 1814. The *Catechism* is a summary of what Catholics believe.

¹² See also CCC 142–165 for a more comprehensive description of faith from a Catholic perspective.

¹³ I owe this example to philosopher Timothy McGrew.