

A photograph of the Aurora Borealis (Northern Lights) over a body of water at night. The sky is a vibrant green and blue, with a person standing on a rocky shore in the foreground, looking up at the lights.

DOES GOD EXIST?

answers for new believers and seekers

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THE QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS HOPE NO ONE WILL ASK

“**WHY ARE CHRISTIANS** against same-sex marriage? . . . Why do you believe God exists at all? . . . Why would God allow evil and suffering? . . . Why trust the Bible when it’s full of mistakes? . . . How could a loving God send people to hell? . . . What makes you think Jesus was more than just a good teacher? . . . Why are Christians so judgmental?”

Some questions can stop a conversation. Today, more than ever, people are raising difficult, penetrating questions about faith, God, and the Bible. Based on an exclusive Barna survey of 1,000 Christians, *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask* presents compelling, easy-to-grasp answers to ten of the most troubling questions facing Christians today. These include everything from the existence of heaven to the issues of abortion and homosexuality, as well as the question of whether evolution eliminates our need for a God.



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This was it—the day I was finally going to pop the question.

After years of friendship and many hours hanging out together, I knew my feelings for Heidi had grown beyond merely “being in like”—the truth is, I was really in love with her!

Was Heidi in love with me—enough to be willing to become my wife? That’s what I was about to find out. I felt fairly confident, but as any guy in my shoes knows, until you actually hear her say “yes,” you live with a certain amount of trepidation and doubt.

When the moment came, I worked up the nerve and blurted out the question. Heidi’s reply? After a brief hesitation—one that felt like a million years—she agreed to marry me! I don’t want to imply that I was excited, but the fact that I shouted, “She said YES!” over and over probably gives away my true feelings.

Was our love real? It certainly seemed to be on that day. As it did on the day of our wedding. And when each of our kids was born. And when Heidi brought me freshly brewed coffee this morning. After more than twenty-five years of marriage, I think we’ve made a pretty strong case: our love for each other is genuine.

Love is not a physical entity, and yet it’s very real. In fact, for those who are in love, it can be more real than the world around them! But in order to *know* if there is true love in a particular situation, sometimes we need evidence. And being the skeptic that I am, I needed fairly strong evidence.

In my relationship with Heidi, evidence of her love emerged along the way—she wrote me notes that reflected her affection; she spent

hours with me on the phone; she seemed to enjoy being around me; she even gave me loving looks sometimes. Then there was the big day when she agreed to marry me. While each one of these actions pointed to her love for me, taken together they provided overwhelming confirmation. I could put it like this: *the cumulative evidence was more than enough to believe that Heidi's love for me was the real deal.*

But can I prove it to you? Can I show you our love for each other in a tangible way—one that you can see, hear, or touch? No, the love itself is invisible. It's one of those things that you have to detect through its effects. Much like air: You can't see it (unless you're in downtown Los Angeles), but you can breathe it, experience it, and move in it. Or like gravity—it's not visible, but you'd better not try to ignore it!

THE INVISIBLE GOD

One of the most important issues that surfaced in the survey we talked about in the introduction—in fact, tied for first place as the question respondents most hoped nobody would ask them—was this: how can you know there's a God? He's not tangible; you can't weigh him, measure him, touch him, or see him with the naked eye—or detect him with radar, for that matter! His presence doesn't register with any of our senses, and yet you believe in him. Why?

It's a challenging question that's obviously central to all we believe as followers of Christ. So how can we respond?

First, we can point out to our friend, as I did above, that there are plenty of important things we believe in without seeing, hearing, or touching them. Love, as I've explained, is a profound reality, and most of us believe in love. But love itself is not a material thing. It's not something we can see, hear, or touch directly.

The Christian understanding is that God is not a material thing either. This is clear in John 4:24, in which Jesus tells us “God is Spirit” (NLT). Unlike my friends, my dog Charlie, my iPod, or my mountain

bike—all of which I can see, hear, and touch because they are physical, material things—God is a spiritual being or reality, and spiritual realities are not the kinds of things that can be seen with physical eyes or heard with physical ears or touched with physical hands. So I guess we shouldn't really be surprised that we can't experience God in the same way we can experience those other things.

A PERSONAL RESPONSE

But that's not to say we don't experience God in other ways. If you are one of his true followers, you have experienced him on a personal level, and I trust you sense his presence and work in your life on at least a periodic basis. I know that years ago in my own life I felt God's touch on me in numerous ways, leading up to the point at which I put my trust in Christ. Some of those "touches" were wake-up calls in which he showed me the dead-end path my life was on, convicted me of sins, and revealed that I was made for much greater purposes than I was experiencing at the time.

Then, when I finally gave in to what I'm confident was the Holy Spirit drawing me to trust and follow Christ, I sensed his forgiveness and his acceptance as God's newly adopted son. That squared with what I later read in Romans 8:15-16, where Paul says, "You received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, 'Abba, Father.' For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children" (NIV).

And since that time I often know, in hard-to-explain and internal ways, that God is prompting me to speak to a person, send an encouraging note, challenge a wayward brother in the faith, or pray for someone in need. And occasionally I sense him guiding me in bigger life decisions regarding my work, ministry involvements, moves to new locales, and so forth. These leadings don't come every day, but there's a marked

pattern of them in my life—they’ve had a huge influence in my overall direction and impact.

I share some of these details to show that one of the ways I know God is real and active in our world is that he’s real and active in my life, and I’m guessing you’d say the same thing if you’re a committed Christian. If so, then that’s a natural part of our answer to people who ask us this question about God’s existence. We know he exists because he’s our friend! He has forgiven us and turned our lives around, and he speaks to us, guides us, redirects us, and rebukes us when we need it (see Heb. 12:5-12)—always acting out of love for us and what’s best for our lives. So one point we can make is our humble acknowledgment of his presence and activity in our daily experience.

Our testimony alone can have a powerful influence on others, especially those who know us well and are therefore inclined to trust what we say. It can also influence those who have seen clear evidence of God’s work in us—they can’t see him, but they can see what he’s done in our lives.

Experience is hard to argue with. That’s why the apostle Paul often appealed to it, as did other biblical writers. He said to his skeptical listeners in Acts 26:12-16, for example, “One day I was on such a mission to Damascus. . . . A light from heaven brighter than the sun shone down on me. . . . I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? . . . I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting. Now get to your feet! For I have appeared to you to appoint you as my servant and witness’” (NLT). Paul went on from there and gave further details, but it’s clear that his account of God’s activity in his life made an impact. Agrippa, one of his listeners, interrupted and asked him, “Do you think you can persuade me to become a Christian so quickly?” (v. 28, NLT). To which Paul, the consummate evangelist, winsomely replied, “Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am” (v. 29, NLT).

Telling others about God’s activity in our lives can be a powerful

tool, but many people will not be convinced by that alone. They might conclude that you're sincere—but that you're mistaking coincidences in your life for supernatural interventions. And some people may even question your sincerity. So let's explore some other ways we can point to the effects of the invisible God in our world by using examples that everyone can access. For the rest of this chapter we'll look at three of the best examples of evidence for God's existence that we can share with our friends: two that are scientific and one that is more philosophical in nature. (Note that other powerful kinds of evidence could be given to support belief in the Christian God, including those from history, archaeology, and the records of prophecies and miracles preserved in the Bible. I do so in my book *Choosing Your Faith . . . In a World of Spiritual Options*,¹ where I present twenty arguments for the Christian faith. Some of that information will come out naturally as we address the other questions in this book.)

As I've been exploring these matters for the last twenty-five years or so, I've come to believe that today, perhaps more than in any other period of human history, the fingerprints of God have become exceedingly evident for anyone who is willing to search for them. Each of these arguments is powerful on its own and has convinced many people of the reality of God. But when considered together, along with our own testimonies of experiencing him in our daily lives, the cumulative case is staggering.

EVIDENCE #1: THE EXISTENCE OF THE UNIVERSE

Throughout history, many people have supposed that the universe always existed. A number of famous ancient thinkers from the East (such as Lao Tzu, a central figure in the Taoist religion) and the West (such as Aristotle) believed that the universe is eternal—in other words, that it never had a beginning. This was a fairly prevalent view among philosophers and scientists up until the twentieth century. They had

their reasons for believing this, but there was no effective way to either confirm or disconfirm their beliefs—until recently.

Fortunately, in the last several decades there has been an exponential growth of understanding in many areas of science, especially in physics, astronomy, and cosmology. This third area, cosmology—which is the study of the origin, structure, and development of the physical universe—has seen explosive advancements in recent years. Let’s look at one example.

In 1915, Albert Einstein developed the general theory of relativity (which is far too complex to explain in this chapter, even if I could fully explain it!). This theory, which is now almost universally accepted, has certain implications. One is that the universe—defined as time, space, matter, and physical energy²—had a starting point in history. And, since it had a beginning, it’s not eternal as Lao Tzu and Aristotle believed. As a matter of fact, through Einstein’s equations we can trace the development of the universe back to its very origin, back to what’s called the *singularity event* when it actually popped into being (what is often referred to as the “Big Bang”).

Now, many scientists and others, including Einstein himself, didn’t like this result (perhaps because it sounded too much like the biblical account of Creation?). So they tried to find an error in the equations—one that would allow for the universe to be understood as eternal after all. But they didn’t succeed. And recent experimental observations have provided even more support showing that Einstein had it right: the universe really did have a beginning.

One of the scientific confirmations of Einstein’s theory was provided by the Hubble Space Telescope, named after American astronomer Edwin Hubble. This impressive telescope allowed astronomers to see that the universe is actually expanding—and the farther away the galaxy is, the faster it’s moving. This led most scientists to further reinforce their conclusion that the universe had a beginning point from which it began this expansion process.³

So how does this Hubble confirmation of the origin of the universe provide evidence for God? Great question! Here's how: if the universe had a starting point in history, then obviously it began to exist. But if it began to exist, then it must have had a cause for its existence. Things don't just begin to exist without a cause. Science itself operates on the principle that all events need a cause. As Einstein once declared, "The scientist is possessed by a sense of universal causation."⁴

But if the universe needs a cause for its coming into being, then that cause must be beyond the universe. As we saw earlier, the universe—by definition—is time, space, matter, and physical energy. So the cause for the universe must be something beyond time and space and matter and physical energy. In other words, the cause must be something uncannily similar to what we commonly refer to as "God"!

Before completely landing on this conclusion, let's look at an objection to it. My friend Chad Meister, who has his doctorate in philosophy and teaches philosophy of religion at the graduate level, told me a story about what happened to him awhile back at a dinner with his wife and others from the company where she was an accountant. The firm was celebrating the end of tax season and had invited the employees and their spouses for a nice dinner at a five-star restaurant. Chad happened to sit next to a pilot for a major airline. As they ate, the conversation eventually came around to spiritual matters, and the pilot said he didn't believe in God—which is not a very good position to take when you're having dinner with the likes of Dr. Meister!

Chad brought up this cosmological evidence from the Hubble telescope, and the pilot responded, "Yes, but how do you know it is *God* who created the universe? Maybe an alien did the creating!" Chad replied, "Maybe so! But let's keep in mind that our alien, whom we can call Bob, is timeless (that is, outside of time), nonspatial (outside of the spatial dimension), immaterial (not made up of any matter), and does not consist of physical energy, yet was powerful enough to create the entire universe—all the billions and billions of galaxies,

each of which has billions and billions of stars. In light of that information, you can call him Bob, but I call him Yahweh! This is the transcendent God beyond space and time in whom Christians have believed for two thousand years.”

Can you see how powerful this information is—even when people try to escape it with clever stories about things like aliens or elves? Even Richard Dawkins, probably the most prominent proponent for atheism of our times, admitted in an article in *Time* magazine that “there could be something incredibly grand and incomprehensible and beyond our present understanding.” When challenged with “That’s God!” he replied, “Yes. But it could be any of a billion Gods. It could be God of the Martians or of the inhabitants of Alpha Centauri. The chance of its being a particular God, Yahweh, the God of Jesus, is vanishingly small.”⁵

Against that kind of a diversion we can say, “You can call him what you want, but the evidence from the origin of the universe tells us a lot about what he is like—and the description sounds amazingly similar to what the Bible tells us about one particular God, who actually *is* called Yahweh, the God of Jesus, the Creator of the world.”

It’s worth noting that the initial reaction of some Christians to the very idea of the Big Bang at the beginning of the universe is negative—but I don’t think this is necessary. Yes, many scientists hold that this event was completely natural, unaided by any outside force or intelligence (such as God). But as we’ve seen, the evidence is against them. The event itself calls for a cause outside of the universe—one that is wise and powerful enough to be able to pull it off. That’s why Einstein and many other thinkers in his day and since then have resisted the idea of the Big Bang—they didn’t like the theological implications that came with it. But from a Christian point of view, the Big Bang sounds like an awfully compelling scientific description of the biblical doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*—“out of nothing.”

One other objection that frequently comes up is this: “Well, if

everything needs a cause, then who caused God?” But this is a misunderstanding of the argument itself, which does not say that *everything* needs a cause—just *everything that has a beginning* needs a cause! Science shows, through Einstein’s calculations and Hubble’s telescope, among other things, that the universe had a beginning—therefore the universe needs a cause. And that cause is the immaterial, eternal God of the universe, who had no beginning and who therefore does not have or need a cause.

We can summarize this cosmological evidence into a concise series of statements:

1. Whatever begins to exist must have a cause for its existence.
2. The universe began to exist.
3. Therefore, the universe must have a cause for its existence.
4. The attributes of the cause of the universe (being timeless, existing outside of space, and so on) are the attributes of God.
5. Therefore, the cause of the universe must be God.

This is precisely what Christians have always believed. The very first words of the Bible, in the book of Genesis, declare, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (NLT). In spite of what many people have heard, science is not at odds with belief in God. To the contrary, science actually provides compelling evidence *for* God’s existence!¹⁶

EVIDENCE #2: OUR “JUST SO” UNIVERSE

The more I watch the Discovery Channel and read about the amazing intricacies of our world, the more amazed I am at the beauty and complexity of it all. I often ride my mountain bike along the trails near where I live. Sometimes I stop and admire the unique plants growing along the hillsides or down in the ravines; other times I’ll enjoy the surprise of an unexpected deer, coyote, or fox as it runs out in front

of me. Often I'll reflect on a sunset showering down brilliant colors of red, yellow, and orange. I'm regularly taken aback by what I see. I think often about how much I relate to the psalmist when he says, "The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship" (Ps. 19:1, NLT).

But here's what is amazing: this incredible array of life and beauty and complexity did not spring into existence unaided. Rather, what cutting-edge science is now telling us is that the building blocks of our world—the laws and physical constants that govern all the matter in the universe—appear to be precisely balanced and finely tuned for life to occur and flourish.

These laws and constants were set at the singularity event mentioned earlier. In other words, when the universe exploded into being—the Big Bang—there were a number of variables within the very structure of the universe itself that had to be set exactly as they are in order for life to exist. Scientists have so far discovered about fifty of these parameters and constants that must be "just so" in order for life to be possible anywhere in the universe.

Let's hone in on one particular example of this "fine-tuning." Physicists have discovered four forces in nature, and one of them is the *force of gravity*. Physicists have calculated that the strength of each of these forces must fall within a very specific range or there would be no conscious life possible. If the force of gravity, for example, were to change by one part in ten thousand billion billion billion relative to the total range of the strengths of the four forces in nature, conscious life would be virtually impossible anywhere in the universe.⁷

There are many other parameters and constants that are also finely tuned and that, if changed even slightly, would have disastrous consequences for life in our universe. For example, if the neutron were not exactly as it is—about 1.001 times the mass of the proton—then all protons would have decayed into neutrons or all neutrons would have decayed into protons, and life would not be possible. If the explosion of

the Big Bang had differed in strength by as little as one part in 10^{60} (one part in a trillion trillion trillion trillion trillion), the universe would have either quickly collapsed back on itself or expanded too swiftly for stars to form. Either way, life would be impossible. The list goes on and on.⁸

What makes all this even more fascinating is that these finely tuned parameters and constants are independent of one another. In other words, they could all be just right for life except for one, which is off to the smallest degree—and that alone would have precluded me from existing to write this and you from existing to read it. This makes it yet more unlikely that they all came to be just so by chance. In fact, because of this evidence Paul Davies, one of the leading physicists and cosmologists of our day, makes this audacious claim: “I cannot believe that our existence in this universe is a mere quirk of fate. . . . We are truly meant to be here.”⁹ That’s quite a statement for one who doesn’t even claim to believe in a personal God!

In addition to the parameters and constants necessary for life in the universe, there are also fascinating characteristics of a *planet* that are necessary for it to support complex life. Recent discoveries demonstrate that there are at least two dozen such characteristics that must be in place for life to be possible on a planet. These include its consisting of the correct mass; being orbited by a large moon, having a magnetic field; manifesting an oxygen-rich atmosphere; orbiting a main-sequence, G2 dwarf star; and being in the correct location in the galactic habitable zone. Each of these factors has to occur in the right place at the right time with respect to the same planet in order for complex life to even be a possibility there. The probability of these factors converging is so infinitesimally small that many cosmologists and astrophysicists now admit that it’s more reasonable to believe that a divine designer was involved than to assume it all happened by chance.¹⁰

Of course, not everyone is happy with this conclusion. Some are working overtime to find alternative theories to explain these phenomena without divine intervention. In fact, there are a few serious

objections that we should address. The first is that these highly unlikely events can be explained without God if a very large number of universes exist besides our own, each with its own parameters and constants. If there are a very large number of universes and they were all produced randomly, most of them would surely include parameters that are life *prohibiting*. But if the number of universes is large enough—maybe infinite—then some of them, by sheer chance, might have just the right parameters for life. Luckily for us, the argument goes, our universe happens to be one that has the right parameters.

One big problem with this objection is that there is no scientific evidence that it is true or even possible. It's purely speculative. Science fiction writers are having a heyday with the idea, but the scientific facts are lacking, to say the least.

Another problem is that if there are an infinite number of universes, then those must have been produced by some kind of a “many-universe generator.” But this generator itself must be a very sophisticated device in order to produce countless universes. I mean, even my toaster needs to be well designed to toast bread (though I'm not so sure it was really well designed, since it often pops my toast onto the kitchen floor!). How much more so a universe maker who produces countless universes, including finely tuned ones like our own. What kind of an incredible intelligence could account for such an astounding machine or process such as that?

Yet another objection I often hear is this: if the evidence points to a divine designer, then who designed the designer? If we don't need to answer that question, it's argued, then why do we need to worry about a designer of our universe? While this is an interesting challenge, it misses the simple point that the universe is better explained by design than by chance.

Consider this example: suppose you went on a deep-sea expedition and came upon what seemed to be an underwater city. It was unique, like nothing you'd ever seen before. Suppose there were structures

apparently designed to sustain oxygen-breathing creatures (like us), including rooms from which water could be evacuated, long tubelike tunnels that could pump in oxygen from above the water, and various inlets that could be used for transportation purposes.

In this scenario, it would seem far more reasonable to believe that there was a designer who created this place than to suppose that it came into being purely by chance. But we would not need to forgo the claim that an intelligent being designed the city just because that intelligent being itself may be in need of further explanation. So the question of whether or not God needs further explanation, though an interesting one, has no bearing on this argument about our finely tuned universe.¹¹

So our argument stands: the incredible confluence of the many examples of fine-tuning in the universe—each independently set to the precise measures necessary to support life—points powerfully to the existence of an incredibly intelligent designer who made it all “just so” . . . for us!

Or, as Isaiah 40:25-26, 28 puts it,

“To whom will you compare me?

Who is my equal?” asks the Holy One.

Look up into the heavens.

Who created all the stars?

*He brings them out like an army, one after another,
calling each by its name.*

*Because of his great power and incomparable
strength,*

not a single one is missing. . . .

Have you never heard?

Have you never understood?

*The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator
of all the earth.*

He never grows weak or weary.

No one can measure the depths of his understanding. (NLT)

Now, someone could object that the characteristics of God just established—that he is timeless, outside of space, matterless, and beyond the physical energy of the universe (from Evidence #1) and that he is a superintellect who fine-tuned the universe to precise measures in order to sustain life (from Evidence #2)—are *some* of the qualities normally attributed to God, but there is an important one missing: how can we know he’s a morally good creator?

Fair question. Let’s look at one more argument, this one from philosophy, which shows that God is not only the powerful and wise creator of the cosmos but also a morally good being who really does care about good versus evil, right versus wrong.

EVIDENCE #3: OUR MORALLY GOOD UNIVERSE

As an avid news watcher I often get depressed about the bad things that are happening in the world (and in my own city!). But what the news reports all too often overlook are the really good things that are happening in our midst.

Here are some examples of goodness I’ve come across recently:

- A celebrity telethon (*Hope For Haiti Now*) raised \$57 million in donations for the Haiti earthquake disaster.
- Parents in Iowa adopted six young special-needs kids now that their biological children are nearly grown.
- A Chicago man donated his kidney to save a local grocery store cashier whom he hardly knew.
- A church in Indiana paid for a poor student’s first year of tuition at a private college.

- A group of California students devoted countless hours of work to help displaced children in Uganda.

The list could go on and on. There are countless examples of goodness and virtue in our world. But a question arises: On what basis is something considered good or evil, right or wrong? And where did this basis come from? Did it start with the Big Bang? I can just imagine it: billions of years ago . . . massive explosion . . . galaxies emerging from the fiery blast. And then, out of the gaseous flames, “Thou shalt act altruistically; thou shalt be kind to the underprivileged; thou shalt love thine enemies; thou shalt not steal; and—oh yes—thou shalt maintain a moderately small carbon footprint” (all in perfect King James English, of course).

No one really believes that moral values emerge out of physical explosions. So where did they come from? Atheists are hard pressed to provide an answer for the existence of *objective* moral values. Look at what one atheist wrote in a recent article entitled, “Secularism’s Ongoing Debt to Christianity”:

Although I am a secularist (atheist, if you will), I accept that the great majority of people would be morally and spiritually lost without religion. Can anyone seriously argue that crime and debauchery are not held in check by religion? Is it not comforting to live in a community where the rule of law and fairness are respected? Would such be likely if Christianity were not there to provide a moral compass to the great majority? Do we secularists not benefit out of all proportion from a morally responsible society?

An orderly society is dependent on a generally accepted morality. There can be no such morality without religion. Has there ever been a more perfect and concise moral code than the one Moses brought down from the mountain?

Those who doubt the effect of religion on morality should seriously ask the question: just what are the immutable moral laws of secularism? Be prepared to answer, if you are honest, that such laws simply do not exist! The best answer we can ever hear from secularists to this question is a hodgepodge of strained relativist talk of situational ethics. They can cite no overriding authority other than that of fashion. For the great majority in the West, it is the Judeo-Christian tradition which offers a template.¹²

We have, then, what is sometimes called the problem of good. The problem of good is a major challenge for atheism, for within the atheist view there simply is no way to explain or justify objective moral values.

When I read about or travel to other parts of the world, I'm often intrigued by the differences in etiquette. In India, many nationals do not use utensils to eat; they use their fingers instead. It would probably be rude in those contexts to whip out my travel mess kit and eat in front of them with fork and spoon. We should respect the differences in etiquette that have been created by various people groups and societies.

But morals and values are different from etiquette, and we all know it. They are not the creations of human beings. As we've said, they are objective, not relative—so they are above us and our particular laws and practices. If there were a culture, for example, that threw their firstborn male babies into the flames in order to gain the favor of the gods, this would be a morally dreadful act. If there were a culture in which men kept females as slaves and beat and raped them at will, we would be morally outraged. If there were a culture that locked up black people for their color or Jewish people for their heritage or left-handed people for their differentness, we would decry these actions as moral abominations.

If that culture's members objected to our indignation by saying that's just the way people do things in their culture—it's their tradition

or custom or preference—we would flat-out reject their answer. We know that murder and rape and bigotry and racism are wrong—really, objectively wrong—regardless of traditions, customs, or preferences. But where did we get this knowledge—this intrinsic sense of right and wrong? If we didn't invent it, if it transcends the realms of culture and politics, if it's something we can't get away from, then what is its source? Could it be that a Moral Lawgiver actually knit those moral standards, along with the ability to understand and operate by them, into the very fabric of what it means to be human?

That conclusion certainly seems to square with logic and experience. It explains why we could boldly tell the Nazis that exterminating Jews was wrong and that they deserved to be punished for such wicked acts. And why we knew that Saddam Hussein was doing evil when he oppressed the Iraqi people, murdered his own family members, tortured and killed those he considered political threats, and ordered the gassing of thousands of Kurds. Our confident conviction about these matters—then and now—shows that morals are objective, not relative.

Unlike the atheist, the Christian has a solid basis for objective moral values, for in the Christian view, God exists as a supreme, transcendent, divine person—the Creator of the universe and everything in it. Goodness flows from God's very nature; moral values are not invented by human beings. They are *discovered* by human beings, but they are *grounded* in the very nature of a good, loving, personal God who made us in his image, implanted a sense of right and wrong in our hearts, and told us to live as imitators of him (see Eph. 5:1). Interestingly, this is also what the Bible tells us in Romans 2:15: “They demonstrate that God's law is written in their hearts, for their own conscience and thoughts either accuse them or tell them they are doing right” (NLT).

This is powerful evidence for God. We can put this evidence in the form of a simple argument:

1. If God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist.
2. But we know that objective moral values do exist.
3. Therefore, God does exist.

I'm not saying that atheists cannot recognize moral values or live generally moral lives. I'm certain they can. But recognizing something and even living by it does not mean that one has a real basis for it. The "moral" atheist is simply left hanging in midair on this issue, without any solid footing. Christians, on the other hand, have a rock solid foundation on which to build their beliefs and to live their lives. Our universe is morally good, and it's good because a transcendent and good God created it that way.

As we saw at the beginning of the chapter, God is like the virtue of love in this way: while we can't see love directly, we can often see evidence for it. The same is true about God. In addition to our own experience of him—which is important to talk about—we have looked at three kinds of evidence for him. These arguments provide solid reasons to believe in God: the existence of the universe, the amazing fine-tuning of the universe, and the reality of objective goodness. While each of these *points to* the existence of God, taken together they provide *strong confirmation* of his existence. We could sum it up like this: *the cumulative case for God's existence is more than sufficient for an open-minded person to believe that he really is there.*

God doesn't force his reality on anyone, but if our friends are interested in real evidence and answers, he has not left them wanting. God's fingerprints are dispersed throughout the cosmos. Maybe that's part of why Jesus told us so boldly in Matthew 7:7 to "keep on seeking, and you will find" (NLT).

SUMMARY OF THE ANSWER

Question 1 asks us, “What makes you so sure that God exists at all—especially when you can’t see, hear, or touch him?”

- We believe in many things that we don’t see or directly experience with our senses—the virtue of love being a great example. Yet we see evidence of love through its effects. Similarly, we can’t see God, but we can believe in him based on his work in us and in the universe around us.
- One of the ways we can know that God is real and active in our world is that he’s real and active in our lives—he’s our friend! If that’s true in your own experience, then talking about him will be a natural part of your answer to people who ask you this question about God’s existence.
- Evidence #1: Whatever has a beginning has a cause. Science shows us that the universe had a beginning. It therefore had a cause—one that’s outside of itself and is therefore beyond time, space, matter, and physical energy. In other words, that cause has the characteristics of the God of the Bible.
- Evidence #2: Our universe is fine-tuned, with astounding “just-so” precision, in ways that make it a place that can support life. The odds of this happening on its own, by sheer chance, are vanishingly small and thus point powerfully to an intelligent designer—One whom the Bible calls God.
- Evidence #3: Apart from God there can be no objective moral standards. But we clearly live in a world that has objective moral standards. Therefore there has to be a divine moral lawgiver. We refer to that lawgiver as “God.”
- Our experience, science, and philosophy all point to the existence of an invisible God, One that fits the descriptions given in

Scripture for Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and of us, as Christians.

TIPS FOR TALKING ABOUT THIS ISSUE

- Usually people who doubt God have a story to tell about how they got to that point. It's important to ask them questions and to respectfully listen to what they tell you, even though you'll probably not agree with everything they say. That's okay; James 1:19 says we need to “be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry” (NLT). Listening before speaking shows that you care about them, and it earns you the right to talk about your own beliefs.
- It's almost a cliché to say that atheists are angry. But if your friends don't believe in God and do seem angry, ask why. Often you'll discover that something bad happened for which they blame God, the church, or a Christian. Listen with empathy and patience. Agree when you can, but also try to help them see that much of what's done in God's name or in religious circles is not from God but from imperfect people and institutions.
- Share the answers and information in this chapter, but realize that helping people think in new ways is usually a slow process. Be patient, and be ready to explain it again and again or to talk about additional questions they might want to raise.
- Realize there may be deeper personal issues—beyond what people are talking to you about—that hold them back from believing or trusting in God. These may be lifestyle issues, personal problems, hurts, prejudices, or misunderstandings about what Christians think and stand for. Pray for discernment and sensitivity in sorting out what the real issues are, and then address those issues.

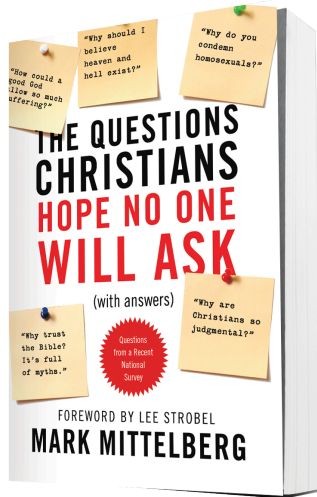
- Refer to the Bible’s teachings in talking about your faith, but realize that many people don’t accept its authority or truthfulness—especially those who question God’s existence. Its message can still have power, but look to other sources of information to reinforce its truths (as we have in this chapter, with science and philosophy).
- The Bible makes it clear that these discussions are not just about logic and good answers—but also about a spiritual struggle. Pray that God will direct your words and attitude and that he’ll open your friends up to his love and truth.
- Remember that love draws people, and disagreement can drive them away. So let love be your motivation, and be ready to back off if a conversation gets too heated or combative.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Why might someone think you should believe only in things you can see, hear, or touch? What are some other things you believe in, in addition to love, that you can’t see or experience directly through your senses?
2. What are some things you can talk about from your own experience that show you—and might convince your friends—that God really exists?
3. How does the fact that our universe had a beginning or the fact that it’s fine-tuned with such exacting precision provide evidence for God?
4. Do you think there could be objective morality apart from God? From where would it draw its authority?
5. How has the evidence for God presented in this chapter affected your faith? Can evidence strengthen one’s faith?

ENDNOTES

1. Mark Mittelberg, *Choosing Your Faith . . . In a World of Spiritual Options* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2008), especially chapters 9-11.
2. Or as my mentor, Dr. Stuart Hackett, used to winsomely put it, "and by 'universe' I mean 'the works!'"
3. The Hubble telescope continues to offer amazing pictures of and information about the universe. You can see many of these pictures online at <http://hubblesite.org>. This site also offers other fascinating features, such as tracking Hubble's exact current location in space and previews of an even more powerful telescope that is now under construction, which will be sent into orbit in 2014.
4. Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, 1994 Modern Library Edition, copyright 1954 by Crown Publishers, Inc. (New York: Random House, 1994), 43.
5. Debate between Richard Dawkins and Francis Collins, as cited on the Richard Dawkins Foundation Web page, <http://richarddawkins.net/articles/4047-god-vs-science-a-debate-between-richard-dawkins-and-francis-collins?page=22&scope=latest&type=articles>.
6. For more on this cosmological argument and many other evidences for God, see William Lane Craig and Chad Meister, eds., *God Is Great, God Is Good: Why Believing in God Is Reasonable and Responsible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).
7. From an interview with Dr. Robin Collins in Lee Strobel, *The Case for a Creator* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 132.
8. For some of the most recent findings regarding this kind of evidence, see Paul Davies, *The Goldilocks Enigma: Why Is the Universe Just Right for Life?* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2008).
9. Paul Davies, *The Mind of God* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 242.
10. For a fascinating book that sketches out these factors, see Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay W. Richards, *The Privileged Planet: How Our Place in the Cosmos Is Designed for Discovery* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2004).
11. These two examples are based on related illustrations from Robin Collins's essay, "A Scientific Argument for God's Existence: The Fine-Tuning Design Argument," in Michael Murray, ed., *Reason for the Hope Within* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 47-75.
12. John D. Steinrucken, "Secularism's Ongoing Debt to Christianity," *American Thinker*, March 25, 2010. To read the article, go to www.americanthinker.com/2010/03/secularisms_ongoing_debt_to_ch.html.



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MORE THAN A CARPENTER

IN *MORE THAN A CARPENTER* Josh McDowell focuses on the person who changed his life—Jesus Christ. It is a hardheaded book for people who are skeptical about Jesus' deity, his resurrection, and his claims on their lives.



Since beginning ministry in 1961, **JOSH MCDOWELL** has given more than 24,000 talks to over 10 million young people in 118 countries. He is the author or coauthor of 112 books, selling over 51 million copies worldwide, including *More Than a Carpenter* (more than 15 million copies in print worldwide), which has been translated into over 85 languages, and *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, recognized by *World* magazine as one of the twentieth century's top 40 books. Josh continues to travel throughout the United States and countries around the world, helping young people and adults bolster their faith and scriptural beliefs. Josh will tell you that his family does not come before his ministry—his family is his ministry. He and his wife, Dottie, have four children and eight grandchildren.

Lord, Liar, or Lunatic?

If you were to Google the name Jesus today, you'd instantly get about 181 million hits. Search for Jesus at Amazon.com and you'll find 261,474 books about him. Given the smorgasbord of competing views, can we still have confidence in the historical Jesus? Many people want to regard Jesus not as God but as a good, moral man or as an exceptionally wise prophet who spoke many profound truths. Scholars often pass off that conclusion as the only acceptable one that people can reach by the intellectual process. Many people simply nod their heads in agreement and never trouble themselves to see the fallacy of such reasoning.

Jesus claimed to be God, and to him it was of fundamental importance that men and women believed him to be who he was. Either we believe him, or we don't. He didn't leave us any wiggle room for in-between, watered-down alternatives. One who claimed what Jesus claimed about himself couldn't be a good moral man or a prophet. That option isn't open to us, and Jesus never intended it to be.

C. S. Lewis, former professor at Cambridge University and once an agnostic, understood this issue clearly. He writes:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who

was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse.

Then Lewis adds:

You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.¹

Cambridge University professor F. J. A. Hort, who spent twenty-eight years in a critical study of the New Testament text, writes:

[Christ's] words were so completely parts and utterances of Himself, that they had no meaning as abstract statements of truth uttered by Him as a Divine oracle or prophet. Take away Himself as the primary (though not the ultimate) subject of every statement and they all fall to pieces.²

In the words of Kenneth Scott Latourette, historian of Christianity at Yale University:

It is not his teachings which make Jesus so remarkable, although these would be enough to give him distinction. It is a combination of the teachings with the man himself. The two cannot be separated.

Latourette concludes,

It must be obvious to any thoughtful reader of the Gospel records that Jesus regarded himself and his message as inseparable. He was a great teacher, but he was more. His teachings about the kingdom of God, about human conduct, and about God were important, but they could not be divorced from him without, from his standpoint, being vitiated.³

Jesus claimed to be God. His claim must be either true or false, and everyone should give it the same kind of consideration he expected of his disciples when he put the question to them: “Who do you say I am?” (Matthew 16:15, NLT). There are several alternatives.

First, consider that his claim to be God was false. If it were false, then we have only two alternatives. He either knew it was false, or he didn't know it was false. We will consider each possibility separately and examine the evidence for it.

WAS JESUS A LIAR?

If, when Jesus made his claims, he knew that he was not God, then he was lying and deliberately deceiving his followers. But if he was a liar, then he was also a hypocrite because he taught others to be honest whatever the cost. Worse than that, if he was lying, he was a demon because he told others to trust him for their eternal destiny. If he couldn't back up his claims and knew it, then he was unspeakably evil for deceiving his followers with such a false hope. Last, he would also be a fool because his claims to being God led to his crucifixion—claims he could have backed away from to save himself even at the last minute.

It amazes me to hear so many people say that Jesus was simply a good moral teacher. Let's be realistic. How could he be a great moral

teacher and knowingly mislead people at the most important point of his teaching—his own identity?

To conclude that Jesus was a deliberate liar doesn't coincide with what we know either of him or of the results of his life and teachings. Wherever Jesus has been proclaimed, we see lives change for the good, nations change for the better, thieves become honest, alcoholics become sober, hateful individuals become channels of love, unjust persons embrace justice.

William Lecky, one of Great Britain's most noted historians and a fierce opponent of organized Christianity, saw the effect of true Christianity on the world. He writes:

It was reserved for Christianity to present to the world an ideal which through all the changes of eighteen centuries has inspired the hearts of men with an impassioned love; has shown itself capable of acting on all ages, nations, temperaments, and conditions; has been not only the highest pattern of virtue, but the strongest incentive to its practice. . . . The simple record of these three short years of active life has done more to regenerate and soften mankind than all the disquisitions of philosophers and all the exhortations of moralists.⁴

Historian Philip Schaff says:

This testimony [that Jesus was God], if not true, must be downright blasphemy or madness. . . . Self-deception in a matter so momentous, and with an intellect in all respects so clear and so sound, is equally out of the question. How could he be an enthusiast or a madman who never lost the even balance of his mind, who sailed serenely over all the troubles and persecutions, as the sun above the clouds, who always returned the wisest answer to tempting questions, who calmly and deliberately

predicted his death on the cross, his resurrection on the third day, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the founding of his Church, the destruction of Jerusalem—predictions which have been literally fulfilled? A character so original, so complete, so uniformly consistent, so perfect, so human and set so high above all human greatness, can be neither a fraud nor a fiction. The poet, as has been well said, would in this case be greater than the hero. It would take more than a Jesus to invent a Jesus.⁵

Elsewhere Schaff gives convincing argument against Christ being a liar:

How in the name of logic, common sense, and experience, could an imposter—that is a deceitful, selfish, depraved man—have invented, and consistently maintained from the beginning to end, the purest and noblest character known in history with the most perfect air of truth and reality? How could he have conceived and carried out a plan of unparalleled beneficence, moral magnitude, and sublimity, and sacrificed his own life for it, in the face of the strongest prejudices of his people and age?⁶

If Jesus wanted to get people to follow him and believe in him as God, why did he go to the Jewish nation? Why go as a common carpenter in an undistinguished village in a country so small in size and population? Why go to a country that so thoroughly adhered to the concept of one God? Why didn't he go to Egypt, or even to Greece, where they already believed in various gods and various manifestations of them?

Someone who lived as Jesus lived, taught as Jesus taught, and died as Jesus died could not have been a liar. Let's look at other alternatives.

WAS JESUS A LUNATIC?

If we find it inconceivable that Jesus was a liar, then couldn't he actually have mistakenly thought himself to be God? After all, it's possible to be both sincere and wrong. But we must remember that for someone to mistakenly think himself God, especially in the context of a fiercely monotheistic culture, and then to tell others that their eternal destiny depended on believing in him, is no small flight of fancy but the delusions and ravings of an outright lunatic. Is it possible that Jesus Christ was deranged?

Today we would treat someone who believes himself to be God the same way we would treat someone who believes he is Napoleon. We would see him as deluded and self-deceived. We would lock him up so he wouldn't hurt himself or anyone else. Yet in Jesus we don't observe the abnormalities and imbalance that go along with such derangement. If he was insane, his poise and composure was nothing short of amazing.

Eminent psychiatric pioneers Arthur Noyes and Lawrence Kolb, in their *Modern Clinical Psychiatry* text, describe the schizophrenic as a person who is more autistic than realistic. The schizophrenic desires to escape from the world of reality. Let's face it—for a mere man to claim to be God would certainly be a retreat from reality.

In light of other things we know about Jesus, it's hard to imagine that he was mentally disturbed. Here is a man who spoke some of the most profound words ever recorded. His instructions have liberated many people in mental bondage. Clark H. Pinnock, professor emeritus of systematic theology at McMaster Divinity College, asks: "Was he deluded about his greatness, a paranoid, an unintentional deceiver, a schizophrenic? Again, the skill and depth of his teaching support the case only for his total mental soundness. If only we were as sane as he!"⁷ A student at a California university told me that his psychology professor had said in class that "all he has to do is pick up the Bible and

read portions of Christ's teaching to many of his patients. That's all the counseling they need."

Psychologist Gary R. Collins explains that Jesus

was loving but didn't let his compassion immobilize him; he didn't have a bloated ego, even though he was often surrounded by adoring crowds; he maintained balance despite an often demanding lifestyle; he always knew what he was doing and where he was going; he cared deeply about people, including women and children, who weren't seen as important back then; he was able to accept people while not merely winking at their sin; he responded to individuals based on where they were at and what they uniquely needed. All in all, I just don't see signs that Jesus was suffering from any known mental illness. . . . He was much healthier than anyone else I know—including me!⁸

Psychiatrist J. T. Fisher felt that Jesus' teachings were profound. He states:

If you were to take the sum total of all authoritative articles ever written by the most qualified of psychologists and psychiatrists on the subject of mental hygiene—if you were to combine them and refine them and cleave out the excess verbiage—if you were to take the whole of the meat and none of the parsley, and if you were to have these unadulterated bits of pure scientific knowledge concisely expressed by the most capable of living poets, you would have an awkward and incomplete summation of the Sermon on the Mount. And it would suffer immeasurably through comparison. For nearly two thousand years the Christian world has been holding in its hands the complete answer to its restless and fruitless

yearnings. Here . . . rests the blueprint for successful human life with optimism, mental health, and contentment.⁹

C. S. Lewis writes:

The historical difficulty of giving for the life, sayings and influence of Jesus any explanation that is not harder than the Christian explanation is very great. The discrepancy between the depth and sanity . . . of His moral teaching and the rampant megalomania which must lie behind His theological teaching unless He is indeed God has never been satisfactorily explained. Hence the nonChristian hypotheses succeed one another with the restless fertility of bewilderment.¹⁰

Philip Schaff reasons:

Is such an intellect—clear as the sky, bracing as the mountain air, sharp and penetrating as a sword, thoroughly healthy and vigorous, always ready and always self-possessed—liable to a radical and most serious delusion concerning his own character and mission? Preposterous imagination!¹¹

WAS JESUS LORD?

I cannot personally conclude that Jesus was a liar or a lunatic. The only other alternative is that he was—and is—the Christ, the Son of God, as he claimed. But in spite of the logic and evidence, many people cannot seem to bring themselves to this conclusion.

In *The Da Vinci Code* Dan Brown claims, “By officially endorsing Jesus as the Son of God, Constantine turned Jesus into a deity who existed beyond the scope of the human world, an entity whose power was unchallengeable.”¹² Novelist Brown wants people to believe the

idea that Christ's deity was invented at the Council of Nicea. Although discussed prominently in popular culture, the "fact" has been rejected by well over 99.9 percent of biblical scholars who study documented history. Here's why.

The New Testament itself provides the earliest evidence for the belief that Jesus is divine. Since these documents were composed in the first century just decades after the events surrounding Jesus, they predate the Council of Nicea by more than two centuries. While they were written by different people for a variety of purposes, one unmistakable theme they share is that Christ is God.

The ante-Nicene fathers provide additional support that Jesus was considered divine long before the Council of Nicea. The ante-Nicene fathers were early Christian thinkers who lived after the close of the New Testament period (c. 100), yet before the Council of Nicea (325). The ante-Nicene fathers included men such as Justin Martyr, Ignatius, and Irenaeus. There is no doubt that they understood Jesus to be divine. Consider some quotes from their ancient works:

Ignatius of Antioch (AD 110): "God incarnate . . . God Himself appearing in the form of man."¹³

Justin Martyr (AD 100–165): ". . . being the First-begotten Word of God, is even God."¹⁴

Irenaeus (AD 177): ". . . the Father is God and the Son is God; for He who is born of God is God."¹⁵

Melito of Sardis (circa AD 177): "He was man, yet He is God."

Probably the most convincing evidence that Jesus was considered divine before Nicea comes from non-Christian writers. The Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata (c. AD 170), the Roman philosopher Celsus

(c. 177), and the Roman governor Pliny the Younger (c. 112) make it clear that early Christians understood Jesus as divine. Pliny persecuted Christians because of their belief that Jesus was divine. Pliny acknowledged: “They had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god.”¹⁶

Given these facts, in addition to many more, the authors of *Reinventing Jesus* conclude: “To suggest that Constantine had the ability—or even the inclination—to manipulate the council into believing what it did not already embrace is, at best, a silly notion.”¹⁷ The evidence is clear: Jesus was believed to be divine long before the Council of Nicea.

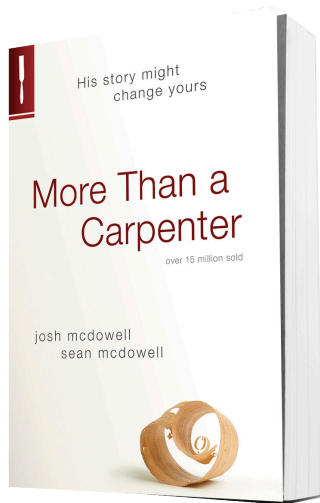
When I discuss the material in this chapter with most Jewish or Muslim people, their response is quite interesting. I share with them the claims Jesus made about himself and then put to them the options: Was he contained in the trilemma (liar, lunatic, or Lord)? When I ask if they believe Jesus was a liar, they give me a sharp “No!” Then I ask, “Do you believe he was a lunatic?” Their reply is, “Of course not.” “Do you believe he is God?” Before I can get a word in edgewise, I hear a resounding “Absolutely not!” Yet one has no more choices.

The issue with these three alternatives is not which is possible, for obviously all three are possible. Rather, the question is, “Which is most probable?” You cannot put him on the shelf merely as a great moral teacher or a prophet. That is not a valid option. He is either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord and God. You must make a choice. Your decision about Jesus must be more than an idle intellectual exercise. As the apostle John wrote, “These are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and”—more important—“that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name” (John 20:31, NLT).

The evidence is clearly in favor of Jesus as Lord.

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Since its original publication in 1977, *More than a Carpenter* has become a modern classic. It has sold over 15 million copies, been translated into dozens of languages, and introduced countless people to the real Jesus. You can read the rest of the book for more evidence about Jesus from the mind of a former skeptic.

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WHERE WAS GOD?

WHEN NATURAL DISASTER STRIKES, survivors and onlookers alike face questions about whether God is in control and how he could allow such tragedy to occur. Respected Bible teacher Erwin Lutzer offers answers about God's purposes, his goodness, and his ultimate plan. Without pretending to know the mind of God, Lutzer offers answers that assure us that God is still sovereign, and his plan is still best.



ERWIN W. LUTZER is senior pastor of The Moody Church in Chicago. A graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary and Loyola University, he is the author of numerous books, including the Gold Medallion Award winner *Hitler's Cross* and the bestseller *One Minute after You Die*. He is also a teacher on radio programs heard on more than 700 stations throughout the United States and the world, including *Songs in the Night*, *The Moody Church Hour*, and the daily feature *Running to Win*. He and his wife, Rebecca, live in the Chicago area and have three married children and seven grandchildren.

Can We Still Trust God?

Wars, poverty, natural disasters, and horrendous injustices exist on this planet. Can we trust a sovereign God who could, at any moment, put an end to such suffering? A God who could have prevented the catastrophes that have pounded the world throughout the centuries? A God who could have had Hitler die as an infant in his mother's arms?

An intellectual answer—even a true one—never satisfies the human heart. Grief is never removed when one is reminded of God's eternal and transcendent purposes. And yet we are encouraged to seek for answers, for as Ecclesiastes tells us, God has put “eternity in our hearts” (NIV).

ATHEISM'S DEAD END

At the outset, one point must be clarified: Atheists (or naturalists) have no right to ask us where God is when tragedy strikes. I've often heard the argument that if a God Who is omnipotent, omniscient, and loving existed, He would do away with evil and suffering. Since horrendous suffering exists, the atheist says, God must either be weak, unknowing, or sadistic. Since such a God does not commend our respect, atheism seems to be a more attractive alternative. Atheists therefore look about, see the misery millions endure, and ask sarcastically, “Where was God when the tsunami happened?” And they defy anyone to give an answer.

The question, coming from an atheist, is illegitimate and irrational. To ask the question is to assume the existence of God. If there were not a creator God—if we are but a complicated combination of atoms that

sprang into existence randomly—then the very idea of good and evil or better and best could not exist. After all, atheists believe that atoms have arranged themselves blindly according to haphazard patterns and whatever is, just *is*.

So if the atheist/naturalist asks, where was God in this disaster, he is assuming a moral framework that can only exist if God exists. Based on atheistic premises, there can be no spiritual substance such as soul or mind, only patterns of physical particles. Naturalists are in the unhappy position of having to maintain that matter can think, that matter can ask questions about which arrangement of matter is good and which is bad. Clearly, notions about good or evil cannot arise from atoms that existed in primordial slime.

Carefully considered, atheism is both contrary to rationality and defies the deepest longings of the human soul. C. S. Lewis makes the same point when he argues that only God can account for the moral law that exists in all of us. During his days as an atheist, Lewis argued against God because the universe appeared so cruel and unjust. Then he realized that his idea of justice presupposed a standard that was beyond himself.

Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too—for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my fantasies. Thus in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist—in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless—I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality—namely my idea of justice—was full of sense.¹

Lewis goes on to argue that the moral law is a better reflection of God than the universe itself. He points out that the intuitive knowledge that

we have of good and evil tells us more about God than nature does: “You find out more about God from the Moral Law than from the universe in general just as you find out more about man by listening to his conversation than by looking at a house he has built.”²

In an atheistic world, evil can never serve a higher purpose, and suffering can never be redeemed, for it can never lead to noble ends. Suicide would be attractive, for there would be no point in staying around to make this world a better place. Furthermore, in an atheistic world, the injustices of the world would just continue their senseless journey to nowhere.

A Jewish friend of mine, who is also an atheist, admitted that he felt some disquiet of spirit knowing that Hitler would never be judged for what he did. He has no hope that there will be a final judgment to set the record straight. He ruefully admitted that without eternity, the events of time can never be redeemed or made right.

Atheism satisfies neither the mind nor the heart. And yet atheists do ask questions about good and evil, for one reason: They also are created in the image of God and have a soul that can think. Ravi Zacharias says that a relativist may say that God has died, “but the question from his soul at a time like this reveals that he cannot kill Him completely.”³

“O Katrina have mercy on us!” a sign read in New Orleans before the hurricane hit. If we do not turn to the living God in a crisis, we will turn to the impersonal god of nature or we will manufacture some other deity in our own minds. Atheism simply cannot abide for long in the thoughtful human heart.

AN INTELLECTUAL ANSWER

So we return to this question: If God is all-powerful and has all knowledge, is He also *good*? Does He deserve our trust? If we answer yes—and I hope we do—we must affirm that there is a morally sufficient reason for God to allow (or ordain) the disasters we see, whether caused by

nature or human beings. If there were no higher purpose in these evils, the Almighty would be operating blindly, making the best of tragic events but unsure of His overall plan.

The Bible stands in stark opposition to Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury who wrote dismissively about the “vacuous words pouring out about the nature of God’s power or control, or about the consolations of belief in an afterlife or whatever. . . . Every single random, accidental death . . . should upset a faith bound up with comfort and ready answers.”⁴

Contrary to the archbishop, I believe we *should* speak about God’s power and control, and we console ourselves with the certainty of an afterlife. Although I agree that we should be wary about “ready answers,” I also believe that we should not have our faith upset by every random, accidental death. I must emphasize the point we discussed earlier: If natural disasters are out of God’s control, then my life and my future are out of God’s control. The weak God of modern liberalism is hardly able to speak comfort to those who seek it.

At this point, we must return to the question raised in the first chapter: Is this the best of all possible worlds? Remember, the philosopher Leibniz said that a good God would choose the best of all possible worlds, so why did He choose *this* world, with its suffering and despair? Can this really be the best of all possible worlds?

Viewed through a narrow lens, this most assuredly is *not* the best of all possible worlds. But if we saw everything from God’s viewpoint—if we could see the ultimate end of God’s purposes and His own glory—we would have to agree that His plan is right and good. This is not the best of all possible worlds, but from the standpoint of eternity, the best of all Architects chose the best of all possible blueprints. This does not mean that God is pleased with evil, but it does mean that He is pleased with how He will use it toward wise and good ends.

What would you do if you had God’s power for twenty-four hours? Of course we all answer that we would rid the world of poverty, wars,

and disasters of every type. We would put an end to all forms of evil and create a paradise for everyone. *If only!*

On the other hand, if we were also given God's wisdom, I'm convinced that we would leave things as they are! For our all-wise and all-powerful heavenly Father has a hidden agenda that makes sense out of it all. There is meaning in the madness.⁵

However—and this is important—if we wonder what God's ultimate, hidden purpose is in natural disasters, we can only say that He is relentless in the pursuit of His own glory (see Jeremiah 13:11; 2 Thessalonians 1:9-10). We've already acknowledged that God does allow us some insight into the divine mind, but let us humbly confess that we see only glimpses of the eternal purpose.

After years of studying the problem of reconciling the suffering of this world with God's mercy, I have concluded that there is no solution that will completely satisfy our minds, much less the mind of a skeptic. God's ways are "past finding out." He has simply not chosen to reveal all the pieces of the puzzle. *God is more inscrutable than we care to admit.*

After all the theological essays have been written and all of the debaters have become silent, we still do not understand. We can only stand in awe of this great mystery. John Stackhouse has written,

The God of predestination, the God of worldwide providence, the God who created all and sustains all and thus ultimately is responsible for all—this God has revealed to us only glimpses of the divine cosmic plan. God has not let us see in any comprehensive way the sense in suffering, the method in the madness. God has chosen, instead, to remain hidden in mystery.⁶

Yes, God has chosen to remain a mystery. In his book *On First Principles*, first-century theologian Origen described what Paul meant

when he wrote that God's judgments are "unsearchable" and His ways "unfathomable." Just read these words:

Paul did not say that God's judgments were hard to search out but that they could not be searched out at all. He did not say that God's ways were hard to find out but that they were impossible to find out. For however far one may advance in the search and make progress through an increasing earnest study, even when aided and enlightened in the mind by God's grace, he will never be able to reach the final goal of his inquiries.⁷

However, I believe strongly that it is not necessary for us to understand the hidden purposes of the Almighty in order to believe that such purposes exist. I also believe that someday we will be granted the ability to understand. "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12, NASB). We see the jumbled bottom of the tapestry right now; only God sees the pattern from above.

The New Testament faces realistically the pain and evil of this world, but assures us that the future will make sense of the past. "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18, NIV). In the future, the unseen will give meaning to that which is seen. Eternity will interpret what happened in time. Meanwhile *we live by promises, not explanations*.

A PERSONAL ANSWER

Where do we turn when the ambiguity of God's ways overwhelms us? Martin Luther, in pondering the mystery of God's ways, urges us to "flee the hidden God and run to Christ." Now of course, the "hidden God" and the God who was made flesh are one and the same; they are not separate divinities between whom we must choose.

But as Stackhouse points out, it is precisely because the two are one that Luther's advice works. He writes, "One must run away from the mysteries of God's providence about which we cannot know enough to understand (because God has revealed so little about them), and run toward Jesus Christ in whom we find God adequately revealed."⁸ Jesus assures us in His Word that He is for us and that nothing shall separate us from His love.

Look at the world and it might be hard to believe that God loves us and cares about us. At the very least, we could argue that God's attributes are ambiguous, at times caring, and at other times indifferent and callous. Based on a study of nature, we would not know whether God intended to punish us at the end of life or forgive us. Just read the history of philosophy and you will agree that no coherent idea of God can ever be formed on the basis of observation and experience.

If we want to discover whether God cares about His creation, we have to look beyond this world to His revelation. There we find hope that we could never discover on our own, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16, KJV).

In his book *The Silence of God*, Sir Robert Anderson wrestles with the apparent indifference of God to human pain and tragedy. After asking all the important *why* questions, he writes the following passage, which deserves a careful reading:

But of all the questions which immediately concern us, there is not one which the Cross of Christ has left unanswered. Men point to the sad incidents of human life on earth, and they ask, "Where is the love of God?" God points to that Cross as the unreserved manifestation of love so inconceivably infinite as to answer every challenge and silence all doubt forever. And that Cross is not merely the public proof of what God has accomplished; it is the earnest of all that He has promised.

The crowning mystery of God is Christ, for in Him “are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden.” And those hidden treasures are yet to be unfolded. It is the Divine purpose to “gather together in all things in Christ.” *Sin has broken the harmony of creation, but that harmony shall yet be restored by the supremacy of our now despised and rejected Lord*⁹ (italics added).

He says it was in the power of these truths that the martyrs died. Heaven was as silent then as it is now. Some reports say that when some Christian martyrs were marched to their death in France, they sang so loudly the authorities hired a band to drown out the sound of their hymns. No sights were seen, no voices heard, no deliverance granted. They looked in vain for some external proof that God was with them.

Speaking of similar martyrdoms, Anderson comments, “But with their spiritual vision focused upon Christ, the unseen realities of heaven filled their hearts, as they passed from a world that was not worthy of them to the home that God has prepared for them that love Him.”¹⁰ With their lives in jeopardy, they found comfort in Jesus.

Damaris Carbaugh sings:

*Christ in me, the hope of glory
Christ in me, the shelter from the storm
Should men of evil have their day,
Or should the earth's foundations sway,
None of these can take away the living Christ in me.*

Words and music by Marie Armenia.

© Penny Hill Publishing.

In Jesus, the curse of nature and the curse of humanity were borne so that we might be free from the debilitating effects of sin. God's answer to calamities is the Cross. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law

by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree’” (Galatians 3:13, NIV).

COPING WITH DOUBT

In order to illustrate the demands of faith, I’ve paraphrased a parable told by Basil Mitchell:

In a time of war in an occupied country, a member of the resistance meets a stranger one night who deeply impresses him. They spend the night together in conversation. The stranger affirms that he also is on the side of the resistance—indeed, he is in charge of it. He urges the young partisan to have faith in him—no matter what. The young man is impressed with the stranger and decides to believe in him.

The next day he sees the stranger fight on the side of the resistance, and he says to his friends, “See, the stranger is on our side.” The young soldier’s faith is vindicated.

But the following day the stranger is in the uniform of a policeman handing members of the resistance to the occupying power—to the enemy!

The young man’s friends murmur against him, insisting that the stranger could not be on their side, because he was seen helping the enemy. But the young partisan is undeterred, believing in the stranger no matter what.

Sometimes he requests help from the stranger and receives it; sometimes he asks for help and does not receive it. In times of such discouragement he affirms, “The stranger knows best.”

This ambiguous behavior on the part of the stranger causes the young man’s friends to ridicule his faith saying, “If that’s what you mean by being on our side, the sooner he goes over to the other side the better!” Now the young man faces

a dilemma: Does he conclude that the stranger is not on his side after all, or does he go on believing, no matter what?¹¹

We can learn two lessons from this parable. First, our continued belief is dependent on the meeting we have had with Christ. If, when we see Jesus, we see God close to us, God loving us, God forgiving our sin, then we will be able to keep believing even though we do not have a final answer to the question of suffering.

And so, the answer as to how much we believe depends on the extent of our friendship with the Stranger (Christ). The better we know Him, the more likely we are to keep trusting Him, even when His actions are confusing and it appears He is not on our side.

We will not judge His love for us by our circumstances but by His promises. “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39, NIV). To quote Stackhouse once more, “We can respond properly to evil in our lives because *we know that God is all-good and all-powerful because we know Jesus*”¹² (italics added).

Those of us who have come to know the Stranger are apt to believe His words of hope and comfort. To His disciples who were about to be bereft of their leader, and who would later die for their faith, Jesus gave this assurance: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going” (John 14:1-4, NIV).

This leads me to a second lesson from the parable: Questions about the mystery of evil are not solved in this life but in the next. You’ll recall that on some days it appeared as if the stranger was on the side of the

enemy and the conflict dragged on without resolution. But remember that God has all of eternity to explain to us (if He should so desire) the mystery of His ways. “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18, NIV).

Evil of all kinds is a problem for which God’s plan of salvation is the solution. Through the Incarnation, Jesus is a participant in our suffering, not a distant observer. God is not far from us, uncaring, unthinking, and disconnected. We have the confidence that God will eventually make right His fallen creation. We should not affirm God’s control over nature divorced from God’s final triumph over this world and over history itself. Both must be believed.

Yes, ultimately the strength of our faith will be dependent on the One in whom we have come to trust. And we can face the uncertainty and trials of life with optimism, helping others along the way. “We can . . . know Jesus, and in his embrace, we can in turn embrace the suffering world and offer it a sure hope.”¹³

Why doesn’t our heavenly Father care for us as a good earthly father would—responding to our requests and shielding us from the plagues of this fallen world? The answer is that our heavenly Father loves us *more* than our earthly father could possibly love us, but He has a different set of priorities. We value health, and so does our heavenly Father; but He values our faith even more. He delights in providing food for us, but He delights even more when we trust Him—though we are hungry and even starving to death. And yes, He delights when we trust Him even when He seems to be absent when we need Him the most.

If I may quote C. S. Lewis once more as he imagines the lead demon Screwtape saying to the demonic underling Wormwood, “Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a

human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will [God's will], looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."¹⁴

Even without a trace of God in the world, the man still obeys! What if God wanted to set up a series of circumstances to prove that some people will go on trusting Him even in the midst of pain, and in the absence of clear explanations? What if our faith means so much to the Almighty that He is willing that we suffer if only to prove our devotion and love even when so much in the world counts against His love and care?

The children weeping on CNN after they've lost their parents in an earthquake—that is not the last chapter in the history of this world. Skeptics are unconvinced, but those of us who have met the Stranger are convinced that He both knows and cares. We are also convinced that the last chapters of the book He is writing will someday clarify the meaning of the earlier smudged paragraphs.

You might remember the story about a blotch of black paint that was spilled randomly on a canvas. A creative artist decided to paint a beautiful landscape working the black paint into the picture. What appeared to be destructive became part of a larger, more perfect design. In the end, every injustice will be answered, suffering will be redeemed, and God's glory will be displayed.

After John the Baptist was thrown into prison, he began to have second thoughts as to whether or not Christ was the Messiah. For one thing, the Old Testament predicted that when the Messiah came, the prisoners would be freed (see Isaiah 61:1). John made the same error as those who believe God is obligated to heal us today: He misinterpreted the timing and application of some of God's promises.

As long as John sat in the dungeon, it seemed that Christ was reneging on the promises of Isaiah. And I'm sure he reflected on how unfair it was that he who had played such a vital part in Christ's earthly ministry should be so summarily punished for taking a righteous stand against

Herod's sinful marriage. So John sent a delegation to Christ to pointedly ask: "Are you the Expected One, or shall we look for someone else?" (Matthew 11:3, NASB). He was polite, but he was hurting badly. Jesus had disappointed him.

In response, Jesus reminded John that miracles were being done and then added, "And blessed is he who does not take offense at Me" (v. 6, NASB). We could paraphrase, *blessed is the person who is not upset with the way I run My business.*

Blessed is the person who does not say, "After the suffering I saw as a result of an earthquake, I will never believe in God again." Blessed is the person who does not say, "I am never going to trust God because He did not keep me from injustice and abuse."

Blessed is the person who understands that we must trust God's heart when we cannot understand His hand; blessed is the person who knows that we must stand in awe in the presence of the mystery of God's purposes. Blessed is the person who keeps on believing no matter what. Blessed is the person who lets God be God.

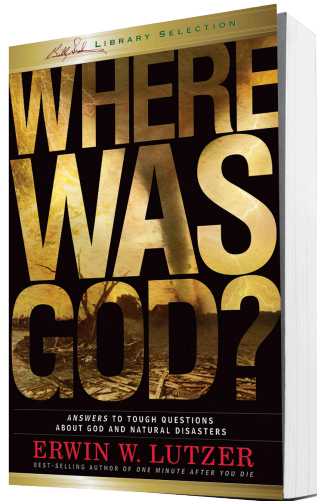
Remember, birds sing not because they understand, but because they have a song.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you believe that God is worthy of our trust? Why or why not?
2. What would you do if you had God's powers—and wisdom—for twenty-four hours?
3. Are there times when you have doubted either the existence or goodness of God? Discuss.
4. Why is it that when life seems most unstable, people often turn to God for comfort?

ENDNOTES

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3. Ravi Zacharias, "The Silence of Christmas and the Scream of the Tsunami," *Just Thinking* (Winter 2005), 1.
4. As quoted in the editorial, "Tsunamis and Birth Pangs," *Christianity Today* (February 2005), 28.
5. I'm indebted to J. M. Monsabre for this idea, as quoted in *12,000 Religious Quotations*, Frank Mead, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 179.
6. John Stackhouse, *Can God Be Trusted?—Faith and the Challenge of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 103.
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9. Sir Robert Anderson, *The Silence of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1952), 150–51.
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13. As quoted in the editorial, "Tsunamis and Birth Pangs," *Christianity Today* (February 2005), 28. Found at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/002/4.28.html>; last accessed April 25, 2006.
14. C. S. Lewis, *Paved with Good Intentions* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 38.



In the wake of loss and disaster, we often struggle to understand how a God who is all-powerful and all-knowing can also be considered good and loving. Read more from pastor and teacher Erwin W. Lutzer as he tackles this tough subject head-on, offering real answers as well as comfort and hope.

<https://www.tyndale.com/p/where-was-god/463/e-book>

THE DELUSION OF DISBELIEF

THE LAST FEW YEARS HAVE seen a great assault on faith, with an influx of books denouncing religious belief. While attacks on faith are not new, what is notable about these books—several of which have hit the bestseller charts—is their contention that belief in God is not only deluded but “dangerous to society.”

In *The Delusion of Disbelief*, former *Time* senior correspondent and bestselling author David Aikman offers an articulate, reasoned response to four writers at the forefront of the anti-faith movement: Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens. Aikman shines a light on the arguments of these “evangelists of atheism,” skillfully exposing their errors and inconsistencies. He explains what appears to motivate atheists and their followers; encourages Christians to look closely at what they believe; arms readers with powerful arguments in response to critics of faith; and exposes the social problems that atheism has caused throughout the world.



DR. DAVID AIKMAN is an award-winning print and broadcast journalist, a bestselling author, and a foreign affairs commentator based in the Washington, DC, area. His wide-ranging professional achievements include a 23-year career at *Time* magazine, serving for several years as bureau chief in Eastern Europe, Beijing, and Jerusalem. His reporting has spanned the globe, and he has covered all the major historical events of the time. Dr. Aikman was educated at Oxford University and holds a PhD from the University of Washington in Russian and Chinese history. He is the author of many books, including *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the World Balance of Power*, *Billy Graham: His Life and Influence*, *Qi (Awaken the Dragon)*, and *A Man of Faith: The Spiritual Journey of George W. Bush*. He is professor of history and writer in residence at Patrick Henry College. He is married and lives near Lincoln, Virginia.

They Don't Like God

*There was a young man who said, "God
Must think it exceedingly odd
If he finds that this tree
Continues to be
When there's no one about in the Quad."*

Reply:

*Dear Sir, Your astonishment's odd:
I am always about in the Quad.
And that's why this tree
Will continue to be,
Since observed by Yours faithfully, God*

A LIMERICK BY RONALD KNOX

This witty limerick by English theologian and priest Ronald Knox (who incidentally attended Balliol, the same Oxford college that both Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens attended) sums up the philosophy of Bishop George Berkeley (1685–1753). Berkeley was one of the eighteenth century's most famous British philosophers and was known for the theory of "immaterialism," which holds that there are no material objects, only the mind and ideas. Others have called this view "subjective idealism."

Berkeley's philosophy recurred in the works of one of the most famous French philosophers of the past half century, Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), who died in March 2007. One of Baudrillard's most famous (or infamous) works was his 1991 book, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, in which he asserted that what appears to be reality to most people is actually only “simulacra,” that is, various accumulated appearances of reality. Such was the 1991 Gulf War, for example, since it had no decisive political impact either in the United States or Iraq and was notable for the many TV newsclips of video-game-like footage showing “smart” bombs in combat.

Much more controversial was Baudrillard's 2002 book, *The Spirit of Terrorism: Requiem for the Twin Towers*, in which he suggested that the terrorist attacks of September 11 were largely a “dark fantasy” conjured up by the media. Though he acknowledged that the terrorists had indeed committed the atrocity, Baudrillard said it was simply the culmination of the savagery of modern bureaucratic living. This prompted one critic to write: “It takes a real demonic genius to brush off the slaughter of thousands on the grounds that they were suffering from severe *ennui* brought on by boring modern architecture.”¹

Baudrillard was also famous for another comment, one that is far more pertinent to our current discussion than the reality—or not—of the September 11 attacks. He said: “God exists, but I don't believe in him,” which prompted Dawkins to coin a rather witty word for this sort of French philosophical pretentiousness: *francophonyism*. The put-down aside, Baudrillard's assertion can be usefully misquoted here to sum up the view that the Four Horsemen have of the Almighty: “God doesn't exist, and actually, I really don't like him either.”

The overwhelming impression one gets from reading Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens is that they are asserting the non-existence of someone they sort of know—or at least think they know *about*—but whom they dislike venomously (especially true in the case of Dawkins), clandestinely admire (Daniel Dennett), or simply would

not care to become acquainted with if he did exist (Hitchens and Sam Harris). So let's take a look at what it is about this God who doesn't exist that has gotten these four authors so worked up that each has gone to the considerable trouble and effort of writing hundreds of pages attacking him.

Dawkins is the most impassioned, and he positively quivers with rage in *The God Delusion* when talking about the Almighty. "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction;" he thunders at the opening of his second chapter, "jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully." Having warmed up to a suitably feverish pitch, Dawkins winds up his opening paragraph for the prosecution of God with a zinger from Thomas Jefferson: "The Christian God is a being of terrific character—cruel, vindictive, capricious and unjust." (Here it must be noted that the eighteenth-century meaning of *terrific* was "terrifying" rather than "great" or "wonderful.") As for that word *capricious*, since Jefferson used it first, then Dawkins *must* be right.²

But then, beginning the second paragraph, Dawkins has a spasm of self-doubt. "It is unfair to attack such an easy target," he concedes magnanimously. "The God Hypothesis should not stand or fall with its most unlovely instantiation, Yahweh, nor his insipidly opposite Christian face, 'Gentle Jesus meek and mild' . . . I am not attacking the particular qualities of Yahweh, or Jesus, or Allah, or any other specific god such as Baal, Zeus or Wotan."³ (Oh? But didn't he just eviscerate Yahweh?) In case anyone still is unclear as to the targets of Dawkins's wrath, he summarizes himself a few pages later: "I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented."⁴ His target may be "all gods," but

he keeps circling back to Yahweh. For Dawkins, the real villain is the deity of Judaism and Christianity.

How does he explain the problem of evil theologically? “Simply postulate a nasty god—such as the one who stalks every page of the Old Testament,” he says.⁵ Harris holds the same view: “The God of Abraham is a ridiculous fellow—capricious, petulant, and cruel—and one with whom a covenant is little guarantee of health or happiness.”⁶

Dawkins goes further and personalizes the issue: “The God of the Bible is a real s—. . .”—well, that word should not appear in a family-friendly publication. Furthermore, since both Christianity and Islam anchor their own authenticity in the Old Testament narrative of patriarchs, kings, and prophets, Dawkins asserts—for the purposes of demolishing monotheism—that “all three Abrahamic religions can be treated as indistinguishable.”⁷ Let’s consider briefly the awkward fact that it has been *only* in countries with a system of government profoundly influenced by Judaism or Christianity that monotheism can even be openly criticized at all; such criticism certainly is not tolerated in any country where Islam is dominant. If Dawkins had even let on in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan that he was merely *thinking* about writing *The God Delusion*, we would be reading his obituary now and not his book. Dawkins’s inability or unwillingness to grasp how profoundly differently each of the three “Abrahamic” religious traditions evolved is perplexing, especially coming as it does from someone whose entire career has been spent studying evolution. He is loath to credit Christianity or Judaism with promoting tolerance or freedom of thought; yet, has anything even remotely atheist been published in any majority-Muslim country in the past two hundred years?

Dennett, by contrast, never gets as personal in his antitheistic campaign. In fact, he seems rather to admire the God of the Old Testament. “Part of what makes Jehovah such a fascinating participant in stories of the Old Testament,” he writes, “is His kinglike jealousy and pride, and His great appetite for praise and sacrifices.”⁸ Unlike his three fellow

Horsemen, Dennett—rather elegantly, in fact—refrains from the bombastic tirades that form the bulk of their attack on Old Testament Jewish beliefs and customs.

Not surprisingly, it is Dawkins who also leads the assault on events in the Old Testament. He provides a running commentary on barbarous goings-on, including a curiously detailed evocation of the story of Lot's two daughters getting him drunk so they could become pregnant by him (Genesis 19), as well as the events involving Lot and the citizens of Sodom (Genesis 19), Abraham being commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22), Jephthah and his daughter (Judges 11), Aaron and the golden calf (Exodus 32), Moses and the Midianites (Numbers 25), and the Israelites and Jericho (Joshua 6). Dawkins denounces it all from the perspective of a twenty-first-century middle-class suburbanite: Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac is "child abuse" and the "unfortunate Midianites" were "the victims of genocide in their own country."⁹ Dawkins has no compunctions at all about passing judgment on degrees of sinfulness of these Old Testament events. The wickedness of "flirting with rival gods," for instance, is deemed "a trifling sin, compared to, say, offering your daughter for a gang rape."¹⁰ The old man of Gibeah who provides hospitality to a visiting Levite and his concubine is, Dawkins declares, "misogynistic" when he tries to assuage the criminal lusts of the young men of Gibeah by giving them his own daughter and the visitor's concubine.¹¹

Dawkins is after a larger point, though, and isn't merely highlighting those episodes of the Old Testament that seem cruel and even barbaric to the modern sensibility. "The point," he says, "is that, whether true or not, the Bible is held up to us as the source of our morality." Yet in this handbook of morality, Dawkins continues, the story of the destruction of Jericho and the invasion of the Promised Land are, in his view, "morally indistinguishable from Hitler's invasion of Poland, or Saddam Hussein's massacres of the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs."¹² He suggests that those who use the Bible as a moral guidebook don't even know all

the sins for which, according to Leviticus 20, the perpetrator must be put to death: “cursing your parents; committing adultery; making love to your stepmother or your daughter-in-law; homosexuality; marrying a woman and her daughter; bestiality (and, to add injury to insult, the unfortunate beast is to be killed too).” Dawkins adds, “You also get executed, of course, for working on the sabbath: the point is made again and again throughout the Old Testament.”¹³

Harris gets on a similar roll when attacking the Old Testament. “The idea that the Bible is a perfect guide to morality is simply astounding, given the contents of the book,” he writes, citing some of the same death-penalty sins as Dawkins. He then devotes an entire page to an excerpt of Deuteronomy 13 about the necessity of putting to death anyone, whether he is a close family member or simply a member of the community, who seeks to entice the Israelites to worship foreign gods.¹⁴ But wait; it gets worse. “Many Christians,” Harris says, “believe that Jesus did away with all this barbarism in the clearest terms imaginable and delivered a doctrine of pure love and toleration. He didn’t,” insists Harris. “In fact, at several points in the New Testament, Jesus can be read to endorse the entirety of Old Testament law.”¹⁵ He then quotes Jesus saying, “For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:18-20, rsv).

Indeed, Harris is right that Jesus did not overturn the Old Testament law, but he has taken the two verses out of context and missed the greater point that Jesus was making in the entire passage, which begins in the previous verse: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill

them” (NIV). Without that verse, the larger message is lost, which is that Jesus is declaring his intention to fulfill every jot and tittle of the Old Testament law and that, as Messiah, he would perfect the law. That being the case, then it only stands to reason that rather than invalidating the law, Jesus would endorse it so that he can build upon it, just as the U.S. Constitution has amendments that improve upon the original document. The amendments do not negate the Constitution any more than Jesus’ teachings invalidated the Old Testament law. Rather, where the Old Testament law prohibits murder, for instance, Jesus in Matthew 5:21-22 prohibits anger; where the law forbids adultery, Jesus forbids lust, in Matthew 5:27-28.¹⁶

Hitchens’s take on the barbarities of the Old Testament is entirely different from Harris’s. He simply doesn’t believe that any of it is historical fact. With customary panache, Hitchens dismisses it all: “It goes without saying that none of the gruesome, disordered events described in Exodus ever took place.”¹⁷ So rest easy, Sam and Richard, *none of it ever happened*. The last to join your gang assures us it’s so.

As for the Bible’s precepts, Hitchens is confident that they have long since been outdated by the cultural progress mankind has made since biblical times. He explains sarcastically: “The Bible may, indeed does, contain a warrant for trafficking in humans, for ethnic cleansing, for slavery, for bride-price, and for indiscriminate massacre, but we are not bound by any of it because it was put together by crude, uncultured human mammals.”¹⁸ (Hitchens has a peculiar habit in his writing of referring to people, from Japan’s Emperor Hirohito to North Korean ruler Kim Il Sung, as “mammals.” One reviewer described it as “a rhetorical tic.”)

For Hitchens, it is the New Testament that most irritates, not the Old. No surprise that he calls the chapter of *God Is Not Great* dealing with this part of the Christian Bible “The ‘New’ Testament Exceeds the Evil of the ‘Old’ One.” Hitchens revs up the same degree of indignation at the New Testament that Hawkins delivered at high volume

against the Old Testament. Unfortunately, Hitchens, for all his literary learnedness and broad general knowledge of world events, is not exactly a scholar in New Testament hermeneutics, archaeology, culture, or textual criticism. In fact, he's completely out of his depth. So to whom does he turn for what he claims is an "irrefutably" accurate summation of the New Testament documents? Why, to a fellow-journalist, satirist, and atheist: the late H. L. Mencken (1880–1956).

Rather than choosing someone with respected academic credentials in biblical scholarship, Hitchens apparently thinks that Mencken is qualified to be an authority on the New Testament simply because of his well-known, vituperative animosity toward the fundamentalists of his day. And so he quotes Mencken declaring, "The simple fact is that the New Testament, as we know it, is a helter-skelter accumulation of more or less discordant documents, some of them probably of respectable origin but others palpably apocryphal, and that most of them, the good along with the bad, show unmistakable signs of having been tampered with." Hitchens alleges that Mencken's views and those of eighteenth-century freethinker Tom Paine "have been borne out by later biblical scholarship."¹⁹ This bold claim of Hitchens, however, is supported by only a single source: the agnostic New Testament critic Bart Ehrman. Such a citation can hardly be considered representative of the body of "later biblical scholarship."

One more point needs to be made here, though, about Hitchens's choice of Mencken as his voice of authority on the New Testament. In another part of his book, Hitchens refers to Mencken far more critically, saying that he's "too keen on Nietzsche," advocates social Darwinism and eugenics, and is "unpardonably indulgent" in his review of Adolf Hitler's manifesto and autobiography *Mein Kampf*. Though Hitchens doesn't mention it in *God Is Not Great*, he surely knows that Mencken was outspokenly anti-Semitic and that his diaries, published only in 1989, long after his death, were splattered with derogatory racist slurs toward both Jews and African Americans.

Having cited as an authority on the New Testament this notorious anti-Semite, Hitchens in the following paragraph turns his guns on the actor/producer Mel Gibson. The charge? *Anti-Semitism*. His poisonous characterization of Gibson would be startling to anyone not familiar with Hitchens's approach to opposition. In true Leninist fashion (Hitchens, after all, was indeed a Trotskyite at one point), he hurls at anyone he dislikes or who disagrees with him every destructive epithet a literary mind can seize on. Thus Gibson is "an Australian fascist and ham actor" who belongs to a "crackpot and schismatic Catholic sect" that Hitchens describes as "explicitly anti-Semitic." Of course, the real target of Hitchens's ire is Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, which he says "sought tirelessly to lay the blame for the Crucifixion upon the Jews."²⁰ The movie was a huge commercial success and was, for millions of viewers, a profoundly moving depiction of the suffering of Jesus in his final hours of life. Its very popularity must have infuriated Hitchens.

In fairness to Hitchens, though, the charge of anti-Semitism against Gibson is not without basis. In the early morning of July 28, 2006, police on the Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu, California, pulled Gibson over for erratic driving and charged him with driving under the influence of alcohol, to which Gibson pled guilty. While he was being taken into custody, though, Gibson hurled some ugly, anti-Semitic slurs at the arresting officer, who indeed was Jewish. Gibson was universally criticized (and rightly so) for his outburst and later apologized profusely and repeatedly. (The Anti-Defamation League, which campaigns against anti-Semitism, rejected an apology by Gibson as "unremorseful," but later accepted a second, more effusive apology from him.)

Also in fairness to Hitchens, it should be noted that some Jewish organizations (as well as some Christian church groups) *did* object to *The Passion of the Christ* because they felt it portrayed the Jews as responsible for crucifying Jesus. (Many critics, however, including some Jewish critics, did not see it that way and thought the Romans came off

as the major culprits.) In his diatribe against Gibson, Hitchens seems to have ignored an important difference between his hero, Mencken, and Gibson: Gibson publicly apologized for his anti-Semitic outburst; Mencken went to his grave an unrepentant bigot.

As the overview thus far of Dawkins's, Harris's, and Hitchens's views on the Bible has shown, one of the principal tactics of the New Atheists in their attack on God is to point to all the examples of cruelty that can be found in the Old Testament and thus discredit the Bible as far as possible in moral terms. That's harder to do with the New Testament, though, because it's well-known even by atheists that Jesus never killed or injured anybody, and, furthermore, that he went to his execution without resisting the authorities or instructing his disciples to oppose them. The most that can be made of a very weak case is to allege, as Harris does, that Jesus was endorsing in his teaching all of the barbarities of the Old Testament, or that the New Testament documents are so muddled and contradictory that none of the traditional Jesus story can really be relied upon anyway. That's a tack that Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris all try. But serious biblical scholars suggest an entirely different approach.

The Four Horsemen don't just want to depict Jewish and Christian traditional beliefs as cruel or self-contradictory, though. They want to lay the charge that anyone, at any time, who has subscribed to these beliefs has either engaged in great wickedness or has been at risk of being provoked to do so by those beliefs. Harris, interestingly, devotes much more time in *The End of Faith* to denouncing Islamic zealotry than he does to the same danger posed by Christianity or Judaism; in so doing, he makes points that would hardly be contested by any Christian or Jewish readers. Suicide terrorism by Islamists, after all, has become a sad part of the American and global consciousness since September 11, 2001.

Harris, however, takes an odd tack that has been strongly criticized even by reviewers sympathetic to the atheist position. He argues—and

Dawkins seems to agree—that even moderate believers in any religion are dangerous, because the moderates provide legitimacy for their truly extreme vicious coreligionists. In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Harris says: “Liberal and moderate Christians will not always recognize themselves in the ‘Christian’ I address . . . It is my hope, however, that they will also begin to see that the respect they demand for their own religious beliefs gives shelter to extremists of all faiths.”²¹ This thesis is developed at great length in *The End of Faith*, in which Harris points out the great dangers that expanding Islam has created for civilized life in the world.

Hitchens, of course, makes his position abundantly clear right on the cover of *God Is Not Great*. The subtitle says it all: *How Religion Poisons Everything*. Hitchens cannot bring himself to credit any religion, in any culture, at any time, with having a positive influence on humankind. Great works of Christian music, sculpture, literature—Bach’s *Mass in B Minor* or his *St. Matthew Passion*, the Hagia Sophia church in Istanbul, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*—or the magnificent architectural achievements of all the great religions are breezily dismissed as merely the results of civilizational and cultural advances that have nothing at all to do with faith. As he puts it, “When we read of the glories of ‘Christian’ devotional painting and architecture, or ‘Islamic’ astronomy and medicine, we are talking about advances of civilization and culture . . . that have as much to do with ‘faith’ as their predecessors had to do with human sacrifice and imperialism.”²² It takes a special kind of intellectual perversity, and indeed intellectual dishonesty, to make the claim that none of the great cultural achievements of the entire human race had *anything at all* to do with the religious sentiments of their creators. Has religion failed to create anything noble in the entire history of mankind? In the next sentence of his book, Hitchens reminds us that some of the purported religiously motivated creators may secretly have been atheists. So indeed they may have been, and indeed some probably were. But does the religious skepticism of a small minority of creative

geniuses in the fields of religious art, music, literature, and architecture render invalid the faith convictions of the vast majority of the others? If Dawkins had an Anglo-Saxon equivalent of “francophonyism,” it should be applied to this assertion by Hitchens. It’s rather unlikely that any of the other Four Horsemen—as we shall see—feel this way.

Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris do, however, share a common view when they point out some of the historical evils that can be laid squarely at the feet of people of faith, including, of course, Christians. Even the most devout religious believer has to agree that many outrages and barbarities in human history were religiously motivated in some way or other. To name the most obvious: the Crusades (chiefly because, on the way to Jerusalem and on their arrival there to *defend* the Christian holy places against Muslim persecution, “soldiers of the [Catholic] church” committed outrages against Jewish and Muslim communities) and the fifteenth-century Spanish Inquisition; the Roman Catholic persecution of the early Protestants (especially in France) in the sixteenth century and the subsequent English Protestant persecution of Roman Catholics; and spasms of anti-Semitism throughout Christian history. Christians must acknowledge all of them and, when possible, apologize for them.

Our own times are not without their examples of religious belief gone mad: the murderous clashes between Hindus and Muslims in South Asia and between Hindus and Buddhists in Sri Lanka; the bombings and killings in Northern Ireland by Catholics against Protestants, and vice versa; the sectarian religious warfare in Lebanon and Iraq; the ugly, religion-based ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. Hitchens luridly—even lovingly—documents his own experiences in some of the world’s hot spots where sectarian violence has, indeed, been extreme. He even tells readers about instances of religious venom in places where the centrality of religion to the violence is not widely known. For example, few probably know what a key role Buddhism played in the aggression of Japanese militarism during World War II. Hitchens quotes the Japanese Buddhist leadership of the time, declaring, “We now have no choice but

to exercise the benevolent forcefulness of ‘killing one in order that many may live’ (*issatsu tasho*). This is something which Mahayana Buddhism approves of only with the greatest of seriousness.”²³

Hitchens, Dawkins, and Harris also focus on the more recent iniquities of Islamic rage, including the violence that broke out in countries around the world and left at least 139 people dead after a Danish newspaper ran cartoons of Islam’s prophet Muhammed, terrorist violence, and suicide bombings on buses in Israel, as well as Islamic terrorism in Spain, Morocco, India, Indonesia, and Britain. Few would disagree with Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris about the link between religious fanaticism and these violent acts. Hitchens, however, goes further and is as extreme as the real religious extremists themselves in his rhetoric against all religious people. While he does not advocate violence of any kind against people of faith, nor, he says, would he support laws suppressing religious freedom, the extremist streak to Hitchens’s discussion of religion seems to border on the pathological. His vicious characterization of Mel Gibson, who did indeed make ugly anti-Semitic comments for which he later apologized, is just one example. Here’s an illustrative collection of the religious (and nonreligious) people Hitchens also skewers: St. Augustine, one of the most important church fathers of Western Christianity, is “a self-centered fantasist”; John Calvin, who developed the Reformed theology of Protestantism, is called “a sadist and a torturer and a killer”; the renowned Christian apologist and writer C. S. Lewis is “pathetic”; British journalist and late-in-life convert to Christianity Malcolm Muggeridge is deemed “silly”; and French Enlightenment writer and philosopher Voltaire is “ludicrous.”

The religious figure who gets the worst of it, though, is Mother Teresa, and Hitchens is joined by Dawkins and Harris in some truly sharp personal attacks on her. This is old ground for Hitchens, whose 1995 book, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*, is a full-bore attack on the Nobel Peace Prize-winning nun. Hitchens is proud of his distasteful and sophomoric title, because he says it is a

triple entendre, as though the achievement of verbal cleverness always excuses a sneering sexual innuendo. In *God Is Not Great*, Hitchens calls her “an ambitious Albanian nun,” but in *The Missionary Position* he is nastier, describing Mother Teresa as “the ghoul of Calcutta,” “dangerous,” “sinister,” “fanatical,” “an obscurantist,” and “a demagogue.”²⁴

The basic material for the book was acquired for a BBC documentary called *Hell’s Angel: Mother Teresa of Calcutta*. The documentary—and the book—noted that Mother Teresa had accepted donations from some rather shady sources, such as Haitian dictator “Papa Doc” Duvalier and American financier Charles Keating, who was convicted of fraud. Hitchens also criticized her for hobnobbing with some unpleasant political dictators in the Communist world, notably East German leader Erich Honecker and Albania’s Maoist demagogue, Enver Hoxha. He could have added that when she arrived in South Africa on a visit before apartheid was abolished, she apparently didn’t know that this system of racial segregation gave a white minority regime the right to rule over the black African majority. The documentary rounded up some disgruntled former volunteers for the Missionaries of Charity, the order Mother Teresa established, to tell unflattering stories about their standards of medicine and hygiene.

Mother Teresa was certainly naïve politically. Perhaps she was also, as Hitchens alleges, “cunning,” in that she knew how to get financial support by appealing to the troubled consciences of powerful and wealthy people. No doubt the Missionaries of Charity have been negligent in disclosing details of their finances. But to point to these shortcomings in an attempt to negate Mother Teresa’s life’s work among the poorest of the poor of Calcutta and the rest of the world is totally missing the huge—and obvious—point. And that is that Mother Teresa literally picked up people abandoned to die on the streets and gave them a place to spend their last few days or hours on this earth in peace and dignity. In the early years, she sometimes used wheelbarrows and personally

carted desperately ill people to local hospitals, where she simply refused to budge until they were treated.

A former leftist colleague of Hitchens said caustically of Hitchens's criticisms of Mother Teresa: "Between the two of them, my sympathies were with Mother Teresa. If you were sitting in rags in a gutter in Calcutta, who would be more likely to give you a bowl of soup?"²⁵

It's no surprise that Dawkins and Harris dutifully repeat Hitchens's criticisms of Mother Teresa, as though the fact that a fellow-atheist has already picked on the Albanian nun opens the doors for atheists-in-waiting to do so as well. On the basis of Hitchens's book, Dawkins describes Mother Teresa as "sanctimoniously hypocritical" and having "cock-eyed judgment" (for saying that "the greatest destroyer of peace is abortion").²⁶ Harris quotes Hitchens on Mother Teresa's identification with poverty, and speaks approvingly of his "characteristic bluntness" in disparaging it. But Harris at least has the decency to admit the obvious, that "there is no denying that Mother Teresa was a great force for compassion."²⁷

The oddest, and surely most intellectually indefensible, aspect of Hitchens's entire book is his refusal to concede a grain of religious conviction or authenticity to people he admires as humanitarians but who happened to be people motivated profoundly by their Christian faith. Hitchens admires greatly, as well he might, German Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), who was hanged by the Nazis. According to Hitchens, Bonhoeffer was executed because "he refused to collude with them."²⁸ That's just Hitchens's lazy interpretation of a far more complex situation, an interpretation that completely ignores Bonhoeffer's faith.

Bonhoeffer was hanged by the Nazis in the prison of Flossenberg just three weeks before the end of World War II because of his connection with anti-Hitler elements in the German military intelligence, or *Abwehr*. He had been arrested in April 1943 after funds to help Jews escape to Switzerland were traced back to him. When a plot to

assassinate Hitler was foiled, Bonhoeffer's fate was sealed because the conspirators were all associates of his. In essence, Bonhoeffer was hanged because he was believed to be connected with the plot to murder Hitler.

Hitchens explains Bonhoeffer's defiance of Hitler and his formidable courage during imprisonment as stemming from "nebulous humanism" and not from faith. After all, he asserts, "Religion spoke its last intelligible or noble or inspiring words a long time ago: either that or it mutated into an admirable but nebulous humanism."²⁹ And how was this "nebulous humanism" evident in the last few hours of Bonhoeffer's life? Ten years later, the camp doctor at Flossenberg, who had witnessed the behavior of all of the condemned prisoners of the Nazis on the day before each was executed, wrote this of Bonhoeffer:

Through the half-open door in one room . . . , I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer.³⁰

After describing the courage and composure Bonhoeffer exhibited at his hanging, the doctor wrote, "In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."³¹ Later in the book, Hitchens grudgingly admits that "many Christians gave their lives to protect their fellow creatures in this midnight of the century." Then, quite incredibly, he trivializes their faith, their conscience, and their courage, dismissing it all with the snide observation that it "is statistically almost negligible" that they were following "orders from any priesthood."³² By this he means that unless a person is obeying the orders of his priest when he acts courageously, the faith component of his life is irrelevant. Let's see now, it's virtually impossible for any person of faith in any age or any circumstance to demonstrate courage unless ordered to do so by a priest, right? So

many examples of Christians acting with great courage without a priest in sight can be found throughout history that it is quite amazing that Hitchens, despite being very well read, seems entirely ignorant of them.

An excellent example is Bonhoeffer's fellow German contemporary Helmuth James von Moltke (1907–1945) who, like Bonhoeffer, paid with his life for resistance to the Nazis. Unlike Bonhoeffer, von Moltke, the scion of a distinguished Prussian military family, took part in no plots against Hitler. He was hanged by the Nazis purely and simply because of his faith; a kangaroo-court trial convicted him of treason based on his Christian beliefs. In his final letter to his wife, in January 1945, he rejoiced that he was not involved in the same putsch against Hitler in which Bonhoeffer was implicated. The reason for this? If he was going to be executed, he wanted it to be solely for his Christian faith, not because of his political dissent. Von Moltke explained to his wife in this deeply moving letter that “the decisive stage of the trial” was when he addressed the Nazi judge who had said, “One thing Christianity and we National Socialists have in common, and only one: we demand the whole man.”³³ Then he wrote,

Your husband is chosen, as a Protestant, to be above all attacked and condemned for his friendship with Catholics, and therefore he stands before Freisler [the presiding judge] not as a Protestant, not as a big landowner, not as a nobleman, not as a Prussian, not as a German but as a Christian and nothing else. “The fig leaf is off,” says Herr Freisler. Yes, every other category was removed.³⁴

Hitchens finds it impossible to believe that religious people might, just occasionally, be motivated by faith to do something good in the world, and his blind bigotry is not confined just to those dark days of World War II in Europe. He casts equal aspersions on more recent American heroes. To his credit, Hitchens does hold in high regard a handful of

people whom most Americans also admire for their courage and historical contribution to American society. One of them, not surprisingly, is American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. Hitchens, in a rare moment of vulnerability, writes, “It is quite impossible even for an atheist like myself to read his sermons or watch recordings of his speeches without profound emotion of the sort that can sometimes bring genuine tears.”³⁵ He eloquently describes King’s ability to speak of the rights of African Americans in terms reminiscent of the Hebrew prophets. Then he knowingly tells his readers, “Christian reformism arose originally from the ability of its advocates to contrast the Old Testament with the New.”³⁶ That explanation would probably surprise everyone from Martin Luther, who launched the Protestant Reformation, to William Wilberforce, who devoted his life to ending Britain’s slave trade.

But never mind. Having embarked on this shabby attempt to explain why Christians have so often been at the forefront of social activism, Hitchens can’t help lurching off for several paragraphs to rant about the teachings of John the Baptist and Jesus on heaven and hell. He links this digression to his commentary on King by declaring that those biblical teachings couldn’t have anything to do with what the civil rights leader believed because King never called down punishment, earthly or heavenly, on his persecutors. For this failure to preach hell and damnation, King is also relegated by Hitchens to the ranks of nonbelievers with this summary judgment: “In no real as opposed to nominal sense, then, was he a Christian.”³⁷

This would certainly be news to all the African Americans who worked closely with King, who were with him when he was assassinated, or who continue to revere his name. Hitchens’s pronouncement is based on a curiously blinkered view of King’s life, one that ignores, for instance, the fact that this ordained Baptist minister was the one who gave the civil rights movement its slogan, “Thou shalt not requite violence with violence.” Or the fact that King was so well known for his advocacy of nonviolent protest that he has been likened to Gandhi, and

that he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize not only for leading the civil rights movement but also for his exemplary role as peacemaker. In fact, the Nobel Prize Committee, in announcing his 1964 award, referred explicitly to King's faith: "Martin Luther King's belief is rooted first and foremost in the teachings of Christ" and cited King's 1955 speech in which he exhorted protestors, "Our actions must be guided by the deepest principles of Christian faith. . . . Once again we must hear the words of Jesus echoing across the centuries: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and pray for them that despitefully use you.'"³⁸

This question of whether King was a Christian came up in a generally well-mannered debate between Hitchens and Rev. Al Sharpton in May 2007 at the New York Public Library. Sharpton, who is close to some of King's associates and who had served as youth director of an organization with close ties to King, gave this unequivocal answer: "In terms of the civil rights movement, it was absolutely fueled by a belief in God and a belief in right or wrong. Had not there been this belief that there was a right and a wrong, the civil rights movement . . . would not have existed. . . . There is no question that [King] himself saw that the basis of the movement was God-based. To try and secularize the civil rights movement is totally inaccurate. It was a church-based, faith-based movement; there's just no question about that. . . . Let's not reinvent Dr. King any more than we try to reduce God to some denomination or convention."³⁹

It's a shame that so eloquent and in many ways effective a voice for atheism as Hitchens, someone who has shown genuine moral courage in certain situations, should be reduced to such specious reasoning as to deny Christian convictions to one of the most heroic figures in American history.

Was King flawed in his personal life? Yes, he was. He was a sinner, as all Christians admit they are by their very decision to believe in Jesus as Savior. For Hitchens, however, to attempt to cast King as another flag carrier for "nebulous humanism" is not just plain wrong,

it's frankly dishonest. Hitchens doesn't even have to resort to this sleight of hand. There are plenty of bad eggs in the history of Christianity. What's deeply saddening is that someone of Hitchens's considerable eloquence, learning, and intelligence should be so deeply bigoted against faith as to deny that there are any good eggs. Perhaps Dawkins would not leave us bereft of a neologism after all: *Anglophonyism*—based on the fact that Hitchens is British born and educated.

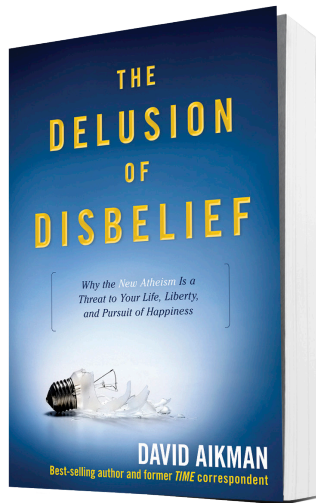
The basic cry of the New Atheists, as of the old atheists, is that they hate God. They claim not to believe that he exists, but their animosity is so personal that it is hard to escape the conclusion that they are combating a personality who in some intuitive way they know is real. God is really horrible, say the Four Horsemen, but, darn it, we can't ignore him. Father of Communism Karl Marx seemed to swing this way when he desperately attempted to do away with the deity in his search for the laws of history. Marx called his ideas "scientific socialism," a speculative utopia based on a claim that he alone had uncovered the scientific principles governing history.

The Four Horsemen hold science in similarly high regard, as we'll see. Dawkins, the only scientist among them, seems to believe that all the serious dilemmas besetting the human condition can be dealt with effectively by the application of the scientific method. It's a little reminiscent of the formula proposed by his twentieth-century predecessor among professional atheists, Bertrand Russell: "The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge."⁴⁰ Dawkins's twenty-first century concoction: the deification of science in the form of "scientism."

ENDNOTES

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23. *Ibid.*, 203. The citation by Hitchens is credited to Brian Victoria, *Zen at War* (London: Weatherhill, 1997).
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25. Ian Parker, "He Knew He Was Right: How a Former Socialist Became the Iraq War's Fiercest Defender," *New Yorker* 82, no. 33 (October 16, 2006): 150.
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27. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 35.
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36. *Ibid.*, 175.
37. *Ibid.*, 176.
38. The 1964 Nobel Peace Prize presentation speech by Gunnar Jahn, chairman of the Nobel Committee, is available online at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/press.html (cited July 2007).
39. Sewell Chan, "Hitchens, Sharpton and Faith," The Empire Zone blog, *New York Times*, May 7, 2007. Available online at <http://empirezone.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/05/07/hitchens-sharpton-and-faith> (cited September 2007).
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In this book, Aikman takes on one of the most controversial questions of our time: Can American liberties survive in the absence of widespread belief in God on the part of the nation's people? The answer to that question, says Aikman, is critically important to your future. *The Delusion of Disbelief* is a thoughtful, intelligent resource for anyone concerned about the increasingly strident and aggressive new attacks on religious belief. It is the book that every person of faith should read—and give away.

<https://www.tyndale.com/p/the-delusion-of-disbelief/97/e-book>

THE REASON WHY

EVERYONE WANTS TO BELIEVE in something beyond or someone bigger than themselves, but nobody wants to be duped. In order to provide answers to people who are seeking the truth, Mark Mittelberg updates for today the classic book by Robert Laidlaw that sold millions, *The Reason Why*. This short book gives clear, concise reasons why belief in God makes sense.



MARK MITTELBERG is the bestselling author of *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask (with Answers)* and *The Reason Why Faith Makes Sense*. He is also the primary creator of the celebrated *Becoming a Contagious Christian* curriculum, which has been translated into more than 20 languages and used to train 1.5 million people around the world. Mark was on the leadership team at the Willow Creek Association in Chicago for many years, and now codirects (with Lee Strobel) The Institute at Cherry Hills in Denver, Colorado.

Is There a God?

While the vast majority of people believe in God or some form of divine being, it has become fashionable to deny God's existence and to declare oneself an atheist. Just scan the shelves of many bookstores—especially, and ironically, the *religion* sections. Many of the top sellers are actually anti-God books written by spiritual skeptics. Or surf the Internet and you'll see that, increasingly, the boldest and brashest opinions are being presented by people who decry the idea of God altogether.

Why is that? Has there been some new discovery that disproves the existence of a deity? Have the claims of the supernatural been conclusively refuted to the point that we can now deduce that there is no God?

To the contrary, the evidence *for* God is growing day by day as thinking people—including scientists, historians, archeologists, philosophers, and others, many of whom were former skeptics—find more and more support for the existence of God and for the claims of Christianity in particular. In fact, the strength of the evidence is mounting to the extent that one popular book came out recently with the title *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*.¹

I like that title because it really does seem to me that the problems of unbelief in God are greater than the problems of belief. To accept that nothing produced everything, nonlife produced life, randomness produced order, chaos produced information, unconsciousness produced consciousness, and non-reason produced reason would require a lot more faith than I'd be able to muster!

Why then the continual onslaught of skeptical literature and

opinion? There are probably a variety of reasons—many of which have little or nothing to do with reason. But if you look at the ideas being furthered and the rationale that often goes with them, you'll find that many people have simply decided—from the outset and apart from compelling evidence or real interaction with the actual arguments for God—that belief in a divine being is unthinkable, so they don't even give it serious thought.

This approach betrays what is sometimes called an “anti-supernatural bias.” In other words, the person has decided in advance that there is nothing in our world beyond nature and then proceeds to dismiss or attack any opinions to the contrary. By way of example, back in the 1940s critical theologian Rudolf Bultmann declared, “It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.”²

This opinion has only intensified in our current age of discovery—and skepticism. For example, the radical left-leaning “Jesus Seminar” scholars published a book that claimed, “The Christ of creed and dogma, who had been firmly in place in the Middle Ages, can no longer command the assent of those who have seen the heavens through Galileo's telescope. The old deities and demons were swept from the skies by that remarkable glass.”³

That's quite a claim! But pronouncing something is not the same as proving it. In fact, upon analysis, these opinions assume the very thing they purport to prove. This is the age-old fallacy of circular reasoning. They are saying, in effect, “Modern people can no longer believe in the supernatural because . . . well . . . they're modern people!”

Now, I'm all for electric lights, using a “wireless” (especially the kind we have *today*), enjoying the benefits of modern medicine, and learning all we can through the latest telescopes—but none of that even begins to address the growing body of evidence we have for God's existence. The question we need to ask is not whether we are

technologically advanced, but what is the evidence for God—and how will we respond to it? In the next section we'll look at several lines of compelling evidence.⁴

REASONS FOR BELIEVING IN GOD

Evidence from the Beginning of the Universe

Every thoughtful person believes in a series of causes and effects in nature, each effect becoming the cause of some other effect. This is the basis of all scientific inquiry. Albert Einstein put it like this: “The scientist is possessed by the sense of universal causation.”⁵ But the acceptance of this as fact compels one to admit that there must be a beginning to any series—or the chain of events never would have gotten started. There could never have been a first effect if there had not been a first cause.

Consider the logic that flows through these three statements:⁶

- Whatever has a beginning has a cause.
- The universe has a beginning.
- Therefore, the universe has a cause.

The first statement, *Whatever has a beginning has a cause*, can be illustrated with a couple of real-life scenarios. If you go to the doctor to find out why a lump has begun to grow in your throat, you're not going to be satisfied to hear there's no cause for the lump—that it just sprang up for no reason. If he or she tries to pass off an explanation like that, you're going to find a new doctor!

Or if you're a parent, and you go into one of your kids' rooms and find a hole punched through the wall, you're not going to accept a causeless, self-existent hole-in-the-wall theory. Instead, you want a real explanation from your son or daughter—the old-fashioned kind that actually explains what happened.

Just as the appearance of lumps in your throat or holes in your kids' walls needs an explanation, so does the sudden appearance of a universe!

The second statement says *The universe has a beginning*. The only other options are to say that it is eternal and has simply always been there—an answer akin to the causeless, self-existent hole-in-the-wall theory—or to claim that it popped into existence out of thin air. But as the song in the classic movie *The Sound of Music* so poignantly reminds us, “Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could.”

Common sense tells us that the universe had a beginning, but we know this through modern science as well. Robert Jastrow, astronomer and founding director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, summarized the conclusion of decades of scientific research in his powerful book *God and the Astronomers*:

Five independent lines of evidence—the motions of the galaxies, the discovery of the primordial fireball, the laws of thermodynamics, the abundance of helium in the Universe and the life story of the stars—point to one conclusion; all indicate that *the Universe had a beginning*.⁷

Jastrow also goes into detail concerning what scientists believe about that amazing beginning, usually referred to in scientific circles as the Big Bang⁸:

The matter of the Universe is packed together into one dense mass under enormous pressure, and with temperatures ranging up to trillions of degrees. The dazzling brilliance of the radiation in this dense, hot Universe must have been beyond description. The picture suggests the explosion of a cosmic hydrogen bomb. The instant in which the cosmic bomb exploded marked the birth of the Universe.

outside the universe. And that “something” would have to be smart enough, powerful enough, and old enough—not to mention have enough of a creative, artistic flair—to be able to pull off such a grand “effect.” That sounds to me like something uncannily similar to the divine being described in the Bible, which starts with these words: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”¹¹ He’s the same one of whom King David wrote (Psalm 19:1-4):

*The heavens proclaim the glory of God.
The skies display his craftsmanship.
Day after day they continue to speak;
night after night they make him known.
They speak without a sound or word;
their voice is never heard.
Yet their message has gone throughout the earth,
and their words to all the world. (NLT)*

Evidence from Design in the Universe

Suppose you are standing at an airport, watching a jet airliner coming in to land. Someone says to you, “A lot of people think that plane is the result of someone’s carefully designed plans, but I know better. There was really no intelligence at work on it at all. In some strange way the metal just came out of the ground and fashioned itself into flat sheets. And then these metal sheets slowly began to grow together and formed the fuselage and wings and tail. Then after a long while the engines slowly grew in place, and one day some people came along and discovered the plane, all finished and ready to fly.”

You would probably think that guy was crazy, and perhaps try to avoid him in the future. Why? You know intuitively that where there is a design, there must be a designer, and having seen other products of

the human mind like the airplane, you are sure that it was planned by human intelligence and built by human skill.

Yet there are sophisticated and highly educated people who tell us that the entire universe, with all its order and intricate design, came into being by chance—that there was really no higher intelligence involved. They claim that there is no God but nature. The American astronomer and television personality Carl Sagan, for example, frequently told his TV viewers with great exuberance that “the Cosmos is all that is or was or ever will be.”

More recently Stephen Hawking declared in his book *The Grand Design* that “spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God.”¹² Yet Hawking apparently cannot escape the principle that *design* points back to a *designer*—when only a few pages later, in the acknowledgments section, he says that “the universe has a design, and so does a book. But unlike the universe, a book does not appear spontaneously from nothing. A book requires a creator.” That’s quite a statement! Looking at his book—including the quote cited above about the mind-boggling expansion of matter at the Big Bang—I think it’s safe to say that if *it* needed a designer, then the *universe* needs one countless times more.

This is true especially in light of our growing understanding of what many thinkers, including renowned physicist Paul Davies, refer to as the “fine-tuning” of the universe.¹³ Cutting-edge science is now telling us that the building blocks of our world—the laws and physical constants that govern all the matter in the universe—appear to be precisely balanced and finely tuned for life to occur and flourish.¹⁴

These laws and constants were set at the Big Bang mentioned earlier. In other words, when the universe exploded into being, there were a number of variables within the very structure of the universe itself that had to be set exactly as they are in order for life to exist. Scientists have

so far discovered about *fifty* of these parameters and constants that must be “just so” in order for life to be possible anywhere in the universe.

Let’s look at an example. Physicists have discovered four forces in nature, one of them being the force of gravity. They have calculated that the strength of each of these forces must fall within a very specific range or there would be no conscious life possible. If the force of gravity, for example, were to change by one part in ten thousand billion billion billion relative to the total range of the strengths of the four forces in nature, conscious life would be virtually impossible anywhere in the universe.¹⁵

There are many other parameters and constants that are also finely tuned and that, if changed even slightly, would have disastrous consequences for life in our universe. For example, if the neutron were not exactly as it is—about 1.001 times the mass of the proton—then all protons would have decayed into neutrons or all neutrons would have decayed into protons and life would not be possible. Or if the explosion of the Big Bang had differed in strength by as little as one part in 10^{60} (one part in a trillion trillion trillion trillion trillion), the universe would have either quickly collapsed back on itself or expanded too swiftly for stars to form. Either way, life would be impossible. The list of such fixed parameters goes on and on.¹⁶

What makes all this even more fascinating is that these finely tuned parameters and constants are independent of one another. In other words, assuming all were just right for life except for one parameter, which was off to the smallest degree, that alone would make it impossible for you or me to be alive today.

When you add this all up, it becomes virtually impossible to believe all of these fine-tuned constants came to be “just so” by chance. British astronomer Fred Hoyle started out as an atheist but eventually coined the term *big bang* derisively, famously saying, “A common sense interpretation of the facts suggests that a superintellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as with chemistry and biology, and that there are no blind

forces worth speaking about in nature.” And if that weren’t enough, he added, “The numbers one calculates from the facts seem to me so overwhelming as to put this conclusion almost beyond question.”¹⁷



Think about *light* for a moment. What is it exactly? As simple as the question seems, it’s actually a very challenging entity to understand. One definition is “the range of electromagnetic radiation that can be detected by the human eye.” Does that clear things up? Scientists tell us that light is made up of waves. Or particles. Or both. But they’re not completely sure how the two aspects of light—waves and particles—coexist and interact with each other.

If scientists are still trying to define and explain the nature of light, then why do we believe it exists at all? Because we see it—or perhaps more accurately, we see *with* it. Either way, we don’t have to fully grasp what light is in order to believe in it and benefit from it. Similarly, although we can’t fully define God, we can know that he exists because we see the manifestations of him everywhere around us.

Dr. Wernher von Braun, onetime director of NASA research and developer of the rocket that put America’s first space satellite into orbit, said this:

In our modern world, many people seem to feel that our rapid advances in the field of science render such things as religious belief untimely or old-fashioned. They wonder why we should be satisfied in “believing” something when science tells us that we “know” so many things. The simple answer to this contention is that we are confronted with many more mysteries of nature today than when the age of scientific enlightenment began. With every new answer unfolded, science has consistently discovered at least three new questions.

The answers indicate that everything as well ordered and perfectly created as are our earth and universe must have a Maker, a Master Designer. Anything so orderly, so perfect, so precisely balanced, so majestic as this creation can only be the product of a Divine idea.¹⁸

Indeed, it was his observations of the amazing order and design of the universe as seen through his telescope that led astronomer Robert Jastrow, author of *God and the Astronomers*, to abandon his atheism and begin believing in God.

More recently Dr. Antony Flew, considered the world's greatest philosophical atheist and the author of the classic text *The Presumption of Atheism*, abandoned his atheism late in life. A few years before his death he wrote his final book, *There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*.¹⁹

Lee Strobel and I had the opportunity to talk with Dr. Flew before he died. We asked him what caused him to reorient his thinking. Flew's response focused on one particular issue: "Einstein felt that there must be intelligence behind the integrated complexity of the physical world," he told us. "If that is a sound argument, the integrated complexity of the *organic* world is just inordinately greater—all the creatures are complicated pieces of design. So an argument that is important about the physical world is immeasurably stronger when applied to the biological world."²⁰

Edwin Conklin, himself a noted biologist, would have concurred with these conclusions, as he expressed in his famous quote comparing the probability of life originating from accident to that of an unabridged dictionary resulting from an explosion in a printing shop.

Additional Lines of Evidence

Many other arguments can and have been given, including the amazing evidence of information that is encoded in DNA—a complex,

cryptographic, four-letter code that is, as former president Bill Clinton once put it, “the language in which God created life.”²¹ Yet wherever we have language or information, we know there has to be an intelligence behind it. This powerfully points us to a *Divine Encoder*.

Then there is the evidence of morality throughout the human race. You see, each of us has an internal standard of morality—but one that is above us and comes from outside of us. Why do I say that the source of this morality is above and outside us? Because everybody has it, yet nobody consistently lives up to it. Why would we each invent a code of ethics that we could never quite fulfill, and then employ it to frustrate and condemn ourselves all life long? If morality were mere choice or convention, we could much more easily let go of it.

So where did we get this inescapable sense of right and wrong? If we didn’t invent it, if it transcends the realms of culture and politics—which it clearly does—and if it’s something we can’t get away from, then what is its source? Could it be that a *Moral Lawgiver* actually knit those moral standards, along with the ability to understand and operate by them, into the very fabric of what it means to be human? That, it seems to me, is where the evidence clearly points.²²

Beyond all of this, there is the historical evidence for Jesus and his exemplary life, his amazing fulfillment of numerous ancient prophecies, his many miracles done in broad daylight and in front of hostile witnesses (convincing a great number of them to follow him), his uncanny and seemingly supernatural insights into people’s minds, and his astounding resurrection from the dead—well documented by many, including those who were not his followers—three days after his crucifixion. All of these realities point powerfully to the existence of a divine heavenly Father, as well as to the divinity of Jesus himself, who gave us countless reasons to believe he was truly God’s Son.²³

In addition to these varieties of evidence that point to the reality of God, I have an internal conviction that he exists. No matter how often I’ve doubted or tried to ignore him in the past, that “still, small voice” has

come to me again and again, just as it comes to you—maybe even right now—in the quiet of life’s more sober moments. Yes, I am confident that there is a God. And as I watch the lives of others, I realize that many of them are looking for God, seeking in “religion” to understand or perhaps to try to appease that same voice that is speaking within them.

Much more could be said, but the evidence for God is strong and getting stronger. It’s important to add that God exists whether or not people choose to believe in him. Think about it: our belief in things does not affect whether they actually exist. We can imagine and meditate intently on the concept of unicorns, but that doesn’t make one pop into existence. And the corollary to this is that our lack of belief in something that is real is not going to make it go away. If I have cancer, to give a negative example, I can try to deny it day and night, but that’s not going to get rid of it.

The bottom line is this: *whatever is, is*. Our knowledge or trust in a thing’s reality has no effect whatsoever on its existence. And if that’s true in every other area of life, then why should we suppose it’s any different when it comes to belief in God?

If the evidence is so great and so clear, why such reluctance to consider it? I think the reason many people do not acknowledge God is not so much that it is intellectually difficult to believe in him, but rather that belief in God forces a person to face the fact that he or she is accountable to him. Many people are unwilling to accept accountability to anyone, let alone God. Romans 1:18-19 says that they “know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them,” but that they “suppress the truth” (NLT). That’s why I think many take refuge in atheism or agnosticism—because it is a convenient escape from the challenging reality that they are accountable to their Creator. What is presented as “I cannot believe” is more usually in reality “I do not want to believe.”

Outspoken atheist Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, described in his autobiography, *The Words*, what led him as a child to reject faith in

God: “Only once did I have the feeling that He existed. I had been playing with matches and burned a small rug. I was in the process of covering up my crime when suddenly God saw me. I felt His gaze inside my head and on my hands. I whirled about in the bathroom, horribly visible, a live target. Indignation saved me. I flew into a rage against so crude an indiscretion, I blasphemed. . . . He never looked at me again. . . . I had all the more difficulty getting rid of [the Holy Ghost] in that he had installed himself at the back of my head. . . . I collared the Holy Ghost in the cellar and threw him out.”²⁴

Well-known author and atheist Aldous Huxley admitted, “I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning. . . . For myself, as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was simultaneously liberation from a certain political and economic system and liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom.”²⁵

And Christopher Hitchens, author of the best-selling diatribe *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, describes himself not as an atheist, but as an “antitheist.”²⁶ Well, I mentioned the idea of unicorns earlier; I don’t believe in them, but I certainly would not describe myself as an “anti-unicornist.” Such passion from atheists—and often anger, too—seems strange when aimed at something that, according to them, does not exist.

I think these examples, as well as the vitriol with which many skeptics attack God and his followers on the Internet, betray the fact that atheism is often motivated by personal or moral issues, not an actual weakness in the evidence for God.



Just as a good detective can tell you many things about my skills, habits, and character merely by examining something I have made or handled,

much can be learned about God by a careful examination of the universe, the work of his hands.

But the detective who examines only what I make can never say he knows me. He may know some things *about* me, but before he can say he knows me there must be a process of revelation; in other words, I must communicate with him. I need to tell him what I think, how I feel, and what I want to do. This self-disclosure may be made in conversation, in writing, or in some other way. Only then does it become possible for him to really know me.

Likewise, if God is ever to be known and his thoughts, desires, and purposes understood, he must take the initiative and make at least a partial revelation of himself to the people he has created.

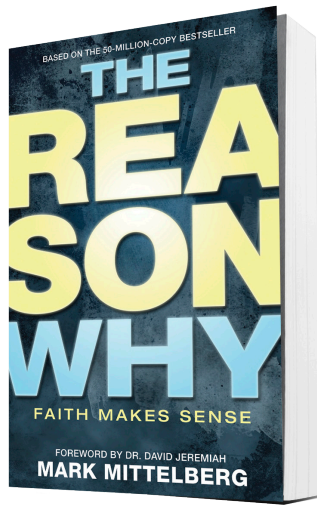
Has God done this? That's the question we will address next.

ENDNOTES

1. Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004).
2. Rudolf Bultmann, et al., *Kerygma and Myth*, www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=431&C=292.
3. Robert W. Funk, *The Five Gospels* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 2.
4. Some of this information is adapted and condensed from my earlier books, *Choosing Your Faith* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008) and *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2010), where you can read about this evidence in greater detail.
5. Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Random House, 1994 edition), 43.
6. This argument is classically referred to as the cosmological argument (*kalam* version). For a great discussion on this powerful argument, see William Lane Craig's book *Reasonable Faith*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), chapter 3, especially page 111 and following.
7. Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 103 (emphasis mine).
8. Some Christians react negatively to the idea of the Big Bang, but I don't think this is necessary. Biblical theology tells us that God created the universe *ex nihilo*—"out of nothing." That's exactly the kind of event scientists describe as the Big Bang (though many of them try to leave God out of the picture). The evidence points to a cause outside of—and greater than—the universe. This is powerful scientific support for the Bible's teachings!
9. Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers*, 13.
10. Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010), 129.
11. Genesis 1:1, NLT
12. Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 180.
13. Paul Davies, "How Bio-Friendly Is the Universe?" *International Journal of Astrobiology* 2, no. 2 (2003): 115.
14. Robin Collins, author of a chapter on fine-tuning in *God and Design: The Teleological Argument and Modern Science*, described the situation in Lee Strobel, *The Case for a Creator* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 132:

When scientists talk about the fine-tuning of the universe, they're generally referring to the extraordinary balancing of the fundamental laws and parameters of physics and the initial conditions of the universe. Our minds can't comprehend the precision of some of them. The result is a universe that has just the right conditions to sustain life. The coincidences are simply too amazing to have been the result of happenstance—as [theoretical physicist, cosmologist, and astrobiologist] Paul Davies said, “the impression of design is overwhelming.”

15. From an interview with Dr. Robin Collins in Lee Strobel, *The Case for a Creator* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 132.
16. For recent findings of this kind of evidence, see Paul Davies, *The Goldilocks Enigma: Why Is the Universe Just Right for Life?* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2008).
17. Fred Hoyle, “The Universe: Past and Present Reflections,” *Engineering & Science*, November 1981. This can be read at <http://calteches.library.caltech.edu/527/2/Hoyle.pdf>.
18. As quoted by Robert A. Laidlaw in the original version of *The Reason Why*. See, for example, this edition: (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 9–10.
19. Antony Flew and Roy Abraham Varghese, *There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).
20. Lee Strobel and I met and talked extensively with Antony Flew on May 12, 2006, in La Mirada, California. Part of that conversation was an on-camera interview Strobel conducted with Flew (clips of which can be viewed at www.leestrobel.com).
21. As recorded and discussed in Francis S. Collins's book *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 1–3. Also see Stephen C. Meyer's groundbreaking book *Signature in the Cell* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).
22. For an excellent discussion of the moral argument for God's existence, read C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne edition, 2001), 6–7.
23. I delve into these and many other arguments for God's existence and for the truth of Christianity in chapters 9–12 of my book *Choosing Your Faith . . . In a World of Spiritual Options* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008).
24. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words: The Autobiography of Jean-Paul Sartre*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Vintage, 1981), 102, 251, 253.
25. Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969 edition), 270, 273.
26. In an article titled “Nothing Sacred: Journalist and Provocateur Christopher Hitchens Picks a Fight with God” by Andre Mayer, May 14, 2007, in CBC (www.cbc.ca/arts/books/nothing_sacred.html).



Almost a hundred years ago, successful business leader Robert A. Laidlaw wrote a small book, *The Reason Why*, to explain in a thoughtful and accessible way why he was convinced that faith in God makes sense. He printed the book primarily for his large staff of employees, but it quickly took on a life of its own. Over time, fifty million copies of his powerful and winsome work were printed. This updated book includes chapters such as “Is There a God?,” “Can the Bible Be Trusted?” and “Who Was Jesus and What Was His Purpose?”

<https://www.tyndale.com/p/the-reason-why/9781414315812>

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Self-Existence

God Has Always Been

*Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth
and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*

PSALM 90:2, NIV

Children sometimes ask, “Who made God?” The clearest answer is that God never needed to be made, because he was always there. He exists in a different way from us: we, his creatures, exist in a dependent, derived, finite, fragile way, but our Maker exists in an eternal, self-sustaining, necessary way—necessary, that is, in the sense that God does not have it in him to go out of existence, just as we do not have it in us to live forever. We necessarily age and die, because it is our present nature to do that; God necessarily continues forever unchanged, because it is his eternal nature to do that. This is one of many contrasts between creature and Creator.

God’s self-existence is a basic truth. At the outset of his presentation of the unknown God to the Athenian idolaters, Paul explained that this God, the world’s Creator, “is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else” (Acts 17:23-25, NIV). Sacrifices offered to idols, in today’s tribal religions as in ancient Athens, are thought of as somehow keeping the god going, but the Creator needs no such support system. The word *aseity*, meaning that he has life in himself and draws his

unending energy from himself (*a se* in Latin means “from himself”), was coined by theologians to express this truth, which the Bible makes clear (Pss. 90:1-4; 102:25-27; Isa. 40:28-31; John 5:26; Rev. 4:10).

In theology, endless mistakes result from supposing that the conditions, bounds, and limits of our own finite existence apply to God. The doctrine of his aseity stands as a bulwark against such mistakes. In our life of faith, we easily impoverish ourselves by embracing an idea of God that is too limited and small, and again the doctrine of God’s aseity stands as a bulwark to stop this from happening. It is vital for spiritual health to believe that God is great (cf. Ps. 95:1-7), and grasping the truth of his aseity is the first step on the road to doing this.

Goodness

God Is Love

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good.

His love endures forever.

PSALM 136:1, NIV

The statement “God is love” is often explained in terms of (a) the revelation, given through the life and teaching of Christ, of the endless life of the triune God as one of mutual affection and honor (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; John 3:35; 14:31; 16:13-14; 17:1-5, 22-26), linked with (b) the recognition that God made angels and humans to glorify their Maker in sharing the joyful give-and-take of this divine life according to their own creaturely mode. But, true as this seems to be, when John says “God is love” (1 John 4:8, NIV), what he means (as he goes on to explain) is that the Father through Christ has actually saved us formerly lost sinners who now believe. “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God”—we didn’t—“but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (vv. 9-10, NIV).

As always in the New Testament, “us” as the objects and beneficiaries of redeeming love means “us who believe.” Neither here nor elsewhere does “we” or “us” refer to every individual belonging to the human race. New Testament teaching on redemption is particularistic throughout, and when “the world” is said to be loved and redeemed (John 3:16-17;

2 Cor. 5:19; 1 John 2:2), the reference is to the great number of God's elect scattered worldwide throughout the ungodly human community (cf. John 10:16; 11:52-53), not to each and every person who did, does, or shall exist. If this were not so, John and Paul would be contradicting things that they say elsewhere.

This sovereign redemptive love is one facet of the quality that Scripture calls God's goodness (Ps. 100:5; Mark 10:18), that is, the glorious kindness and generosity that touches all his creatures (Ps. 145:9, 15-16) and that ought to lead all sinners to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Other aspects of this goodness are the mercy or compassion or pity that shows kindness to persons in distress by rescuing them out of trouble (Pss. 107, 136) and the long-suffering, forbearance, and slowness to anger that continues to show kindness toward persons who have persisted in sinning (Exod. 34:6; Ps. 78:38; John 3:10-4:11; Rom. 9:22; 2 Pet. 3:9). The supreme expression of God's goodness is still, however, the amazing grace and inexpressible love that shows kindness by saving sinners who deserve only condemnation: saving them, moreover, at the tremendous cost of Christ's death on Calvary (Rom. 3:22-24; 5:5-8; 8:32-39; Eph. 2:1-10; 3:14-18; 5:25-27).

God's faithfulness to his purposes, promises, and people is a further aspect of his goodness and praiseworthiness. Humans lie and break their word; God does neither. In the worst of times it can still be said: "His compassions never fail. . . . Great is your faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22-23; Ps. 36:5; cf. Ps. 89, especially vv. 1-2, 14, 24, 33, 37, 49). Though God's ways of expressing his faithfulness are sometimes unexpected and bewildering, looking indeed to the casual observer and in the short term more like unfaithfulness, the final testimony of those who walk with God through life's ups and downs is that "every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed" (Josh. 23:14-15, NIV). God's fidelity, along with the other aspects of his gracious goodness as set forth in his Word, is always solid ground on which to rest our faith and hope.

Providence

God Governs This World

*The lot is cast into the lap,
but its every decision is from the LORD.*

PROVERBS 16:33, NIV

“God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures, and all their actions” (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.11). If Creation was a unique exercise of divine energy causing the world to be, providence is a continued exercise of that same energy whereby the Creator, according to his own will, (a) keeps all creatures in being, (b) involves himself in all events, and (c) directs all things to their appointed end. The model is of purposive personal management with total “hands-on” control: God is completely in charge of his world. His hand may be hidden, but his rule is absolute.

Some have restricted God’s providence to foreknowledge without control, or upholding without intervention, or general oversight without concern for details, but the testimony to providence as formulated above is overwhelming.

The Bible clearly teaches God’s providential control (1) over the universe at large, Ps. 103:19; Dan. 4:35; Eph. 1:11; (2) over the physical world, Job 37; Pss. 104:14; 135:6; Matt. 5:45; (3) over the brute creation, Ps. 104:21, 28; Matt. 6:26; 10:29; (4) over the affairs of nations, Job 12:23; Pss. 22:28; 66:7; Acts 17:26; (5) over man’s birth and lot in

life, 1 Sam. 16:1; Ps. 139:16; Isa. 45:5; Gal. 1:15-16; (6) over the outward successes and failures of men's lives, Ps. 75:6, 7; Luke 1:52; (7) over things seemingly accidental or insignificant, Prov. 16:33; Matt. 10:30; (8) in the protection of the righteous, Pss. 4:8; 5:12; 63:8; 121:3; Rom. 8:28; (9) in supplying the wants of God's people, Gen. 22:8, 14; Deut. 8:3; Phil. 4:19; (10) in giving answers to prayer, 1 Sam. 1:19; Isa. 20:5, 6; 2 Chron. 33:13; Ps. 65:2; Matt. 7:7; Luke 18:7, 8; and (11) in the exposure and punishment of the wicked, Pss. 7:12-13; 11:6. (L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed.)

Clear thinking about God's involvement in the world-process and in the acts of rational creatures requires complementary sets of statements, thus: a person takes action, or an event is triggered by natural causes, or Satan shows his hand—yet God overrules. This is the message of the book of Esther, where God's name nowhere appears. Again: things that are done contravene God's will of command—yet they fulfill his will of events (Eph. 1:11). Again: humans mean what they do for evil—yet God who overrules uses their actions for good (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23). Again: humans, under God's overruling, sin—yet God is not the author of sin (James 1:13-17); rather, he is its judge.

The nature of God's "concurrent" or "confluent" involvement in all that occurs in his world, as—without violating the nature of things, the ongoing causal processes, or human free agency—he makes his will of events come to pass, is mystery to us, but the consistent biblical teaching about God's involvement is as stated above.

Of the evils that infect God's world (moral and spiritual perversity, waste of good, and the physical disorders and disruptions of a spoiled cosmos), it can summarily be said: God permits evil (Acts 14:16); he punishes evil with evil (Ps. 81:11-12; Rom. 1:26-32); he brings good out of evil (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; 13:27; 1 Cor. 2:7-8); he uses evil to test and discipline those he loves (Matt. 4:1-11; Heb. 12:4-14); and one day he will redeem his people from the power and presence of evil altogether (Rev. 21:27; 22:14-15).

The doctrine of providence teaches Christians that they are never in the grip of blind forces (fortune, chance, luck, fate); all that happens to them is divinely planned, and each event comes as a new summons to trust, obey, and rejoice, knowing that all is for one's spiritual and eternal good (Rom. 8:28).

Humankind

Humans Are Body and Soul, in Two Genders

The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

GENESIS 2:7, NIV

Male and female he created them.

GENESIS 1:27, NIV

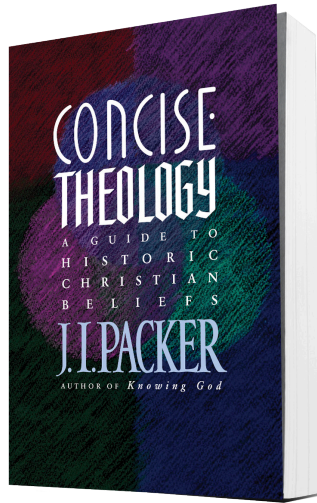
Each human being in this world consists of a material body animated by an immaterial personal self. Scripture calls this self a “soul” or “spirit.” “Soul” emphasizes the distinctness of a person’s conscious selfhood as such; “spirit” carries the nuances of the self’s derivation from God, dependence on him, and distinctness from the body as such.

Biblical usage leads us to say that we *have* and *are* both souls and spirits, but it is a mistake to think that soul and spirit are two different things; a “trichotomous” view of man as body, soul, and spirit is incorrect. The common idea that the soul is an organ of this-worldly awareness only and that the spirit is a distinct organ of communion with God that is brought to life in regeneration is out of step with biblical teaching and word usage. Moreover, it leads to a crippling anti-intellectualism whereby spiritual insight and theological thought are separated to the impoverishing of both, theology being seen as “soulish” and unspiritual while spiritual perception is thought of as unrelated to the teaching and learning of God’s revealed truth.

The embodiment of the soul is integral to God's design for mankind. Through the body, as was said earlier, we are to experience our environment, enjoy and control things around us, and relate to other people. There was nothing evil or corruptible about the body as God first made it, and had sin not come in, the physical ailing, aging, and rotting that leads to death as we know it would have been no part of human life (Gen. 2:17; 3:19, 22; Rom. 5:12). Now, however, human beings are corrupt throughout their psycho-physical being, as their disordered desires, both physical and mental, warring against each other as well as against the rules of wisdom and righteousness, clearly show.

At death the soul leaves the defunct body behind, but this is not the happy release that Greek philosophers and some cultists have imagined. The Christian hope is not redemption *from* the body but redemption *of* the body. We look forward to our participation in Christ's resurrection in and through the resurrection of our own bodies. Though the exact composition of our future glorified bodies is presently unknown, we know that there will be some sort of continuity with our present bodies (1 Cor. 15:35-49; Phil. 3:20-21; Col. 3:4).

The two genders, male and female, belong to the Creation pattern. Men and women are equally God's image-bearers (Gen. 1:27), and their dignity is equal in consequence. The complementary nature of the genders is meant to lead to enriching cooperation (see Gen. 2:18-23) as their roles are fulfilled not just in marriage, procreation, and family life, but in life's wider activities also. Perception of the unfathomable difference between a person of the other gender and oneself is meant to be a school for learning the practice and joy of appreciation, openness, honor, service, and fidelity, all of which belong to the courtesy that the mysterious reality of the other gender requires. The ideology of "unisex," which plays down the significance of the two genders, thus perverts God's order, while the French tag on gender distinction, "*vive la différence!*" (Long live the contrast!) expresses the biblical viewpoint.



Read more about what Packer calls the “permanent essentials of Christianity.” These essentials are summed up so you can find them quickly and easily, and they are expressed so you can understand and appreciate the greatness of God. Discover for yourself why Christian theology is not just a system of beliefs but a way of life.

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