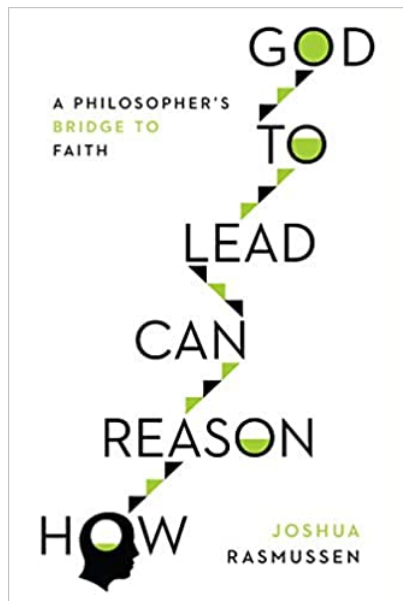


How Reason Can Lead to God – Part 1

Dr. Michael Gleghorn makes a compelling case for how reason can lead us, step by step, to the logical conclusion of God's existence.



In 2019 the Christian philosopher Josh Rasmussen published a little book with the intriguing title, *How Reason Can Lead to God: A Philosopher's Bridge to Faith*. Rasmussen earned his Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Notre Dame and currently teaches philosophy at Azusa Pacific University.

The book, dedicated to Rasmussen's "skeptical friends," aims "to mark out a pathway . . . that can inspire a greater vision of the ultimate foundation of everything."[\[1\]](#) Now admittedly, this is a tall order. And it leads Rasmussen into some deep philosophical waters. Still, he claims to be writing for a broad audience of truth-seekers—and he has largely managed to make the book accessible to the educated layperson. One reviewer characterized the result of Rasmussen's effort as both an "original presentation of cutting-edge philosophy of religion, and an engaging personal invitation to reason one's way to God."[\[2\]](#)



Now I realize that you may be thinking, "Well, this doesn't apply to me. I'm not interested in such 'heady' things as this." But do you know someone who is? Perhaps a son or

daughter, spouse or co-worker? If so, you'll want to keep reading, for this may be just the sort of thing they need. Rasmussen wrote the book for those who need to think their way carefully through the issues. The sort of person who is not content to dodge difficult questions or settle for superficial answers.

Several philosophers have praised Rasmussen's efforts. Robert Koons, of the University of Texas at Austin, describes the book as "winsome and engaging, drawing the reader into a thrilling adventure . . . of the existence and nature of reality's ultimate foundation."[\[3\]](#) And J. P. Moreland, of Biola University, compares the study with C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* and claims that "Rasmussen's argument for God is developed with such precision and care that, quite frankly, it could not be improved."[\[4\]](#)

With praise like this for Rasmussen's book, I hope you'll agree that it's worth our time and effort to take a deeper look at its contents. What is Rasmussen's argument for God? How does he develop it? Why does he refer to it as a "bridge to faith"? What sort of materials does he use in constructing his "bridge"? We'll begin our inquiry in the same place that Rasmussen does, with the deceptively simple observation that *something exists*.[\[5\]](#)

The Blob of Everything

Let's begin by considering the book's subtitle: *A Philosopher's Bridge to Faith*. What sort of bridge is this? As you might expect, since Rasmussen is a philosopher, this is a "bridge of reason." But it has an interesting destination, for it leads not to skepticism, but to faith.[\[6\]](#)

Rasmussen constructs his bridge very carefully. He wants every step in his construction project to be reasonable. In order to accomplish this, he seeks to use quality materials and first-

rate tools. His materials are statements that anyone can see are clearly true. His tools “are rules of logic.” By carefully selecting his materials, and conscientiously using his tools, he constructs “a bridge of reason that leads . . . to a special treasure.”[{7}](#)

Rasmussen begins his project with the claim that something exists. Although few will object to such a claim, some may still have doubts. After all, what if everything you think you experience is just an illusion? Well, in that case, “the experience of your illusion exists.” Moreover, *you* exist. If you didn’t, you couldn’t have any doubts about reality. In order to have such doubts, you must *first* exist. Thus, Rasmussen’s first claim, that something exists, seems quite secure.[{8}](#)

Next, Rasmussen bundles every existing thing, of whatever sort, into a comprehensive whole, which he aptly dubs the “blob of everything.” This “blob” includes every existing thing, the totality of reality. Since every existing thing is included in the “blob of everything,” there is nothing “outside” or “beyond” it. It is *everything*. Hence, the blob cannot have its cause, or reason for being, in anything outside it (for, of course, there *isn’t* anything outside the blob of *everything*).[{9}](#)

Now this is strange! My car, cat, and computer were each created by causes beyond themselves. My car had a car maker. My cat had parents. But something about the “blob of everything” isn’t like this. It has what Rasmussen calls a *foundational layer* that doesn’t depend on anything outside itself for its existence. We’ll consider the nature of this “foundation” more carefully next.[{10}](#)

Probing the Foundation

As we just noted, there isn't *anything* outside "the blob of everything." And hence, there isn't anything *outside* the blob that could cause, or explain, its existence.

What are we to make of this? Notice, first, that since the blob includes *everything* that exists, it includes many things that depend on other things for their existence. For example, the blob contains things like weasels, watches, and waffles and each of *these* things depend on *other* things for their existence. Baby weasels depend on mommy and daddy weasels. Watches and waffles depend on watch- and waffle-makers.

But notice: not everything in the blob can be like this. After all, if everything in the blob depended on something else for its existence, then we would have a serious problem—for the "blob of everything" does not depend on anything else for *its own* existence. Attempting to build such a blob using only dependent materials (that is, materials that depend on something outside themselves for their existence) would commit what Rasmussen calls a "construction error."[\[11\]](#) One cannot construct an independent, self-sufficient reality (like the "blob of everything), using only dependent parts. That would be like trying to construct a black steel pipe using nothing but toothpaste! No matter how much toothpaste you have, you will never construct a black steel pipe with such materials.[\[12\]](#)

So here's the problem. The "blob of everything" includes many things with a dependent nature (like weasels, watches, and waffles). At the same time, the blob (as a whole) depends on nothing outside itself for *its* existence. How is this possible? Clearly, the blob must contain some special ingredient that does not depend on anything else for its existence. Rasmussen calls this ingredient the "foundation."[\[13\]](#) It has an independent, self-sufficient, necessary nature. It's the sort of thing that *must*

exist, no matter what.{14} It must therefore be eternal (i.e. without beginning or end) and provide “an ultimate foundation for everything else.”{15}

Eternal Power

This “foundation” that is self-sufficient doesn’t need a cause for its existence. It exists on its own. It’s the sort of thing that *must* exist, that cannot *not* exist. And for this reason, the foundation must be eternal. That is, it must have always existed. Finally, it must also be powerful. But why?

Well, consider first that “power exists.” Rasmussen observes that there are only two ways of explaining this. The first suggests that power “came into existence from nothing.” The second says that power is eternal and has always existed. Which way is more reasonable?{16}

Well, suppose that power came into existence from nothing. The difficulty here is that something cannot come from nothing without a cause. And if there isn’t anything, then there cannot be a cause. Moreover, we must remember that “nothing” is *not* anything. It is the absence of anything. It thus has no potential to produce anything. It has no power or potential because it *isn’t* anything. Something cannot come from nothing, then, because “nothing” has no power or potential to produce anything.{17}

Thus, Rasmussen claims that reason itself drives us to suggest “a power that exists on its own, by its own nature.” In other words, since power exists, and since it can only come from something powerful, there must be an *eternal power*. That is, there must be a power that has always existed. This power never *became* powerful; it *has always been* powerful. Fortunately, this conclusion agrees with reason, unlike the view that power came from nothing.{18}

Rasmussen sums it up this way: “The foundational power is eternal.”[\[19\]](#) Now this is quite astonishing. By thinking very carefully and following the light of reason, we have arrived at a foundation of all reality that is independent, self-sufficient, necessary, and eternally powerful. But we can go even further. By considering some of the things that the foundation has produced, we can learn even more about its nature.

Implications

Let’s recap: beginning with the simple (and undeniably true) statement that *something exists*, we have watched Rasmussen carefully construct a bridge of reason that has led (so far) to an independent, self-sufficient, eternally powerful foundation of all reality. But Rasmussen goes still further. For if this foundation is the ultimate source of all other things, then we can learn something about the nature of the foundation by considering some of what it has produced.

For example, it is doubtless true that one of the most important things the foundation has produced is *you*—a human being. But what sort of thing are you? And what might this tell us about the foundation’s nature?

Rasmussen examines four aspects of human beings that reveal some important characteristics of the foundation.[\[20\]](#) First, human beings have minds. We are not like rocks, papers, or scissors. We are self-conscious beings, aware of our own existence. We can think, feel, make plans, and work to accomplish them. Second, we have bodies. We are not disembodied minds, souls, or spirits. There is a complex physical (and physiological) dimension to our being. Third, we are moral agents. We

experience a moral dimension to our existence. We sense that some things are good and that others are evil. We recognize that it is good to be kind to other persons and bad to harm

them. Finally, we are rational agents. We can “see” or discern certain logical and mathematical truths. For example, we can “see” that two plus two equals four and that “nothing is both true and false at the same time.”[{21}](#)

If we ultimately depend for our existence on a self-sufficient and eternal foundation, then what might this tell us about that which brought us into being? Although the details will have to wait for the next article, the various characteristics of human beings mentioned above point to “a certain *mind-like* aspect of the foundation.”[{22}](#) Indeed, we might even say that these characteristics reveal a foundation with mental, moral, rational—and even personal attributes!

Our goal for the [next article](#), then, is to consider each of these characteristics in greater detail, showing how each one plausibly leads to a personal foundation of existence.

Notes

1. Joshua L. Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God: A Philosopher's Bridge to Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), ix.
2. Todd Buras, review of *How Reason Can Lead to God: A Philosopher's Bridge to Faith*, by Joshua L. Rasmussen, *Philosophia Christi* 21, no. 2 (2019): 453.
3. Robert Koons, Endorsement, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, frontmatter.
4. J. P. Moreland, Endorsement, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, frontmatter.
5. Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, 9.
6. Ibid., 8-18.
7. Ibid., 8.
8. Ibid., 9.
9. Ibid., 11-13.
10. Ibid., 19-34.
11. Ibid., 22.

12. This illustration is indebted to others like it offered in Rasmussen's book.
13. Ibid., 19-34.
14. Ibid., 31.
15. Ibid., 34.
16. Ibid., 56-7.
17. William Lane Craig, "Questions About Leibniz's Cosmological Argument," Reasonable Faith, August 10, 2014, accessed May 24, 2020, www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/questions-about-leibnizs-cosmological-argument/
18. Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, 57.
19. Ibid., 60.
20. Ibid., 75-135.
21. Ibid., 131.
22. Ibid., 75.

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The Causes of War

Meic Pearse's book The Gods of War gives great insight into the charge that religion is the cause of most war. History shows this is not true: the cause of most war is the sinful human heart, even when religion is invoked as a reason.

The Accusation

Sam Harris, the popular author and atheist, says that "for everyone with eyes to see, there can be no doubt that religious faith remains a perpetual source of human conflict."^[1] Writing for the Freedom from Religion Foundation, fellow atheist Richard Dawkins adds, "Only the willfully blind could fail to implicate the divisive force of

religion in most, if not all, of the violent enmities in the world today.”{2} Speaking more bluntly, one British government official has said, “theocrats, religious leaders or fanatics citing holy texts . . . constitutes the greatest threat to world peace today.”{3}

War is the ultimate act of intolerance, and since intolerance is seen as the only unforgivable sin in our postmodern times, it’s not surprising that those hostile to religion would charge people holding religious convictions with the guilt for causing war.



This view is held by many others, not just despisers of religion. A 2006 opinion poll taken in Great Britain found that 82% of adults “see religion as a cause of division and tension between people. Only 16% disagree.”{4}

To be honest, religion has been, and remains, a source of conflict in the world; but to what degree? Is it the only source of war, as its critics argue? Is it even the primary source? And if we agree that religion is a source of war, how do we define what qualifies as a religion? This leads to another question. Are all religions equally responsible for war or are some more prone to instigate conflict than others? Once these issues are decided, we are still left with one of the most difficult questions: How does a religious person, especially a Christian, respond to the question of war?

When confronted with the accusation that religion, and more importantly, Christianity, has been the central cause of war down through history, most Christians respond by ceding the point. We will argue that the issue is far too complex to merely blame war on religious strife. A more nuanced response is needed. Religion is sometimes the direct cause of war, but other times it plays a more ambiguous role. It can also be argued, as Karl Marx did, that religion can actually restrain the warring instinct.

In his provocative new book, *The Gods of War*, Meic Pearse argues that modern atheists greatly overstate their case regarding religion as a cause for war, and that all religions are not equal when it comes to the tendency to resort to violence. He believes that the greatest source for conflict in the world today is the universalizing tendencies of modern secular nations that are pressing their materialism and moral relativism on more traditional cultures.

The Connection Between Religion and War

When someone suggests a simple answer to something as complex as war, it probably is *too* simple. History is usually more complicated than we would like it to be.

How then should Christians respond when someone claims religion is the cause of all wars? First, we must admit that religion can be and sometimes is the cause of war. Although it can be difficult to separate political, cultural, and religious motivations, there have been instances when men went off to war specifically because they believed that God wanted them to. That being said, in the last one hundred years the modern era with its secular ideologies has generated death and destruction on a scale never seen before in history. Not during the Crusades, the Inquisition, nor even during the Thirty Years War in Europe.

The total warfare of the twentieth century combined powerful advances in war-making technologies with highly structured societies to devastating effect. WWI cost close to eight and a half million lives. The more geographically limited Russian Civil War that followed the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 resulted in nine million deaths. WWII cost sixty million deaths, as well as the destruction of whole cities by fire bombing and nuclear devices.

Both Nazi fascism and communism rejected the Christian belief

that humanity holds a unique role in creation and replaced it with the necessity of conflict and strife. By the end of the nineteenth century, Darwin's ideas regarding natural selection and survival of the fittest had begun to affect philosophy, the social sciences, and even theology. Darwin had left us with a brutal universe devoid of meaning. The communist and fascist worldviews were both firmly grounded in Darwin's universe.

Hitler's obsession with violence is well known, but the communists were just as vocal about their attachment to it. Russian revolution leader Leon Trotsky wrote, "We must put an end once and for all to the papist-Quaker babble about the sanctity of human life." Lenin argued that the socialist state was to be "a system of organized violence against the bourgeoisie" or middle class. While critics of the Russian Tsar and his ties with the Orthodox Russian Church could point to examples of oppression and cruelty, one historian has noted that when the communists had come to power "more prisoners were shot at just one soviet camp in a single year than had been executed by the tsars during the entire nineteenth century."[\[5\]](#)

So, religion is not the primary cause of warfare and cruelty, at least not during the last one hundred years. But what about wars fought in the more distant past; surely most of them were religiously motivated. Not really.

Meic Pearce argues that "most wars, even before the rise of twentieth century's secularist creeds, owed little or nothing to religious causation."[\[6\]](#) Considering the great empires of antiquity, Pearce writes that "neither the Persians nor the Greeks nor the Romans fought either to protect or to advance the worship of their gods."[\[7\]](#) Far more ordinary motives were involved like the desire for booty, the extension of the empire, glory in battle, and the desire to create buffer zones with their enemies. Each of these empires had their gods which

would be called upon for aid in battle, but the primary cause of these military endeavors was not the advancement of religious beliefs.

Invasions by the Goths, Huns, Franks, and others against the Roman Empire, attacks by the Vikings in the North and the Mongols in Asia were motivated by material gain as well and not religious belief. The fourteenth century conquests of Timur Leng (or Tamerlane) in the Middle East and India resulted in the deaths of millions. He was a Muslim, but he conquered Muslim and pagan alike. At one point he had seventy thousand Muslims beheaded in Baghdad so that towers could be built with their skulls.[\[8\]](#)

More recently, the Hundred Years War between the French and English, the American Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars were secular conflicts. Religious beliefs might have been used to wrap the conflicts with a Christian veneer, but promoting the cause of Christ was not at the heart of the conflicts.

Pearce argues that down through the millennia, humanity has gone to war for two main reasons: greed expressed by the competition for limited resources, and the need for security from other predatory cultures. The use of religion as a legitimating device for conflict has become a recent trend as it became less likely that a single individual could take a country to war without the broad support of the population.

It can be argued that religion was, without ambiguity, at the center of armed conflict during two periods in history. The first was during the birth and expansion of Islam which resulted in an ongoing struggle with Christianity, including the Crusades during the Middle Ages. The second was the result of the Reformation in Europe and was fought between Protestant and Catholic states. Even here, political motivations were part of the blend of causes that resulted in armed conflict.

Islam and Christianity

Do all religions have the same propensity to cause war? The two world religions with the largest followings are Christianity and Islam. While it is true that people have used both belief systems to justify armed conflict, are they equally likely to cause war? Do their founder's teachings, their holy books, and examples from the earliest believers encourage their followers to do violence against others?

Although Christianity has been used to justify forced conversions and violence against unbelievers, the connection between what Christianity actually teaches and these acts of violence has been ambiguous at best and often contradictory. Nowhere in the New Testament are Christians told to use violence to further the Kingdom of God. Our model is Christ who is the perfect picture of humility and servant leadership, the one who came to lay down his life for others. Meic Pearce writes, "For the first three centuries of its history, Christianity was spread exclusively by persuasion and was persecuted for its pains, initially by the Jews but later, from 63, by the Romans."[\[9\]](#) It wasn't until Christianity became the de facto state religion of the Roman Empire around AD 400 that others were persecuted in the name of Christ.

The history of Islam is quite different. Warfare and conflict are found at its very beginning and is embodied in Muhammad's actions and words. Islam was initially spread through military conquest and maintained by threat of violence. As one pair of scholars puts it, there can be no doubt that "Islam was cradled in violence, and that Muhammad himself, through the twenty-six or twenty-seven raids in which he personally participated, came to serve for some Muslims as a role model for violence."[\[10\]](#)

Much evidence can be corralled to make this point. Muhammad himself spoke of the necessity of warfare on behalf of Allah. He said to his followers, "I was ordered to fight all men

until they say, 'There is no God but Allah.'" [\[11\]](#) Prior to conquering Mecca, he supported his small band of believers by raiding caravans and sharing the booty. Soon after Muhammad's death, a war broke out over the future of the religion. Three civil wars were fought between Muslims during the first fifty years of the religion's history, and three of the four leaders of Islam after Muhammad were assassinated by other Muslims. The Quran and Hadith, the two most important writings in Islam, make explicit the expectation that all Muslim men will fight to defend the faith. Perhaps the most telling aspect of Islamic belief is that there is no separation between religious and political authority in the Islamic world. A threat to one is considered a threat to the other and almost guarantees religiously motivated warfare.

Pacifism or Just Wars?

Although most Christians advocate either pacifism or a "just war" view when it comes to warfare and violence, Pearse argues that there are difficulties with both. Pacifism works at a personal level, but "there cannot be a pacifist state, merely a state that depends on others possessed of more force or of the willingness to use it." [\[12\]](#) Some pacifists argue that humans are basically good and that violence stems from misunderstandings or social injustice. This is hardly a traditional Christian teaching. Pearse argues that "a repudiation of force in all circumstances . . . is an abandonment of victims—real people—to their fate." [\[13\]](#)

Just war theory as advocated by Augustine in the early fifth century teaches that war is moral if it is fought for a just cause and carried out in a just fashion. A just cause bars wars of aggression or revenge, and is fought only as a last resort. It also must have a reasonable chance of success and be fought under the direction of a ruler in an attitude of love for the enemy. It seeks to reestablish peace, not total destruction of the vanquished, and to insure that

noncombatants are not targeted.

However, even WWII, what many believe to be our most justified use of force, failed to measure up to this standard. Massive air raids against civilian populations by the Allies were just one of many violations that disallow its qualification as a just war. As Pearce argues, “war has an appalling dynamic of its own: it drags down the participants . . . into ever more savage actions.”[\[14\]](#)

How then are Christians to think about war and violence? Let’s consider two examples. In the face of much violent opposition in his battle for social justice, Martin Luther King said, “be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. . . . We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win *you* in the process.”[\[15\]](#) Reform was achieved, although at the cost of his life, and many hearts and minds have been changed.

However, another martyr, German minister Dietrich Bonhoeffer, rejected pacifism and chose to participate in an attempt on the life of Adolf Hitler, mainly because he despaired that an appeal to the hearts and minds of the Nazis would be effective.

Neither King nor Bonhoeffer were killed specifically for their faith. They were killed for defending the weak from slaughter, as Pearce puts it. Perhaps Pearce is correct when he argues, “If Christians can . . . legitimately fight . . . , then that fighting clearly cannot be for the faith. It can only be for secular causes . . . faith in Christ is something for which we can only die—not kill. . . . To fight under the delusion that one is thereby promoting Christianity is to lose sight of what Christianity is.”[\[16\]](#)

Notes

1. Meic Pearce, *The Gods of War* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 16.

2. Ibid., 15.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 14.
5. Ibid., 31.
6. Ibid., 53.
7. Ibid., 54.
8. Ibid., 55.
9. Ibid., 134.
10. Ibid., 58.
11. Ibid., 59.
12. Ibid., 173.
13. Ibid., 175.
14. Ibid., 173.
15. Ibid., 180.
16. Ibid.

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The Old Testament and Other Ancient Religious Literature

Do similarities in the Old Testament with other ancient Near Eastern literature prove that it is all the same kind of thing? Rick Wade shows why it's not.

The Challenge

In the 1870s a scholar named George Smith revealed the discovery of both creation and flood stories in ancient Babylonian literature.[\[1\]](#) Bible scholars were soon claiming that the writer of Genesis was merely borrowing from Babylonian mythology. Although competent scholars have since shown that the similarities between these accounts are largely

superficial, the idea remains today in certain areas of academia and pop culture that the Bible is just another work of ancient mythology.



Although there are good reasons to see the Bible as very different from other religious literature, the problem for conservative Christians is in how similar it is to other ancient literature; it's because there are significant affinities that scholars made that leap in the first place. On the one hand, liberal scholars and a lot of ordinary lay people take the similarities to indicate that the Old Testament isn't any more divine than other ancient literature. On the other hand, conservatives, fearful of seeing the Bible lose its status, tend to shy away from the similarities. Most of us wouldn't say it, but we don't like to think there's much overlap between the worldview of the ancient Israelites and that of their neighbors. Where we run into problems is when we assume that God revealed Himself in ways that are always satisfactory to modern people, especially with regard to scientific and historical accuracy. Neither the giving-away-the-store approach nor the approach of turning a blind eye to genuine similarities will do. We must let the Bible be what it is and determine for us how we should understand and use it.

For all the similarities, there are fundamental differences that set the Bible apart. In this article I will spend more time on the differences. Before turning to those, however, it would be good to mention a few similarities.

For one thing, there is similarity in the form that religious practice took. Temples, priests, prophets, and sacrifices were a part of the practices of other religions as they were of the Israelites'. Old Testament scholar John Oswalt notes, for example, that "the layout of the tabernacle and of the temple

following it is essentially the same as the layout of contemporary Canaanite sanctuaries. Furthermore, the decoration of the temple seems to have been similar to that of Canaanite sanctuaries.”{2}

There were similarities in law as well. For example, the “eye for an eye” injunctions in Exodus 21:23-25 are similar to some found in the Babylonian *Code of Hammurabi*. Both include punishments for striking a pregnant woman and causing her to miscarry.{3}

Even here, though, there are differences, specifically in the purposes of these two. Old Testament scholar John Walton points out that the ancient codes, or treatises as he calls them, were not rules legislated by authorities. Rather, they were collections of principles, learned over time, assembled to show the worthiness and wisdom of the king in his role of maintaining order in society.{4} “This,” Walton writes, “was the most fundamental expectation of the gods.”{5}

By contrast, the Old Testament law was an important part of the covenant between God and His people; the laws were, as Walton says, the “stipulations of the covenant.”{6}

More could be said about similarities, but we’ll turn now to the differences between the Old Testament and other literature of the ancient Near East.

The One True God

Two fundamental differences between the Old Testament and ancient myths are the biblical claims that there is only one true God and that this God is not to be worshipped by means of idols.{7}

Israel’s neighbors were polytheists or henotheists, meaning they believed there were multiple gods but they worshipped only one, or one primarily. This is why the steward of

Joseph's house could speak to Joseph's brothers of "your God and the God of your father" (Gen. 43:23) and why Pharaoh could say to Moses and Aaron, "Go, sacrifice to your God within the land" (Ex. 8:25). The Egyptians had their gods, the Hebrews had theirs. The cultural "atmosphere" of belief in many gods was as normal in that day as the modern secular mentality is in ours.

By contrast, Yahweh declared that there was only one God and it was Him. "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no God," Yahweh said. "Who is like me? Let him proclaim it" (Isa. 44:6b-7a; see also 45:5,6).

Further, the true God was not to be worshipped through idols. That was a new idea. Idols were very important to the ancients. They were the actualized presence of deities. The idol received worship on behalf of the god. An example of that worship was providing food for the god by presenting it to the idol. John Walton says that through such expressions, "in this way the image mediated the worship from the people to the deity."[\[8\]](#)

This entire understanding was declared false by Yahweh. Through Isaiah and Jeremiah God declared that idols were wood or stone, silver or gold, and nothing more (Isa. 44; Jer. 10). "Every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols," God said through Jeremiah, "for his images are false, and there is no breath in them. They are worthless, a work of delusion" (Jer. 10:14-15a). Through the Psalmist, God asked rhetorically, "Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?" (Ps. 50:12-13).

Transcendence vs. Continuity

One of the ways we distinguish the Old Testament from other literature of the ancient Near East is to note the difference between actual history and myth. The stories of the gods in

other literature we call mythological. The word myth is often used today to mean false, but it has a much richer meaning than that.

In his book *The Bible Among the Myths*, John Oswalt gives several definitions of myth which have to do with such things as the definition of the word and sociological and theological factors and more.^{9} A central feature of all of them is what Oswalt calls "continuity." By continuity he means an actual metaphysical connection between all things. A simple illustration of this principle is the claim, "I am one with the tree, not merely symbolically or spiritually, but actually. The tree is me; I am the tree."^{10} In the ancient world, this continuity included the gods. The differences between nature and the gods were more of degree than of kind.

This connection is more than a matter of mere resemblance. Because the pagan gods were understood to be continuous with nature, what happened in nature was thought to be a direct result of the activities of the gods. If the crops didn't grow or the animals didn't reproduce, it must have had something to do with the gods. Moving in the other direction, people hoped to manipulate the gods by engaging in some ritualistic act on the level of nature. So, by retelling and acting out the mythical stories of the divine, ideal world, a connection was made between humanity and the gods. It was hoped that the outcomes of the mythical accounts would apply to the natural world.^{11} This direct continuity between earth and "heaven" sheds light on such things as temple prostitution and fertility rituals. Through re-enactments of the mythological origins of the world, which involved the sexual activities of the gods, people hoped they could inspire the gods to make their crops grow and their animals fertile.

By contrast, the God of the Old Testament is not continuous with the created world. Yahweh is transcendent, above and separated in His very nature from the created order. This

distinction marks a fundamental difference between the teachings of the Old Testament and those of the ancient myths.

This has several very important implications. I'll run through a few.

Being transcendent meant God could not be manipulated through rituals the way pagan gods could. Fertility rituals, for example, were meaningless because they had no relation whatsoever to how God created or governed the world. The Israelites engaged in certain ritualistic acts, but they were not for the purpose of making God do what they wanted. In fact, when they became substitutes for godly living, God told them to stop doing them. We read in Isaiah chapter 1 about how abhorrent the sacrifices and the rituals of the Israelites had become to God.

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood (Isa. 1:11-17).

The pagan gods demanded the appeasement of sacrifices. Yahweh looked for a change of heart and behavior.

Here's another difference. Because the various acts of the pagan deities recounted in myths were thought to be eternally recurring, time and space lost their significance. The acts of the gods were timeless. They couldn't be connected to

particular moments in history.[{12}](#) Thus, the mythological view reduced the significance of the historical.

By contrast, in Scripture we see the transcendent God acting in history through specific events and persons. The people of Israel were called not to re-enact but to remember particular events in history, for it was in these things that the transcendent God of the Bible revealed Himself.

The transcendence/continuity distinction helps explain why idol worship was so strongly condemned in Scripture. It was more than just a matter of worshipping the wrong God. It showed a basic misunderstanding of the *nature* of God. To engage in idol worship was to give in to the idea of continuity between nature and the divine. This mentality was likely behind the creation of the golden calf by Aaron when Moses was on the mountain. The people had lived in a world where gods could be seen through physical idols. It was natural for them, when wondering where Moses and Yahweh were, to find reassurance in a physical representation of deity. But it was condemned by God.

A Few More Differences

Here are three more differences between the worldview and religion prescribed in the Old Testament and that seen in other ancient Near Eastern literature.

First, the biblical worldview regards humanity highly. In the Old Testament, we read that man and woman were created in God's image. They were the pinnacle of God's creative work. In the pagan myths, mankind was created merely to serve the needs of the lazy and conceited gods. Humans were only good for "food and adulation," as John Oswalt says.[{13}](#)

Second, Yahweh was concerned with people's moral lives. Among other ancient Near Eastern peoples, Oswalt writes, religion was "about sacrifice, ritual, ritual purity, prayer,

offerings, and the like.” Things like this were part of the covenant between Israel and Yahweh, but not the only things, and not even the most important, as we saw in the Isaiah 1 passage quoted earlier. Ethical obedience was and is an important part of our response to God. His people are to tell the truth, to respect other people and their possessions, to keep the marriage bed pure, etc. Similar laws can be found in some other religious codes, but for Israel they weren’t just the laws of the land; they were aspects of a *relationship* with God that were grounded in the *character* of God.{14}

Third, the people of Israel could know if they were pleasing or displeasing Yahweh and why. They knew what they were required to do and not do, and they got feedback, typically through the prophets.

By contrast, other gods didn’t seem so concerned to communicate their thoughts or motives to people. When hardships came for no apparent reason, people thought they must have offended the gods, but they couldn’t know for sure what they had done or not done. Walton writes that “the minds of the gods were not easily penetrated.”{15} By contrast, he says, “nothing in the ancient Near East compares to the extent of revelation that Yahweh gives to his people and the depth of relationship that he desires with them.”{16}

By countering the idea that the Bible is just another example of ancient literature, I have not proved that the Bible’s message is true. The point is to clear away an objection that gets in the way of understanding. It provides a space for people to give more thought to the teachings of the Bible. The Bible is then able to speak for itself.

Notes

1. Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology,” *Evangelical Quarterly*, 46 (1974) 81-102; accessed online at www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/eq/1974-2_081.pdf.

2. John Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 91-92.
3. Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 31-32.
4. John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 290-91.
5. Ibid., 295.
6. Ibid., 299.
7. Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 57-58.
8. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 114-115.
9. Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths*, chaps. 3 and 4.
10. Ibid., 43.
11. Ibid., 42.
12. Ibid., 43.
13. Ibid., 70.
14. Ibid., 77.
15. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 307.
16. Ibid., 298.

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Friendship with Jesus

Dr. Michael Gleghorn draws on a work by Dr. Gail R. O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John,"[{1}](#) to explore the perspective of Jesus Christ as a Friend.

What a Friend We Have in Jesus[{2}](#)

In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis offers four analogies of God's love for humanity.[{3}](#) These include the

love of an artist for a great work of art, the love of a human being for an animal, the love of a father for his son, and the love of a man for a woman. Interestingly, he does not consider the analogy of friendship, or love between friends. In one sense it's surprising, for Lewis would later write quite perceptively about friendship in his book, *The Four Loves*.

Of course, at this time in his career, Lewis may not have even thought about the love of friendship in the context of discussing analogies of God's love for humanity. After all, on the surface, the Bible appears to say little about friendship between God and human beings. But saying little is not the same as saying nothing, and the Bible does speak about the possibility of enjoying friendship with God. In fact, the Gospel of John offers a great illustration of this in the life and teaching of Jesus, whom Christians regard as God the Son incarnate. John presents Jesus as a true friend, one who is willing to speak the truth to those He loves and to lay down His life for their benefit.

Consider Jesus' words to his disciples in John 15: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (vv. 12-15).

In this brief passage, Jesus surfaces several important elements of friendship which would have been readily recognized by people in the ancient world. We'll carefully consider each of these elements in this article. For now, however, the key point to notice is that Jesus explicitly refers to His disciples as "friends." Moreover, He also holds out to them the possibility of deepening their friendship with both Him, and one another.

In what follows, we'll unpack many of these ideas further. First, however, we must get a better understanding of how friendship was viewed in the ancient world.

Friendship in the Ancient World

Of course, John's discussion of friendship in his gospel does not occur in a cultural or historical vacuum. Indeed, he seems to have been aware of other such discussions and even enters into a dialogue (of sorts) with some of them. So how was friendship understood in the ancient world?

The most important discussion of friendship in antiquity is probably that found in Aristotle's *Ethics*. As one philosopher observes, "Aristotle's treatise on friendship is comprehensive and confident, as well as undeniably profound."[\[4\]](#) Aristotle views friendship as something like the glue of a community, binding people together in relations of benevolence and love. Such relations are indispensable for the community's health and well-being.[\[5\]](#)

Aristotle describes friendship as "*reciprocated goodwill*" and claims that the highest form of friendship occurs between "good people similar in virtue." The primary virtue of real friends is "loving" one another. And such love is expressed in practical actions, for the virtuous person "labours for his friends" and is even willing to "die for them" if necessary.

Finally, the ancients also viewed "frank speech" and "openness" as essential elements of friendship. According to Plutarch, "Frankness of speech . . . is the language of friendship . . . and . . . lack of frankness is unfriendly and ignoble."[\[6\]](#) The language of friendship thus involves something like "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). Friendship should allow, and even encourage, frank speech. And yet, such speech should always be characterized by love and a genuine desire for the friend's best interest.

Putting this all together, we can see how Jesus' remarks about friendship correlate with the ancient ideals expressed in the writings of men like Aristotle and Plutarch. Just as Aristotle viewed friendship as the glue of a community, so also Jesus seems to envision the formation of a community of friends, who are bound together in love by their shared allegiance to Him. As biblical scholar Dr. Gail O'Day observes, "The language of friendship provided language for talking about the construction of a community of like-minded people informed by a particular set of teachings."[\[7\]](#)

Below, we'll consider how Jesus both models and encourages the ancient ideals of friendship in His life and teaching.

The Language of Friendship

One of the ways in which John shows Jesus demonstrating friendship is through his frank and honest speech. We've seen that in the ancient world, open and honest speech was regarded as one of the hallmarks of friendship. And there are several occasions in which such speech is attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of John (e.g., 7:26; 10:24-30; 11:14; 16:25-33; 18:19-20).[\[8\]](#)

Of course, this doesn't mean that everything Jesus had to say was easy to understand. It wasn't, and even his disciples often misunderstood Him. Nor does it mean that Jesus never taught truths about God by using parables or figurative language. Indeed, He often did. What it does mean, however, is that throughout his Gospel, John repeatedly portrays Jesus as speaking and teaching the truth about God openly and honestly to all who care to listen.

For example, Jesus is described as "speaking openly" while teaching the people in the temple at the Feast of Booths (John 7:14, 26). Moreover, after His arrest, when Jesus is being questioned by the High Priest, He frankly declares to those

present, "I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret" (John 18:20). Dr. Gail O'Day observes that Jesus here claims that His entire public ministry has "been characterized by freedom of speech throughout its duration." She writes, "Jesus has not held anything back in His self-revelation but has spoken with the freedom that marks a true friend."^[9]

Finally, we must not forget what Jesus says to His disciples in John 15: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (v. 15). Here Jesus explicitly refers to His disciples as "friends," claiming that He has "made known" to them everything that He has heard from the Father. Not only does Jesus call His disciples "friends," He also speaks to them in the language of friendship, openly and honestly revealing to them the heart and mind of the Father.

Judged by the criterion of "frank and honest speech," Jesus thus reveals Himself to be a true friend to His disciples. And as we'll see next, He is willing to do much more than this, for Jesus is willing to lay down His life for the benefit of others.

The Ultimate Demonstration of Friendship

In John 15 Jesus declares, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (v. 13). Earlier we saw that Aristotle, in his writings on friendship, maintained that the true friend, actuated by genuine goodness, would even be willing to "die" (if necessary) for the sake of a friend.^[10] Of course, as any reader of the Gospels knows, Jesus soon does this very thing, thus demonstrating the greatest possible love according to the ancient ideals of friendship. As Dr. O'Day observes, "Jesus did what the philosophers only talked about—He lay down his

life for His friends.”[{11}](#)

This event is foreshadowed by Jesus in His claim to be the Good Shepherd in John 10. “I am the good shepherd,” He says. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (v. 11). This claim is one of the seven “I Am” statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John, and it likely involves an implicit claim to deity, for as Edwin Blum has noted, “In the Old Testament, God is called the Shepherd of His people (Psalm 23:1; 80:1-2; Ecclesiastes 12:11; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 31:10).”[{12}](#) One thinks of the way in which David begins Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want” (v. 1). The Lord Jesus, as the Good Shepherd of His people, is willing to lay down His life for their benefit (John 10:11).

But Jesus goes further than this, for as Paul tells us, Jesus not only gave His life for His “friends,” but even for His “enemies.” “For while we were still weak,” writes Paul, “at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Romans 5:6). “While we were still sinners” (Romans 5:8), and even “enemies,” “we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Romans 5:10). If dying for one’s friends epitomizes the ancient ideal of friendship, dying for one’s enemies far transcends this ideal. It demonstrates the sacrificial love of God for all humanity. While we were spiritually dead, mired in sin and rebellion (Ephesians 2:1-3), God “sent his Son to be the savior of the world” (1 John 4:14).

Aristotle referred to friendship as “reciprocated goodwill.” Jesus demonstrated the greatest possible love and “goodwill” of God by giving His life for the sins of the world (John 1:29). He commands His disciples to reciprocate His goodwill by loving “one another” as He has loved us (John 15:12, 14). By following His command, a community of friends is formed, bound together in love for one another and a shared commitment to Jesus.

A Community of Friends

Jesus calls His disciples “friends” and commands them to “love one another” as He has loved them (John 15:12). Jesus wants His followers to regard themselves not only as *His* friends, but as friends of one another as well. He intends for them to be a community of friends, bound together in their love for one another because of their shared devotion to Him. The sort of love to which Jesus calls them is a costly love, for He desires that His people’s love for one another be an imitation of the love that He has already demonstrated toward them. And what sort of love is this? It’s the kind of love that is willing to give one’s life for the benefit of others, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (John 15:13).

Now this, I think we can all agree, is a very high calling. Indeed, if we’re honest, I think that we must all admit that, humanly speaking, it is frankly impossible. If some degree of discomfort does not grip our hearts in considering this commandment, then we probably aren’t considering it in all due seriousness. Very few of us will probably ever reach the level of truly loving other believers just as Jesus has loved us, and if any of us do reach it, we probably won’t be able to consistently maintain such love in our daily practice. But Jesus commands us to do it, and we must at least begin trying to do so. But how?

Dr. Gail O’Day, I think, strikes the right tone when she comments: “The disciples begin with the explicit appellation, ‘friend,’ and the challenge for them is to enact and embody friendship as Jesus has done. The disciples know how Jesus has been a friend, and they are called to see what kind of friends they can become. Jesus’ friendship is the model of friendship for the disciples, and it makes any subsequent acts of friendship by them possible because the disciples themselves are already the recipients of Jesus’ acts of friendship.”[\[13\]](#)

We must remember that Jesus is our friend, that He loves us

and provides all that we need to live a holy and God-honoring life. Indeed, He has sent the Holy Spirit to indwell and empower His people for just this purpose. As we trust in Jesus, giving ourselves to Him (and one another) in genuine love and friendship, we will find that we are increasingly obeying His commands and bearing fruit that brings Him glory. So let's commit ourselves to friendship with Jesus, and to those who compose His body, the church (1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:24).

Notes

1. Much of the content of this article is indebted to the prior work of Gail R. O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John," *Interpretation*, 58(2):144-157.
2. The title for this day is indebted to the song, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." The words to this song were originally penned by Joseph Scriven in the 19th century; they were set to music by Charles Converse in 1868. For a brief history of Scriven and the hymn, please see Terry, L. (2004, July-August). Joseph Scriven's: "What a Friend We Have in Jesus": What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! *Today's Christian*, 42(4), 16.
3. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1962), 42-48.
4. Michael Pakaluk (Ed.), *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1991), 28.
5. I am drawing from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Hackett Publishing, 1985), 1155a23-27.
6. Plutarch, *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, 61; cited in Gail O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John," *Interpretation* 58(2):147.
7. O'Day, 147.
8. See the discussion in O'Day, 152-57.
9. O'Day, 156.
10. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin

(Hackett Publishing, 1985).

11. O'Day, 150.

12. Edwin A. Blum, "John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Victor Books, 1989), 310.

13. O'Day, 152.

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Religious Trends Over the Last Decade

Probe VP Steve Cable examines some of the findings of the Probe Survey 2020: The Changing Face of Christianity in America.

Religious Trends Over the Last Fifty Years

In late 2020, Probe administered a [new survey{1}](#) to over 3,000 Americans ages 18 through 55 as a follow up to our 2010 survey{2}. Comparing these two surveys reveals a striking decline in Christian religious beliefs and practice across America over the last decade. Before focusing on these changes, let's begin with a foundational question.

How have young adult religious affiliations changed over the last five decades?



As documented in the General Social Surveys{3} from 1970 through 1990, their religious affiliations remained fairly

constant. Since then, there have been significant changes.

The most dramatic change is found in young adults under thirty who select a non-Christian affiliation. This group grew from about one fifth of the population in 1990 to almost half today. Those non-Christians from other religious faiths{4} such as Judaism, Islam, and Mormonism, grew slightly up to about 10% of the U.S. young adult population. At the same time, **the Unaffiliated (i.e. Atheist, Agnostic or Nothing in Particular) almost tripled** to over a third of the population. Among the Unaffiliated, the Nothing in Particular category had by far the largest growth. The Pew Research surveys show an even greater increase, growing from 27% in 1996 to 59% in 2020.

Now bringing in the data from GSS 2010 survey, we learn that 26% of those in their twenties were Unaffiliated in 2010, growing to 30% of those in their thirties in 2018. This result means that more people in their twenties became Unaffiliated in their thirties. This result runs directly counter to the supposition of many that the growth in Unaffiliated would dissipate as young adults age and return to churches to raise their families.

Conversely, **Christian groups declined** with Other Protestants{5} dropping by half, from about one in four down to less than one in eight young adult Americans. Catholics also experienced major losses, dropping by one quarter down to less than one in five young adult Americans over this thirty-year period.

Although less affected, the Evangelical affiliation also experienced a drop in recent years. GSS reported a small decline in young adult, born again Protestants, from about one in four down to around one in five Americans. Pew Research{6} reported a steeper decline in young adult Evangelicals, from 28% in 2007 down to 20% in 2019.

Perhaps this decline is a winnowing out of those whose Christian beliefs are not vital to their lives. In which case, a greater percentage of born again Christians should hold a strong biblical worldview now in 2020 than in 2010. In the next section, we will explore this topic to find out the truth of the matter.

Born Again Young Adults and a Biblical Worldview

In the next sections, we will be focusing on Born Again Christians in our Probe results. A Born Again Christian is someone who says:

1. I have made a personal commitment to Jesus that is still important in my life today and
2. I will go to heaven because I confessed my sins and accepted Jesus Christ as my savior.

We can compare the responses of Born Again Christians to those of Other Protestants and Catholics.

What portion of these three groups have a Basic Biblical Worldview strongly affirming that:

1. God is the all-powerful, all knowing, perfect creator who rules the world today.[{7}](#)
2. The Bible is totally accurate in all of its teachings.
3. A person cannot be good enough to earn a place in heaven.
4. While on earth, Jesus committed no sins like other people do.

All four concepts above are key components of God's redemptive plan. For example, Jesus being sinless made it possible for his death to redeem us.[{8}](#) Or, if the Bible is inaccurate in some of its teachings how could we know that it is correct in teaching about redemption?

In 2020 for those ages 18 through 39, one of four Born Again Christians, one of twenty Other Protestants and one of one hundred Catholics affirmed all four of these foundational beliefs. The statement least likely to be affirmed by all three groups was “a person cannot earn a place in heaven”. Perhaps many have been influenced by the current postmodern thinking that what’s not true for you can be true for someone else.

Only Born Again Christians had a sizable minority of one fourth affirming this worldview. In contrast, nearly half of Born Again Christians affirmed it in 2010. Clearly, this last decade had a serious impact on the perception of what it means to be a Christian.

We see a similar drop when comparing those ages 18 to 29 in 2010 with the same cohort now 30 to 39 in 2020, once again belying the notion that young adults will return to a conservative faith in their thirties. Instead of a noticeable increase as the cohort aged, we see a sizeable drop in those who affirm these key Christian doctrinal statements.

As the percent of true Christians drops, the ability to reach out with the gospel is surely reduced. However, Christians in the Roman Empire in AD 60 were an even smaller portion. Three hundred years later virtually the entire empire was nominally Christian. If we “proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light^{9},” God will bring many to repentance.

Born Again Young Adults and Pluralism

Pluralism is the belief that there are multiple ways to be right with God. **Pluralism and Christianity are not compatible.** Jesus clearly stated, “No one comes to the Father except through me.”^{10} The high price paid through Jesus’ life and death excludes the

possibility of Jesus being one of several options. As the Apostle Paul wrote, *"There is salvation in no other name under heaven . . . by which we must be saved."*[\[11\]](#)

What does Probe's new survey reveal about pluralism? Confronted with the statement, "Muhammad, Buddha and Jesus all taught valid ways to God," how did American Christians respond? Do they align with clear biblical teaching by strongly disagreeing? For those ages 18 through 39, we found that about one third of Born Again Christians, one in eight Other Protestants, and one in twenty Catholics did so. An overwhelming majority of Christians chose to accept a belief that devalues the death and resurrection of our Lord. Once again, only Born Again Christians had a sizeable minority of one third who agreed with Jesus and the New Testament.

Looking back to 2010, was there a significant change among Born Again Christians during this decade? For the same age group, the percent in 2010 strongly disagreeing was almost one half, compared to the one third in 2020. So, more Christians than ever have no reason to share their faith with people of other religions. As the need for evangelism increases, the number of Christians who believe evangelism is even needed by people of other religions decreases.

The age group 18 to 29 saw 45% choosing a non-pluralist view in 2010 with that same age cohort (now 30 to 39) dropping to 35% in 2020. Once again, we see that as Born Again Christians are maturing, more of them are abandoning rather than clinging to the strong truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

To counter this slide with the young adults we know, please:

1. Pray for the Lord to send laborers into the harvest, opening their to the infinite value of the gospel.
2. Explain that the chasm is so great only God can make a way of reconciliation. As Paul wrote, *"God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For*

there is one God and one intermediary between God and humanity, Jesus . . . who gave himself as a ransom for all . . .

[{12}](#)

3. Explain that your accepting pluralism will not get your non-Christian friends into heaven. Only the truth of Christ presented to them by willing lips has power over their eternal destiny.

Young Adults and Jesus Our Savior

Probe's new survey shows that professing to be born again does not equate to orthodox biblical beliefs. In this section, we will see this borne out in beliefs about Jesus Christ.

First, why did Jesus die on a cross? The Bible is clear Jesus chose the cross. **"He did it to redeem us by taking our sins and our punishment upon Himself."** Close to nine out of ten 18- to 39-year-old, Born Again Protestants selected this answer.[{13}](#) All Christian leaders should want their people to know Jesus' role in their redemption, even those with a works-based gospel. Yet less than two thirds of Other Protestants and Catholics selected that answer.

Many said either the Jewish or Romans leaders caused Jesus' death. But Christians should know that prior attempts by those groups were supernaturally thwarted.

Second, "Jesus will return to this earth to save those who await his coming."

This statement comes from scripture, "*. . . so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, . . . to save those eagerly waiting for him.*"[{14}](#)

As you can see, this verse answers both questions. The apostle Paul wrote, "*For the Lord himself will come down from heaven . . . and the dead in Christ will rise first.*"[{15}](#)

Around two thirds of Born Again Protestants strongly agree that Jesus will return to save. Apparently, the remaining third are not sure.

For other Christian groups, only about one third of them strongly agreed.

The third question is: “When he lived on earth, Jesus committed sins like other people.”

The Bible clearly states, “God made the one who did **not know sin** to be sin for us so that in Him we would become the righteousness of God.”[\[16\]](#) God laid our sins upon Jesus in his earthly death. If Jesus were a sinner like you and I, His death would have been for His own sin.

Once again, about one third of Born Again Protestants did not select Disagree Strongly. Having this large group who don’t understand biblical Christianity is disappointing.

Young adult Born Again Protestants drop down to about one half when looking at **all three questions together**. It appears the other half are trusting Jesus to save them, without a good understanding of who Jesus is. All other Christian groups drop to one in ten or less professing these truths about Jesus.

Finally, we find nine out of ten people with a Basic Biblical Worldview also select a biblical answer for the three Jesus questions. This shows a strong correlation between a Basic Biblical Worldview and an understanding of Jesus’ purpose.

Are the Unaffiliated Uncommitted Christians?

In this section we will access Probe’s 2020 survey to learn about those identifying as Agnostic or Nothing in Particular. We will call them AGNIPS. Perhaps, as some have suggested, a significant percentage are really Christians not affiliated

with any denomination.

Among those ages 18 through 39, one in five are AGNIPS. About one third of these were Protestants as children but only three out of one hundred profess to being born again. So, it appears unlikely that any significant portion of the AGNIPS are latent Born Again Christians.

Of course, many people professing to be Christians do not qualify as Born Again. So perhaps many AGNIPS are latent Other Protestants or Catholics. Let's look at three different metrics to see if this proposition is supported by data.

First, look at a nominal level of religious activity: pray at least daily and read your Bible at least weekly. I think anyone not doing these has little interest in their faith. For this young adult segment, 35% of Born Again Christians and almost 30% of Other Protestants and Catholics *but* less than 5% of AGNIPS perform these activities. Compared to professing Christians, the AGNIPS have very few doing these activities.

Looking only at AGNIPS who were affiliated with a Protestant faith as a child, we find only 3% performing these activities.

A second metric: how about those who believe God is creator and active in the world and do not believe good works will get them into heaven? We find: 33% Born Again Christians, 4% Other Protestants and Catholics, around 0.5% of all AGNIPS and only 0.4% of AGNIPS with a childhood Protestant affiliation.

Finally, of those who strongly agrees with the statement, "I believe that the only path to a true relationship with God is through Jesus Christ." Once again: 64% of Born Again Christians, 28% of Other Protestants and Catholics, 5% of all AGNIPS and 5% of AGNIPS with a childhood Protestant affiliation.

All of these metrics agree that very few young adults who are Agnostics or Nothing in Particular appear to have latent

Christian beliefs. Even those who were affiliated with a Protestant church as a child did not have a higher level of affiliation with Christian beliefs.

Over this last decade, among Born Again Christians, a basic biblical worldview and understanding of Jesus is decreasing while pluralism is increasing. And the growing AGNIP population is far removed from Christian thought. Those who follow Christ, must respond by speaking the truth about Christ in our churches, our neighborhoods, and the world. We cannot expect any of these groups to just come back to a solid Christian belief. We must reach out to them.

Notes

1. Our new 2020 survey looks at Americans from 18 through 55 from all religious persuasions. Although still focused on looking at religious beliefs and attitudes toward cultural behaviors, we expanded the scope surveying 3,106 Americans ages 18 through 55. Among those responses, there are 717 who are Born Again allowing us to make meaningful comparisons with our 2010 results while also comparing the beliefs of Born Again Christians with those of other religious persuasions.
2. Our previous survey, the 2010 Probe Culturally Captive Christians survey, was limited to Born Again American's ages 18 through 40. This survey of 817 people was focused on a obtaining a deeper understanding of the beliefs and behaviors of young adult, Born Again Christian Americans. For a detailed analysis of the outcomes of our 2010 survey and other surveys from that decade, go to our book [Cultural Captives: The Beliefs and Behavior of American Young Adults](#)
3. General Social Survey data was downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the National Opinion Research Center.
4. Note that the Other Religions category includes Christian cults (e.g. Mormon, Jehovah's Witnesses), Jews, and other world religions.
5. Protestants who did not profess to being born again

6. U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2007, U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2014, Religious Knowledge Survey 2019 Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (a project of The Pew Research Center). The Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The data were downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.TheARDA.com, and were collected by the Pew Research Center.

7. Other answers to select from:

- God created but is no longer involved with the world today.
- God refers to the total realization of personal human potential.
- There are many gods, each with their different power and authority.
- God represents a state of higher consciousness that a person may reach.
- There is no such thing as God.
- Don't know

8. See for example 2 Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 4:15

9. 1 Peter 2:9

10. John 14:6

11. Acts 4:12

12. 1 Timothy 2:4-6

13. Other answers included:

- He threatened the Roman authority's control over Israel.
- He threatened the stature of the Jewish leaders of the day.
- He never died on a cross.
- He failed in his mission to convert the Jewish people into believers.

14. Hebrews 9:27-28 ESV

15. 1 Thessalonians 4:16

16. 2 Corinthians 5:21 NET

Body and Soul in the New Testament

Dr. Michael Gleghorn draws on John Cooper's book Body, Soul and Life Everlasting to provide an overview of what the NT teaches about the body-soul connection.

The Teaching of Jesus

What does the New Testament teach about the nature and destiny of human beings? In a [previous article](#), I discussed what the Old Testament has to say about these issues, giving special attention to the human body and soul. In this article, we'll consider what the New Testament has to say.

About 400 years separate the end of the Old Testament from the beginning of the New. During this so-called "intertestamental" period, Jewish biblical scholars, like the Pharisees, continued to teach and write about what God had revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures. According to John Cooper, the Pharisees taught that when a person dies, the soul leaves the body to continue its existence "in an intermediate state, already enjoying or lamenting the anticipated consequences of God's judgment."[\[1\]](#) Interestingly, both Jesus and the Apostle Paul also seem to have held this view.[\[2\]](#)



Consider, for example, some of the last words spoken by Jesus just prior to His death on the cross. You may remember that Jesus was crucified between two criminals. While one of these men railed against Jesus, the other (aware of his guilt),

asked Jesus to “remember” him when He came into His kingdom (Luke 23:39-42). Jesus responded by promising *this* man that he would join Him “in Paradise” that very day (v. 43). Paradise, in the Jewish thinking of the time, was understood to be a pleasant and refreshing place where the souls of the righteous continue their existence between the death and resurrection of the body.[\[3\]](#)

The body, in other words, may die, but the soul, or person, continues to exist apart from their body. Although this criminal had only hours left to live, his elementary confession of faith in Jesus resulted in Jesus promising him that they would be together in Paradise that very day! This ought to encourage all of us who have put our hope in Christ for salvation. Our bodies may wear out and die. But when they do, we shall go to be with Christ, awaiting the resurrection of our bodies while enjoying the presence of the Lord!

But what about the other criminal, the one who mocked and insulted Jesus? Although we’re not told what happened to him, we know from elsewhere in Scripture that the souls of the unrepentant also continue to exist after the death of the body. In the next section we’ll take a closer look at the fate of the righteous and unrighteous dead.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

What happens to us when we die? Do we continue to exist in some sense? Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus appears to offer some answers to these questions (see Luke 16:19-31). The story concerns a rich man, who lacks for nothing, and a poor beggar, named Lazarus, who is laid at the rich man’s gate (v. 20). The story implies that the rich man could have helped Lazarus, but never did so.

Eventually, both men died. Lazarus is said to be “carried by the angels to Abraham’s side” (v. 22). Essentially, he is

depicted as being with the Jewish patriarch Abraham in Paradise. Paradise, you'll remember, was considered a place of rest and refreshment for the righteous dead. By contrast, the rich man, his body having been buried, finds himself in "torment" in Hades (vv. 22-23). Seeing both Abraham and Lazarus at a great distance, he pleads with them for help. Abraham, however, tells him that this just isn't possible (vv. 24-31).

What might this story teach us about the nature and destiny of human beings? Though we should perhaps be careful about reading the story too literally, it seems to teach that we will each continue to exist (in some sense) even *after* the death of our body. Moreover, this existence will be experienced as either joyful or sorrowful, depending on our relationship with God. Although the story seems to depict the rich man and Lazarus as if they still have bodies of some sort, John Cooper offers several reasons for believing that the story is using figurative language to describe a time in which these men exist apart from their bodies.[\[4\]](#) This would be the period between the death and resurrection of the body. What are some of the reasons that Cooper offers for this view?

First, at the time Jesus tells this story, He regarded the resurrection as a still future event (see Luke 20:34-36). It is thus unlikely that the story here concerns some sort of literal bodily existence. Second, the story locates the rich man in "Hades"—and this term appears only to be used of the intermediate state, between the death and resurrection of the body.[\[5\]](#) The story thus appears to depict the rich man and Lazarus as consciously existing persons between the death and resurrection of their bodies. And if this is so, then we are *more* than just our bodies (as we'll see more fully in the next section).

Paul's Heavenly Vision

Do you view yourself as *more* than just your body? Might you also have a soul? We've previously considered evidence for the human soul in the teachings of Jesus. In this section, we'll consider further evidence from the writings of the Apostle Paul. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul recounts an extraordinary experience which he had fourteen years earlier (see 2 Corinthians 12:1-4, 7). He describes being "caught up . . . into paradise" and hearing "things that cannot be told, which man may not utter" (vv. 2-4).

For our purposes, the most important element of this experience concerns a peculiar detail mentioned twice by the apostle. According to Paul, he was unsure whether he had this experience while "in the body or out of the body" (vv. 2-3). That is, Paul was unsure whether he had been "caught up into Paradise" (v. 3) in his body, or out of it. But why is this important? Because it shows that Paul regarded the "out of body" option as a genuine possibility.[\[6\]](#)

You see, many scholars have argued that Paul did not believe in any sort of conscious existence apart from the body. The great New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce claimed that Paul "could not conceive" of a situation in which he might exist and have experiences apart from his body.[\[7\]](#) Now you might be thinking, "Well wait just a minute. Didn't you say that Paul was unsure whether this experience had occurred while in the body or out of it? Maybe he remained in his body and the experience was just a *vision* of Paradise, occurring while he was in some sort of trance-like state on earth."[\[8\]](#)

Yes, you're right. That *is* possible (although it doesn't seem consistent with what Paul actually says).[\[9\]](#) And here's the thing: the very fact that Paul was unsure whether this experience occurred while he was in (or out of) his body, tells us that he regarded the "out of body" explanation as a genuine possibility. And if this is so, then contrary to what

some scholars have said, Paul most certainly *could* conceive of conscious existence apart from his body. Indeed, he thought he may have had just such an experience himself.

But we can take this argument further. For as we'll see in the next section, Paul (like the Pharisees and Jesus), seemed to think that we'll continue to exist and have experiences between the death and resurrection of our bodies.

Our Heavenly Dwelling

When I was a child, our family would occasionally go camping. Although we usually went in a camper, with air-conditioning and beds, I've also spent a few nights camping out in a tent. Most of us have probably had such an experience (though whether we enjoyed it or not is another matter). A tent is basically a portable structure that provides a temporary place to stay while we're away from our permanent home.

In 2 Corinthians 5 the Apostle Paul has a fascinating discussion that touches on some of these issues (see vv. 1-10). The discussion is challenging, but if we consider it step by step, I think we can get a handle on what the apostle is saying. He begins, "For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (v. 1).

When Paul writes of "the tent that is our earthly home," he is referring to our physical bodies here and now. If our body is "destroyed," and we die physically, "we have," says Paul, "a building from God . . . eternal in the heavens" awaiting us. According to John Cooper, this "building" can plausibly refer to one of two things.[{10}](#) It *might* refer to our future resurrection body. However, it may also refer simply to "being 'with Christ'." If the second option is meant, then Paul is speaking about going to be "with Christ" at the time of death, in which we are (as he later puts it), "at home with the Lord"

(2 Corinthians 5:8; see also Philippians 1:23).

Paul characterizes our present “earthly” state as one of groaning, “longing to put on our heavenly dwelling” that “we may not be found naked” (1 Corinthians 5:2-3). Although these verses are difficult to interpret, it is probable that “nakedness” refers to temporarily existing without a body when we die. If so, then Paul is saying that when we die, we go immediately to be “with Christ.” There we are “at home with the Lord,” awaiting that day in which we will “put on our heavenly dwelling” (v. 2). This likely refers to our resurrection body. At the time of the resurrection, our souls will be united with a glorious new body, so that we might eternally enjoy life with Christ and fellow believers in the new heaven and new earth. We will consider these issues more fully in the next section.

The Resurrection of the Body

The Bible envisions a future time in which all who have died will be raised from the dead into some sort of physical, bodily existence. The New Testament writers refer to this as “the resurrection of the dead” and it will include both believers and unbelievers. Hence Jesus, referring to His own unique role in executing divine judgment, claims that “an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28-29). Although evidence elsewhere in the New Testament suggests that different groups of people may be raised at different times, the key point here is that this event has not yet taken place. It’s still in the future.

Paul says much the same thing in several of his letters. To cite just one example, he tells the Philippians that “we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables

Him even to subject all things to Himself” (Philippians 3:20-21). Elsewhere Paul tells us that our resurrection bodies will be “imperishable,” “powerful,” and glorious (1 Corinthians 15:42-43). It’s incredibly exciting to contemplate the fact that the Lord intends to give his people marvelous new bodies, patterned after his own resurrection body, so that we might enjoy eternal life with him forever. When that day dawns, our joy will truly be complete!

So how might we attempt to summarize our discussion in this article? First, both Jesus and Paul seem to have taught that human beings are (in some sense) composed of both a body and a soul. John Cooper describes the relationship of soul and body as one of “functional holism.” Our body and soul *function* as a thoroughly integrated *whole* during our present earthly lives. But when our body dies, our soul continues to exist, awaiting the resurrection of our body at some future time.[\[11\]](#)

On that day, our soul will be united with our resurrection body, either to enjoy eternal life with Jesus, or face eternal judgment in hell. This, it seems to me, is what the New Testament has to say about the nature and destiny of humanity. In Christ we are offered a sure and steadfast hope for both our soul—and our body!

Notes

1. John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), Kindle Loc. 1208.
2. J. P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know It’s Real and Why It Matters* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 55, Kindle.
3. This becomes a bit complicated. John Cooper points out that Jewish thinking about the afterlife continued its development during the intertestamental period. While some Rabbis conceived of “Paradise” as a special place for the righteous dead within Sheol, others began to think of Paradise as outside Sheol altogether. Regardless of such differences, however, Cooper reminds us that “Paradise” was understood as

the place “where the blessed dwell with the Lord” (see Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1175-1200).

4. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1605; see also Loc. 1592-1607.

5. Again, see Cooper’s discussion in *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1592-1607.

6. Cooper makes this point emphatically in *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1880-86.

7. F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 313; cited in John Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1840.

8. This possibility is also mentioned in *Cooper, Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1871.

9. Again, see Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1872.

10. See Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 1837.

11. See Cooper’s discussion in *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Kindle Loc. 699-712.

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Probe Live: Truth Decay



PROBE MINISTRIES
INVITES YOU TO

TRUTH DECAY: POSTMODERNISM, RELATIVISM, AND PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY



Kerby Anderson, host of nationally broadcast radio show Point of View and president of Probe Ministries, will discuss how these ideas have infiltrated the church.

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We encounter postmodern thinking when we share the gospel and then hear, "That's your truth, but it's not my truth." Moral relativism surfaces when someone says, "That may be your morality, but it's not my morality," or "Who are you to say abortion or homosexuality is wrong?" And progressive Christians deny absolute moral truth and therefore question the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith.

Probe Ministries President Kerby Anderson will provide an overview of these faulty ways of thinking and answer questions from the audience.

We will record this message but not live stream it.

A Christian Purpose for Life – Proclaiming the Glory of Christ

Steve Cable answers the question, Why does God leave Christians on earth after we are saved?

Misconceptions and Our Identity

Examining the beliefs and behavior of born-again emerging adults over the last few years, one common deficiency is a misunderstanding of their relationship to eternity. Many believers either have not thought about the question of “Why did God leave me here on earth once I was saved?” or they harbor misconceptions about the answer. Let’s begin by considering some common misconceptions.



The first misconception is being purposeless. These people believe that thinking about their eternal purpose is a waste of time. Just live for the moment. My eternal destiny is secure so why bother myself with asking, “Why am I still here? I’ll worry about the things of heaven after I die.” This viewpoint devalues the sacrifice of Christ. He did not give His life for us so that we can be unconcerned about what concerns Him.[\[1\]](#)

The second misconception is focusing on this life's pleasures. Many young people say things like "I don't want Jesus to return until after I have traveled, married, had children, gotten that promotion, etc." They assume these things are of ultimate importance in their lives. Yet, the Bible teaches us that this attitude will choke out God's fruit in our lives. As Jesus said, "[T]he worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things, enter in and choke the word and it becomes unfruitful."[{2}](#)

A third misconception is becoming prepared for heaven. Some think that God needs to get our character up to some entrance level requirement before we are ready to move on to heaven. Most people with this view are not really working hard to match their lifestyle to a biblical standard, but they figure at some point they will. However, since our righteousness is not our own, but rather that of Jesus',[{3}](#) we don't need to get more righteous to enter heaven. In fact, when we see Him then we will be like Him.[{4}](#) The fastest way to make us completely mature is to take us out of this world.

One final misconception is providing for one's family. Caring for our family is certainly part of God's desire for our lives. However, if our sole purpose is to provide for our own family and our children have the same purpose and so on, the church will be limited to us and our progeny—and no one else.

These common misconceptions as to our purpose fall under the warning Paul gave us in Philippians,

For many walk, of whom I often told you, . . . that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, . . . whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.[{5}](#)

Paul goes on to explain, "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ . . ."[{6}](#)

We are to live our lives constantly aware of our heavenly citizenship, eagerly awaiting the return of our Lord. In this article, we examine the book of 1 Peter to see what Peter has to say about our purpose in life and how we are to live it out.

Called to a Critical Mission

Peter begins the book of 1 Peter by reminding us what Christ has done for us. Let's read the first few verses of this amazing letter.

According to his great mercy, [God] has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Through the resurrection of Jesus we are born again and are looking forward to an eternal inheritance kept in heaven for us to be revealed in the last time. What a wonderful truth helping us to realize that we are already living in eternity as we wait for our inheritance to be revealed. In the meantime, we are living on this earth in a temporary "earthsuit" called to fulfill God's purpose for our lives.

In the remainder of his letter to the churches, Peter addresses what we are to do while we are living on this earth. He first tells us that we are likely to encounter trials and suffering in this world. Then, beginning with verse 13 of chapter 1, Peter conveys to us the importance of our mission, giving us instructions we would expect a military commander to give before sending his team out on a dangerous and critical mission. He tells us to:

Prepare our minds for action – we are to be action oriented, not passively waiting for our life to pass by.

Be alert and focused on the mission – we are to keep our minds focused on God's purpose for our life on this earth.

Keep a long term perspective – don't be deceived into putting your thoughts and your hope on the temporary temptations of the world, and

Realize God has entrusted you with the priceless resource of time – Peter tells us that we are to conduct ourselves in the fear of the Lord while we are on this earth.

In the latter parts of chapter 1, Peter reminds us that we have been redeemed at a very high cost, the precious blood of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God. We owe a tremendous debt which motivates us to desire to faithfully carry out our mission on this earth.

The calls to action listed above must be accompanied by two critical components to be effective in this life. Specifically, Peter calls on us to purify our hearts not conforming to our former lusts and to love other believers not only as a friend, but also with sacrificial love by which Jesus loves you. The actions listed above are not our purpose on this earth, but rather activities we need to address if we are fulfill our purpose.

Our Purpose: To Proclaim His Excellencies

Why does God leaves us on this earth after we are saved? In the second chapter of his letter, Peter begins by reminding us that we are living stones, part of the holy building God is building on the cornerstone Jesus Christ. This building made up of the lives of Christians is to be a beacon proclaiming the glory of God and the good news of redemption in Jesus.

In verses 9 and 10 of Chapter 2, Paul clearly states the purpose of our lives and of the church when he writes:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy

nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

We are a special people on this earth, God's own people. Peter uses the terms used by Yahweh of the Israelites in the wilderness where God told them through Moses,

Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.{7}

The Israelites discovered that they could not obey His voice or keep His covenant even when ruled by kings who desired to serve the Lord. Jesus Christ had to "become sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God through Him." {8} In Jesus' righteousness, we now become the special people of God given His purposes to accomplish on this earth.

We are left here so that we may proclaim His excellencies. We are to proclaim more than just the general attributes of our Creator. We are to let people know that our Creator is prepared to deliver them out of darkness and let them live in His marvelous light. God has entrusted us with His glory, His light. We have the privilege of proclaiming His glory and offering His grace. At a basic level, we proclaim His excellencies by obeying His commands to proclaim Christ, make disciples, and be available for God to use us on this earth.

If we are to proclaim the glories of Christ and the gospel of redemption to eternal life, how are we to accomplish this wonderful goal?

Fulfilling Our Purpose Through Excellent Behavior and Right Relationships

In this article we have been looking at the question, “What purpose does God have for my life as a Christian here on planet Earth?” We have seen that God leaves us here primarily for the purpose of bringing others into His kingdom. As Paul said, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain . . . if I am to remain on in the flesh it will mean fruitful labor for me.”[{9}](#) In his letter to the Colossians, Paul stated, “We proclaim [Christ] by instructing and teaching all people with all wisdom so that we may present every person mature in Christ.”[{10}](#) The apostle Peter put it this way, “[You are] a people of his own, so that you may proclaim the virtues of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”[{11}](#)

If we are to proclaim Christ in this world, the next obvious question is, how are we to do this? Is the best approach to rent a large electronic bull horn and drive the streets preaching the good news? Or in today’s world perhaps we can start a Facebook page or send out a tweet with John 3:16? These techniques may be appropriate in some circumstances, but that is not where the apostle Peter says we should begin.

Peter follows his statement that we are called to proclaim Christ with this interesting instruction:

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.[{12}](#)

Instead of following this primary purpose with instructions on how to best verbalize our faith, he first focuses on how we live out our faith. He clearly points out that our behavior if

kept excellent in purity and good deeds will attract the attention of non-Christians, of evil doers, causing them to consider the work of Christ in this world. We see that the reason God calls us to excellent behavior is not so that we will be good enough to get into His heaven, but rather to convict others of their need for a savior.

Peter continues to address ways in which we should proclaim Christ in the remainder of the second chapter. He points out that having godly relationships is an important way of proclaiming Christ. What types of relationships does Peter address? He specifically calls out our relationships with unbelievers, government authorities, our bosses, our co-workers, husbands and wives, other believers and the elders He has placed over us.

Relationships are the biggest part of life. As people observe your relationships, they can see that they are different because you offer supernatural love, and your eternal perspective allows you to approach them with a servant's heart. As Christians, our relationships are not about getting what we deserve, but rather about giving to others the same way Jesus has given to us.

Fulfilling Your Purpose Through Your Testimony and Your Prayers

Above we have seen that our post-salvation purpose of life on earth is to proclaim the excellencies of Jesus Christ through the gospel. We also looked at the first two ways that we should use to proclaim Christ in this world. The first way is through excellent behavior lived out before an unbelieving world. The second is through living out right relationships with those with whom we deal in this world. As you can see, these first two ways that Peter addresses do not require us to explain our faith in Jesus Christ. Rather, they draw unbeliever's attention to our lives, building up questions in

their minds.

For example, in 1 Peter 2:18-19, Peter tells us,

Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.

Having a good attitude toward our boss even in those times when they are unreasonable finds favor with God and testifies to others of our different perspective.

After dealing with a comprehensive list of life relationships, from the government to our husbands and wives, Peter brings up our spoken testimony as well. In 3:15, he says:

Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.

Not only are we to live our lives in ways that proclaim the glories of our Savior, we are to be prepared to give an account for the hope that is in us. We know from the first chapter of 1 Peter that the hope that is in us is the hope that comes from being born again and knowing that we have obtained an eternal inheritance reserved for us in heaven. We need to be prepared to share with others that through faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ they too can share in this same hope that drives our lives. The phrase in the verse, to make a defense, is a translation of the Greek word *apologia* from which we obtain our English word “apologetics.”

It is important to note the context in which this call to apologetics is placed. First, it is to be done with gentleness

and reverence, not with arrogance and self-righteousness. The object is not to demonstrate you are right, but rather to help the questioner come to grips with the truth of grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Second, Peter reiterates his instruction found in 2:12, reminding us that we are to focus on living sanctified lives so that even those who slander us know in their hearts of our good behavior in Christ.

Finally, in 1 Peter 4:7, we are called to be “of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.” If we are to be effective in proclaiming Christ in this world we must be consistently praying about the people and the obstacles we face.

Peter makes it clear that our purpose as a church on this earth is to proclaim the goodness of Christ who delivered us out of the domain of darkness and into the eternal kingdom of God. Proclaiming Christ in this way involves our excellent behavior, our right relationships, our gentle defense of the gospel, and a commitment to prayer. Let us examine our lives to see how this call is being lived out in us.

Notes

1. 2 Corinthians 5:14 and 1 Peter 1:13-17
2. Mark 4:19
3. Philippians 3:9-10, 2 Corinthians 5:21
4. 1 John 3:3
5. Philippians 3:18-19
6. Philippians 3:20-21
7. Exodus 19:5-6
8. 2 Corinthians 5:20

9. Philippians 1:21-23

10. Colossians 1:28 NET Bible

11. 1 Peter 2:9b NET Bible

12. 1 Peter 2:11-12

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Christ and the Human Condition

Dr. Michael Gleghorn looks at how God has acted in Christ to address those things which ail us most: sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God.



Early in the book of Job, Eliphaz the Temanite declares that “man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward” (5:7). Whether it’s the trouble that befalls us as we’re simply minding our own business or the trouble we bring upon others (or even ourselves), difficulties, sin, and suffering seem to plague us wherever we turn. Just think for a moment about some of the natural evils which afflict the human race. This class of evils includes both natural disasters like hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes, and earthquakes, and diseases like cancer, leukemia, Alzheimer’s and ALS. While natural evils are bad enough, they are only part of the problem. In addition to these, we must also consider all the moral evils which human beings commit against God, one another, and

themselves. This second class of evils includes things like hatred, blasphemy, murder, rape, child abuse, terrorism, and suicide. Taken together, the scope and magnitude of human sin and suffering in the world are truly mind-boggling. What does God have to say about issues such as these? Even better, what (if anything) has He done about them?

The Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga has written

As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, coolly observing the suffering of His creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering. He endures the anguish of seeing his son, the second person of the Trinity, consigned to the bitterly cruel and shameful death of the cross. Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself; and God, the Lord of the universe, was prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon his son's humiliation and death. He was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin, and death, and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious than we can imagine.[\[1\]](#)

According to Plantinga, then, God *has acted*, and acted decisively through His Son, to address those things which ail us most—sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God. In what follows, we will briefly examine each of these ailments. More importantly, however, we will also see how God has acted in Christ to heal our bleak condition, thereby giving us encouragement, strength and hope, both now and forevermore.

Moral Evil

When Adam and Eve first sinned in the garden (Gen. 3:6), they could hardly have imagined all the tragic consequences that would follow this single act of disobedience. Through this act, sin and death entered the world and the human condition was radically altered (Rom. 5:12-19). Human nature had become defiled with sin and this sinful nature was bequeathed to all mankind. The human race was now morally corrupt, alienated from God and one another, subject to physical death, and under the wrath of God. The entire creation, originally pronounced “very good” by God (Gen. 1:31), was negatively affected by this first act of rebellion. Like the ripples that radiate outward when a stone is thrown into a calm body of water, the consequences of that first sin have rippled through history, bringing evil, pain, and suffering in their wake. As the Christian philosopher William Lane Craig has noted, “The terrible human evils in the world are testimony to man’s depravity in his state of spiritual alienation from God.”[\[2\]](#) Indeed, we are so hopelessly entangled in this web of sin and disobedience that we cannot possibly extricate ourselves. This, according to the Bible, is the sorry plight in which all men naturally find themselves.

Fortunately for us, however, God has acted to free us from our enslavement to sin, to disentangle us from the web that holds us captive, and to reconcile us to Himself. He did this by sending His Son to so thoroughly identify with us in our painful predicament that He actually *became* one of us. By identifying Himself with sinners who were under the wrath of God, He was able to take our sins upon Himself and endure God’s wrath in our place, so that we might be reconciled to God by placing our trust in Him. The apostle Paul put it this way: God made Christ “who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, we're told that anyone hanged on a tree because of their sins is "accursed of God" (21:23). In the New Testament, Paul picks up on this idea and says that through His substitutionary death on the cross, Christ became "a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). We should not lose sight of the significance of these words. By identifying Himself with the guilty human race, and becoming a curse for us, He has opened the way for us to be freed from our sins and reconciled to God as we are identified with *Him* through faith. This is just one of the ways in which Christ has met the desperate needs of the human condition.

Natural Evil

Another reason why we suffer arises from what philosophers and theologians call *natural evil*. Natural evil refers to all the causes of human pain and suffering which are not brought about by morally-responsible agents. This would include the pain and suffering arising from natural disasters like earthquakes, famines, and storms, as well as diseases like cancer and ALS.

Now the question I want to pose is this: Is there a sense in which Christ is also a solution to the problem of natural evil? And if so, then how should we understand this? When we examine the life and ministry of Jesus as it's recorded in the Gospels, we can hardly help but be struck by the number of miracles He performs. He walks on water, calms raging storms, feeds thousands of people with a few loaves and fish, cleanses lepers, heals the sick, restores sight to the blind, and even raises the dead! Although some might demur at all these accounts of miracles, Craig has noted that "the miracle stories are so widely represented in all strata of the Gospel traditions that it would be fatuous to regard them as not rooted in the life of Jesus." [\[3\]](#)

So what is the significance of Jesus' miracles? According to New Testament scholar Ben Witherington, Jesus' miracles show

him to be God's special agent of blessing, healing, liberation, and salvation, as well as the "one who brings about the conditions associated with the final . . . dominion of God."[\[4\]](#) Since the kingdom of God is portrayed in Scripture as a reign of peace, prosperity, health, well-being and blessing, Jesus' miracles of healing, as well as his demonstrations of power over nature, indicate that He is indeed capable of ushering in such a wonderful kingdom.[\[5\]](#) And if Jesus has the power to bring in an era of health and well-being, both for our physical bodies and for the physical universe, and if he in fact will do so, then he clearly provides a solution to the problem of natural evil. Ultimately, in the new heaven and new earth, which God will give to those who love Him, we are promised that there "will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

Physical Death

The apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, described death as an "enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26). People fear death for any number of reasons. Some fear that the process of dying will be painful. Others dread the thought of leaving behind the ones they love. Some may fear that death is simply the end, that whatever joys and pleasures this life holds, death takes them away forever. But others may fear that there is an afterlife and worry that things may not go well for them there. For many people, however, death is feared as the great unknown.[\[6\]](#) Friends and relatives die and we never see or hear from them again. For these people, death is like the ultimate black-hole, from which nothing and no one can ever escape.

But according to the Bible, Christ *did* escape the snares of death, and in doing so He dealt our mortal enemy a mortal blow of his own. I said that Paul describes death as an "enemy," but this is simply to inform us of the fact that our enemy has been conquered by Christ. "The last enemy that will be

abolished,” he writes, “is death” (1 Cor. 15:26). But how has Christ conquered this enemy? And how does *His* victory help *us*?

Christ conquered death through his resurrection from the dead and all who put their trust in Him can share in his victory. Pastor Erwin Lutzer has written:

Thus the resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Standing at the empty tomb, we are assured of the triumph of Jesus on the Cross; we are also assured that He has conquered our most fearsome enemy. Yes, death can still terrify us, but the more we know about Jesus, the more its power fades.{7}

Consider the life and death of the great Reformation theologian Martin Luther. As a young Augustinian monk, Luther struggled with a very sensitive conscience and a terrible fear of death. But once he understood the gospel and placed his trust in Christ, his fear gradually began to fade. By the time he died, his fear was gone. It’s reported that on his deathbed, he recited some promises from the Bible, commended his spirit to God, and quietly breathed his last.{8} Believing that Christ had conquered death and given him eternal life, he was able to die at peace and without any fear. And this is the hope of *all* who trust in Christ!

The Weight of Glory

Christian theologians sometimes describe the knowledge of God as “an incommensurable good.”{9} By this they mean that knowing God in an intimate, personal way is quite literally the *greatest good* that any created being can experience. It is an “incommensurable” or “immeasurable” good—a good so great that it surpasses our ability even to comprehend. The apostle Paul once prayed that the Ephesians might “know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:19). He understood that “intimate relationship with God . . . is incommensurately

good-for created persons.”{10}

Of course, this doesn't mean that one who is intimately related to God will never experience any of the trials and difficulties of life. In fact, it's possible that such a person will actually experience *more* trials and difficulties than would have been the case had they *not* been intimately related to God! Knowing the love of Christ doesn't make one immune to suffering. It does, however, provide indescribable comfort while going through it (see 2 Cor. 1:3-5).

The apostle Paul understood this quite well. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he described himself as a servant of God who had suffered afflictions, hardships, beatings, imprisonments, labors, sleeplessness, and hunger (2 Cor. 6:4-5). In spite of this, however, he did not lose heart. He famously wrote that “momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17).

But how could Paul describe his sufferings as just a “momentary, light affliction”? Because, says Craig, he had an *eternal* perspective. “He understood that the length of this life, being finite, is literally infinitesimal in comparison with the eternal life we shall spend with God.”{11}

The greatest hunger of the human heart is to know and experience the love and acceptance of God and to enjoy Him forever. In his magnificent sermon “The Weight of Glory,” C.S. Lewis wrote, “In the end that Face which is the delight or . . . terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or . . . the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be . . . disguised.”{12} Incredibly, just as Christ has dealt with the problems of sin, suffering, and death, He has also acted decisively to reconcile us to God. Through faith in him, anyone who wants can eventually experience “an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17).

Notes

2. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 96-97.
3. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 324.
4. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 43-44.
5. Some biblical passages that pertain to Christ's coming kingdom are Isaiah 11:1-9, Matthew 19:28, and Acts 3:19-21.
6. I was reminded of many of these examples while watching the round table discussion on suffering and death in Catherine Tatge, "The Question of God: Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis" (U.S.A.: PBS Home Video, 2004).
7. Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Vanishing Power of Death* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 13.
8. Mike Fearon, *Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1986), 157-58.
9. See, for example, Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 100.
10. Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 47.
11. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 99.
12. C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 13.

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No Reason to Fear: Examining the Logic of a Critic

Rick Wade uses the faulty arguments in Sam Harris' book Letter to a Christian Nation to show why Christians don't have to be afraid of the new atheists' assault on our faith.

Getting Started

Sometimes we Christians shy away from books which attack our beliefs because we're afraid we can't answer the objections. That's understandable. Often the authors of such books carry impressive credentials. It's easy to feel intimidated.

Another response which is the opposite of fearful avoidance is haughty dismissal. Sometimes we act as if our position is so obviously true that others can be dismissed as downright stupid and hardly worth bothering with. Even if the opponents' arguments *are* bad, that's no reason to adopt an arrogant attitude. It's especially bad when the dismissive Christian hasn't even bothered to read the book!



A better response, I think, is to use such occasions to grow in understanding and to exercise one's apologetic "muscles" by working at answering the challenges posed. So, for example, when a doctrine is challenged, by studying the subject, we grow in our knowledge of Christian beliefs and (here's the uncomfortable part) we are sometimes corrected in our understanding. Another advantage is preparation for real face-to-face encounters with critics. Responding to arguments in a book means there isn't the pressure of a person staring at you, waiting for an answer (and fully expecting one; critics do have such a high view of us!).

In this article I'm going to use Sam Harris's book *Letter to a Christian Nation* to give some suggestions about what to look for in such books.[\[1\]](#) I won't try to address every challenge. Others have given more extensive responses.[\[2\]](#)

I titled this essay "No Reason to Fear" for a good reason. The challenges of critics throughout the ages have not been able to prove Christianity false, and those of modern day critics won't either. Most of their arguments have already been answered. When we brace ourselves and start reading a critic's

book, we often find that the arguments don't pack that great a punch after all, much like the neighborhood bully who the other boys are afraid of but really have no reason to be.

Of course, we can't always answer seemingly good objections, and certainly can't answer them all to the atheist's satisfaction. I'll go further than that. I don't think we *have* to answer every objection. There will always be objections. But it's as intellectually wrong to drop one's convictions because of a few unanswered criticisms as it is to hold to such convictions for no reason at all. Atheists obviously don't abandon their beliefs so easily, and they shouldn't expect us to either.

Fallacious Arguments

If we're going to engage books like *Letter to a Christian Nation* responsibly, we have to be ready to hear some good criticisms of our beliefs or actions. We have to accept the fact that there are some hard things to deal with in our beliefs, especially the problem of evil. We need to admit our inability to give satisfying answers to all objections if we're going to expect that kind of openness from critics. Also, it is often Christians who come under attack rather than Christianity. Harris spends a lot of time here. Christians have done some bad things, and they need to be acknowledged.

More to the point for this article, Christians can sometimes give bad arguments for what they believe. I'm not suggesting that we have to bow to all the demands of skeptics; there are several theories of the proper use of evidences and logical arguments and personal experience, and some formulations are unreasonable. It *is* to say, however, that we must use good reasoning when we make a case.

The problem with using poor reasoning is that it undermines one's case. That's what we find in Harris's book, and that

will be our focus here. When we read a case for a particular belief, we should keep a lookout for such things as questionable assumptions, logical fallacies, and incorrect facts. Harris's book is plagued with fallacious arguments, a surprising turn since he presents his side as being that of reason. So I'm going to spend most of my time on those and mention the other things when appropriate.

Don't let the term "logical fallacies" put you off, like they're things only specialists can understand. It's just another name for poor reasoning. So, for example, if you make the claim that Christianity is the only true religion, and someone responds that you only believe that because you grew up in a Christian nation, you could cry "Foul!" You're making a universal claim; where you're from is irrelevant. If it's true, it's true in India and China and the US and everywhere else, too. This is a kind of fallacy of false cause. No one is a Christian because he lives in a Christian nation. We are Christians because we have believed Jesus' claims that are universal. It also reflects the current mood according to which religions are human constructs, and Christianity is just one such religion among many.

Although fallacious arguments can have *psychological* force (when we don't spot them and they seem correct), they have no *logical* force. Their conclusions should not be believed.

Are We Really So Evil?

Harris's favorite target in his attack on religion is its supposed immorality. He tells us that "Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tormented, tortured, and killed people in the name of God for centuries, on the basis of a theologically defensible reading of the Bible."[3](#) Well, *that's* a surprise! Not that Christians have done bad things, but that such acts are *theologically defensible*! Such things are sanctioned by God because He, too, does such things. Harris

accuses Christians of picking and choosing sections of Scripture that present a more loving God while ignoring the truly telling ones which reveal a God who condones slavery and the beating and killing of rebellious children.

But Harris is guilty of this picking and choosing himself. He commits the fallacy which is called the *neglect of relevant evidence*. To be fair, he does note that “it is undeniable that many people of faith make heroic sacrifices to relieve the suffering of other human beings.”[\[4\]](#) But he doesn’t bother listing them. He gives no space to the great work done by Christians in the fields of medicine, literacy, agriculture, famine relief, etc. He ignores the good work of organizations like Mercy Ships which takes life-changing medical help to people in third world nations in the name of Christ.

Well, he doesn’t completely ignore missionary efforts. One of his favorite rants is against the evils perpetrated by missionaries. They waste time preaching about such things as the virgin birth when there is important work to be done. The most memorable accusation is when he charges missionaries who preach against the use of condoms with “genocidal” piety![\[5\]](#) “Genocidal!” Maybe a little exaggeration there? (And, by the way, while it’s true that Christian medical missionaries do present the gospel to people—which they should, since one’s eternal life is more important than one’s temporal life—I’ve never heard of any who withhold medical help from people in need until they first preach a sermon on the virgin birth.)

In another place Harris commits the fallacy called *causal oversimplification*. As he sees it, religion is the cause of conflicts in Palestine, the Balkans, Sudan, Nigeria, and other countries. Religion is so unnatural and wrong-headed to atheists, that it becomes an easy target for casting blame.

I’m going to give a bit more space to this charge since it’s a very popular one these days.

In 2004, the BBC published what it called a “War Audit” which was conducted to determine how significant religion has been in war, at least in the last century.[\[6\]](#) In the article “God and War: An Audit and an Exploration,” authors Greg Austin, Todd Kranock and Thom Oommen report that

at a philosophical level, the main religious traditions have little truck with war or violence. All advocate peace as the norm and see genuine spirituality as involving a disavowal of violence. It is mainly when organised religious institutions become involved with state institutions or when a political opposition is trying to take power that people begin advocating religious justifications for war.

They continue:

After reviewing historical analyses by a diverse array of specialists, we concluded that there have been few genuinely religious wars in the last 100 years. The Israel/Arab wars from 1948 to now, often painted in the media and other places as wars over religion, or wars arising from religious differences, have in fact been wars of nationalism, liberation of territory or self-defense.

Regarding Islamic terrorism, the authors write:

The Islamist fundamentalist terror war is largely about political order in the Arab countries, and the presence of US forces in Saudi Arabia. It is not about religious conversion or a clash of religions. Nevertheless, bin Laden claims a religious duty in executing the war. . . .

It is mainly when organised religious institutions become involved with state institutions that people begin advocating religious justifications for war.

We need to go back to the wars of Arab expansion, the Crusades and the Reformation Wars for genuine wars over religion.

The authors—or as they call themselves, compilers—of this article include tables which give death tolls in different categories of wars. The writers say that the tables

show that the overwhelming majority of wars and the overwhelming majority of the victims of such wars cannot be classified primarily according to religious causes or religious beliefs. There have been horrific examples though where particular communities have been *targeted because of their religious faith* [italics mine], and these atrocities have been perpetrated by the three most 17 vicious and blood-thirsty regimes ever to hold power: Stalin's Russia, Mao's China and Hitler's Germany.

It's interesting that Harris tries so hard to make religion a source of violence when, as this report indicates, it is often the religious who are targeted by violence.[\[7\]](#)

A Few More

Sam Harris's book is titled *Letter to a Christian Nation*, not simply because he's against Christianity. He wants all religion to come to an end. It just happens that Christianity is the most prominent religion in America. Because he lumps all religions together, he can smear Christianity with the evils of Islam by implication.

This is a fallacy. It's called the fallacy of *over-generalization* (or *converse accident*). If evil is done in the name of Islam, and Islam is a religion, then every religion is prone to evil. Thus, what counts against Islam counts against Christianity, too. (If one is reluctant to group Christianity with other religions, then one might see here the fallacy of *faulty comparison*, or what is more commonly called "comparing apples to oranges.")

Another argument Harris presents employs a fallacy we've already discussed, the fallacy of *causal oversimplification*.

Harris commits this fallacy when he tells us that “the anti-Semitism that built the Nazi death camps was a direct inheritance from medieval Christianity.”{8}

The reality of Christian anti-Semitism through the ages cannot be denied. However, Harris’s evaluation is simplistic. It is very easy to narrowly focus on the very real anti-Semitism of Christians and ignore other very significant factors. For example, Harris fails to tell us that the Jews were persecuted quite apart from Christianity and even before Christianity came into existence. For example, serious tensions between the Jews and the Greeks of Alexandria in the first century B.C. spilled over into the next century. Things got so bad that Jews were forced to live in one section of the city. Their houses were broken into and looted. Synagogues were burned, and women were dragged to the theater and forced to eat pork. Historian H. I. Bell reports that “men, women, and even children [were] beaten to death, dragged living through the streets, or flung on to improvised bonfires.”{9} He also ignores the shift from religious persecution to racial persecution which occurred in the nineteenth century, notably in Russia.

Of course, this doesn’t prove that Hitler *didn’t* get his anti-Semitism from Christians; but it *does* mean that one should not immediately assume that Christian prejudice is at the root of anti-Semitism. There have been other causes as well. A significant factor in Hitler’s hatred of the Jews was the strong influence of *Darwinism* that led him to think that people who were racially or eugenically inferior needed to be eliminated from the evolving human race.{10}

Although some people already believed in the inferiority of some races, and although Darwinism wasn’t Hitler’s sole inspiration, Historian Richard Weikart writes, “Darwinism was a central, guiding principle of Nazi ideology, especially of Hitler’s own world view.” Weikart quotes Richard Evans, a historian at Cambridge University: “The real core of Nazi

beliefs lay in the faith Hitler proclaimed in his speech of September 1938 in science—a Nazi view of science—as the basis for action. Science demanded the furtherance of the interests not of God but of the human race, and above all the German race and its future in a world ruled by ineluctable laws of Darwinian competition between races and between individuals.” Weikart continues: “This is not a controversial claim by anti-evolutionists, but it is commonly recognized by scholars who study Nazism.”[\[11\]](#)

A Fundamental Commitment to Atheism

One of the questionable assumptions in *Letter to a Christian Nation* is Sam Harris’s assertion that “there is no question that human beings evolved from nonhuman ancestors.”[\[12\]](#) Of course, there is indeed a question about this, a question raised by highly educated scientists easily as qualified as Mr. Harris.

It’s no wonder, really, that Harris makes such bold statements. He is prevented from allowing the possibility of divine creation by his basic worldview commitments. He admits that he doesn’t know why the universe exists, but he’s confident there’s no God behind it. That sounds like a philosophical presupposition. What evidence or reasons does he give for it? Harris might like to pretend that his beliefs are based solely on the “trinity” of science, reason, and nature, but his naturalism cannot be established by these. Rather, it informs his use of them.

One of the (potentially!) maddening things about the arguments of atheists these days is their frequent silence with respect to any justification of their own basic worldview commitments. Harris goes so far as to claim that atheism isn’t really a belief; that there shouldn’t even *be* the word “atheism.”[\[13\]](#) Although “atheism” has long been understood to mean the belief that there is no God, many atheists today deny that. It isn’t

the belief that there is no God; it's simply an absence of belief in God.[\[14\]](#) It's a kind of "default" position, a "zero" belief, where everyone should be until given sufficient reasons to believe in God. Thus, the atheist has nothing to defend or prove.

But really, folks. Who's going to believe that atheists are belief-less about God, that they don't actually believe that there is no God? It's astonishing the effort they put forth in arguing against religious belief if indeed they have no belief at all.

However, we can go back and forth with atheists about whether they truly deny the existence of God, or we can let that stand and simply ask what they *do* believe about ultimate reality, for surely they believe *something*. It's simply false to assume that atheism is some kind of zero belief, that it involves no metaphysical commitments. If one denies God, one must have some other view about ultimate reality. Naturalism is a metaphysical position, and it has serious problems of its own.[\[15\]](#) If Christians are responsible to give good reasons for their belief in Christian theism, naturalistic atheists must give reasons for their naturalism.

Sam Harris speaks as a voice on high, shouting down to us poor, ignorant people who are stuck in our absurd religious beliefs. It's hard to imagine anyone with thoughtful convictions changing his or her beliefs based on this book. He's preaching to the choir. Now that you have a few tips on what to look for, you might want to take a look at the book, and hear the rest of the "sermon."

Notes

1. Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).
2. Douglas Wilson addresses many of Harris's arguments in his *Letter from a Christian Citizen* (Powder Springs, GA: American

Vision, 2007) and Ravi Zacharias does the same in *The End of Reason: A Response to the New Atheists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

3. Ibid., 22.

4. Ibid., 22.

5. Ibid., 33-34.

6. Greg Austin, Todd Kranock and Thom Oommen, "God And War: An Audit & An Exploration," <http://tinyurl.com/a2tpb>.

7. For more on this subject, see also Don Closson, "The Causes of War," Probe Ministries, 2008, www.probe.org/the-causes-of-war/.

8. Harris, *Letter*, 41.

9. H. I. Bell, "Anti-Semitism in Alexandria," *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 31. (1941), pp. 1-18.

10. Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

11. Richard Weikart, "Re-examining the Darwin-Hitler Link," The Discovery Institute, http://www.evolutionnews.org/2008/02/reexamining_the_darwinhitler_1.html.

12. Harris, *Letter*, 71.

13. Ibid., 51.

14. See Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, (Temple University Press, 1990), 463.

15. See Norman Geisler, *Is Man the Measure? An Evaluation of Contemporary Humanism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), chap. 11.

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