

WHY AND WHAT

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION
TO CHRISTIANITY

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canonpress
Moscow, Idaho 

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Douglas M. Jones III, *Why and What: A Brief Introduction to Christianity*
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Second Edition.

Published by Canon Press, P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, ID 83843
800.488.2034 | www.canonpress.com

Cover design by David Dalbey.
Printed in the United States of America.
Scripture taken from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jones, Douglas, 1963-

Why and what : a brief introduction to Christianity / Douglas Jones. --
2nd ed.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59128-023-1 (booklet)

ISBN-10: 1-59128-023-0 (booklet)

1. Christianity. I. Title.

BR121.3.J66 2007

230--dc22

2007018011

07 08 09 10 11 12 13

9 8 7 6 5 4 3

For the brothers,
Russell, Curtiss, Joseph, and John
and for Dana Collins

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Imagine that you are mistaken about everything you hold dear. Suppose you wake up one morning and clearly realize that your long-held, day-to-day views of nature, social values, and self are obviously mistaken. Common things that you have seen for years take on a whole new light. The world hasn't changed, but different things stand out in odd ways. Things you once adored are now utterly disgusting. Things you once hated now command your deepest loyalty. You can now see through your motives and rationalizations in a way hidden before. How could you have been so naive?

Could one really be so radically deceived about the world after all these years? We may not often think about it, but most people do in fact assume that millions of others are out to lunch in just this way. For example, probably much of the world believes, rightly or wrongly, that millions of zealous Muslims are seriously disconnected from reality. And millions of third-world animists, slavishly trying to balance numerous life forces in trees and rocks and heads, fare no better on reality checks. Even postmodernist types who pretend to deny any single reality or truth are usually the first to insist that the vast millions of us who believe in reality and truth are terribly mistaken about *the* world.

Some can easily write off “fanatics,” but why can't a more mundane, common-sensical, middle-of-the-road view be equally deceived about the world? After all, most people with “sane,” moderate views acquired those views in the same way that most

“fanatics” acquired theirs—living in a community where those views seem obvious. Fanatics don’t usually look like fanatics within their own communities. There, they appear rather mundane and average. To them, *you* are the fanatic, wildly at odds with reality.

Most people hold the beliefs they do because they picked them up along the way from people they trusted—parents, friends, media, maybe even from some zealous college instructor. But over millennia, many parents and zealous college instructors have proven themselves terribly mistaken. Real deception never looks strange when you’re on the inside.

The kind of deception I’m suggesting isn’t the rather unbelievable sort, like being mistaken about whether your left thumb is really an African elephant. The more interesting and plausible kind of radical deception involves less obvious, even invisible things, like moral standards and rules of reasoning and assumptions about how the world works. If people are wrong about these sorts of things, then they could be radically mistaken but go along with the flow of life in the short term without running into any corners. They might only recognize their horrible mistake in the long run, when it all starts to fall apart. But then it could be dangerously late.

Now add to all this the fact that anyone’s years on earth has really been very few. And the time any of us spends thinking about the world is relatively minute compared to all that there is to understand. Given all this, then, isn’t it even *likely* that most people, maybe even you, are indeed radically deceived about the world? Considering how many and how easily people are deceived, it doesn’t seem that wild a conjecture.

In fact, people’s actions often reveal more about their likely deception than their words. For example, whenever you do something like go to a grocery store to buy milk, you reveal many things about yourself. When you first walk up to the grocery store, you assume that you and the store are two different things, not one, thus showing your rejection of most Eastern and New Age religions. When you walk down that same dairy aisle and select the same kind of milk, you assume that the world is not chaotic, but orderly, regular, and divided into set kinds of

things. When you stand in line with others, expecting others to respect your space and person, you reveal your rejection of moral relativism and your deep trust in absolute ethical norms. When you calculate your available change, compare the price of the milk, and make the exchange with the clerk at the register, you engage in a complex array of thought processes involving nonmaterial rules of reasoning, thus showing your rejection of materialism and evolution.

In short, when you do something as mundane as buying milk, you accept and reject all sorts of views. You act like you reject many popular religions and scientific claims. In fact, given the sum of what you assume and reject just when buying milk, you act like you believe that you live in the world described by Christianity. The world depicted above suggests complexities and contours of reality that are only supplied in Christianity. If Christianity weren't true, then such things as simple as milk buying would appear to be impossible. Now, you may openly reject Christianity, but you certainly act like it is true and that your non-Christianity is false. Why such self-deception? Why don't you just confess what you appear to assume?

Non-Christian thought has no cogent answer for such evident and world-encompassing self-deception, but Christianity does. The Christian Scriptures explain that the world is in an abnormal state, due to the destructiveness of our sin. We have rebelled against a holy and gracious God, and so we try to make up grand scenarios in order to evade Him. Such evasion isn't a marginal error. It is concerted warfare against our Creator, and it deserves divine capital punishment. The alternative to such self-deceptive evasion is to embrace the mercy found in Christ, the God-given substitute sent to take our punishment so that we can be reconciled and at peace with God. That's the heart of Christianity—peace with God through Christ's work, with no more radical self-deception about the world.

Could you be radically mistaken in your non-Christian outlook? It looks likely. You profess non-Christianity, but assume Christianity. Think about Christ's work the next time you go to buy some milk.