

*On Reasons and Believing the Christian Message Today*

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Presented to Visiting International Scholars at the University of Illinois (who were given copies for discussion)

In this talk I investigate whether it's rational or reasonable to believe the Christian message. Do we need evidence to believe? If not, why not? But if so, what counts as evidence? Who decides? On what basis?

I want to address the subject of whether bright, thoughtful people—such as people who teach and study in the universities of the world—people who do not yet believe the Christian message—people such as these, do they have good reason to believe? Hopefully this talk will help Christians better understand these issues as well. For thoughtful Christians, of course, the issue is should they believe what they have believed?

Some of you here who are still trying to figure out if you believe or not, have been involved in Bible studies or Bible discussions for some time already. You wonder why you should believe what you've been learning. You heard about the loving and holy creator God of the Bible and his kingdom over all creation, and about human beings that God created in his image and likeness for fellowship with himself and with one another.

But then you heard about our human sinfulness and rebellion against this God which lead not only to separation from him and therefore spiritual death [a particularly important kind of death] but also which lead to devastating effects on our relationships with one another and with God's good creation.

You've heard too about God continuing to work in his creation to bring wayward human beings into his kingdom or kingship, back under his loving rule so that one day he will redeem and renew all of his creation. In particular, you heard about God sending his only Son Jesus whom, as it turns out, is unique in his being and thus uniquely qualified to save sinful and rebellious human beings—you and me included. For we learn that Jesus is both fully God and fully human—yet without the sin and rebellion that plagues all of created humanity. [Hebrews 4.15] Jesus, we learn, always did what

pleases his Father who sent him. [John 8.29] And what's more, to see Jesus is to see God the Father. [John 14.9]

You also heard the Good Friday message, the news how Jesus Christ died on a cross, taking on himself the penalty for the sin and rebellion of the world; how Jesus, the righteous Son of God, was made to be sin that we, who are sinful and rebellious, might in him become the righteousness of God. [See 2 Corinthians 5.21]

And you heard the Easter message, the good news that death couldn't keep Jesus in the tomb but that Jesus was raised from the dead and that God the Father "exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue [whether it be Hebrew, Chinese, Japanese, English, etc.] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father." [See Philippians 2.6-11]

Perhaps you also heard about God's purpose and goal in Jesus Christ to remake human beings into his image and likeness once again [see e.g. Ephesians 4.22-24; Colossians 3.10; Romans 8.29; and 2 Corinthians 5.17] so that we will love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and love other human beings [our neighbors] as we love ourselves, and to once again care over God's creation as his representatives on earth and not as exploiters of it. As God rescues us in Christ, so he sends us back into his world that we should live for him. [See e.g. 2 Corinthians 5.15; cf. John 17.15-19]

And finally, you've heard Jesus's words, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." [Mark 1.14]

What's more you've met many graduate students and faculty members. Some of these believe the Christian message and try to live as followers of Jesus Christ. You may have heard them say how they became Christians, maybe what they were like before, and how God has begun to change their lives in wonderful ways. Of course the Christian message isn't necessarily true because their lives are changed, but these Christians make the claim that it is God at work in their lives changing them.

You may have noticed that some very bright and otherwise sensible men and women take their faith in Christ seriously, not just in their personal lives but in how they think about the subject matter of their studies. You may have encountered thoughtful Christians and you wonder how it is that they came to believe.

Well, you've learned much about the Christian message and you now wonder whether it's all true. You wonder whether it's rational or reasonable to believe. You're not alone in raising those very questions.

Perhaps you noticed in the Gospel accounts how people of all kinds and temperaments and personalities encountered Jesus, how they saw his "miraculous signs" and heard his words, and how they variously responded.

Some of these very people began following Jesus and over the course of time came to 'repent and believe' that Jesus was the One whom God had sent into the world as the Christ, the anointed King, the One who would save the world. Although they believed, they later came to better understand the One in whom they had put their trust or faith, and their belief in him deepened and matured.

What's interesting in the gospel of John is that some people who came to believe did so rather easily, while others came to believe only with great difficulty. Nathanael is an example of the first kind of person. [See John 1.44-51] On his first encounter with Jesus he came to believe that Jesus was the Son of God, the King of Israel. But Jesus seemed to indicate that he believed too easily! Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see great things than that." [John 1.50]

At the other end of the spectrum of belief we have Thomas. After the crucified Jesus had been raised from the dead, and after hearing from others that the resurrected Jesus had appeared to them, the disciple Thomas said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side [where the spear was thrust in], I will not believe it." [John 20.25] When Jesus later appeared to Thomas himself, he said to him "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." [John 20.29] I

see here a mild rebuke to Thomas that he should have believed a little sooner. Repentance and belief seem to come to people in different ways and at different rates.

Other people, however—others who saw many of the same miraculous signs and who heard many of the same words of Jesus—did not believe. Some followed for a while but when Jesus's message became too hard for them to bear, we are told "many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." [John 6.66] They found his message appealing up to a point, but only up to a point. And if you look at the whole of that passage in John 6, you will see that at some point in their conversation with Jesus they decided to fall back and rely on their own way of understanding God and his purposes in the world. They then stopped following Jesus.

Still others—in particular the religious leaders of the day—sought to arrest Jesus and have him put to death on the false charges that Jesus was a king in direct challenge to the kingship of Caesar, the Roman emperor. But we learn that the religious leaders of the day, driven along by envy, fear and [therefore??] unbelief, found Jesus and his message both unacceptable and dangerous [see e.g. John 11.45-53].

Unacceptable because Jesus didn't fit their pre-conceived ideas of who and what the Christ would be and do. Jesus didn't fit their conception of reality. Jesus was not the Christ, the Messiah they wanted. And Jesus was dangerous because many of the Jewish leaders had come to benefit from the uneasy relationship they had with their Roman occupiers, and they didn't want to do anything that would cause the Romans to decide to become even more harsh to the Jewish nation. And so the Jewish rulers had Jesus killed.

Now back to you and me. Why should we 'repent and believe' the good news? The 'good news' includes all that I've rehearsed above: the good news "that God was reconciling the whole world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them." [2 Corinthians 5.18-19] That's the good news we are called to believe. The word 'repent' comes from the Greek word that means 'to change one's mind'. Jesus called his fellow Jews to change their minds—about God and his purposes in the world, about

their own relationship with him, and about Jesus and the demands of the kingdom of God on them. He called them to believe him—put their trust or faith in him as the One they had been waiting for all along.

But that summons to repentance and faith was not just for the people of Jesus's own race, the Hebrew people. And neither was it just for that time. We learn that the summons to repent and believe is for all humanity. In Acts 17.29-31 the apostle Paul says,

Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.

The apostle Paul was an extremely devoted Jew. According to his own admission he was a Hebrew of Hebrews, very careful to keep the Jewish law, and was so zealous that he believed it was God's will to persecute the church, the followers of Jesus Christ. [See [Philippians 3.4-11](#)] But Paul had an encounter with Jesus that turned his world upside down. He came to believe that he was going in the wrong direction with his life. And he came to believe that true life came only in Jesus Christ. This was no small change in his Jewish worldview! Paul had to rethink his entire world on many levels. The first was that he now realized that in Jesus Christ he came to see who God was all along. This point is crucial for our thinking here tonight.

Paul thought he knew who God was. God was Yahweh, the creator God who alone was God; God was the God as revealed in the Old Testament, which was Paul's Bible. But what Paul came to see was that he now had to rethink his understanding of God through his new understanding of Jesus Christ. When Paul encountered Jesus he came to realize that Jesus was all along the One whom God sent into the world as the Savior of the world and as the King and Lord of all reality. [See [e.g. Colossians 1](#)] So when Jesus told his disciples, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" [John 14.9] he

was saying that we are to give content to the concept "God" by seeing and knowing Jesus.

The apostle Paul had preconceived notions about what God must be like. But he now had made room for the reality that God had come in the person of Jesus Christ to redeem the world. What he discovered to his shock and, later to his delight and joy, was that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. The staunchly strict monotheist Paul had a conversion experience where his world was now a different place. He repented and believed the good news. And he came to believe that the good news of the Jewish Messiah was good news for all the nations [= the Gentiles/non-Israelites] as well. That was a dramatic change for Paul and sent him off in an entirely new direction in ministry. Instead of destroying the church, he believed he was called by God to start worshipping communities and to build up the church, the people of God, and further to work for the faith of the Gentiles whom God also included as his people! The story of the apostle Paul in the book of Acts is a marvelous story of a man who was changed by God and who then helped change the world.

But I don't think any of us here tonight are Jews who share the Jewish worldview that Paul held. I think all of us here are non-Israelites. Let's face it; we're all Gentiles! For those of you who don't quite yet believe there is a being called 'God', your worldview is very different from Paul's worldview—both before he became a follower of Jesus and afterwards. And the issue for you is why should you repent [have a change of mind] and believe?

I think it's now time we did some religious epistemology. 'Epistemology' is just a fun word that has to do with knowledge, what is or what counts as knowledge, or what turns mere true belief into knowledge, and such related issues. One primary set of issues in religious epistemology has to do with whether we have justification or warrant to believe religious beliefs, and if so, to what extent. One reason why I spent so much time unpacking the Christian message the way I did on the first few pages of this paper is this. If a non-theist asks me why should she believe that God exists, I must first ask her which 'god' she is talking about. There are very many gods I don't believe exist.

Typically in the philosophy of religion the debate turns on whether the god-of-the-philosophers exists. This god-of-the-philosophers is typically a being that is only faintly recognizable as the biblical God. When the seventeenth century French philosopher Blaise Pascal 'repented and believed the good news', he made a very startling discovery. He wrote the following that summed up his conversion: "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars, God of Jesus Christ, my God and your God. Your God shall be my God." It was not a human conception of god brought forth from the minds of the philosophers that is at issue, but rather a particular God, with a particular character, with particular purposes, doing particular things in human history, etc. whom Pascal had come to believe, and belief in whose existence is at issue before us this evening.

Religious epistemology, as I said, has to do with the justification of religious belief. It's reported that twentieth-century British philosopher Bertrand Russell, noted for his outspoken atheism, was once asked the 'what if' question: What if you die and find that there is a God, and he asks why you didn't believe, what will you tell him? Russell supposedly said, That's simple, not enough evidence! It seems to be about evidence doesn't it.

Typically the argument that belief in God is not reasonable or rational goes as follows:

- (1) Person S is rational in believing the proposition "God exists" only if, and to the extent that, S's belief is based upon strong evidence or good argument.
- (2) There is neither strong evidence nor good argument that God exists.

Therefore (by modus tollens),

- (3) It is not the case that S is rational in believing the proposition "God exists".

This is known as the evidentialist challenge. This argument is deductively valid: if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true as well. As I used to tell my logic students here at the U of I, we must next look at the premises of the argument to see if we should believe them.

Theists who see the evidentialist challenge as legitimate, accept the challenge. That is, they accept Premise (1) but deny the truth of Premise (2), and in so doing, deny the truth of the conclusion. What these theists do then is offer evidence that they think is strong enough to support belief in the existence of God. Such arguments might be the ontological argument, or the teleological argument, or the design argument, or whatever, for the existence of God. But even if such arguments are successful, they do not show that the particular God of the Bible exists. And remember, it is this God we are interested in asking whether it is reasonable or rational to believe in.

But why should we accept Premise (1)? Premise (1) has a long and cherished tradition. The modern epistemological tradition stemming from Descartes [early seventeenth century] identifies epistemic justification with having a reason, perhaps even a conclusive reason for thinking that a belief is true. For those who are not philosophers, by 'epistemic justification' all we mean is the justification of a belief or something we say we know. Just as there is moral justification that seeks to justify why some action or other is morally permitted, there is also epistemic justification.

William Clifford [nineteenth century English philosopher and mathematician] so believed in Premise (1) that he said the following in a little essay entitled "The Ethics of Belief": "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." In the same essay he went so far as to say that if one doesn't have enough time to believe upon sufficient evidence, then one doesn't have enough time to believe!

Let's work with premise (1) a bit. Premise (1) as you might guess is not meant to apply just to religious beliefs; it is meant to apply to all beliefs. Well, do you believe Premise (1) is true? According to Premise (1), you should believe Premise (1) only if, and to the extent that, your belief in Premise (1) is based upon strong evidence or good argument.

What's interesting about William Clifford's belief in Premise (1) is that it's because he thinks Premise (1) is a duty we have as rational thinkers in the real world. Why?

Because beliefs have consequences. Philosopher William James thus finds Clifford's affirmation of Premise (1) to be one of passion and not of reason!

What's wrong with Premise (1)? The way Premise (1) is supposed to work is that you say you have a belief, B, which you assert, is true. According to Premise (1), B is the conclusion of your argument that requires there to be premises that lead to B as the conclusion.

I think there are at least these several problems with Premise (1). First, there are those who do not believe in the existence of the biblical God yet who require the theist to prove to them that God exists, or they can't believe—and, presumably, the theist shouldn't believe either. Here the idea is that the theist must offer premises to the conclusion that God exists. If they find the argument good, then, they say, they will believe. Otherwise they will not believe. Typically the standard is a very high standard if not deductive validity with premises they think are true. The theist offers evidence and the atheist knocks it down. The theist says, "Jesus's body wasn't in the tomb"; the atheist says, "It was stolen." The theist says "But lots people saw the resurrected Jesus"; the atheist says, "They were hallucinating"; and on and on it goes.

The problem here is that same requirement the atheist insists on for the theist must apply to all their own beliefs, otherwise it is mere prejudice to say it must apply only to theists's beliefs in God. What I've sometimes done in class with a student who maintains the high requirement is to have him give me an argument that he exists. This is how it always goes. Student: "Here I am sitting right in front of you!"; Me: "I could be hallucinating"; Student: "Well, here's my birth certificate"; Me: "It could be a forgery". You get the idea. If that high of a standard of proof is fair game for religious belief, then perhaps it is so for all of one's beliefs, especially the really important beliefs, such as that other people have minds, or that other people have dignity and should be respected. And if Premise (1) is correct, we soon find that we are not rational with very many of our beliefs which we think we are perfectly rational in holding.

A second problem with Premise (1) is that a vast number of our beliefs are not formed the way Premise (1) seems to say they are. Take the following belief and call it M (for 'me'): "You see me standing in front of you." I hope you believe M is true! My guess is that not one of you holds M on the basis that Premise (1) says you must in order for you to be rational in holding it. Do you think you are rational in believing M? I think you are. What this illustrates is that there are many beliefs that you hold without strong evidence or good argument—and you are rational in holding those beliefs.

Another example: Do you believe that the world has existed for more than five minutes? If you answer yes, then let's hear your argument if you are to be rational in believing it! And it won't do to rely upon the fact that I too just happen to believe this along with you. After all, your argument is aimed at the person who thinks the universe sprang into being less than five minutes ago. This problem with Premise (1) is, again, that we are rational in holding a whole bunch of very useful and important beliefs which Premise (1) says we are not rational in holding.

A third problem with Premise (1) is what will count as evidence or good reason? Most people these days agree that one's theory or paradigm picks out say, x, as a fact whereas y is not a fact. Facts do not come to us uninterpreted; they are not objective in that sense. One of the ways this problem plays itself out with respect to religious beliefs has to do with miracles. The atheist claims that miracles are not possible. The theist says, "Why do you believe that?" The atheist offers arguments having to do with the laws of nature, or that science has never established a miracle, or what we don't understand we cannot call it a miracle, but rather must seek a naturalistic explanation. If you've ever watched TV's The X-Files and the interplay between FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, then you've seen this played out between them time and again. Mulder sees evidence of extra-terrestrial life, and Scully just doesn't draw that conclusion; she trusts that there is some other explanation. On and on it goes through many of the episodes of the series.

But one way or another the issue with miracles is that the atheistic worldview cannot admit a miracle by definition. You can never start with premises, one of which

is that God does not exist and have as your conclusion that a miracle of God took place. Perhaps you've all seen the cartoon of two scientists standing before a large chalk board filled with equations except for a large gap in the argument. In that gap is written, 'God did it'. The other scientist is not impressed with that reasoning.

A last problem with Premise (1) I'll mention is one that Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga at the University of Notre Dame offers. It's more technical so I've tried to undermine your confidence in Premise (1) in other ways. Instead of accepting the evidentialist challenge, what Plantinga does is reject Premise (1). And he does so with an argument that it is false. The details are complicated and would take us into too much detail. To put his overall argument simply, Plantinga argues that Premise (1) depends upon epistemological theories which are false! Having argued that Premise (1) is false, Al Plantinga says that the evidentialist argument does not give us good reason to believe the conclusion that it is not the case that S is rational in believing the proposition "God exists".

What Plantinga and others [e.g. William Alston and Nicholas Wolstersdorff] do in their religious epistemology is to argue that one does not need evidence that God exists for the belief that he does to be rational. According to them, when a person is in the right environment or under the right circumstances, and one's belief-forming capacities are functioning properly for forming such a belief, and one does in fact form the belief, say, that God loves her, then she need not believe it based on strong evidence or good argument. Plantinga argues that one's belief in God is a properly basic belief which does not need an argument to be rationally held.

I mention Plantinga because he is a first-rate, world-class philosopher who believes in the biblical God and who is a follower of Jesus Christ. I have recently purchased but have not yet begun to read his latest in his series of Oxford U. Press books on epistemology. It's entitled, Warranted Christian Belief [2000]. At a mere 499 pages with small print, I heartily recommend it to you.

At this point I want us to look deeper into the role of evidence, what counts as evidence, and competing worldviews. I will also mention something about burdens of proof, and how and why to believe.

C. Stephen Evans is a Christian philosopher who has made the following observation. It's an extended quotation but I think it is well-stated and will be very helpful to quote it at length.

People who think [that religious belief is presumed to be guilty until proven innocent] imagine the religious situation to be something like the following: Suppose you are having an argument with someone over how many species of animals there are. Both of you agree that there are many species—cats, dogs, cows and so on. You, however, believe in one species of monsters residing in the Loch Ness. Your opponent claims that the burden of proof is on you if you want to believe in such monsters. Without strong positive evidence you would do better to refrain from believing in the Loch Ness monster.

Perhaps in this situation the burden of proof would be on you to come up with evidence for your belief. Perhaps if that evidence is less than conclusive it would be wiser to suspend or withhold judgment. After all, we don't usually believe in monsters if we have no evidence of their reality. But believe in God is not at all comparable to belief in such a monster.

One important difference is that the Loch Ness monster is merely "one more thing." The two people who disagree about the monster agree about all the other animals. God, however, is not merely "one more thing." The person who believes in God and the person who does not believe in God do not merely disagree about God. They disagree about the very character of the universe [emphasis his]. The believer is convinced that each and every thing exists because of God and God's creative activity. The unbeliever is convinced that natural objects exist "on their own," without any ultimate reason or purpose for being. In this situation there are no neutral "safe" facts all parties are agreed on, with one party believing some

additional "risky facts." Rather, each side puts forward a certain set of facts and denies its opponents' alleged facts. There is risk on both sides.

A second important difference between the case of God and the case of the Loch Ness monster is that... religious beliefs imply something fundamental about how life should be lived. Insofar as religious beliefs embody themselves in actions, suspending judgment is not possible. Even if it were possible to suspend judgment intellectually, it would by no means enable a person to avoid risk. It is clear that the faith of the religious believer and the faith of the atheist are equally risky. It is hard to see why any special burden of proof falls on the religious believer. [From Why Believe? Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God (Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 21-22]

I appreciate what Stephen Evans says in this quote and find it very helpful for our purposes here. What's at issue between those who believe in God and those who do not believe in God is the issue of trying to decide which view of reality, which worldview is correct. Worldviews are basic presuppositions through which and by which we view the world; they are orientations of the heart. They are presuppositions about the nature of ultimate reality, of human beings, of morality, etc. There is no neutral place to stand in the universe where we can hold 'reality' in our left hand and hold, in turn, each of the various worldview candidates in the right hand to see which worldview is the correct one. If there were such a neutral place to stand, that, whatever it is we are holding in our left hand, is not 'reality' but just one more view of reality. What we are left with at the end of the day is the totality of human experience and us human beings trying to make sense of those experiences including ourselves as well. No one can prove that a worldview is true. No one can prove presuppositions; they are by nature something we come to believe but do not lend themselves to strict proof. The person who accepts Premise (1) of the evidentialist challenge is hard pressed to prove whatever worldview she holds that will meet the demands that Premise (1) seems to require.

How then can we rationally support the Christian message or worldview?

Contemporary British philosopher Basil Mitchell has written a wonderful and brief book entitled, The Justification of Religious Belief [Oxford U. Press, 1981]. He argues that when we are trying to support a worldview, we do so by means of a cumulative case argument. We do not ignore evidence. Rather we seek to gather it and see what makes better sense of it than any alternative. The difference a cumulative case argument makes is that we are not trying to provide a proof that the Christian message is true. Instead, we are trying to see if it seems to make the best sense of a variety of evidence we have before us that might be clues to what reality is like.

What Mitchell does is show that this kind of reasoning-to-the-best-explanation is rational, that it meets the needs of the kinds of issues that are involved in assessing competing worldviews, and which is used in other realms of knowledge as well. He looks at literary critical theory and how debate goes on there. He looks at how historians with rival conceptions of what has happened in history use cumulative case arguments to make their own case. He shows how in the natural sciences where there are competing or incommensurable frames of reference that scientists find themselves believing a brand new paradigm. And they find themselves believing a new paradigm not because it was proved to be true, but because they began to see things in a new light—all things taken together, and thus cumulative.

So it is with an argument for the Christian message. Let me quote Mitchell and, again, at length:

Prima facie [= 'on the face of it'] the elements of the theistic scheme [he means the Christian message] do tend to reinforce one another in a way that is recognizable both by theists and by their opponents. Thus, although the cosmological and teleological arguments do not... prove that there must be a transcendent creator of the world, they do make explicit one way (arguably the best way) in which the existence and nature of the universe can be explained, if indeed they can be explained at all. The atheist is entitled, as we saw, to deny that the universe requires explanation, and so long as the matter is left there, the theist's far-ranging claims can rest on nothing more than the abstract

consideration that explanation is to be sought wherever possible. But when there is brought into the reckoning the claim of some men to be aware of the presence of God, and of others to have witnessed the action of God in the world or to have been addressed by him, the case is altered. These claims cannot simply be dismissed without reason given. It is true that the sense of the presence of God (for example) involves an element of interpretation and can consistently be interpreted otherwise by the atheist. Nevertheless it can reasonably be demanded of any interpretation that it deal adequately with the phenomenon in its fullest and most impressive forms, in which it has been so strong and so pervasive of a man's entire life that he himself, at least, could scarcely doubt the reality of his encounter with God. How others should judge it might properly depend on its effects on the individual's life. If, as tends to happen, it informs a character of unusual charity and strength, or effects a transformation into such a character, it becomes correspondingly hard even for the uncommitted to withhold the name of saint. The word can be used, as it were in inverted commas, in such a way as to admit the presence of certain rare qualities while denying the man's own ascription of them to the grace of God. But to use it in this way, notwithstanding the individual's own testimony, requires some justification, which would have to be in terms of some non-theistic worldview, for which conspicuous sanctity must inevitably pose a problem, associated as it is, on such a view, with manifest error... To the extent that we are satisfied by such tests as these [e.g. the person's general truthfulness, observed changes in the person's life which he says is from God, etc.] we are the more inclined to trust his testimony; but his testimony makes its own independent contribution to our final judgment.

Again, the theist maintains, if there were a God who had created the universe in which there could develop rational beings capable of responding to him and to one another with love and understanding, it is to be anticipated that he would in some way communicate with them. The existence, then, of what purport to be such 'revelations' is something which tends to support the belief in a God who has

in these ways revealed himself; although here too the support would be weakened if the historical and other evidence appealed to were to be seriously impugned, or if the concept of revelation were to run into intractable philosophical difficulties. That there is a variety of claims to be the revealed truth about God does not in itself show that none of the claims can be justified. We need to ask of each of them what sort of sense they make of human experience and of one another. It is also relevant to ask of each of them whether some other interpretation, more satisfactory than is provided in its own terms, is available to explain its occurrence, its character and its effects. [Mitchell, pp. 40-43]

What Mitchell is doing in the quotation above is showing how to think about the various pieces of evidence that theists have for why they think the Christian message is true. It's being sensitive that no one piece of evidence is conclusive. It's being sensitive that people with an opposing worldview might see things differently, but how a theist might help her opponent 'seeing things' from her perspective. It's also being sensitive to a whole range of data or evidence in the human experience.

The things that theists typically point to are not only the fact and orderliness of the universe, and the claims of some men and women that their lives have been changed by God. Other things that Christians insist are relevant to their belief include the apparent moral order or sense of 'ought' that we feel; the mystery of persons including how consciousness [whatever that turns out to be] arose in us and why we hunger for greater meaning and purpose in life and how such purpose gives guidance to our lives; the purported miracles both mentioned in the Bible but also as witnessed by some people to have incurred in their lives or in the lives of their loved ones; the origin and character of the Christian church [with all it's obvious faults!]; and Jesus himself, his life, teachings, and resurrection from the dead. If Jesus is indeed raised from the dead—and I think a good cumulative case can be made that he did—then this too is something worth investigating with an open mind and an open heart.

I say with an open mind because unless we are willing to relinquish the impossible and hypocritical demand for a proof for the truth of a worldview before you believe,

you will never reach outside the box of your own worldview to see the possibility that the Christian faith may just be the way the world is.

I also say you must investigate with an open heart because of something Jesus once said to the Jews who initially believed but who would later stop following. "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." [John 8.31-32] There is a moral dimension to 'knowing' in the Bible. To those who seek after the truth, and who begin to put into practice Jesus's teachings, they often find themselves having a change of mind [repenting] and believing the good news.

I'll close by mentioning Alvin Plantinga's position again. What I appreciate about his position—I hope to one day work through his latest book—is that he reasons that if the Christian message is true, then God has created human beings in his image and likeness in such a way that we are capable of knowing him by giving us belief-forming capacities, placing us in a good world where we can come to know him and follow him as he intended all along, and where millions upon millions of people of all nationalities and levels of income and intelligence have formed the belief that the biblical God not only exists, but has come in the person of Jesus Christ to be the Savior and Lord of the world.

Remember Nathanael whom I mentioned earlier. In the first chapter of John's gospel we read,

Finding Philip, he [Jesus] said to him, 'Follow me.'...

Philip found Nathanael and told him, 'We have found the One Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph'.

'Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?' Nathanael asked.

'Come and see,' said Philip." [John 1.43-46]

I think the best reason for believing the Christian message is indeed Jesus Christ himself. If you 'come and see', and you find yourself 'repenting and believing', though

some people might think you are foolish indeed, you are perfectly reasonable to believe. And you join what I think is a good company of fellow believers.