

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
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THE NEW ATHEISM AND THE DEFENSE OF FAITH

Introduction:

In 2008 the Pew Research Center released the latest data on the religious sensibilities and practices of Americans. The people of Mississippi ranked highest in the nation in terms of the percentage who claim that religion is “a very important part” of their life (82%, national average = 56%) and in terms of those who claim to attend worship services once a week (60% v. 39%). Ninety-one *per cent* (v. 71% are “certain” of the existence of God).¹ Most Americans who claim religious affiliation claim to be Christian.² It’s easy to look at these data and feel good about the health of the Church we confess to be “one holy catholic [universal] and apostolic,” until we notice that 29% of Americans question whether there is a God, and even in Mississippi, 59% of a population self-identified as having a strong faith and as being regular in the practice of public worship believe that there is more than one path to eternal life. In other words, almost two-thirds of our fellow faithful believe that Jesus is in some sense optional.

All trend lines point in the direction of decrease in the religious life of America, and remember that Americans are by far the most religious people in the West. In England, for example, there are more Muslims worshipping in a mosque on a typical Friday than Christians worshipping in the Church of England on a typical Sunday. The trend lines also get steeper when we take age into account. Within churches classified as Mainline Protestant the age group 18–29 represents only 14% of members and a significantly smaller percentage of regular worshippers. This key growth cohort of people getting ready to have families is increasingly “opting out” of the practice of religion, and in many cases is defining God as irrelevant to their lives. Some of this is the result of significant cultural changes, and some results from the fact that many churches have done a poor job of evangelizing and growing disciples, but it is impossible to ignore the effects of a new and militant atheism that is becoming more and more a part of our national discourse and culture.

At 1 Peter 3.15 the apostle teaches that we must “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you ...” This means that we need to do a better job in teaching the content of the faith. A mature faith has two components: trust and assent. We are to *trust* in God on the basis of our relationship with Him. We are to give mental *assent* (agreement) to revealed doctrine (*e.g.*, we confess in the Creed to the fact that there is one God in three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit). The *practice* of religion has in recent decades focused more on affect, on feeling, and so has emphasized the dimension of trust over assent. This means that many are ill-equipped to defend the faith against attacks which are themselves focused on argument, not on relationship. A person who denies the existence of God is not going to find persuasive the testimony offered by one who claims a relationship with God. Neither is such a person going to respond to arguments from Scripture, for he or she does not

¹ The lowest percentages for belief and practice are found in New Hampshire and Vermont.

² All data <http://religions.pewforum.org/maps#>, accessed 01-28-10. Seventy-five *per cent* of Americans identify themselves as belonging to one of four groups: Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Historically Black Protestant. Sixteen *per cent* are “unaffiliated”.

recognize the Bible to have authority, except perhaps in parts as a record of moral sensibility. The net result is that many in our society (particularly in the growth cohort of 18–29) hear, on the one hand, arguments against faith which claim to be rational and scientific, and on the other hand, testimonies which are deemed to be particular or citations of authority which the listener may deem to be “Fundamentalist”. The net result is that many “tune out” all such arguments as mere noise. They may not confess a frank atheism, but neither do they confess a faith. They are trapped in a human and temporal frame-of-reference, and it is up to us to reset that frame-of-reference to one that is eternal.

In identifying and understanding the New Atheism, we need to note the following particulars:

1. What arguments are being offered?
 - a. What are the factual assumptions of these arguments?
 - b. What are the rational/logical assumptions of these arguments?
 - c. What about epistemology (the philosophy of truth) and moral philosophy?
2. What historical claims are being made about:
 - a. The effects of faith on society?
 - b. The relationship of faith and science?
 - c. The relationship of faith and moral philosophy?
3. Identifying the most common attacks on the practice of religion:
 - a. Are the “culture wars” really cultural?

These elements will be explored in parallel, using the *schemata* found in two recent books:

- a) David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 2009).
- b) Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton-Penguin, 2008).

A) *What is Atheism?*

In its broadest sense atheism is a denial of the existence of any deity. Depending on how atheism is defined, the number of people in the West who classify themselves as atheists ranges from 5% in the United States³ to 33% in France.⁴

Atheism can be “explicit” or “positive” (a positive denial of the existence of God) or “implicit” (the absence of belief in God). Explicit atheism is also often called “strong” atheism, with the corresponding “weak” atheism also including agnosticism (the denial that it is possible for humans to know whether God exists, with doubt being a necessary corollary). Finally, atheism can be “practical” (living as if the existence of God is irrelevant to life, *i.e.*, indifference).

³ Gallup Organization, “Religious Beliefs of Americans, 2005”.

⁴ Eurostat (Directorate General of the European Commission), *Eurobarometer Poll on the Social and Religious Beliefs of Europeans* (2005).

B) *A Brief History*

Atheism finds its roots in pre-Socratic philosophy, with the first person specifically identified as an “atheist” (“one without gods”) being the 5th C. B.C. Greek philosopher Diagoras. Debates over the existence of gods persisted in Classical antiquity, and specific doubts about religious doctrine were certainly expressed (very rarely) in the Middle Ages, but atheism *per se* did not really appear in Western thought before the late Renaissance (and then more in the form of a mocking of Christian practice, *e.g.*, as found in the writing of François Rabelais). It is in the late Modern period (17th and 18th centuries) that atheism began to take hold as an ongoing topic of speculation and polemic, reaching a furious climax in the French Revolution, with its “Cult of Reason” and attendant persecution of the Church. The secularizing effects of the French Revolution were institutionalized in Napoleonic France, with attacks on the Church being deliberately exported to northern Italy to foment revolution, to allow for the formation of pliable “republics” and French puppet states.⁵

Throughout the nineteenth century atheism took on a “materialist” flavor in the writings of philosophers such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Arthur Schopenhauer, Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. A materialist argues that reality is comprised of observable, quantifiable phenomena only; there is no world of spirit. Marx and Nietzsche were, of course, important influences in the growth of materialist political and economic philosophies (Communism and Fascism), that regarded individual morality as weakness, and advanced the ideal of morality as an exercise of will (whether that of the people or that of the “superman”).

In the twentieth century, atheism took many forms, including logical positivism (which combines materialism with a quantitative approach to empirical knowledge to define truth), existentialism (which defines reality in terms of subjective experience), secular humanism (a form of positivism in which truth is defined with reference to human decisions alone), rationalism (which defines reason as the only source of knowledge and truth), and nihilism (which denies objective meaning or purpose in life). In reality, all forms of atheism are a form of nihilism. Nihilism (from the Latin *nihil*, “nothing”) does not really “believe in nothing;” rather, a nihilist believes in one thing only, his will. All reality, and all “good” and “truth” are defined with reference to the exercise of will.

C) *What’s Different about the New Atheism?*

The New Atheism may follow any one of the philosophical schools mentioned above, but the predominant strains of thought remain those current in the twentieth century. What is new is an emphasis on “strong rationalism,” on what is known as the “verification principle,” which posits that no one should believe any proposition unless it can be proved rationally by logic or empirically by sense experience. Indeed, this principle has been stated as an *ethical* imperative: “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient [empirical] evidence.”⁶

⁵ The *political* agenda behind atheism has in general been evident. In addition to the exportation of French revolutionary atheism in the early 19th C. the 20th C. movements of Bolshevism, Nazism, and Fascism all were virulent in their attacks on religion.

⁶ W. K. Clifford (English mathematician and philosopher), *The Ethics of Belief* (1879). This maxim is a rallying cry in the New Atheism.

The thinking behind the New Atheism is not really new. What is really new is technique. The New Atheists are aggressive cultural critics who state broad propositions of attack against faith and the Church, and then “prove” these attacks through the citations of historical, logical and scientific authorities. These “proofs” bear close examination (something which is not happening in the culture at large), whereupon they can be demonstrated to be: historically inaccurate or illiterate; scientifically unproven; and philosophically illogical. A charitable critique would label the New Atheists misguided and grossly ignorant (or given merely to puerile ranting), but given their demonstrated spirit of attack, one cannot but question whether the distortions in their “proofs” are innocent.

D) *What are the New Atheists Arguing?*

We will examine what the New Atheists are arguing, and what the counterarguments are, in the context of nine propositions. Our examination of counterarguments, of arguments for faith, will *not* focus primarily on citations from religious authority (*e.g.*, Scripture or Church doctrine), but will use the “ammunition” of reason, logic, science, and the historical record to demonstrate that arguments against faith are not rational, logical, scientific or supported by history.

1. **Proposition:** Faith is the foundation of intolerance and hatred.

In his best selling book, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Christopher Hitchens states that faith is foundational to intolerance. In his chapter “Religion Kills,” he argues that religion takes racial and cultural differences and makes them worse. Hitchens makes a fair point, that faith “transcendentalizes” ordinary cultural differences so that the parties believe that they are in a cosmic battle of good and evil.⁷ Examples in history and today abound of hatred and violence being perpetrated in the name of religious identity. The problem is that Hitchen’s ignores the fact that human regimes which have rejected all authority other than human “reason” have been notable principally for their practices of hatred and oppression. The French Revolution and its “Cult of Reason,” and the twentieth century Communist and Nazi regimes come to mind. All of these societies were rational and secular, yet each produced massive violence against its own people without the influence of religion.

When the idea of God is gone a society will “transcendentalize” something else: racial or ethnic purity, the will of the proletariat, the State. Examples of rational and secular fanaticism and oppression point to the fact that there is something *human* in the demonization of the “other;” there is an impulse to violence so deeply rooted in the human heart that it expresses itself regardless of what the beliefs of a particular society may be. The fair question becomes, therefore, not how faith may be abused to justify hatred, but what the faith teaches about hatred. The Christian injunction to “love thine enemies” has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found to be difficult and not tried.

“Tolerance” is a catchword under which persons of all ideologies seek to legitimize beliefs and practices without the necessity of examining and defending the beliefs and practices themselves. As such, “tolerance” is a transcendental principal; it is not a rational principal. There is, however, a fundamental assumption which underlies all injunctions to tolerance: the

⁷ Hitchens conveniently ignores, however, the Christian teaching that worldly differences are of no effect for those who are “in Christ” (Gal. 3.28-29).

construct of “personhood,” under which each individual has individual worth by reason of being a human being. This understanding of personhood is *not* a development of the “Enlightenment”. It is not an inheritance from ancient philosophy and anthropology. It is a belief which arose specifically in the context of Judaism and Christianity, which teach first that each human being is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1.26) and second that each individual is of value to God (Matt. 10.31; Luke 12.7).

In this series we seek to engage secular argument at its own level. So why now cite Scripture? It’s because if we go back and look through the history of human thought it’s just not possible to find the concept of personhood as we know it—of an individual being having worth which is independent of utility or status, and of this worth itself being absolute and transcendental—apart from the revolution in thinking which resulted from Judeo-Christian belief. In most human societies, and even in Classical pagan thought, a human being is an interchangeable commodity subject to unchanging laws of fate which are independent from any individual free will. The concept of free will itself is founded upon constructs of faith. If we are all controlled by “fate” and “random processes” of what import is freedom?

Freedom has itself evolved as a concept. Classically, true freedom was understood as something inseparable from one’s nature. To be truly free was to be at liberty to realize one’s proper “essence”.

For Plato or Aristotle, or for Christian thinkers like Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, or Thomas Aquinas, true human freedom is emancipation from whatever constrains us from living the life of rational virtue, or from experiencing the full fruition of our nature; and among the things that constrain us are our own untutored passions, our willful surrender to momentary impulses, our own foolish or wicked *choices*.⁸

We are free when we achieve the end toward which our inmost nature is oriented, and whatever separates us from this end (even if it comes from our own wills) is a form of bondage.⁹ In other words, freedom involves not just choice but *choosing well*, and to choose well requires that our choices be made with reference to some standard outside our own wills.

In our culture freedom is defined as the unfettered exercise of the will, without reference to the end toward which the will acts and without reference to a standard external to the will. (The “standard” is that the will is exercised.) The net effect of this is to define a person merely in terms of his ability to act, not in terms of his essence as a being and not in terms of how his being relates to other beings in creation and to creation itself. The culture has succeeded, therefore, in regressing to a worldview in which the definition of a person is *functional* as opposed to *ontological*.¹⁰ A finite thing’s (in this case a human’s) essence (*what* it is) entirely fails to account for its existence (*that* it is), and however we measure and define what humans do this does not account for what humans are within creation. If there is anything to existence beyond

⁸ D. B. Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 2009), 24 (emphasis original).

⁹ Michelangelo Buonaroti employed this imagery in describing his work as a sculptor being that of “liberating” the form of the sculpture from the marble.

¹⁰ Ontology is the philosophical study of the nature of being, essence, and reality.

physicality, then certain boundaries exist to how humans are defined, how personhood is defined. On the other hand, if the materialist view of reality is correct, than the exercise of the will is its own measure, and we are free to define others as no more than objects for the exercise of power.

Christians have failed signally in practicing actual tolerance and love, but this relates to our natures as human beings and not to the teachings of the faith. On the other hand, once we define “person” and “freedom” in functional terms only—once we get faith out of the picture so we can focus only on the exercise of the will—tolerance (let alone love) itself becomes something which *reason itself* defines as nothing but weakness.¹¹ The Church has failed the Gospel repeatedly, but no church ever built death camps.

What about persecutions in the name of faith? What about “witch trials” and the “Spanish Inquisition”? A close examination of history reveals:

1. Witch trials first arose in the early modern period (*ca.* 15th C.) as a popular movement. The first reaction of the Church was to discount the possibility of magic, and to seek to control the lynch mentality that gave rise to persecutions. In this the Church failed in most cases, to the point where Church authorities themselves sometimes participated in persecutions, *contrary* to the teachings of the Church.
2. The “Spanish Inquisition” was a political process, using local Church officers to persecute “conversos” (Sephardic and Moorish converts from Judaism and Islam), as a means to “purify the Spanish blood”. This happened at a time when Spain was becoming unified as a nation under one crown. In other words, the process was in general political, although it used religious language and officers. Repeatedly, the pope sought to intervene to end the exercise of the inquisition in Spain.

These two brief examples are used to illustrate how easy it is for faith to be coöpted by those pursuing a worldly agenda, and how it is necessary to look at facts carefully. Thus, the “religious” wars of the Reformation era can be seen, on examination, to be focused on political power and not on religious doctrine. The Church has often failed to uphold her own teachings, but institutional and individual weakness, venality, and opportunism are independent of the value of the teaching which is *ignored* thereby.

2. **Proposition:** There can’t be just one true faith.

The greatest intolerance and violence in history were practiced by those (the Nazis and the Communists) who believed that religion caused intolerance and violence, and so sought to eliminate it from public and private life. Since banning religion has never really worked (and has often strengthened faith), an alternative strategy is to condemn and marginalize it, characterizing believers as unenlightened. This second approach is working well,¹² but ultimately has its own problems:

¹¹ Friederich Nietzsche made the charge that all morality is a form of weakness, and developed a philosophy around the ideal of the realization of will. The Nazis found significant inspiration in Nietzsche.

¹² This second approach is also giving rise to intolerance, *vide* the refusal to allow a “conscience clause” that would allow a Roman Catholic to refuse to perform an abortion, or the marginalization (in some dioceses) of an Episcopal clergy who would refuse to bless a same-sex union.

1. When anyone argues that “all major religions are basically valid and basically teach the same thing,” they are making a statement of *doctrine*, while at the same time refusing to recognize that religious doctrine matters. To say, for example, that Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists all believe in the same “God,” an all-loving spirit in the universe, and that differences in belief are marginal, is to ignore, for example, that Buddhists don’t believe in a personal God; Christians, Jews and Muslims believe in a personal God who holds people accountable for their beliefs and practices, and whose attributes can not all be reduced to love. To insist that doctrine doesn’t matter is to take a doctrinal position.
2. When anyone argues that all religions reveal a partial truth, but that no one can see the whole truth (as in the story of the elephant being described by blind men), they assume that *they* can see the whole truth (that they are not blind). This is a claim of superior knowledge, of having an absolute vantage point.
3. The argument that “truth” is relative to the culture in which it arises presupposes an absolute vantage point which is not relative.¹³

Ultimately, debunkers of faith argue that any religious claim to truth is “arrogant,” that there cannot be one truth. “Truth” is defined in terms of a process-of-seeking, and in terms of personal experience (a subjective viewpoint) as opposed to being defined as external to the individual (as objective) and as at some level immutable. But this definition is itself a statement of faith! It is a statement which presupposes that the one making the definition is speaking the truth. An argument for epistemological¹⁴ relativism and pluralism is ultimately and necessarily circular.

3. Proposition: “Creation” is the result of random processes.

In discussing intolerance, we just noted that under the materialist worldview existence is physicality only. A materialist argues that reality is comprised of observable, quantifiable phenomena only; there is no world of spirit. What is ignored in this line of argument is the distinction between essence (*what* a thing is) and existence (*that* a thing is). The materialist worldview would have all life explained as the result of random processes giving rise to combinations of matter and energy states, but this ignores that one must first have matter and energy, and where did they come from?

It is, in fact, a leap of *faith* to confuse the ability of the scientific method to investigate and describe natural causes and the ability to describe existence. (Why is there a universe? Why are there matter and energy?) Science proceeds on the assumption that whatever occurs in the world can be accounted for by other events in the world, other events that are just as measurable. To be termed scientific a method of inquiry must be based on gathering observable, empirical and measurable evidence subject to specific principles of reasoning. The scientific method consists of the collection of data through observation and experimentation, and the formulation and testing of hypotheses. Thus, for example, under the *Special Theory of Relativity* of Albert Einstein, we are familiar with the famous equation $E = MC^2$ (Energy equals [Matter times the

¹³ The same can be argued about the cultural bases for the idea of truth being relative. If a cultural pluralist were to be born in a nonpluralistic society (say, for example, in Mecca), he would be most unlikely to be a pluralist.

¹⁴ Epistemology is the science of knowledge, the philosophy of truth.

Speed of Light], squared). This relationship between energy and matter can and has been measured, but science cannot “measure” or otherwise explain why when matter is accelerated to a sufficient energy state (speed) it will be transformed into its energy state. This “nature” of matter remains unexplained.

When studying a phenomenon a scientist must always assume that there is a natural cause. This is because the scientific method can only address causation, not existence. But to focus only on natural causes is not the same thing at all as to be able to say that there can't *be* any other kind of cause (whether this is described as supernatural, spiritual, or using other terminology and concepts). There is simply no experimental model for testing the statement, “No supernatural cause for any natural phenomenon is possible.” This statement is a *philosophical supposition*; it is not a scientific finding, nor can it be. Commenting on this problem in the context of a discussion of miracles, the philosopher Alvin Plantinga states:

[One may suggest] that the very practice of science requires that one reject the idea (*e.g.*) of God raising someone from the dead. ... [This] argument ... is like the drunk who insisted on looking for his lost car keys under the streetlight on the grounds that the light was better there. In fact, it would go the drunk one better: it would insist that because the keys would be hard to find in the dark, they *must* be under the light.¹⁵

Science, by its very nature, can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God or of the supernatural. To argue that it can or has is unscientific.

4. **Proposition:** The existence of suffering proves that there is no good, all-powerful God.

The problem of suffering has perhaps more to do with the questioning of faith than any other phenomenon. The twentieth century examples of the Holocaust, the Ukrainian famine, the Gulag Archipelago, and the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge have perhaps more to do with the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century attacks on faith than any other episodes in human history. (The fact that each example proceeded from secularist, rationalist attacks on faith is now conveniently unmentioned.) But are suffering and evil evidence against God?

The problem of suffering gives rise to the argument that if a good and powerful God exists, he would not allow pointless evil, but because there is much unjustifiable, pointless evil in the world, then a good and powerful God cannot exist. The flaw in this argument is the premise that if evil appears pointless to me, then it must *be* pointless. Lurking within such “hard nosed skepticism” is an enormous faith in the skeptic's own perception and cognitive faculties. C. S. Lewis in fact argued that suffering may be evidence *for* God:

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of “just” and “unjust”? ... What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? ... Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying that 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

¹⁵ A. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford U.P., 2000), 406 (emphasis original).

happen to please my private fancies. ... Consequently, atheism turns out to be too simple.¹⁶

Modern objections to God are based on a sense of fair play and justice, but evolutionary, scientific explanations of life and the mechanism of natural selection *depend* on death, destruction, and violence of the strong against the weak. What we may quite properly view as unjust is nonetheless *natural*. On what basis, then, does the atheist judge the world to be unjust and unfair? As soon as you claim that the world is filled with evil, you must assume the reality of some extra-natural (supernatural) standard by which to make your judgment. The only “escape” from this dilemma is to assume a complete nihilism, to focus on the self and the expression of will as the only realities, with the net result being that all other persons are liable to be treated as objects, not persons. (A most unjust result!)

5. Proposition: The Church is responsible for injustice. The history of “religious” wars and the toleration of slavery proves this.

Last week we discussed the need to look carefully at the facts of history before deciding what role religion has had to play in warfare. There are certainly examples of warfare waged with specific reference to doctrine,¹⁷ but what about warfare waged in the name of Christian doctrine?

a. *The Crusades:* The Crusades began in 1096, as a response to the 1076 conquest of Jerusalem by Muslim armies. The Byzantine emperor Alexius I appealed to Pope Urban II for help, and the pope in turn asked the French king to intervene. The precipitating cause for Alexius’ appeal for aid was the virtual impossibility for Christians to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This allowed Alexius to raise the issue with the pope, but Alexius was perhaps more motivated by the military threat to his empire posed by the Muslim caliphate. Urban II declared a crusade to recapture Jerusalem. The pope enhanced recruiting by declaring a plenary indulgence¹⁸ for crusaders.

Crusades occurred over the next two centuries. In many cases the principal aim of crusaders was pillage and spoil, and in all cases the principal factors in play were the geopolitical contest for dominance of the Mediterranean between the lands of the old Roman Empire (the states of western Europe and the Byzantine Empire in the East) and the Muslim caliphate. The final crusade involved western (Christian) armies destroying much of the eastern (Christian) empire, so weakening it that it eventually fell to the Muslims. In other words, the warfare was focused on power, with religious doctrine at best providing a little “window dressing” and incentive in recruitment.

b. *The “religious” wars of the 16th and 17th centuries:* The Reformation in Europe was about Christian doctrine. Martin Luther, Jean Calvin and others did specifically reject much of the teaching and practice of Roman Catholicism. But no armies were fielded in defense, *e.g.*, of the eucharistic doctrine of transubstantiation *v.* consubstantiation or memorialization. Fighting focused on power, with doctrinal differences serving to identify rivals as the “other,” and to

¹⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1960), 31(emphasis original).

¹⁷ The current warfare waged by Al-Qaeda seeks to impose a particular Wahhabist Muslim worldview and polity on all persons, regardless of their beliefs and traditions.

¹⁸ A sort of “get out of Purgatory free” pass in the medieval mindset.

transcendentalize differences. This is made clear by the way in which peace was first negotiated. In the so-called “Peace of Augsburg” of 1555 the principal of *cuius regio, eius religio*¹⁹ applied. If a prince became Protestant his subjects all were to be Protestants; if he remained Catholic his subjects were to remain Catholic. In other words, peace was agreed on the basis of political power, not on the basis of religious doctrine. The Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 effected peace on diplomatic grounds, to put an end to the ongoing warfare which had existed between the Holy Roman Empire (a principally German power), France, Spain, Sweden, and the Netherlands. Notable is the fact that the Catholic powers of France and Germany were often enough on opposite sides. The wars which arose in the Reformation were about power politics, not religious doctrine.

Many, many abuses occurred throughout the wars attendant to the Reformation. Many of these were done invoking religious doctrine. In this Christians of all stripes failed to observe their own doctrine, but this is not the same thing as saying that the Protestant Dutch (for example) sought their independence from Spain because Spain was Catholic. The differences in religion between the Dutch and the Spanish were but one factor in a struggle between two people and two commercial and naval powers.

c. *Slavery, Old world and New*: In current debates within the Church over sexuality, one argument often made in favor of a revision in doctrine is that “The Church got it wrong on slavery, and so can be shown to have been on the wrong side of freedom before.” Leaving aside current debates²⁰ and definitions of freedom, the argument is historically wrong. (Nietzsche understood this. He argued that Christianity was a *slave revolt* in values.)

Slavery in the old world was a pervasive institution, which reflected the pagan worldview of a settled order of creation, in which people were born to different, unchangeable stations in life. A slave was not a “person”. The concept of personhood (*persona* is Latin for “mask”) was one of *public* standing, not individual worth. Expecting the imminent second coming of Jesus, St. Paul enjoins that slaves obey their masters (Eph. 6.5; Col. 3.22; cf. 1 Pet. 2.18), but then goes on to enjoin that masters treat their slaves as persons, as brothers in Christ (Eph. 6.9; Col. 4.1), a radical proposition that is entirely contrary to the worldview of the Classical world. The truth of the matter is that the Christian concept of “person” as involving individual, God-given, worth, gave rise to the death of old world slavery, albeit this process required five centuries to complete.²¹

New world slavery (*e.g.*, on a racial basis) was a development of *modern* (16th century) thought. Africans were deemed to not fall within the definition of “person” by reason of a racist, secular anthropology which defined them as not fully human. This school of thought certainly appealed to religious authority to attempt justification. As late as the 1860’s Christian ministers

¹⁹ Loosely translated at “Whose realm, his religion.” The divisions effected under this principal still obtain in Germany where, for example, the River Mainz is a sort of “Mason-Dixon” line demarcating majority Catholic from Protestant states.

²⁰ Those who argue in favor of revisions in Church doctrine are not atheists, but they are using a line of argument common to atheistic attacks on faith as a restriction on freedom.

²¹ In the Crusades, the survivors of vanquished Muslim armies were not sold by Christians into slavery.

(a decided minority) were arguing that the institution of slavery was part of the divine order,²² but the Abolitionist movement in fact arose from both the Enlightenment concept of the “rights of man”²³ and the Christian concept of justice and unity in Christ.²⁴ Indeed, the principal agitator against slavery, William Wilberforce, took up this cause upon his conversion to being an Evangelical Christian.²⁵

6. Proposition: How can a loving God send people to hell? Faith is a defense mechanism against existential fear, an evolutionary coping mechanism.

a. *Divine judgment:* Within our culture, divine judgment is one of Christianity’s most offensive doctrines. The doctrine is offensive because it is understood to mean that a Christian can hold a non-Christian, upright, law-abiding, fellow American to be a valued member of society, entitled to all of the same legal rights and protections of any other person, and yet to be subject to eternal damnation, and thus to be a person to be in some sense valued less and even subjected to opprobrium. The “offensive” nature of the doctrine of judgment reflects a profound and often willful ignorance of main stream Christian teaching (*see below*).²⁶ But, before we turn to what the doctrine of judgment actually is, let’s first go back to the first sentence of this paragraph: it is within *our culture* that the concept of divine judgment is considered offensive.

Judgment is offensive because it collides with one of our most cherished Western values, that of the exercise of human power to define reality. Magic as we know it was not an ancient concept; it arose in the 16th century as medievalism gave way to modernity. It arose at the same time as the modern scientific method, as a sort of “evil twin”. Both magic and applied science seek to subdue reality to the wishes of humans. They seek to apply different technique in this, and expecting magic to work leads to disappointment, but each is an attempt to exert human power over reality. The mindset and worldview which supports this exercise of power accepts as a necessary (if most often unspoken) corollary that human beings can exercise power to determine right and wrong. Instead of trying to shape our desires to fit reality (as in ancient wisdom) we seek to shape reality to fit our desires. This is a Western cultural prejudice. In most of the rest of the world the concept of a God who does *not* punish is counter-cultural; the idea of forgiveness is seen as a denial of reality.

Punishment or forgiveness collides with the human prejudices inherent in all cultures about how power can be exercised. But if we assume, for the sake of argument, that there is a loving God, this still begs the question of how He can send people to hell? To this question Christian

²² Ministers tended to cite Noah’s curse upon Canaan, the son of Ham (Gen. 9.25-27), and Paul’s sending of the slave Onesimus back to his master, Philemon. They conveniently ignored that Paul enjoins Philemon to receive the runaway Onesimus as “a beloved brother” (Phin. 16).

²³ A rational concept based upon the earlier faith-based concept of personhood.

²⁴ “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3.28).

²⁵ Wilberforce is commemorated in the Episcopal Church on 30 July.

²⁶ Coupled with these objections to divine judgment is the teaching that God is a delusion. *See, e.g.,* R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006). *But see,* A. McGrath and J. C. McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

doctrine poses a unique answer, that God so loves the world that He gives His Son to satisfy justice, and that the only people who go to hell are people who reject this offer of love. The damned are those who have received God's offer of salvation and have knowingly rejected it. They have damned themselves by rejecting the Cross.

This argument is, of course, a statement of religious doctrine. It is not a secular argument, but this is "fair" insofar as the atheist attack is not a secular argument either. To argue about a supposed contradiction between a loving God and damnation is to argue on the basis of doctrine one does not agree with, not on the basis of the invalidity of doctrine.

b. *Faith as an evolutionary adaptation*: Whatever the many similarities between human and animal existence are, human consciousness is different. A principal difference would appear to relate to the consciousness of time, *i.e.*, of future, and of the present awareness of future personal demise.

In evolutionary theory there is no "purpose" to existence apart from the propagation and continuation of genetic material. A creature's survival and adaptation behavior (and that of a species) is behavior with no other function than to continue the existence of that defined genetic material (a gene) which defines the creature or the species. In the case of a human being, even behavior which is considered selfless or altruistic (*e.g.*, a parent risking his or her life to save the life of a child) is defined to serve the function of continuing the existence of genetic material.

Under this theory, the present awareness of future death is a condition which leads to a level of anxiety in humans. This anxiety would lead to maladaptive behavior (*e.g.*, we would not be able to plan, but would each live for the moment alone) which would make it less likely that we succeed in propagating genetic material. Therefore, natural selection has caused the brain to adapt, and to develop a concept of "God" and the supernatural as a defense mechanism against debilitating anxiety.²⁷ This "God" idea is a "meme," an idea that replicates in successive generations of humans the way a gene (genetic material) does.

The problem with this argument is two fold. At a functional level, no coherent scientific evidence has been adduced which: (a) identifies brain anatomy and/or function which controls the "adaptation"; (b) or which identifies the anatomy or function of meme imprinting (programming). More fundamentally, the argument confuses categories. Purpose and function are two different things. Even if memes exist, even if the brain has adapted by developing an idea of God in order to cope with otherwise limiting anxiety and dysfunction, this would only explain mechanism, not the existence affected by the mechanism. A meme could be God's way of making human beings aware of His existence. *That* our brains may function in a given way does not address *why* they do.

7. Proposition: Scripture is at most a cultural record of specific cultural practices, prejudices, and delusions.

There is much in the Bible that not only seems foreign to us; it is. We live in a very different society, albeit the most salient differences between our world and the ancient have resulted from changes in human culture with an origin in biblical teaching (even if most of the culture now either forgets or willfully ignores this fact). We do not live in the developed West in a strictly patriarchal society. We do not live principally as pastoralists. We do not live mostly in small

²⁷ M. Alper, *The "God" Part of the Brain: A Scientific Interpretation of Human Spirituality and God* (Napierville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2006); R. Wright, *The Evolution of God* (New York: Little Brown, 2009).

settlements, and in the U.S., at least, the experience of hostile neighbors and local battlefields is at best a distant memory. So why pay any attention to what people living under such radically different conditions had to say?

An atheist accords no authority to Scripture, and so the current proposition is really a statement about what he or she believes the Bible to be, not about what it has to *say*. But, let's work backward from what the Bible has to say to what it is. To do this we must define the authority of Scripture. An extreme position is that the Bible is "infallible". This means that the Bible is the literal word of God, which records without error what God has to teach and reveal in history; it is a literal historical record, no part of which is not true in a literal sense. Amongst nonbelievers and doubters this is often thought of as what all Christians believe.

A second approach to biblical interpretation is that Scripture is "inerrant". Inerrancy holds that the Bible need not be literally true, but that taken as a whole Scripture will not lead us into error. The Bible is held to reveal God's will and to reveal truth, with discrepancies (*e.g.*, between the biblical record and history as recorded in other sources) being immaterial. In other words, the Bible is inerrant in its *purpose*, *i.e.* the revelation of the nature of God and God's message for humanity.

Finally, some hold biblical authority to be advisory. The Bible is a guidance document, and meaning is contextual. Thus, if the context (culture) changes, the meaning changes. This third position is used to support a lot of current polemic about sexuality.²⁸

Why do we care about whether the Bible is true or not? It is because only truth can have final authority to determine belief and behavior, and Scripture cannot have such authority further than it is true. A factually and theologically untrustworthy Bible could still impress us as a presentation of religious experience and expertise, but if we cannot affirm its truthfulness we cannot claim that it is God's testimony and teaching, given to control our convictions and conduct.

It is indisputable that Jesus Christ and his apostles held and taught that the Jewish scriptures (our Old Testament) were God's witness to himself in the form of human witness to him. There is no disputing that Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Son, viewed these scriptures as his Father's Word.²⁹ So, too, it is clear that the apostles, like their Lord, saw the scriptures as the God-given verbal embodiment of teaching from the Holy Spirit.³⁰ This brings us to the real issue:

Either Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Eternal Son of God, or He was a fraud and/or a lunatic.

a) If Jesus was and is the Eternal Son of God, the Word made flesh, then we must pay the closest attention to what He had to say and to what He did, and to the scriptures that He considered to be the authoritative revelation of the Creator's unique utterance of His will for us.

²⁸ *E.g.*, statements to the effect that the Bible was written by humans, and so we humans can change it.

²⁹ See how Jesus quotes a narrative comment as the Creator's utterance in Mt 19.5, citing Gen 2.24. He quotes Scripture to repel Satan (Mt 4.3-11), and claims to be fulfilling both the law and the prophets (Mt 5.17). Jesus ministered as a rabbi, that is, a Bible teacher, explaining the meaning of texts of which the divine truth and authority were not in doubt (*see, e.g.*, Mt 12.1-14; 22.23-40). Finally, Jesus went to Jerusalem to be killed and, as He believed, to be raised to life again because this was the way Scripture said God's Messiah must go (Mt 26.24, 52-56; Lk. 18.31-33; 22.37; *compare* 24. 25-27, 44-47).

³⁰ See Acts 4.25; 28.25; 2 Tim 3.16-17; Heb 3.7; 10.15. The apostles claimed not merely that particular predictions were fulfilled in Christ (Acts 3.22-24), but that all the Jewish scriptures were written for Christians (*compare* Rom. 15.4; 16.26; 1 Cor. 10.11; 2 Cor. 3.6-16; 1 Pet. 1.10-12; 2 Pet. 3.16). The early Church took over the Old Testament (*Septuagint* version) for liturgical and homiletical use in the churches alongside the teaching of the apostles.

b) If Jesus was a fraud and/or a lunatic then it is irrational to pay attention to anything that He had to say and teach. Nonbelievers may argue that it is possible to look to Jesus as an important moral teacher; that one can follow the ethical teaching of Jesus without believing Him to be Lord, judging all biblical stories of miracles and other signs (and statements) of divinity as false interpolation.³¹ The problem with this argument becomes evident once we look more closely at the ethical teachings that are “retained”. These precepts (*e.g.*, having mercy upon and providing for the destitute, treating one’s neighbor as one’s self, etc.) are *not* part of any natural human order. Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens may argue that if we can just get the “poison” of religion out of society, then we’ll be OK; that we will be tolerant and peaceful. All evidence from history is to the contrary. To the limited extent that we both preach and practice that peace is an imperative, or that not persecuting the stranger is; to the extent we do provide for the unfortunates of the world, these sentiments and practices are cultural inheritances from Judaism and Christianity. The teachings of Jesus brought about a revolution in human thought, a revolution away from the universal acceptance of life being defined as a zero sum game in which, for example, care of the poor would have been considered irrational.

c) *What about other “revelations”?* The argument recited above could be equally applied to other “revelations” (*e.g.*, the Koran). Muhammad certainly claimed to have received a new revelation (one in which Jesus is recognized as a prophet). It is logical to make this argument, *e.g.*, for the Koran, but it fails as an argument for atheism. The moral imperatives held up by atheists as being part of being human are not revealed in other religious traditions.³² More importantly, once an atheist argues that we can look to any religious tradition as reflecting underlying, natural human characteristics (*i.e.*, he or she ignores the revolutionary nature of Judaeo-Christian teaching), he or she is teaching a form of *doctrine*, while at the same time denying that doctrine exists.

Believers do not argue that we need to follow the specific cultural practices and prejudices of biblical people. Believers argue that we need to seek the truth revealed in Scripture; the revelation of which is independent of specific cultural practices and prejudices.

8. Proposition. Faith is a straightjacket. Faith is just a restriction on human will and atheism is liberating.

Life without limitations or boundaries, this is the fantasy of modern conceptions of freedom. Freedom is defined solely as the power of choosing, without reference to the subject of the choice or the intention of the chooser. Neither God, then, nor nature, nor reason provides the measure of an act’s true liberty, for an act is *free* only because it might be done in defiance of all three. Freedom is the “triumph of the will”.³³ An atheist may recognize the existence of evil

³¹ This was the position held by Thomas Jefferson, who cut all references to miracles out of his New Testament, retaining only the ethical teachings.

³² Islam does include a large degree of overlap with the ethical teachings of Judaism and Christianity, but Islam is a faith which claims to be a successor to Judaism and Christianity.

³³ The allusion to Leni Riefenstahl’s cinematic celebration of Nazism is intentional.

(and argue that this proves that God does not exist), but under this conception of freedom, the ability to choose *evil* is itself liberty, a positive good.³⁴

When an atheist argues that faith is a straightjacket, it is necessary to reduce this argument to particulars. Either the argument is absolute (in which case choosing evil is “good,” because it involves unfettered choice), or it is directed against particular prohibitions. Is the atheist prepared to argue that murder and adultery are without ethical implications? That stealing or lying is OK? The problem the atheist has with such “restrictions” is that they necessarily involve the proposition that something must be true (in order to uphold the restrictions). The French philosopher Michel Foucault wrote, for example, “Truth is a thing of this world. It is produced only by multiple forms of constraint and that includes the regular effects of power.”³⁵ In other words, if you claim to have truth you are merely seeking to exercise power over another.

The assertion that truth is a power play runs into the same problems as the assertion that all truth is culturally conditioned. You can’t explain away all assertions of truth. As observed by C. S. Lewis:

[Y]ou cannot go on “explaining away” for ever: you will find that you explained explanation itself away. You cannot go on “seeing through” things for ever. The whole point of seeing through something is *to see something through it*. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too? ... a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To “see through” all things is the same as not to see.³⁶

To say that truth is a power play is to attempt a power play.

To argue that “freedom” equates with unfettered choice is to oversimplify and cheapen freedom. For example, you may have a musical gift, but unless you practice, and practice, and practice for years, this gift will not lead to a career as a performer. In order to realize this gift you must limit your freedom. There will be other things that you cannot do. Perhaps the best example that freedom involves choosing *well* is love. Love is the most liberating loss of freedom of all. You have to lose liberty in order to gain greater intimacy. To experience the joy and freedom of love, you must give up personal autonomy.³⁷ Far from being liberating true atheism is enslaving.

³⁴ “Freedom” thus defined means that there is no overarching purpose in creation. In this respect the atheist argument is consistent with the atheist doctrine that all creation is random.

³⁵ M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 131.

³⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (London: Collins, 1978), 48 (*emphasis supplied*).

³⁷ As quoted by Jesus at Mt. 19.5, “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2.24).

9. **Proposition.** Faith is incompatible with reason.

This is the real nub of modern attacks on faith. This “conflict” reflects a confusion of categories of thought, and a lack of clarity over definitions. In classical thought (*e.g.*, Plato and Aristotle) “reason” was a *participatory knowledge*. To know something is to experience it, to share or participate in something. Reason is not just about how we think; it is not just cognition. Reason, in this sense, allows us to experience how the world works; it is a sort of practical wisdom. This requires us to understand reality as objective, not subjective, *i.e.*, reality is not just what we define it to be.

Consider the contrast between how a Christian might reach an important decision and how an atheist might approach the same decision. A Christian would seek to discern what he or she is supposed to do with reference to God’s will, using a process that would look something like this:³⁸

1. *Begin with data:* What is known and demonstrable? The unknown is judged with reference to the known, the uncertain by the certain.
2. *The heart must educate the mind:* The love of God must educate our reason in discerning God’s will. Jesus teaches this principle to the Pharisees, at John 7:17.
3. *Have a soft heart but a hard head:* Christians are to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves,” sharp as a fox in thought but loyal as a dog in will and deed. The will must be giving and forgiving; the intellect examining and analytical.
4. *Revelation must support the decision:* Revelation includes: (a) Scripture, (b) Tradition (church teaching), (c) human reason (which God created), both as reality testing and as cognition, (d) the appropriate situation or circumstances (which God controls by His providence), (e) conscience, the innate sense of right and wrong, (f) individual personal bent or desire or instincts, and (g) prayer. A choice is to be tested by holding it up before God’s face. If one of these seven forms of revelation points away from doing something, don’t do it. If none says “no,” do it.
5. *Seek the fruits of the spirit,* especially the first three: love, joy, and peace. If I am angry and anxious and worried, loveless and joyless and peaceless, I have no right to say I am sure of being securely in God’s will.

Ideally, that’s how a Christian approaches an important decision. What about an atheist? Data certainly remain important, but reference to the “heart” can only be deemed a “delusion”. The intellect must be examining and analytical, but the will cannot be giving and forgiving. The will must be characterized only as exercised and realized. “Revelation” is irrelevant; it is delusional. Human reason (as cognition) alone controls. Situation and circumstances are random. Any distinction between “right” and “wrong” must be utilitarian only (*Does this benefit me?*), *i.e.*, what is right is defined as what the exercise of the will requires.

To make reality subjective, to make truth subjective, to define reason in functional terms only (as in how cognition works), is to define existence itself as a function of the exercise of the will within the random conditions of a wholly material universe. This is not “reason” in the sense of any participatory knowledge; it is “acquisatory” or acquiring knowledge, in which what is not useful to the individual will is rejected. In other words, philosophy and psychiatry here meet in

³⁸ Adapted from P. Kreeft, “Discernment,” <http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics/discernment.htm>, accessed 03-12-10.

diagnosis.³⁹ Just as the loss of intact reality testing is the hallmark of a psychotic break, the exercise of pure “reason” without reference to external testing is a form of philosophical madness. An epistemology which recognizes no truth outside of self-reference is not a philosophy of truth.

Conclusion: Apologetics is the branch of theology that offers a rational defense for the truthfulness of the divine origin and the authority of the Christian faith. That first adjective matters: we must make *rational* defense. This means that we must first engage the arguments of atheism, whether these are couched in terms of reason, science, or epistemology (2 Cor. 10.5). We will never be given an opportunity to present the case *for* the faith except to the extent that we can refute the arguments made against the faith. In arguing against the New Atheism we are not engaged, really, in theological debate. The debate is first rational and philosophical; it involves the examination of scientific and historical method and evidence. We may hope to be “innocent as doves” in our own trust in God, but Jesus enjoins us to also be “wise as serpents” (Mtt. 10.16) in our dealings with the world.

It is a cliché that when a Christian minister is confronted with a question for which he cannot offer a ready answer, the reply given will be either “It’s a mystery” or “You have to have faith.” As in all clichés there is an element of truth in this. A mystery of truth is not a thing unknowable, but something that must be experienced to be known. Faith involves both assent and trust (relationship), and absent relationship we will look to no authority outside of ourselves. Our first task in defending belief, then, is to get the nonbeliever to recognize that honest inquiry and rational thinking *require* an examination of argument and evidence which is more than self-referential. Let him first doubt his doubt, and it is into this emptiness that the true Word can then be spoken.

The Rev. Dr. Karl C. Schaffenburg
Feast of St. Patrick of Ireland, 2010

³⁹ In psychiatry a key finding in support of a diagnosis of psychosis is that “reality testing” is not intact. A man may believe himself to be Napoleon Bonaparte in his own mind, but this does not make him Napoleon!