

Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. Penguin, 2008. 293 pages.

Timothy Keller is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York. Established in 1989 with an initial attendance of about 50, this church now draws some 5000 listeners each Sunday. It has also spawned more than a dozen daughter churches in metropolitan New York and contributed to the work of church planting world-wide. With its associate churches, Redeemer has illustrated the great opportunities that exist today for Scripture-based urban mission. At a time when many traditional churches in the western world are emptying, the new urban mission has experienced explosive growth, in New York and in cities across the globe. Keller writes that hundreds of orthodox-Christian churches have in recent years been planted in New York alone.

Keller's book is inspired by his work at Redeemer. His target audience there is different from that of more traditional churches. It is multiethnic and consists mainly of young urban professionals, two-thirds of them single and practically all of them drawn from a community of "skeptics, critics, and cynics." While attempting to understand their culture, Keller has withstood the temptation to buy into it and accommodate his message accordingly. He has from the beginning preached "the orthodox, historic tenets of Christianity – the infallibility of the Bible, the deity of Christ, the necessity of regeneration (the new birth). . . ."

That message draws people. But it is also controversial; certainly in a sophisticated, postmodern urban society, and in the first part of his book Keller discusses some of the objections to Christianity he has to deal with. His goal in this part is to demonstrate that there are no sufficient arguments for *rejecting* Christianity. In the second part of the book he moves on to show that there *are* sufficient reasons for believing it.

Religious polarization

Before turning to some of Keller's specific arguments, I will comment on his general approach. His book has been compared to C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, and there are indeed many similarities. Keller more than once admits his indebtedness to the English apologist. He is writing, however, in postmodern times, in a religious situation which is different from that of the 1940s and '50s. In Lewis's days it was widely agreed that Christianity was dying out, whereas today there is evidence of explosive growth, especially among non-westerners, but also in some pockets in the western world. But that is only one side of the religious scenario of our days. The other side is that in this very epoch of desecularization and religious expansion, religious skepticism and militant atheism also are growing apace. The world is getting more and less religious at the same time.

This makes the situation more volatile than it was some fifty years ago. Because both groups are growing fast, each feels threatened by the other and hostility increases. Respectful dialogue is rare. "We don't reason with the other side," Keller writes, "we only denounce." Christians have to admit this to their shame. In today's "culture wars" we tend to forget the biblical warning that the faith should be defended in a spirit of gentleness and respect. Christians should also, Keller reminds us, consider the reasons why such large sections of a formerly Christian society have turned their back on the faith. There is need for self-examination.

Dealing with skepticism and doubt

If Keller is aware of ever-increasing religious polarization, he also notes *similarities* between the two opposing groups. The most striking one is that, strange as it may seem, both are motivated by *belief* –

atheists as much as Christians. And people who believe encounter doubt – again, atheists as much as Christians. Rather than denying that this truth applies to them, Keller argues, Christians should take their own doubts seriously and at the same time pay serious attention to the doubts of others. “Only if you struggle long and hard with objections to your faith,” he writes, “will you be able to provide grounds for your beliefs to skeptics, including yourself, that are plausible. . . .” It is this process that will make it possible for believers to respect, understand, and perhaps help skeptics.

The same advice, however, goes for the other side. If Christians must learn to look for reasons behind their faith, skeptics and atheists must recognize the role of faith underlying their reasoning and examine its grounds. For none of the many objections to Christianity can be empirically or logically proven. Statements such as “There is no God,” or “Science has disproved Christianity,” or “There can’t be just *one* true religion” are incapable of demonstrative proof. They are based on belief. Much of Keller’s book is devoted to arguing this point. He concludes that it is inconsistent for a skeptic to require more justification for the Christian faith than for his own beliefs.

The question of proofs

Keller shows himself to be a man of his time also in his attack upon the typically *modernist* position that we can only be certain about anything, including the existence of God, if we have empirical, scientific proof for it. That position, although definitely outdated by now, is still held by militant atheists like Richard Dawkins and his associates and is among the reasons why even some non-Christians thinkers have criticized the work of these men.

The objection to this modern scientism is threefold. Firstly, the argument is self-defeating, for it is impossible to prove *empirically* that empirical proof is needed before anything can be considered true. In short, the argument itself is based on belief. Secondly, science can deal only with what can be observed, measured, weighed, calculated; its field of inquiry is the natural world, the realm of matter, not the supernatural and the spiritual. It can therefore prove neither the existence nor the non-existence of God. And thirdly, twentieth-century philosophers have drawn attention to the fact that science does not (and cannot) expect final proof even within its own realm. A scientific theory is verified not on the basis of absolute logical or empirical evidence, but because its explanatory and predictive power appears to be greater than the theory it replaces. Scientists, in sum, are looking not for airtight proofs, which can’t be had, but for the best “empirical fit.”

What goes for science goes for religion and other human knowledge. God alone is omniscient; we humans are finite and see reality as in a mirror, dimly. We live by faith. But the Christian faith is not unreasonable, and to admit our finitude is not to endorse religious relativism. Just as scientists have the means to test and evaluate a scientific theory (although unable to demonstrate its absolute truth), so believers are able to give grounds for their religious faith. In fact, they are called to do so. And the intellectual criteria for justifying belief in God are similar to those for justifying belief in a scientific theory. Summarizing the arguments of Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne, Keller writes: “The view that there is a God. . . leads us to expect the things we observe – that there is a universe at all, that scientific laws operate within it, that it contains human beings with consciousness and with an indelible moral sense. The theory that there is no God . . . does not lead us to expect any of these things. Therefore, belief in God offers a better empirical fit, it explains and accounts for what we see better than the alternative account of things.”

Keller goes on to quote C. S. Lewis’s words, “I believe in God as I believe the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.” Keller adds, “We should not try to ‘look into the sun,’ as it were, demanding irrefutable proofs for God. Instead, we should ‘look at what the sun shows us.’ Which account of the world has the most ‘explanatory power’ to make sense of what we see in the world and in ourselves? We have a sense that the world is not the way it ought to be. We

have a sense that we are very flawed and yet very great. We have a longing for love and beauty that nothing in this world can fulfill. We have a deep need to know meaning and purpose. Which worldview best accounts for these things?” And again: “Christians do not claim that their faith gives them omniscience or absolute knowledge of reality. Only God has that. But they believe that the Christian account of things – creation, fall, redemption, and restoration – makes most sense of the world.” (The reader will realize that I have been dealing all along with *intellectual* reasons for the faith. Certainty of faith does exist, but is a divine gift, not the result of intellectual argument.)

Arguments

In giving answers to specific objections to the faith, Keller refers to these two major points: the role of belief in human reasoning and the fact that human beings, though they can certainly find truth, are creatures and cannot see reality as God sees it. With respect to the objection that no truth exists, for example, he points out that this statement is self-defeating. For why, Keller asks, should I believe the person who says it? How could he or she credibly proclaim as truth that there is no truth? Obviously, this type of statement is based on wishful thinking, on “belief,” not on logical or empirical proof. And the same applies to other objections such as that all religions lead to God, or that you can’t take the Bible message literally, or that a God who judges cannot also be a God of love.

Keller has also had to answer more traditional objections to the faith. Perhaps the most pressing of these is the existence of evil. It is the age-old question how evil and human suffering in the world can be reconciled with the existence of a God who is both all-good and all-powerful. Attempting to answer the question, Keller mentions the following:

(1) We often admit that our suffering, agonizing as it may have been, has not been in vain. Isn’t it possible that from God’s point of view all suffering is ultimately for our good? If we have a God great enough to be angry at because he hasn’t stopped the world’s suffering, then we have a God great enough to allow it to continue for good reasons that we can’t know. We can’t have it both ways.

(2) Evil and suffering may be seen as evidence not for the non-existence, but for the existence of God. If we were simply the products of mindless evolution, as atheists claim, we should not worry about evil, since natural selection and the struggle for survival demand endless suffering: death and violence and the destruction of the weak by the strong. Nature being “red in tooth and claw,” suffering is simply natural. If human beings find it unnatural, then they subscribe, consciously or not, to an ethics whose origins cannot be natural but must be supernatural. And a supernatural ethics implies a supernatural law-giver.

(3) The cross of Christ. In his Son, God himself entered our suffering and pain so that “by His unspeakable anguish, pain, terror and agony” Christ might deliver his own “from the anguish and torment of hell” (L.D. 16). When looking at the cross we may have no answer for the world’s suffering, Keller writes, but we do learn that this suffering does not happen because of God’s indifference and lack of love. “God is truly *Immanuel* – God with us – even in our worst suffering.” We learn also that suffering does not have the last word. Good Friday was followed by Easter and will be followed by the restoration of all things. “The Biblical view of things is. . . not a future that is just a *consolation* for the life we never had but a *restoration* of the life [we] always wanted. This means that every horrible thing that ever happened will not only be undone and repaired but will in some way make the eventual glory and joy even greater.” In the words of C.S. Lewis: “They say of some temporal suffering, ‘No future bliss can make up for it,’ not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even that agony into a glory.”

Creation and evolution

More could be said about Keller's apologetics, also about the arguments in the second part of the book, which I have left largely unexplored, but space is limited and I hope that I have written enough to whet the reader's appetite. I must add here that I do not expect everyone to agree with all that Keller wrote. A controversial point is his attitude toward evolution. Keller rejects the concept of evolution as an "All-Encompassing Theory" but thinks that God has "guided some kind of process of natural selection." In short, he reveals himself (in tune with the large majority of Christian apologists today) as a theistic evolutionist. Unsurprisingly, that has bothered a good many of his evangelical readers. I myself place a question mark here.

This is not to say that I have easy answers to the question as to how Genesis 1 and 2 are to be explained. Although "young-earth creationism" appears to be widely accepted among us these days, there is no Reformed consensus on the issue, nor has there been in the past. Theologians of unsuspected orthodoxy such as Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Klaas Schilder, and others, both past and present, have considered the possibility of an old (or older) earth.* Nor does it seem that a consensus will easily be achieved. As Herman Bavinck wrote, no single person and not even a generation or an age may be able to resolve the questions that arise in connection with modern science; it is God who must, in the course of history, bring light into darkness.

And therefore, while questioning Keller's conclusion, I understand his reluctance to make dogmatic statements on the issue. And I fully agree with him that, when we are evangelizing, the question of origins should remain on the back burner. We certainly should not begin, he rightly warns, by asking the skeptical inquirer to decide on the different positions that have been and continue to be held by orthodox Christians on the matter. Rather, we should urge him or her to concentrate on the central claims of Christianity. Once these have been accepted in faith, the time may come to evaluate the various options regarding the meaning of Genesis 1.

*See my articles "Faith and Science in the Reformed Tradition," 1-5, *Clarion*, Feb. 1-March 29, 2002, and "Klaas Schilder on Creation and Flood," 1,2, *Clarion*, March 14, 28, 2003.