

# The Liberal Mind

*Kerby Anderson tries to understand the liberal mind from a biblical perspective. What are the assumptions the liberals make? How do those assumptions square with the Bible?*

As we begin this discussion, I want to make a clear distinction between the terms “liberal” and “leftist.” We often use the terms interchangeably but there is an important difference.



Dennis Prager wrote about this and even described those differences in a PragerU video.[\[1\]](#) His argument is that traditional liberalism has far more in common with conservatism than it does with leftism. Here are some examples he uses to make his point.

Liberals and leftists have a different view of race. The traditional liberal position on race is that the color of one’s skin is insignificant. By contrast, leftists argue that the notion that race is insignificant is itself racist. Liberals were committed to racial integration and would have rejected the idea of separate black dormitories and separate black graduations on university campuses.

Nationalism is another difference. Dennis Prager says that liberals always deeply believed in the nation-state. Leftists, on the other hand, oppose nationalism and promote class solidarity.

Superman comics illustrate the point. When the writers of Superman were liberal, Superman was not only an American but also one who fought for “Truth, justice, and the American

way.” The left-wing writers of Superman comics had Superman announce a few years ago that he was going to speak before the United Nations and inform them that he was renouncing his American citizenship.

Perhaps the best example is free speech. American liberals agree with the statement: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend your right to say it.” Leftists today are leading a nationwide suppression of free speech everywhere from the college campuses to the Big Tech companies.

Capitalism and the free enterprise system would be yet another example. Dennis Prager says, “Liberals have always been pro capitalism,” though they often wanted government “to play a bigger role” in the economy. Leftists oppose capitalism and are eagerly promoting socialism.

Liberals have had a love of Western civilization and taught it at most universities. They were promoters of the liberal arts and fine arts. In fact, one of the most revered liberals in American history was President Franklin Roosevelt who talked about the need to protect Western Civilization and even Christian civilization.

Today Western Civilization classes are rarely if ever taught in the university. That’s because leftists don’t believe Western Civilization is superior to any other civilization. Leftists label people who attempt to defend western values as racist and accuse them of promoting white supremacy. And attempts to promote religious liberty are dismissed as thinly disguised attacks on the LGBT community.

In conclusion, liberals and leftists are very different.

## **Ethics and a Belief in Right and Wrong**

The philosophical foundation for most liberal perspectives is secularism. If you don’t believe in God and the Bible, then

you certainly don't believe in biblical absolutes or even moral absolutes. Dostoyevsky put it this way: "If God is dead, then everything is permitted."

Even atheists admit that a view of God affects human behavior. Richard Dawkins recently expressed his fear that the removal of religion would be a bad idea for society because it would give people "license to do really bad things."

He likens the idea of God to surveillance, or as he puts it, the "divine spy camera in the sky."[{2}](#) People generally tend to do the right thing when someone is watching them. They tend to do bad things when no one is watching. He goes on to add that the "Great Spy Camera theory" isn't a good reason for him to believe in God.

It is also worth mentioning that more and more young people aren't making decisions about right and wrong based on logic but instead based on feelings. I began to notice this decades ago. College students making a statement or challenging a conclusion used to say "I think" as they started a sentence." Then I started to see more and more of them say "I feel" at the start of a sentence. They wouldn't use reason to discuss an issue. Instead, they would use emotion and talk about how they felt about a particular issue.

The liberal mind also has a very different foundation for discussing right and wrong. Dennis Prager recently admitted that he had been wrong. All of his life, he has said that the left's moral compass is broken. But he has concluded that "in order to have a broken moral compass, you need to have a moral compass to begin with. But the left doesn't have one."[{3}](#)

He doesn't mean that conclusion as an attack. It is merely an observation that the left doesn't really think in terms of good and evil. We assume that other people think that way because we think that way. But that is not how most of the people on the left perceive the world.

Karl Marx is a good example. He divided the world by economic class (the worker and the owner). One group was exploiting the other group. Good and evil aren't really relevant when you are thinking in terms of class struggle. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, operated "beyond good and evil."

To the Marxists, "there is no such thing as a universal good or universal evil." Those of us who perceive the world from a Judeo-Christian worldview see ethics as relevant to the moral standard, not the person or their social status.

A biblical view of ethics and morality begins with the reality that God exists and that He has revealed to us moral principles we are to apply to our lives and society. Those absolute moral principles are tied to God's character and thus unchanging.

## **A Naïve View of Human Nature**

In this article we are talking about the liberal mind, while often making a distinction between liberals and the left. When it comes to the proper view of human nature, both groups have a naïve and inaccurate view.

You can discover this for yourself by asking a simple question: Do you believe people are basically good? You will get an affirmative answer from most people in America because we live in a civilized society. We don't have to deal with the level of corruption or terror that is a daily life in so many other countries in the world.

But if you press the question, you will begin to see how liberals have difficulty explaining the holocaust and Muslim terrorism. Because the liberal mind starts with the assumption that people are basically good. After all, that is what so many secular philosophers and psychologists have been saying for centuries. Two world wars and other wars during the 20th century should have caused most people to reject the idea that

people are basically good.

The Bible teaches just the opposite. Romans 3:23 reminds us that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” This statement about the deceitfulness of our heart may seem extreme until we realize that Jesus also taught that “out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Matthew 15:19).

This naïve view of human nature should concern all of us. Young people, two generations after Auschwitz, believe people are basically good. One reason is biblical illiteracy. Another reason is historical illiteracy. A recent survey found two thirds of young people did not know six million died in the Holocaust and nearly half could not name one of the Nazi death camps.[{4}](#)

This naïve view of human nature may also explain another phenomenon we have discussed before. One of the untruths described in the book, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, is the belief that the battle for truth is “us versus them.”[{5}](#) If you think that people are basically good and you have to confront someone who disagrees with you, then they must be a bad person. They aren’t just wrong. They are evil.

Tribalism has been with us for centuries. That is nothing new about people joining and defending a tribe. But that has become more intense because of the rhetoric on university campuses and the comments spreading through social media. We don’t have to live this way, but the forces in society are making the divisions in society worse by the day.

A biblical perspective starts with the teaching that all are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27) and thus have value and dignity. But all of us have a sin nature (Romans 5:12). We should interact with others who disagree with us with humility

(Ephesians 4:2) and grace (Colossians 4:6).

## Big Government

We will now look at why liberals and the left promote big government. The simple answer relates to our discussion above about human nature. If you believe that people are basically good, then it is easy to assume that political leaders and bureaucrats will want to do the best for the citizens.

Christians agree that government is necessary and that it is one of the institutions ordained by God (Romans 13:1-7). There is a role for government to set the rules of governing and to resolve internal disputes through a legal system. Government is not God. But for people who don't believe in God, then the state often becomes God.

Friedrich Hayek wrote about this drive toward big government and the bureaucratic state in his classic book, [\*The Road to Serfdom\*](#). He argued in his book that "the most important change which extensive government control produces is a psychological change, an alteration in the character of the people."[\[6\]](#)

The character of citizens is changed because they yield their will and decision-making to a more powerful government. They may have done so willingly in order to have a welfare state. Or they may have done so unwillingly because a dictator has taken control of the reins of power. Either way, Hayek argues, their character has been altered because the control over every detail of economic life is ultimately control of life itself.

Friedrich Hayek wrote *The Road to Serfdom* to warn us that sometimes the road can be paved with good intentions. Most government officials and bureaucrats write laws, rules, and regulations with every good intention. They desire to make the world a better place by preventing catastrophe and by encouraging positive actions from their citizens. But in their

desire to control and direct every aspect of life, they take us down the road to serfdom.

He argued that people who enter into government and run powerful bureaucracies are often people who enjoy running not only the bureaucracy but also the lives of its citizens. In making uniform rules from a distance, they deprive the local communities of the freedom to apply their own knowledge and wisdom to their unique situations. A government seeking to be a benevolent god, usually morphs into a malevolent tyrant.

The liberal mind is all too willing to allow political leaders and bureaucrats to make decisions for the public. But that willingness is based on two flawed assumptions. First, human beings are not God and thus government leaders will certainly make flawed decisions that negatively affect the affairs of its citizens. Second, liberals do not believe we have a sin nature (Romans 3:23), and that includes government leaders. Even the best of them will not always be wise, compassionate, and altruistic. This is why the founders of this country established checks and balances in government to limit the impact of sinful behavior.

## Tolerance?

If there is one attitude that you would think would be synonymous with the liberal mind, it would be [tolerance](#). That may have been true in the past. Liberalism championed the idea of free thought and free speech. That is no longer the case.

Liberals have been developing a zero-tolerance culture. In some ways, that has been a positive change. We no longer tolerate racism. We no longer tolerate sexism. Certain statements, certain jokes, and certain attitudes have been deemed off-limits.

The problem is that the politically correct culture of the left moved the lines quickly to begin to attack just about any

view or value contrary to the liberal mind. Stray at all from the accepted limits of leftist thinking and you will earn labels like racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic.

Quickly the zero-tolerance culture became the cancel culture. It is not enough to merely label an opponent with a smear, the left demands that an "enemy" lose their social standing and even their job and livelihood for deviating from what is acceptable thought. A mendacious social media mob will make sure that you pay a heavy penalty for contradicting the fundamental truths of the liberal mind.

One phenomenon that promotes this intolerance is the use of smears and negative labels. For example, patriotism and pride in your country is called xenophobia. Acknowledging the innate differences between males and females is labelled sexist. Promoting the idea that we are all of one race (the human race) and that all lives matter is called racist. Questioning whether we should redefine traditional marriage is deemed homophobic. Arguing that very young children should not undergo sex assignment surgery is called transphobia. Pointing out that most terrorist attacks come from Muslim terrorists is labelled Islamophobic.

Should Christians be [tolerant](#)? The answer is yes, we should be tolerant, but that word has been redefined in society to argue that we should accept every person's behavior. The Bible does not permit that. That is why I like to use the word [civility](#). Essentially, that is the Golden Rule: "Do to others whatever you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12).

Civility requires humility. A civil person acknowledges that he or she does not possess all wisdom and knowledge. That means we should listen to others and consider the possibility that they might be right, and we could be wrong. Philippians 2:3 says, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself." We can disagree with other



without being disagreeable. Proverbs 15:1 reminds us that “A gentle answer turns away wrath.”

This is an important principle as we try to understand the liberal mind and work to build bridges to others in our society.

## Notes

1. Dennis Prager, *Left or Liberal?*, <https://www.prageru.com/video/left-or-liberal/>.
2. David Sanderson, “Ending religion is a bad idea, says Richard Dawkins,” *The Times*, October 5, 2019, [www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ending-religion-is-a-bad-idea-says-richard-dawkins-sqqdbmcpq](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ending-religion-is-a-bad-idea-says-richard-dawkins-sqqdbmcpq)
3. Dennis Prager, “The Left’s Moral Compass Isn’t Broken,” September 15, 2020, [townhall.com/columnists/dennisprager/2020/09/15/the-lefts-moral-compass-isnt-broken-n2576225](http://townhall.com/columnists/dennisprager/2020/09/15/the-lefts-moral-compass-isnt-broken-n2576225).
4. Ryan Miller, “Almost two-thirds of millennials, Gen Z don’t know that 6 million Jews were killed in the Holocaust, survey finds,” *USA Today*, September 16, 2020, [www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/09/16/holocaust-history-millennials-gen-z-cant-name-concentration-camps/5792448002/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/09/16/holocaust-history-millennials-gen-z-cant-name-concentration-camps/5792448002/).
5. Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff, et al., *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. New York City: Penguin Press, 2018, [probe.org/coddling-of-the-american-mind/](http://probe.org/coddling-of-the-american-mind/).
6. F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom: Text and Documents, the Definitive Edition*, ed. Bruce Caldwell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 48.

# 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<sup>{5}</sup> 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<sup>{6}</sup> 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<sup>{9}</sup>,” 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.*”<sup>{10}</sup> 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.*”<sup>{11}</sup>

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](http://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](http://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

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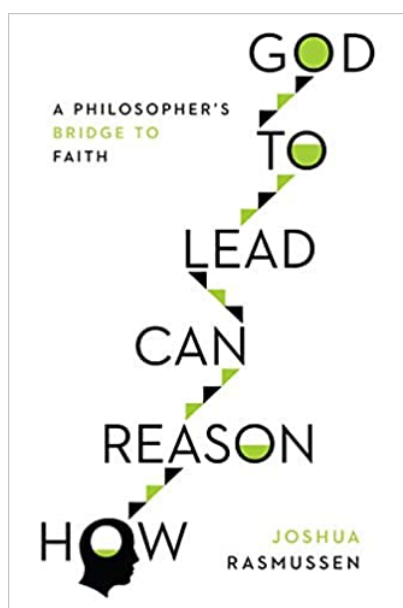
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## How Reason Can Lead to God –

# Part 2

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn continues to make a compelling case for how reason can lead us, step by step, to the logical conclusion of God's existence based on the book How Reason Can Lead to God.*

## Foundation of Mind



In this article we're continuing our examination of Christian philosopher Josh Rasmussen's book, *How Reason Can Lead to God*.<sup>{1}</sup> In [my previous article](#), I introduced the book and showed how Rasmussen began constructing a "bridge of reason" that led to "an independent, self-sufficient, . . . eternally powerful foundation of all reality."<sup>{2}</sup>

But Rasmussen goes further, arguing that there must also be "a certain *mind-like* aspect" to this foundation.<sup>{3}</sup> And that's what we'll explore in this article. We're going to follow Rasmussen's lead as he takes us over the "bridge of reason." And once we've taken that final step, we'll see that it's led us not to some cold, calculating, "mind-like" reality, but to a very "special treasure."<sup>{4}</sup>



But to begin, why does Rasmussen think that the foundation of all reality must be "mind-like"? To answer that question, consider that one of the things the foundation has produced is *you*—and *you* have a mind. As Rasmussen notes, "you are capable of thinking, feeling, and making decisions."<sup>{5}</sup> Indeed, if

you're awake and functioning normally, you have some awareness of what is going on "around" you—and even of what is going on "within" you. That's because you possess a conscious (even *self-conscious*) mind. How is this to be explained?

According to Rasmussen there are only two live options: either minds ultimately originate from some sort of "mind-like" or "mental" reality, or else they arise solely from a physical process.[{6}](#) Is one of these options better than the other? Rasmussen thinks so, and points to "a construction problem" with the matter-to-mind option.[{7}](#) Here's the problem. Just as a black steel pipe cannot be constructed out of emerald green toothpaste, so a self-conscious mind cannot be constructed from mindless particles. Particles just aren't the right thing for constructing the thoughts, feelings, and purposes of a mind. In order to construct a mind, "mental materials" are needed. Hence, the foundation of all reality *must be* mind-like in order to account for the unique features of self-conscious human minds.[{8}](#)

But at this point, some may raise an objection. After all, if we say there's a construction problem going from matter to minds, then wouldn't there also be a problem in saying that an immaterial mind created the material world? The answer is "No."

## Foundation of Matter

Above, we argued that one can't explain the thoughts and intentions of human minds by appealing only to material particles. There must rather be an ultimate mind at the foundation of all reality.

But of course, human beings also have *bodies*. And your body (including your brain) is an example of incredible material complexity. Not only that, but in order for you to be physically alive, the "fundamental parameters" of the universe

must be delicately balanced, or “fine-tuned,” with a precision that is mind-boggling. As physicist Alan Lightman observes, “If these fundamental parameters were much different from what they are, it is not only human beings who would not exist. No life of any kind would exist.”[{9}](#)

How should we account for such complexity? Can we explain it in terms of chance?[{10}](#) That’s wildly implausible. And better explanations are available. After all, one could *try* to explain the words of your favorite novel by appealing to “chance.” But is that “the *best* explanation?”[{11}](#) Isn’t it far more likely that an intelligent mind selected and ordered the words of that story with the intention of communicating something meaningful to others? While the chance hypothesis is *possible*, is it really *probable*? If we’re interested in truth, shouldn’t we prefer the *best* explanation?

So what *is* a better explanation for the material complexity that we observe—not only in our bodies, but in the fine-tuning of the universe that allows for our existence? If the ordering of the letters and words in your favorite novel is best explained by an intelligent mind, then what about the biological complexity of human beings? Scientists have observed “that molecular biology has uncovered an analogy between DNA and language.” In short, “The genetic code functions exactly like a language code.”[{12}](#) And just as the words in a novel require an intelligent *author*, the genetic code requires an intelligent *designer*.

Hence, a *foundational mind* offers a good explanation not only for human *minds*, but for the complexity of human *bodies* as well. Moreover, a foundational mind also provides the best explanation for objective moral values.

## Foundation of Morals

What is the best explanation for our moral experience in the

world? How might we best account for our sense of right and wrong, good and evil? So far, we've seen two reasons for thinking that the ultimate foundation of reality is "mind-like." First, a foundational mind best explains the existence of *human* minds. Second, it also offers the best explanation for the staggering material complexity of the human body and the exquisite "fine-tuning" of the universe that allows for our existence. Might a foundational mind also provide the best explanation for our moral experience? Rasmussen thinks so, and he offers potent reasons for us to think so too. [{13}](#)

Consider our sense of right and wrong. How should this be explained? Rasmussen proposes that our "moral senses are a *window* into a moral landscape." [{14}](#) Just as our sense of sight helps us perceive objects in the physical world, so our moral sense helps us perceive values in the moral world. Of course, just as our sense of sight may not be perfect, such that a tree appears blurry or indistinct, so also our moral sense may not be perfect, such that a particular action may not be clearly seen as right or wrong. But in each case, even imperfect "sight" can provide *some* reliable information about both the material and moral landscapes. [{15}](#)

How might we best explain both the moral landscape and our experience of it? "Can the particles that comprise a material landscape, with dirt and trees, produce standards of good and bad, right and wrong?" [{16}](#) It's hard to see how undirected particles could do such a thing. And naturally, they could have no *reason* to do so.

On the other hand, a foundational mind with a moral nature could account for *both* the moral landscape *and* our experience of it. As Rasmussen observes, such a being would account for moral values because of its moral nature. [{17}](#) Further, such a being would have both a *reason* and *resources* to create moral agents (like us) with the ability to perceive these values. [{18}](#) Its reason for creating such agents is that we're valuable. [{19}](#) A mind-like foundation thus offers a better

explanation for human moral experience than mindless particles ever could.

## Foundation of Reason

Human minds are special for their ability to reason. This ability helps us think correctly. When we reason correctly, we can begin with certain basic truths and infer yet other truths that logically follow from these. For example, from the basic truths that “all men are mortal” and “Socrates is a man” we can logically infer the further truth that “Socrates is mortal.”

But here an interesting puzzle arises. Where does our ability to reason come from? How might we account for the origin of human reason? And one of the interesting topics tackled by Josh Rasmussen in his book, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, is the origin of reason itself. What’s the best explanation for this incredible ability?

If the universe sprang into being “from nothing, with no mind behind it,” then not only human minds, but even rationality itself, must ultimately come from mindless material particles.<sup>{20}</sup> But as Rasmussen observes, “If people come only from mindless particles, then *reasoning* comes from non-reason.”<sup>{21}</sup> But could reason really come from non-reason? Is that the *most plausible* explanation? Or might a *better* explanation be at hand?

The atheistic scientist J. B. S. Haldane once observed, “If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true . . . and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.”<sup>{22}</sup> For Haldane, if human reason arises entirely from a non-rational historical and physical process, then we have little reason to think that our beliefs are true.



Fortunately, there's a way out of this difficulty. We can suggest that human reason comes from an ultimately *rational* foundation. In that case, reason comes from reason. We've already seen that the best way to account for minds, matter, and morals is by positing a foundational Mind as the source of all reality. And this is also the best way to account for human reason as well. As Rasmussen notes, "by anchoring reason in the nature of the foundation, we can explain how the foundation of all existence can be the foundation of minds, matter, morals . . . and reason itself."[{23}](#)

In the next section we will follow Rasmussen "to the treasure at the end of the bridge of reason."[{24}](#)

## Perfect Foundation

In this article we've seen that a foundational Mind offers the best explanation for the existence of human minds and bodies, moral concepts, and even reason itself. In my previous article, we saw that this foundation is also independent, self-sufficient, and eternally powerful. Today, with some final help from the Christian philosopher Josh Rasmussen, we want to pull together the various strands of this discussion to see what unifies the various features of this foundation into a single, coherent being. What sort of being might all these features point to? According to Rasmussen, they all point to a *perfect* being. But why does he think so?

Rasmussen argues that a perfect being must have two essential features. First, it must have no defects, or imperfections. And second, it must have "supreme value."[{25}](#) In other words, a perfect being cannot possibly be improved.

But why think the foundation of all reality is a perfect being? Simply put, the concept of perfection enables us to account for all the characteristics of this being that reason has revealed to us. Perfection accounts for this being's

independent, self-sufficient, and eternally powerful nature. It also accounts for how this being can be the ultimate foundation of other minds, astonishing material complexity, morality, and reason itself. As Rasmussen observes, “Perfection unifies all the attributes of the foundation” and “successfully predicts every dimension of our world.”<sup>{26}</sup>

A perfect being is thus the foundation of “every good and perfect gift” that we possess and enjoy, and must surely be described as “the greatest possible treasure.”<sup>{27}</sup> Moreover, since this being possesses “the maximal concentration of goodness, value, and power imaginable,” it can only properly be termed “God.”<sup>{28}</sup> Thus, by following the “light of reason” to the end of the “bridge of reason,” we have arrived not at meaninglessness or despair, but at “the greatest possible treasure,” the self-sufficient, eternally powerful, supremely rational, and perfectly good, Creator God.

If you would like to explore the work of Josh Rasmussen further, I would recommend reading his book, *How Reason Can Lead to God: A Philosopher’s Bridge to Faith*. You can also visit his website at [joshualrasmussen.com](http://joshualrasmussen.com).

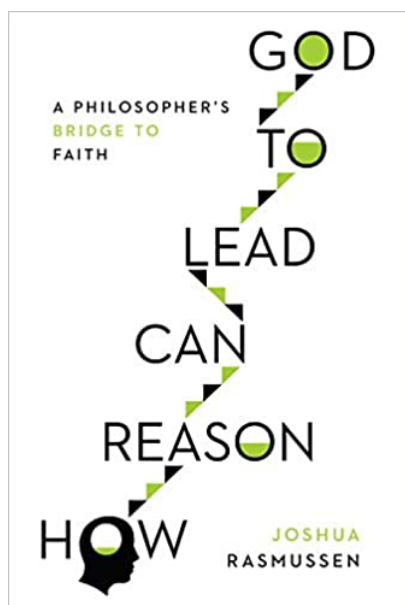
## Notes

1. Joshua L Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God: A Philosopher’s Bridge to Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019).
2. See my previous article, “[How Reason Can Lead to God, Part 1](#).”
3. Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, 75.
4. Ibid., 8.
5. Ibid., 76.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 77.
8. Ibid., 92. The phraseology of “mental materials” in the previous sentence is also borrowed from Rasmussen.
9. Alan Lightman, “The Accidental Universe,” Harper’s, December 2011, [harpers.org/archive/2011/12/the-accidental-](http://harpers.org/archive/2011/12/the-accidental-)

- [universe/](#), cited in Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, 95.
10. Rasmussen deals with this option, as well as several others, in *How Reason Can Lead to God*, 95-108.
  11. *Ibid.*, 95.
  12. Walter L. Bradley and Charles B. Thaxton, "Information and the Origin of Life," in *The Creation Hypothesis: Scientific Evidence for an Intelligent Designer*, ed. J. P. Moreland. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 205.
  13. *Ibid.*, 109-24.
  14. *Ibid.*, 110. Rasmussen takes the terminology of a "moral landscape" from Sam Harris's book, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2011).
  15. Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, 110-11.
  16. *Ibid.*, 119.
  17. *Ibid.*, 121.
  18. *Ibid.*, 121-22.
  19. *Ibid.*, 122.
  20. *Ibid.*, 133.
  21. *Ibid.*, 133-34.
  22. Haldane, J. B. S., *Possible Worlds*, 209, as cited in C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1960), 15.
  23. Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, 135.
  24. *Ibid.*, 136.
  25. *Ibid.*, 137-38.
  26. *Ibid.*, 148.
  27. *Ibid.* See also James 1:17.
  28. Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God*, 148.

# 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/](http://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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## Worldviews Through History – Compared to a Christian View

*Kerby Anderson provides a summary of how mankind has viewed the world from the Romans until today. This summary provides us a perspective against which to compare and contrast a Christian, biblical worldview based on New Testament principles.*

### Roman Worldview

On the Probe Web site we often talk about [worldviews](#). I want to explain how the worldviews we talk about developed through history. We will be using as our foundation an excellent book written by Professor Glenn Sunshine whom I have met and also had the privilege of interviewing. His book is *Why You Think*

*the Way You Do: The Story of Western Worldviews from Rome to Home.* {1}

Glenn Sunshine is a member of the church that Jonathan Edwards attended when he was at Yale. Professor Sunshine gave a lecture about Jonathan Edward's worldview at a conference they held, and Chuck Colson invited him to teach with the Centurions program. He gave a talk about "How We Got Here" and then later turned it into *Why You Think the Way You Do*.



Since we will be talking about worldview, it would be good to begin with Glenn Sunshine's definition. "A worldview is the framework you use to interpret the world and your place in it." {2} You do not need to be a philosopher to have a worldview. All of us have a worldview.

Although Glenn Sunshine begins with the worldview of the Roman world, he quickly takes us back to neo-Platonism. It was the religion and philosophy based upon Plato's ideas. Neo-Platonism was the belief that the fundamental ground of reality is non-physical. Instead it is found in the world of ideas (and is known as *idealism*). These ideas cast shadows that cast other shadows until they arrive at the physical world.

According to this worldview, the whole universe exists as a hierarchy. The spiritual is superior to the physical. This provides a scale of values for the world, but also provides a scale for humanity. In other words, those who are superior should rule over those who are inferior because they have demonstrated their ability to rule or conquer.

This view of hierarchy led to the idea of the father having superiority over all members of the family. It led to the idea that men are superior to women. It led to the idea that the emperor should rule and be worshipped. And it led to the idea that slaves are inferior to free people and nothing more than

“living tools.”[{3}](#)

This explains not only the success of Rome but also its ugly underside. Essentially there are two pictures of Rome: “the glittering empire and the rotten core.”[{4}](#)

In Rome, human life did not have much value. While it is true that Romans abandoned human sacrifice, they engaged in other practices equally abhorrent. “They picked up the Etruscan practice of having people fight to the death in games in honor of the dead.”[{5}](#)

Slavery provided the economic foundation for the empire. Abortion and infanticide were regularly practiced. “Roman families would usually keep as many healthy sons as they had and only one daughter; the rest were simply discarded.”[{6}](#) And Roman law required that a father kill any visibly deformed child.

## **Transformation of the Pagan World**

How did Christianity transform the pagan world? In AD 303, the Roman emperor Diocletian began a severe persecution of Christians. But because Christians were faithful and even willing to go to their deaths for their beliefs, their credibility increased. Eventually they were accepted and allowed to exercise their faith. Constantine even legalized the Christian faith by AD 313.

Once that took place, Christian ideas were allowed to percolate through society. One of the most important ideas was that human beings are created in the image of God. This idea has a profound impact. First, it meant that people are fundamentally equal to each other. No longer were there grounds for saying that some people are superior to others. In fact, “Christians were the first people in history to oppose slavery systematically.”[{7}](#)

Christians (who believed that all are created in the image of God) treated the sick differently. They believed that even those who were deathly ill still deserved care. Dionysius of Alexandria reported that Christians (often at great risk to their own lives) “visited the sick fearlessly and ministered to them continually.”[\[8\]](#) They would rescue babies abandoned in an act of infanticide. They would oppose abortion.

In economics, we can also see the influence of Christianity. The idea that God created the universe and then rested showed that God worked. That would mean that human beings (made in the image of God) are expected to work as well. God gave Adam and Eve intellectual work (in naming the animals) and physical work (in tending the Garden). Contrast this with the Roman world where physical work was seen as something that only slaves would do. Christians saw labor as something that was intrinsically valuable.

Labor is good; drudgery is bad. Drudgery is a result of the Fall (Genesis 3). So Christians were the first to develop technology to remove drudgery from work. Other civilizations had technology, but the West uniquely applied such things as water power to make work more valuable and worthwhile by eliminating the drudgery and repetitive nature of certain tasks.

Property rights were also well-developed during this period. “The medieval world under the influence of Christianity has a much stronger emphasis on property rights than other cultures had.”[\[9\]](#)

These ideas come from a biblical worldview and began to be developed during the Middle Ages. This led to a complete transformation of western society and set it on a trajectory to our modern world.

# Christianity and Politics

Glenn Sunshine points out that in the West, the dynamic between church and state is unique. Christianity was originally a persecuted minority religion. Even when Christianity was declared a legal religion, the church did not depend upon the state. So the question of the relationship between church and state has been an open question.

During the Middle Ages, two men helped shape political thinking. The first was Augustine, who described two realms: the City of God and the City of Man. He argued that human government is the result of sin. He believed that it is based upon selfishness. Government itself is corruption. In the absence of government, anarchy reigns. So government is a necessary evil.

The City of God is different in that it is not based upon force or coercion. It is based upon love, charity, and repentance. That doesn't mean that the City of Man and the City of God cannot work together. But overall, Augustine had a more pessimistic view of government.

Aristotle had a different view of government. As people in the Middle Ages began to rediscover Aristotle, they began to develop a different view of government. They saw government as a necessary institution that God has placed in the world. It had positive and legitimate functions.

Aristotle believed that government had a more positive role in society. But the Christian theologians had to also deal with the problem of original sin. They wanted to find a way to prevent original sin from corrupting the government. The tension between these two views is what drives the discussion of western political theory.

Sunshine notes that "another check on civil government involved the idea of rights."[10](#) We normally associate the

idea of rights, especially inalienable rights, with eighteenth century political theorists. However, John Locke's idea that we have inalienable right to life, liberty, and property is already found in the writings of medieval theologians. The basis for this is a belief that all are created in the image of God. Therefore, all of us have a number of natural rights that the state cannot remove. Natural law was the idea that God wove moral laws into the fabric of the universe.

There also was the belief that there should be limitations on the jurisdiction of civil government and church government. One example is the Magna Carta, that stated that the English church was to be free and its liberties unimpaired by the crown.

## **The Renaissance and Enlightenment**

What about the transformation into the modern world? In the early modern period, starting with the Renaissance in the fifteenth century to the seventeenth century, there are a whole series of events that shook the worldview consensus that developed in the Middle Ages.

Previously there were certain beliefs about truth: (1) that truth was absolute, (2) that truth is knowable to the human mind, and (3) that truth is necessary for society (a society could not be based upon a lie). The best good guide for truth would be the great civilizations of the past that lasted for so long and thus must have been based upon truth.

The idea was to go to the past to find truth. During the Renaissance scholars were very successful in collecting manuscripts and finding ancient sources. Unfortunately, they found so many sources that they discovered there was not a coherent perspective. The ancient writers disagreed with each other. In a sense, the Renaissance was a victim of its own success. There was too much information. The more ancient



sources they found, the less likely they would find agreement in the perspectives. Once it became obvious that this grand synthesis was not possible, the entire purpose of intellectual activity was thrown into question.

Then there were the wars of the Reformation in which various factions fought over who was the true follower of the prince of peace. The devastation of the religious wars left many people wondering if there really was religious certainty. No longer was the question "is Christianity true" but rather "which Christianity is true?" Now you had a multiplicity of options that left people confused. This also generated questions about the role of religion in society.

Then you also had the discovery of the New World and whole people groups that had never heard the gospel. Some began to ask questions like: Is it fair of God to send them all to hell because they had never heard of Christianity? Or, in light of biblical history, where did they come from? How do these people fit with the story of Noah? These discoveries called into question biblical morality and biblical history.

Also, people started using a new way of looking at knowledge. They began to use the scientific method to evaluate everything. This begins a significant shift in how we understand the world. There is a movement away from certainty toward probability. There is also a movement away from studying ancient authors toward scientific experimentation.

In the modern world, therefore, truth is not found in the past but in the present and future. With this is also questioning of biblical authority.

## **The Modern World and Christianity**

Let me conclude by talking about our modern world and how Christians should respond. Sunshine concludes his book with chapters on "Modernity and Its Discontents" and "The Decay of

Modernity.” Essentially the modern world has left humans with a loss of truth, certainty, and meaning in life. “Materialism provides a ready answer to the question of the meaning and purpose of life: there is none.”[\[11\]](#) From a Darwinian perspective, our only purpose is to pass our genes on to the next generation.

This rejection of spirituality and meaning has ushered in various other worldviews as alternatives. These would be such worldviews as postmodernism, neo-paganism, and the New Age Movement. Sunshine argues that in many ways we have been catapulted back to Rome.

Like Rome we value toleration as the supreme virtue. Rome believed that toleration was important because it kept the empire together. If you go beyond the lines of toleration, you are persecuted. This is similar to the mindset today. The highest value in a postmodern world is toleration. Toleration so defined means that we will embrace any and all lifestyles people may choose.

The Romans lived in an oversexed society.[\[12\]](#) So do we. Rome practiced abortion. So does our society. Rome was antinatal and made a deliberate attempt to prevent pregnancy. They focused on sexual enjoyment and did not want to bother with kids. In our modern world, birthrates in most of the western democracies are plummeting.

Western civilization is a product of ancient Roman civilization plus Christianity. Sunshine argues that once you removed Christianity, modern society reverted back to Roman society and a recovery of the ancient pagan worldview.

So how should Christians live in this world? Of course, we should live out a biblical worldview. Every generation is called to live faithfully to the gospel, and our generation is no exception.

This is especially important today since we are facing a

society that is not willing to accept biblical ideas. In many ways, we face a challenge similar to the early church, though not as daunting. From history we can see that the early church did live faithfully and transformed the Roman world. Christians produced a totally new civilization: western culture. By living faithfully before the watching world, we will increase our credibility and earn the respect from those who are around us by living in accordance with biblical principles.

## Notes

1. Glenn Sunshine, *Why You Think the Way You Do: The Story of Western Worldviews from Rome to Home* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).
2. Ibid., 13.
3. Ibid., 31
4. Ibid., 20
5. Ibid., 30
6. Ibid., 33-34
7. Ibid., 43
8. Ibid., 44
9. Ibid., 76
10. Ibid., 91
11. Ibid., 177
12. Ibid., 33

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# Ancient Perspectives on

# Happiness

*After examining several pagan view of happiness from the ancient world, Dr. Michael Gleghorn argues for the view of Christian philosopher Augustine.*

The Declaration of Independence says that all men “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” including “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”[\[1\]](#) Although we could say a lot about this statement, I want to focus on that very last phrase: the pursuit of happiness. What exactly is happiness? And how should we pursue it in order to have the best chance of attaining it? These questions not only interest us, they also interested some of the greatest thinkers from the far-flung past.

So what *is* happiness? An online dictionary says that happiness “results from the possession . . . of what one considers good.”[\[2\]](#) A good start, but it raises another question, namely, what should we consider *good*? Many things can be described as *good*: a cat, a job, a lover, and a book may all qualify. And each of these things might even make us *happy* . . . at least, for a while. But is there a *good* that offers us genuine and lasting happiness? If so, what is it? Now we’re getting closer to what the ancients were interested in knowing about happiness.



Of course, as you can probably guess, many different answers were proposed. A few thought that happiness could be found in the pleasures of the flesh. But most believed you needed something a bit more . . . *lofty*, shall we say, in order to experience *real* happiness, things like friendship, peace of mind, virtue, and even God. One thing they virtually all agreed on was that a truly good and happy life ought to be lived with a sense of mission or purpose. Hence, the ancients did not think about happiness primarily in terms of just

“having a good time.” Instead, they thought there was an important *moral* component to happiness. As Christian theologian Ellen Charry notes, for the ancients, happiness “comes from using oneself consistently, intentionally, and effectively, and hence it is a moral undertaking.”[{3}](#)

The link between morality and happiness has, I fear, become rather under-appreciated in our own day. But important as it is, many (including myself) don’t believe that this can be the *final* word on happiness. So in an effort to find out what is, we’ll spend the rest of this article looking first at some of the most important pagan perspectives on happiness from the ancient world before concluding with a Christian proposal by possibly the greatest theologian in the early church, a man named Augustine.[{4}](#)

## **Epicureanism**

Let’s begin with Epicureanism. Epicurus lived from 341–270 B.C. and is often viewed as the poster boy for a hedonistic lifestyle. A popular gourmet cooking site, [epicurious.com](http://epicurious.com), creatively plays off this reputation to celebrate the pleasures of a great meal.[{5}](#) But as we’ll see, Epicurus was not the total “party animal” that people often think.[{6}](#)

Although he rightly regarded physical pleasure as a good thing, and believed that it was natural for us to want it, he personally thought that friendship and mental tranquility were even better. It was these latter sources of happiness, and not merely the pleasures of the flesh, which Epicurus thought of as the greatest goods. In order to attain them, he even commended a life of virtue. After all, it’s the virtuous person, living at peace with his neighbors, who generally has far less cause for fear and worry than someone who’s been up to no good. Such a person is thus more likely to experience the true joys of friendship and mental tranquility than his non-virtuous counterpart.[{7}](#)

As you can probably see, there are aspects of Epicureanism that even a Christian can appreciate. But there are problems with this view as well. For example, while Epicurus did not deny either God or the gods, he did teach that they were rather unconcerned about human affairs, and he denied that there would be a final judgment. For him, death was simply the end of existence and you didn't need to worry that God would judge you for your deeds in an afterlife. But these ideas made many people uncomfortable.

For instance, the Roman philosopher Cicero (106-43 B.C.) reacted strongly against Epicureanism in his book *The Nature of the Gods*. And Lactantius, an early Christian writer (A.D. 250-325), believed that only the fear of God "guards the mutual society of men."[{8}](#) In his view, if people think they aren't accountable to God, society will likely be in trouble. Hence, many thinkers worried that Epicureanism might lead to an amoral—or even *immoral*—pursuit of pleasure as the highest good of life. And unfortunately, this "can just as easily lead to debauchery and . . . selfishness as it can to the simple, honest life style of Epicurus."[{9}](#)

So while the Epicurean view of happiness has some things in its favor, there are several reasons for rejecting it.

## **Stoicism**

Stoicism was another important school of thought that addressed the issue of human happiness. In the ancient world, it "was the single most successful and longest-lasting movement in Greco-Roman philosophy."[{10}](#) The Stoics' manly, morally tough philosophy of life had broad appeal in the ancient world. It attracted slaves like Epictetus (ca. A.D. 55-ca. 135) as well as the Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121-180). Even many of the early church fathers admired the Stoic emphasis on moral virtue and integrity.[{11}](#)

So what did the Stoics think about human happiness? According

to Ellen Charry, the Stoics viewed “the goal of life” as human flourishing. This was understood, however, not in terms of having a long life or being financially successful. Rather, it was viewed “as maintaining one’s dignity and grace whatever may happen.”[{12}](#) The Stoics understood that things don’t always work out as we want. Life throws us many curve balls and, if we’re not prepared, we’re bound to be disappointed.

Their solution? In a statement reminiscent of the Buddha’s teaching, the Stoic Epictetus declared, “Demand not that events happen as you wish, but wish them to happen as they do happen, and you will get on well.”[{13}](#) We often don’t have any control over what goes on around us. But we can control how we react to it. By knowing the good and morally virtuous thing to do, and by consistently choosing to do this, one attains the highest happiness of which human beings are capable; namely, “the enjoyment of self that comes from the conviction that one is living a principled life of the highest integrity.”[{14}](#) This, in a nutshell, is the Stoic conception of human happiness.

But there are some problems with this view. Although Christians will readily cheer the Stoic commitment to a life of moral virtue, they’ll nonetheless deny that such a life is ever really possible apart from the grace of God. As the Christian theologian Augustine observed, Stoicism fails to adequately address the problem of human sinfulness. Moreover, he thought, it holds out the false hope that one can achieve happiness through self-effort. But as Augustine wisely saw, only God can make us truly happy. Hence, while there’s much to admire about Stoicism, as a philosophy of human happiness it must ultimately disappoint.[{15}](#)

## **Neo-Platonism**

Having now surveyed Epicureanism and Stoicism, and found each of them wanting, we must next turn to Neo-Platonism to see if it fares any better.

Probably the most important Neo-Platonist philosopher was a man named Plotinus, who lived in the third century A.D. Plotinus believed that in the beginning was the One, “the supreme transcendent principle” and the “ground of all being.”[{16}](#) Everything which now exists ultimately originated from the One through a series of emanations. Since everything proceeds from the One *not* by a process of creation, but rather by a process of emanation, “Creator and creation . . . are not sharply distinguished in Plotinus’s account.”[{17}](#)

Although this is certainly different from the biblical view, in which there *is* a clear distinction between Creator and creation, it would probably not be fair to simply call Plotinus a pantheist—that is, someone who believes that “all” of reality is “Divine.” According to one scholar, Plotinus tried “to steer a middle course” between pure pantheism (on the one hand) and creation by God (on the other).[{18}](#) But since everything that exists emanates or proceeds from the One, Plotinus’s view is certainly *close* to pantheism. And it is thus quite different from the biblical doctrine of creation.

But how is this relevant to Plotinus’s perspective on the nature of human happiness? According to Plotinus, since everything (including mankind) emanates out of the One, human beings can only truly find happiness by realizing their “oneness” with the One. In Plotinus’s view, “Happiness resides in a person’s realization that she is one with divinity.”[{19}](#) According to Plotinus, then, realizing one’s “oneness” with the One is the key to human happiness.

Are there any problems with this view? Although there’s much to admire about Neo-Platonism, and while it was quite influential in the early church, it was never entirely accepted, and that for several reasons. From a Christian perspective, Neo-Platonism ultimately has a defective view of God, creation, human nature, the meaning of salvation, and what happens to a person after death. In other words, while



the system is very religious, it's *not* Christianity. And thus, while we can agree with Plotinus that happiness can only be found in God, we must nonetheless reject his system on the grounds that he's not pointing us to the one *true* God.

## Augustinianism

Having previously surveyed some of the most important perspectives on happiness from the ancient world, we'll now bring our discussion to a close by briefly considering the thought of Augustine, one of the greatest theologians of the early church. Augustine lived from A.D. 354 to 430 and was familiar with the various perspectives on happiness which we've already examined.

Like the Epicureans, he believed that our happiness is at least tangentially related to our physical well-being. Like the Stoics, he believed that a life of integrity and moral virtue was important for human happiness. And like the Neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus, Augustine thought that true human happiness could only be found in God.

Nevertheless, Augustine views each of these perspectives as ultimately inadequate for all who long to experience *lasting* human happiness (and Augustine thinks that's pretty much all of us). After all, neither physical well-being nor a virtuous life can grant us lasting happiness if our existence ends at death. And while he agrees with Plotinus that happiness can only be found in God, Augustine (like all Christians) is convinced that Plotinus ultimately has a defective view of God. [{20}](#)

So where is true and lasting happiness to be found? Ellen Charry sums up Augustine's view quite nicely when she writes, "Happiness is knowing, loving, and enjoying God securely." [{21}](#) In Augustine's view, happiness is a condition in which one's desires are realized. Happy is he who has what" he wants," he writes in his little book on happiness. [{22}](#) But he also

believed that what we all really want is the *everlasting* possession of the *greatest* good that can be had. That is, we want the best that there is—and we want it forever!

But since the greatest good can only be God, the source and foundation of every other good there is (or ever will be), it seems that what we ultimately want, whether we realize it or not, is God! And if we not only want the best that there is, but want it forever, it seems that we must ultimately want the very thing God freely offers us in Christ, namely, everlasting life in the presence of God. The psalmist urges us to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8). And those who do are promised joy in His presence and “eternal pleasures” at His right hand (Psalm 16:11).

This, then, is Augustine’s view on human happiness. In my opinion, it’s far and away the best perspective that we’ve examined in this article, and I hope you’ll think so, too.

## Notes

1. Cited from the text of the Declaration of Independence at [www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html) (accessed August 26, 2011).
2. Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, inc., s.v. “happiness,” [dictionary.reference.com/browse/happiness](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/happiness) (accessed August 26, 2011).
3. Ellen T. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 3-4.
4. Ellen Charry surveys the views of each of these persons and perspectives in the first two chapters of her book *God and the Art of Happiness*, 3-62.
5. For more, check out [www.epicurious.com](http://www.epicurious.com)
6. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 70.

7. This paragraph is indebted to the discussion of Epicurus in Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 70-71.
8. Lactantius, "A Treatise on the Anger of God," in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, Ante-Nicene Fathers (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 269; cited in Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 8.
9. Stanley R. Obitts, "Epicureanism," in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 358.
10. Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 71.
11. Gary T. Burke, "Stoics, Stoicism," in Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1056.
12. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 9.
13. The Enchiridion, VIII; cited in Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 71.
14. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 10.
15. This paragraph is indebted to Ellen Charry's discussion of Augustine's critique of Stoicism in *God and the Art of Happiness*, 14-15.
16. Everett Ferguson, "Neoplatonism," in Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 756.
17. Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 122.
18. Frederick Copleston, Greece and Rome, vol. 1 of *A History of Philosophy* (Garden City: Image Books, 1985), 467.
19. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 19.
20. This paragraph and the one that precedes it are generally indebted to Charry's discussion in *God and the Art of Happiness*, 3-62.

21. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 29.

22. De beata vita 10; cited in John Bussanich, "Happiness, Eudaimonism," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 413.

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## Your Work Matters to God

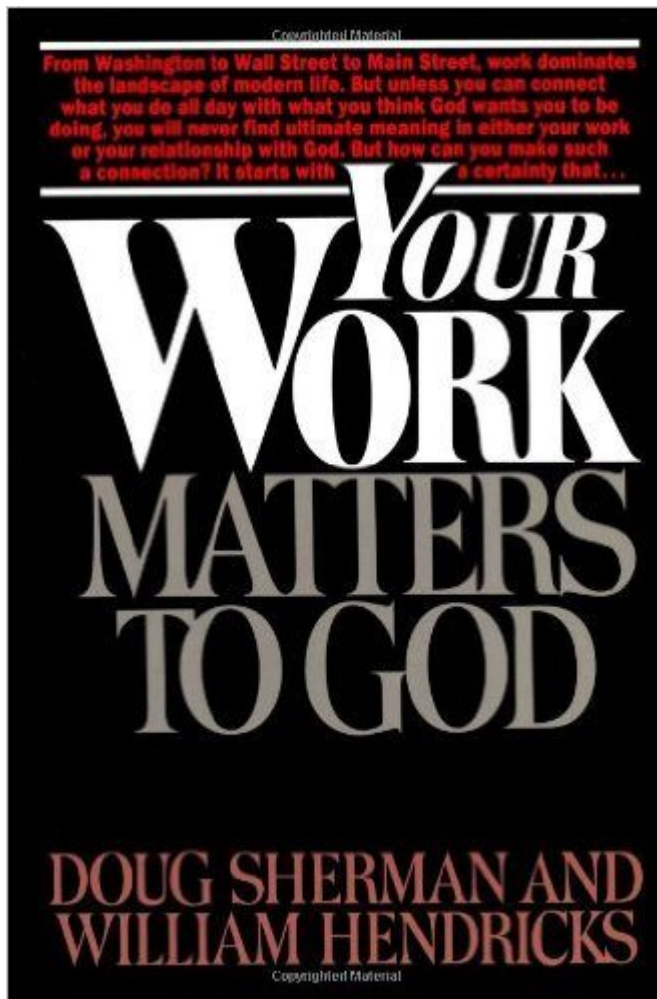
*Sue Bohlin helps us look at work from a biblical perspective. If we apply a Christian worldview to our concept of work, it takes on greater significance within the kingdom of God.*



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

Many Christians hold a decidedly unbiblical view of work. Some view it as a curse, or at least as part of the curse of living in a fallen world. Others make a false distinction between what they perceive as the sacred—serving God—and the secular—everything else. And others make it into an idol, expecting it to provide them with their identity and purpose in life as well as being a source of joy and fulfillment that only God can provide.





In their excellent book *Your Work Matters to God*,<sup>{1}</sup> Doug Sherman and William Hendricks expose the wrong ways of thinking about work, and explain how God invests work with intrinsic value and honor. Rick Warren echoes this idea in his blockbuster *The Purpose Driven Life* when he writes, “Work becomes worship when you dedicate it to God and perform it with an awareness of his presence.”<sup>{2}</sup>

First, let’s explore some faulty views of work: the secular view, some inappropriate hierarchies that affect how we view work, and work as merely a platform for doing evangelism.

Those who hold a secular view of work believe that life is divided into two disconnected parts. God is in one spiritual dimension and work is in the other *real* dimension, and the two have nothing to do with each other. God stays in His corner of the universe while I go to work and live my life, and these different realms never interact.

One problem with this secular view is that it sets us up for disappointment. If you leave God out of the picture, you’ll have to get your sense of importance, fulfillment and reward from someplace else: work. Work is the answer to the question, “Who am I, and why am I important?” That is a very shaky foundation—because what happens if you lose your job? You’re suddenly a “nobody,” and you are not important because you are

not employed.

The secular view of work tends to make an idol of career. Career becomes the number one priority in your life. Your relationship with God takes a back seat, family takes a back seat, even your relationship with other people takes a back seat to work. Everything gets filtered through the question, "What impact will this have on my career?"

The secular view of work leaves God out of the system. This is particularly unacceptable for Christians, because God calls us to make Him the center of our life.<sup>{3}</sup> He wants us to have a biblical worldview that weaves Him into every aspect of our lives, including work. He wants to be invited into our work; He wants to be Lord of our work.<sup>{4}</sup>

## **Inappropriate Hierarchies: Soul/Body, Temporal/Eternal**

In this article, we're examining some faulty views of work. One comes from believing that the soul matters more than the body. We can wrongly believe that God only cares about our soul, and our bodies don't really matter. The body is not important, we can think: it is only temporal, and it will fade and die. But if that view were true, then why did God make a physical universe? Why did He put Adam and Eve in the garden to cultivate and keep it? He didn't charge them with, "Go and make disciples of all nations which aren't in existence yet, but they will be as soon as you guys go off and start making babies." No, He said, "Here's the garden, now cultivate it." He gave them a job to do that had nothing to do with evangelism or church work. There is something important about our bodies, and God is honored by work that honors and cares for the body—which, after all, is His good creation.

Another wrong way of thinking is to value the eternal over the temporal so much that we believe *only* eternal things matter. Some people believe that if you work for things that won't

last into eternity—jobs like roofing and party planning and advertising—you're wasting your time. This wrong thinking needs to be countered by the truth that God created two sides to reality, the temporal and the eternal. The natural universe God made is very real, just as real as the supernatural universe. Asking which one is real and important is like asking which is real, our nine months in our mother's womb or life after birth? They are both real; they are both necessary. We have to go through one to get to the other.

Those things we do and make on earth DO have value, given the category they were made for: *time*. It's okay for things to have simply temporal value, since God chose for us to live in time before we live in eternity. Our work counts in both time and eternity because God is looking for faithfulness *now*, and the only way to demonstrate faithfulness is within this physical world. Spiritual needs are important, of course, but first physical needs need to be met. Try sharing the gospel with someone who hasn't eaten in three days! Some needs are temporal, and those needs must be met. So God equips people with abilities to meet the needs of His creation. In meeting the legitimate physical, temporal needs of people, our work serves people, and people have eternal value because God loves us and made us in His image.

## **The Sacred/Spiritual Dichotomy; Work as a Platform for Evangelism**

Another faulty view of work comes from believing that spiritual, sacred things are far more important than physical, secular things. REAL work, people can think, is serving God in full-time Christian service, and then there's everything else running a very poor second. This can induce us to think either too highly of ourselves or too lowly of ourselves. We can think, "Real work is serving God, and then there's what others do" (which sets us up for condescension), or "Real work is serving God, and then there's what I have to do" (which sets

us up for false guilt and a sense of “missing it”).

It’s an improper way to view life as divided between the sacred and the secular. ALL of life relates to God and is sacred, whether we’re making a business presentation or changing soiled diapers or leading someone to faith in Christ. It’s unwise to think there are sacred things we do and there are secular things we do. It all depends on what’s going on in our hearts. You can engage in what looks like holy activity like prayer and Bible study with a dark, self-centered, unforgiving spirit. Remember the Pharisees? And on the other hand, you can work at a job in a very secular atmosphere where the conversation is littered with profanity, the work is slipshod, the politics are wearisome, and yet like Daniel or Joseph in the Old Testament you can keep your own conversation pure and your behavior above reproach. You can bring honor and glory to God in a very worldly environment. God does not want us to do holy things, He wants us to be holy people.

A final faulty view of work sees it only as a platform for doing evangelism. If every interaction doesn’t lead to an opportunity to share the gospel, one is a failure. Evangelism should be a priority, true, but not our *only* priority. Life is broader than evangelism. In Ephesians 1, Paul says three times that God made us, not for evangelism, but to live to the praise of His glory.[{5}](#) Instead of concentrating only on evangelism, we need to concentrate on living a life that honors God and loves people. That is far more winsome than all the evangelistic strategies in the world. Besides, if work is only a platform for evangelism, it devalues the work itself, and this view of work is too narrow and unfulfilling.

Next we’ll examine at how God wants us to look at work. You might be quite surprised!



# How God Wants Us to See Work

So far, we have discussed faulty views of work, but how does God want us to see it? Here's a startling thought: we actually work for God Himself! Consider Ephesians 6:5-8, which Paul writes to slaves but which we can apply to employees:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, *as if you were serving the Lord, not men*, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

It's helpful to envision that behind every employer stands the Lord Jesus. He sees everything we do, and He appreciates it and will reward us, regardless of the type of work we do. I learned this lesson one day when I was cleaning the grungy bathtub of a family that wouldn't notice and would never acknowledge or thank me even if they did. I was getting madder by the minute, throwing myself a pity party, when the Lord broke into my thoughts. He quietly said, "I see you. And I appreciate what you're doing." Whoa! In an instant, that totally changed everything. Suddenly, I was able to do a menial job—and later on, more important ones—as a labor of love and worship for Jesus. I know He sees and appreciates what I do. It forever changed my view of work.

God also wants us to see that work is His gift to us. It is not a result of the Fall. God gave Adam and Eve the job of cultivating the garden and exercising dominion over the world *before* sin entered the world. We were created to work, and for work. Work is God's good gift to us!

Listen to what Solomon wrote:

After looking at the way things are on this earth, here's what I've decided is the best way to live: Take care of yourself, have a good time, and make the most of whatever job you have for as long as God gives you life. And that's about it. That's the human lot. Yes, we should make the most of what God gives, both the bounty and the capacity to enjoy it, accepting what's given and delighting in the work. It's God's gift!{6}

Being happy in our work doesn't depend on the work, it depends on our attitude. To make the most of our job and be happy in our work is a gift God wants to give us!

## Why Work is Good

In this article we're talking about how to think about work correctly. One question needs to be asked, though: Is all work equally valid? Well, no. All legitimate work is an extension of God's work of maintaining and providing for His creation. Legitimate work is work that contributes to what God wants done in the world and doesn't contribute to what He doesn't want done. So non-legitimate work would include jobs that are illegal, such as prostitution, drug dealing, and professional thieves. Then there are jobs that are legal, but still questionable in terms of ethics and morality, such as working in abortion clinics, pornography, and the gambling industry. These jobs are legal, but you have to ask, how are they cooperating with God to benefit His creation?

Work is God's gift to us. It is His provision in a number of ways. In *Your Work Matters to God*, the authors suggest five major reasons why work is valuable:

1. Through work we serve people. Most work is part of a huge network of interconnected jobs, industries, goods and services that work together to meet people's physical needs. Other jobs meet people's aesthetic and spiritual needs as well.

2. Through work we meet our own needs. Work allows us to exercise the gifts and abilities God gives each person, whether paid or unpaid. God expects adults to provide for themselves and not mooch off others. Scripture says, "If one will not work, neither let him eat!"[{7}](#)

3. Through work we meet our family's needs. God expects the heads of households to provide for their families. He says, "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."[{8}](#)

4. Through work we earn money to give to others. In both the Old and New Testaments, God tells us to be generous in meeting the needs of the poor and those who minister to us spiritually. [{9}](#)

5. Through work we love God. One of God's love languages is obedience. When we work, we are obeying His two great commandments to love Him and love our neighbor as we love ourselves.[{10}](#) We love God by obeying Him from the heart. We love our neighbor as we serve other people through our work.

We bring glory to God by working industriously, demonstrating what He is like, and serving others by cooperating with God to meet their needs. In serving others, we serve God. And that's why our work matters to God.

## Notes

1. Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1987.

2. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002. p. 67.

3. Philippians 1:21

4. Romans 12:1, 2

5. Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14

6. Ecclesiastes 5:18-19, The Message.

7. 2 Thess. 3:10

8. 1 Tim. 5:8

9. Leviticus 19:10–Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the LORD your God. Ephesians 4:28–Let him who steals, steal no longer but rather let him labor performing with his own hands what is good in order that he may have something to share with him who has need. Gal 6:6–The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him.

10. Matthew 22:37-39

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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 Pearse 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 Pearse puts it. Perhaps Pearse 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 Pearse, *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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## **Probe Live: Truth Decay**

Probe  
for answers

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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**Thursday, December 1, 2022**

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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.*

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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."<sup>{3}</sup> 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."<sup>{4}</sup> 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.<sup>{15}</sup> 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/](http://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](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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