

# No Reason to Fear: Examining the Logic of a Critic

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

## Getting Started

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

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



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

In this article I'm going to use Sam Harris's book *Letter to a*

*Christian Nation* to give some suggestions about what to look for in such books.[\[1\]](#) I won't try to address every challenge. Others have given more extensive responses.[\[2\]](#)

I titled this essay "No Reason to Fear" for a good reason. The challenges of critics throughout the ages have not been able to prove Christianity false, and those of modern day critics won't either. Most of their arguments have already been answered. When we brace ourselves and start reading a critic's book, we often find that the arguments don't pack that great a punch after all, much like the neighborhood bully who the other boys are afraid of but really have no reason to be.

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

## Fallacious Arguments

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

More to the point for this article, Christians can sometimes

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

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

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

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

## Are We Really So Evil?

Harris's favorite target in his attack on religion is its supposed immorality. He tells us that "Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tormented, tortured, and killed people in the name of God for centuries, on the basis of a theologically defensible reading of the Bible."[\[3\]](#) Well, *that's* a surprise! Not that Christians have done bad things, but that such acts are *theologically defensible*! Such things are sanctioned by God because He, too, does such things. Harris accuses Christians of picking and choosing sections of Scripture that present a more loving God while ignoring the truly telling ones which reveal a God who condones slavery and the beating and killing of rebellious children.

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

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

need until they first preach a sermon on the virgin birth.)

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

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

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

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

They continue:

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

Regarding Islamic terrorism, the authors write:

The Islamist fundamentalist terror war is largely about political order in the Arab countries, and the presence of

US forces in Saudi Arabia. It is not about religious conversion or a clash of religions. Nevertheless, bin Laden claims a religious duty in executing the war. . . .

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

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

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

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

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

## A Few More

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

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

Another argument Harris presents employs a fallacy we've already discussed, the fallacy of *causal oversimplification*. Harris commits this fallacy when he tells us that "the anti-Semitism that built the Nazi death camps was a direct inheritance from medieval Christianity." {8}

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

Of course, this doesn't prove that Hitler *didn't* get his anti-Semitism from Christians; but it *does* mean that one should not immediately assume that Christian prejudice is at the root of anti-Semitism. There have been other causes as well. A

significant factor in Hitler's hatred of the Jews was the strong influence of *Darwinism* that led him to think that people who were racially or eugenically inferior needed to be eliminated from the evolving human race.[{10}](#)

Although some people already believed in the inferiority of some races, and although Darwinism wasn't Hitler's sole inspiration, Historian Richard Weikart writes, "Darwinism was a central, guiding principle of Nazi ideology, especially of Hitler's own world view." Weikart quotes Richard Evans, a historian at Cambridge University: "The real core of Nazi beliefs lay in the faith Hitler proclaimed in his speech of September 1938 in science—a Nazi view of science—as the basis for action. Science demanded the furtherance of the interests not of God but of the human race, and above all the German race and its future in a world ruled by ineluctable laws of Darwinian competition between races and between individuals." Weikart continues: "This is not a controversial claim by anti-evolutionists, but it is commonly recognized by scholars who study Nazism."[{11}](#)

## A Fundamental Commitment to Atheism

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

It's no wonder, really, that Harris makes such bold statements. He is prevented from allowing the possibility of divine creation by his basic worldview commitments. He admits that he doesn't know why the universe exists, but he's confident there's no God behind it. That sounds like a philosophical presupposition. What evidence or reasons does he give for it? Harris might like to pretend that his beliefs are

based solely on the “trinity” of science, reason, and nature, but his naturalism cannot be established by these. Rather, it informs his use of them.

One of the (potentially!) maddening things about the arguments of atheists these days is their frequent silence with respect to any justification of their own basic worldview commitments. Harris goes so far as to claim that atheism isn't really a belief; that there shouldn't even *be* the word “atheism.”[\[13\]](#) Although “atheism” has long been understood to mean the belief that there is no God, many atheists today deny that. It isn't the belief that there is no God; it's simply an absence of belief in God.[\[14\]](#) It's a kind of “default” position, a “zero” belief, where everyone should be until given sufficient reasons to believe in God. Thus, the atheist has nothing to defend or prove.

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

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

Sam Harris speaks as a voice on high, shouting down to us poor, ignorant people who are stuck in our absurd religious beliefs. It's hard to imagine anyone with thoughtful

convictions changing his or her beliefs based on this book. He's preaching to the choir. Now that you have a few tips on what to look for, you might want to take a look at the book, and hear the rest of the "sermon."

## Notes

1. Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).
2. Douglas Wilson addresses many of Harris's arguments in his *Letter from a Christian Citizen* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2007) and Ravi Zacharias does the same in *The End of Reason: A Response to the New Atheists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).
3. Ibid., 22.
4. Ibid., 22.
5. Ibid., 33-34.
6. Greg Austin, Todd Kranock and Thom Oommen, "God And War: An Audit & An Exploration," <http://tinyurl.com/a2tpb>.
7. For more on this subject, see also Don Closson, "The Causes of War," Probe Ministries, 2008, [www.probe.org/the-causes-of-war/](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*

# Defending Theism: A Response to Hume, Russell, and Dawkins

*T.S. Weaver looks at anti-God arguments from three prominent philosophers, showing why belief in God is more reasonable than their objections to His existence.*

Theism, broadly defined, is the belief in the existence of a supreme being or other deities. Believers in Jesus Christ would say we follow Christian Theism, believing in and trusting the one true God who has revealed Himself through His word and through His Son Jesus. In pursuit of the defense of theism and answering profound antagonists to the faith, I will engage with some of the objections raised by three prominent thinkers: David Hume, Bertrand Russell, and Richard Dawkins.

## David Hume

David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish philosopher who is often considered the best philosopher to have written in the English language. Although he was wary of metaphysical things like God, he was very fascinated by religion. He is widely considered to be an atheist, but we do not know for certain whether he was atheist [one who denies that God exists], agnostic [one who is not sure if God exists], or deist [one who believes God created the universe but then let it run according to natural laws without divine intervention] by the time of his death. Regardless, his more prominent work is *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. In it he presents

classical challenges to theism.

The strongest challenge to theism Hume presents in *Dialogues* is the problem of evil and God's moral nature. His view is that with the amount of evil in the world, we cannot consider God as morally sensible, morally great, and powerful. His assumption is that if God were to exist, He does not care to solve the problem of good and evil. While this is the toughest intellectual challenge a theist has to answer, I believe there is an answer.

When God created, He gave humans the ability to make free decisions. If this ability were denied, our love (the supreme ethic) for Him would not be a choice and thus coerced. As a result, it would not be real love. Church Father Augustine (354-430) commented on this in his book *On the Free Choice of the Will*, by arguing that free will is what makes us human. God made us that way so we could freely choose to venerate, trust, and follow Him. So built into love, veneration, trust, and obedience was the ability to make free decisions. Consequently, certain choices are going to be terrible or evil (e.g., Adam and Eve's disastrous disobedience in the Garden of Eden). As a result, the only way to eradicate evil is to eradicate free will. Hence, evil is merely the consequence of the free will of humanity. John Stackhouse rearticulates this case:

God desired to love and be loved by other beings. God created human beings with this in view. To make us capable of such fellowship, God had to give us the freedom to choose, because love, though it does have its elements of "compulsion," is meaningful only when it is neither automatic nor coerced. This sort of free will, however, entailed the danger that it would be used *not* to enjoy God's love and to love God in return, but to go one's own way in defiance of both God and one's own best interest. This is what the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden portrays.[\[1\]](#)

It is not that God is insensitive to evil (Proverbs 6:16, 15:26; Psalm 5:4), but that moral and natural evils are the cause of the sin (free choice to disobey God) of man.

## Bertrand Russell

Shifting gears, Bertrand Russell, (1872-1970) a famed agnostic philosopher, argued against theism with a famous view that everything on this globe is the result of “an accidental collocation of atoms.”[\[2\]](#) Thus, there is no real aim for which we were produced. I believe this view is both incredibly depressing and incredibly wrong. If one were to take what Timothy Keller would call a “clue of God” like beauty and think this through, it would have serious implications. If this were true, as Keller put it in *The Reason for God*, “Beauty is nothing but a neurological hardwired response to particular data.”[\[3\]](#) Conductor Leonard Bernstein once spoke of the effect of the beauty of Beethoven’s music:

Our boy has the real goods, the stuff from Heaven, the power to make you feel at the finish: Something is right in the world. There is something that checks throughout, that follows its own law consistently: something we can trust, that will never let us down.[\[4\]](#)

Does that sound like a “neurological hardwired response to particular data”? Or is Beethoven’s music beautiful? As a seminary student, I often yearn for an excellent night of sleep. The thought is beautiful to me. Augustine in his *Confessions* argued that yearnings like this were clues to the existence of God. While my tiredness does not prove that my desire for an excellent night of sleep will happen tonight, it is correct that native yearnings like this link to actual substances that can fill them. For example, sensual yearning (linking to sex), hunger (linking to food), tiredness (linking to sleep), and interpersonal yearning (linking to relationship). We have a desire for joy, love, and beauty that no quantity or condition of sex, food, sleep, and relationship

can satisfy. We hope for something that nothing on this globe can satisfy. Do you think this is a clue? I assert this unpleasing yearning is a deep-rooted native longing that is an undeniable clue not only for the existence of God, but also that God is the only one who can satisfy that yearning. C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."[\[5\]](#) (Please also see Dr. Michael Gleghorn's article "C.S. Lewis and the Riddle of Joy" at [probe.org/c-s-lewis-and-the-riddle-of-joy/](http://probe.org/c-s-lewis-and-the-riddle-of-joy/)) Tying all this back to Russell's famous view, it makes sense that if there were a God who can satisfy that kind of yearning, this God likely made us, not by accident, but with a purpose. That is worth investigating.

## Richard Dawkins

Now I turn to Richard Dawkins (1941- ), who I think is best described as a militant atheist scientist. He writes in his book *The God Delusion*, describing God:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.[\[6\]](#)

Tell us how you really feel, Dawkins. Although there is a lot said here, what is most obvious is his portrayal of God as immoral because of what God displayed of Himself in the Old Testament. These acts are perceived to undermine his morally perfect nature. Although this will not be my main response, I want to highlight that for Dawkins to grumble that God has perpetrated immoral acts, he acknowledges there is an objective moral law. In [a separate argument](#), I could go from here to make the case that for there to be an objective moral

law there must be an objective moral law giver (God). However, I instead want to concentrate on “the God of the Old Testament.”

The Old Testament passage found in Deuteronomy (7:1-5; 20:16-18) tends to be the most cited in an argument against God such as Dawkins’s quote above. In this passage, God instructed the Israelites to destroy the Canaanites living in a specific region: “[T]hen you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy” (7:2), and “[D]o not leave alive anything that breathes” (20:16). This passage bothers many (including myself) and may be an example of where Dawkins got his characterization. It is understandable to wonder how a good and loving God could instruct this.

To make sense of a tough passage like this one must understand the context, starting with who God is. God is not like any earthly ruler. He’s not like Trump. He’s not like Biden. He is Creator of all things and King of the Universe. That said, He supplies life, and He can take life when He chooses, however He chooses. The next step is to think through whether His instruction was justified (as if it were up to us to define justice). There are occasions when we as humans may feel it is justified for people to take another’s life, as in self-defense, to safeguard others, or in a just war. What we must understand about the Canaanites in this passage is that this was not some illogical imperative for them to be murdered. The Canaanites were malevolent. In their obscene paganism, they were spiritually dangerous. They were unspeakably wicked. God said to the Israelites, “It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; *but on account of the wickedness of these nations*” (emphasis mine) (Deuteronomy 9:5).

The worst example of their wickedness is child sacrifice. Apologist Timothy Fox informs us, “They would burn their children alive in a fiery furnace as a sacrifice to the god Molech. Just that one act alone would be justification for

their complete annihilation.”[\[7\]](#) I wonder what Hume, who raised the problem of evil, would have to say to Dawkins about God dealing with and judging evil. One of the explanations God provided for wrecking the Canaanites was so that Israel would not embrace their malevolent ways. Dawkins may still object though and say, “What about the kids? How could a loving God instruct the Israelites to destroy harmless kids?” I do find this troubling as well, but as shown above, God can take life when He chooses, however He chooses. No one is promised a lengthy, peaceable life and to perish of old age. Furthermore, what if God saw that if these children were to mature, they would be just as evil and corrupt as their parents? What if ordering the death of children infected by their parents’ wickedness is similar to an oncology surgeon cutting out small cancer cells along with the full-grown cells? That is a possibility. In addition, God does not appreciate the murder of the evil but patiently waits for repentance of sins (Ezekiel 18:23). In the case of the Canaanites, we see He will only allow wickedness for so long though.

Another objection Dawkins has to the existence of God is science. His view is that you can either be scientific and sensible, or religious. He is either ignoring, or ignorant of, the fact that modern science arose out of a biblical worldview. Christians are responsible for developing the scientific perspective and method. Francis Bacon, astronomers Kepler and Galileo, and the brilliant mathematician and physicist Isaac Newton all believed in God. They all helped shape the development of modern science; they believed that since God was a God of order, they expected nature to be orderly. They also understood that one man’s opinion could be faulty because of sin, and therefore others needed to verify what any one scientist said. Kepler even characterized his scientific perspective as “thinking God’s thoughts after Him.”

Dawkins thinks God and science do not mix. Yet two legendary experiments performed in 1916 and 1997 reveal this view is not

as widely held as Dawkins and others make it seem. In 1916, American psychologist James Leuba conducted a study asking scientists if they believed in a God who actively communicates with humanity, no less than via prayer. 40 percent confirmed they did, 40 percent confirmed they did not, and 20 percent were not confident either way. Edward Larson and Larry Witham duplicated this study in 1997 using identical queries with scientists. They discovered the figures had not altered substantially. Even atheist philosopher Thomas Nagle disagrees with Dawkins's view of reality. Nagle even questions whether atheist naturalists think their moral instincts (yes morality has come up again), for example the belief that genocide is morally incorrect, are true instead of just the consequence of neurochemistry hardwired into humans. He writes:

The reductionist project usually tries to reclaim some of the originally excluded aspects of the world, by analyzing them in physical—that is, behavioral or neurophysiological—terms; but it denies reality to what cannot be so reduced. I believe the project is doomed—that conscious experience, thought, value, and so forth are not illusions, even though they cannot be identified with physical facts.[\[8\]](#)

Science *cannot* explain all and *can* be consistent with religious faith. Therefore, it is unreasonable to think that an individual can only be a believer of science *or* a believer of God. It is also irrational to believe we came into the world by accident, or that because of the presence of evil in the world theism is not workable. In short, it is more reasonable to believe in theism than not to.

## Notes

1. J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2003), 552.
2. Bertrand Russell, "The Free Man's Worship," *The Independent*

Review 1 (Dec 1903), 415-24 Title of essay changed after 1910 to "A Free Man's Worship."

3. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 138.

4. From Leonard Bernstein's "The Joy of Music" (Simon and Schuster, 2004), 105.

5. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 105.

6. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2006), 51.

7. [crossexamined.org/god-behaving-badly-destruction-canaanites/](https://crossexamined.org/god-behaving-badly-destruction-canaanites/), accessed March 31, 2022.

8. Thomas Nagel, "The Fear of Religion," *The New Republic* (October 23, 2006).

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# Atheism 2.0? Talking Back to a TED Talk

*In 2011, atheist Alain de Botton gave a now-famous TED talk "Atheism 2.0." As part of a seminary class on apologetics, Probe intern T.S. Weaver was assigned to write a response to it, which we are honored to publish. First, here is a video of that TED talk:*

Dear Mr. de Botton,

First, I want to say I admire your courage to share these ideas publicly and I do think you are a gifted orator. I am a Christian seminary student and have both many things I agree with and disagree with from your talk. I will try to touch on them in the order you bring them up in your talk.

To start with when you say, "Of course there's no God . . .

now let's move on. That's not the end of the story. That's the very very beginning," I can respect that because I agree that a truth claim regarding the existence of God is just the beginning. This truth claim informs our entire worldview and how we live. To me, knowing there is a God (the same conclusion to which avowed atheist [Sir Antony Flew](#) came) gives me meaning, purpose, knowledge of where we came from, where we are going, and how to live. I wonder from your perspective, though, how without a God, any of these key issues in life can be addressed. Without a God, where do we come from? What does life really mean? How do we differentiate between good and evil? What happens when we die?

Going further in your talk, I must say I too love Christmas carols, looking at churches, and turning the pages of the Old Testament. We have common ground here, so again, we do not disagree on everything.

However, evaluating your view again, I do not see how you can be attracted to the "moralistic side" of religion without the existence of God. You say you are "stealing from religion;" that I agree with as well. I wonder if you have thought, if you are truly an atheist, how can there even be such things as morals? How can you define good? In relation to what? Where does this come from? If there is some moral law, have you thought about where it comes from? Do you think that implies there must be some sort of law giver? In the atheistic worldview what is the moral law and who is the law giver?

You go on to say, "There's nothing wrong with picking out the best sides of religion." That sounds nice, but I disagree. You must either adopt it all or nothing, otherwise you do not have a worldview that makes sense. There will be self-contradictions all throughout your view. A perfect example as I touched on above is your idea of "Atheism 2.0." It is impossible to adopt a moralistic side because without God there are no morals. There is no reason to have a moralistic side. This is a contradiction. Have you considered this?

As your talk goes on, you say some remarkably interesting things I have not heard before, even from an atheist. Your claim the church in the early nineteenth century looked to culture to find morality, guidance, and sources of consolation is new to me. I would like to know how you came to this conclusion. Which denomination? Which church? What was your source of information? It is noticeably clear to me that the practice of the (Christian) church is to find all those things from Scripture and God. In fact, the Bible tells us in several places not to conform to culture. Here is one example from my favorite verse: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." (Romans 12:2) So, your claim is the exact opposite of what I as a Christian know presently and have learned about church history.

Furthermore, does not this refute how you opened your talk when you said, "We have done secularism bad"? You even say the church replacing Scripture with culture is "beautiful" and "true" and "an idea that we have forgotten." This is the very description of how atheists "have done secularism," is it not? From my understanding, atheism replaces Scripture with culture. Is this true, or am I missing something? If it is true, you have already done the reflection on how it is working and concluded it is "bad." Yet you want to "steal from religion." So, if your claim about church history is true, this is how it falls out: You think secularism has been done bad and want to instead steal morality from religion. And yet, religion (according to you) has gotten morality from culture (i.e., secularism). So, the very thing you would be stealing is what you yourself already called bad and would end up stuck with in the end anyway. Nothing has changed. Do you see how this is incoherent if it were true? Have you thought about this?

I do like your thoughts about the difference between a sermon (wanting to change your life) and a lecture (wanting to give

you a bit of information). I also agree we need to get back to "that sermon tradition," and we are in need of morality, guidance, and consolation, because like you said, "We are barely holding it together." And I do mean "we" to cover both the atheist and the Christian alike. This is exactly what Christianity is about. We cannot "hold it together" on our own. That is why we have a Savior, and we live dependently on God, the moral law giver. Now again, you cannot have morality without the moral law giver. Furthermore, if you get guidance from atheists preaching sermons are you not facing the same problem I wrote of in the earlier paragraph? Where is the guidance coming from? Culture? Have you considered this to be the blind leading the blind?

I also agree with your point about the value of repetition. I have so much information coming at me so fast that if I do not revisit it enough, almost none of it sticks. That is another reason I am repeating some of my points.

Now you mentioned one of the things you like about religion is when someone is preaching a rousing part of a sermon, we shout "Amen," "Thank you Lord," "Yes Lord," "Thank you Jesus," etc. Your idea of atheists doing this when fellow atheists are preaching passionate points is both clever and funny. However, as Rebecca McLaughlin (a Christian) pointed out in her book, *Confronting Christianity*, your examples of secular audiences saying, "Thank you Plato, thank you Shakespeare, thank you Jane Austen!" falls flat because of the examples you chose. McLaughlin writes, "One wonders how Shakespeare, whose world was fundamentally shaped by Christianity, would have felt about being cast as an atheist icon. But when it comes to Jane Austen, the answer is clear: a woman of deep, explicit, and abiding faith in Jesus, she would be utterly appalled."

Your point on art is amazingly fascinating. You say if you were a museum curator, you would make a room for love and a room for generosity. While this sounds beautiful, there is a problem. This will sound repetitive (helping us both learn and

remember), but it is just like the morality dilemma you have presented earlier. If no God exists, what is love? What is generosity? How do you define it? Where does it come from? Why is it valuable? Why is anything valuable?

To beat the dead horse one more time (apologies) . . . In your closing statements you again you say all these things are “very good.” Well, what is good? How do you define it? In relation to what? Where does it come from? How do you know that? As you earlier confessed, you are stealing from religion. These stolen values have no grounding if atheism is true.

I know some of the issues I raised were not necessarily the purpose of your talk, but in all, I wonder if you have considered how the facts and implications you presented correspond to reality. Do you think all the assertions you made cohere? Do you find your idea of Atheism 2.0 logically consistent and rational? If you could give a follow up talk, could you offer any way to verify your claims empirically? Could you supply answers to the questions of origin, meaning, morality, and destiny?

Sincerely,

A Christian – T.S. Weaver

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## **Atheist Myths and Scientism**

*Steve Cable exposes some atheist myths and the false ideology of scientism, all designed to destroy people's faith.*

# A Two-Pronged Attack Against Christianity



Atheist attacks against American Christianity are gaining more traction in our society. Their success can be readily seen in the growth of the number of American young adults who do not profess to be Christians. Tracking recent trends, around 50% of American Millennials fall in this category, with most of those identifying as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular. More identify as nothing in particular than as atheist, but the atheist attacks certainly have a role to play in their ambivalent feelings about Christianity.

What have atheists done to create a cultural milieu that is drawing more and more young Americans away from Christianity? In this article, we will focus on two prominent prongs of the attack against Christianity. Those prongs are:

1. Fabricating myths around the premise that Christianity and modern science are enemies of one another and have been so since the advent of modern science, and
2. Promoting the philosophy of scientism as the only way to view science.

First, the myths are an attempt to cause people to believe that the Christian church and a Christian worldview were and are anti-science. They want us to believe that the findings of science are counter to the make-believe teachings of Christianity and the Bible. They want us to look back at history and believe that the church was actively opposing and trying to suppress scientific knowledge. As Michael Keas tells us in his 2019 book *Unbelievable*, "These stories are nothing but myths. And yet some leading scientists . . . offer these

stories as unassailable truth. These myths make their way into science textbooks . . . (and) enter into popular culture, whereby the myths pass as accepted wisdom.”{1}

However, many historians and philosophers have correctly pointed out that the Christian worldview of an orderly universe created by an involved God produced the mindset that gave birth to the scientific revolution. In his book *How the West Won*, sociologist Rodney Stark states, “Christianity was essential to the rise of science, which is why science was a purely Western phenomenon . . . science only arose in Christian Europe because only medieval Europeans believed that science was possible and desirable. And the basis of their belief was their image of God and his creation.”{2} In this article, we consider the key figures who propagated this myth and some of the falsified stories they have foisted upon us.

Second, they want us to accept scientism as the only valid way to view the role of science in our understanding of the universe. What is scientism? In his 2018 book *Scientism and Secularism*, professor of philosophy J. P Moreland defines it this way: “Scientism is the view that the hard sciences provide the only genuine knowledge of reality. . . . What is crucial to scientism is . . . the thought that the scientific is much more valuable than the non-scientific. . . . When you have competing knowledge claims from different sources, the scientific will always trump the non-scientific.”{3}

But scientism “is not a doctrine of science; rather it is a doctrine of philosophy . . . (In fact,) scientism distorts science.”{4} This philosophical doctrine came into favor among the public not because of scientific results, but rather as the result of proponents presenting it in popular ways as if it were the undisputable truth. As Moreland points out, “It is not even a friend of science but rather its enemy.”{5}

# Myths about Christianity and Science

Atheists want to create stories to demonstrate that Christians are and have been the enemies of scientific exploration and discovery. Why this drive to recreate the past? They want to encourage people to turn away from Christianity as an enemy of science and weaken the faith of believers.

As Michael Keas makes evident in *Unbelievable*, this thinking is not based on reality. Instead, historical myths have been created to bolster their position either as a result of ignorance of the actual history or intentional deceit. After creating these myths, they use the educational system and mass media to ingrain these myths into the thinking of the masses.

Keas specifically looks at seven myths used for this purpose which we find embedded in our textbooks and proclaimed by popular television programs. To understand the nature of these myths, let's consider two of the ones discussed by Keas.

Many of you learned of the Dark Ages, a period of time between A.D. 500 and 1500 where textbooks have claimed that science and the arts were stifled by the control of the church which opposed scientific understanding. In truth, this view is not supported by historical evaluations of that time. As reported in Stark's revealing book, *How the West Won*, "Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Dark Ages myth is that it was imposed on what was actually "one of the great innovative eras of mankind." During this period technology was developed and put into use on a scale no civilization had previously known.[\[6\]](#) Keas found that this myth first appeared in textbooks in the 1800s but did not surface with an anti-Christian slant until the 1960s. Carl Sagan, and later Neal deGrasse Tyson, would help promulgate this myth on television through their *Cosmos* series.

Another myth exploded by Keas is that "Copernicus demoted humans from the privileged 'center of the universe' and

thereby challenged religious doctrines about human importance.”{7} In fact, Copernicus as a Christian did not consider his discovery that the earth orbited the sun a demotion for earth or humans. What Copernicus saw as unveiling the mysteries of God’s creation over time began to be pictured as a great humiliation for Christians. In the 1950s some scientific writers began using the term “the Copernican principle” to refer to the idea “that the Earth is not in a central, specially favored position”{8} in the cosmos. As one Harvard professor has noted, “This is the principle of mediocrity, and Copernicus would have been shocked to find his name associated with it.”{9}

Keas also documents how this atheist strategy also pretends that many early scientists were not Christians. Johannes Kepler, known for his discovery of the three laws of planetary motion, is cited by Sagan in *Cosmos* as someone who “despaired of ever attaining salvation,”{10} implying that Kepler always felt this way. Sagan leads one to believe that in his astronomical discoveries Kepler was somehow freed from this concern. Yet from Kepler’s own writing it is very clear that he was a Christian, telling people shortly before his death that he was saved “solely by the merit of our savior Jesus Christ.” And speaking of his scientific endeavors he wrote, “God wanted us to recognize them [i.e. mathematical natural laws] by creating us after his own image so that we could share in his own thoughts.”{11}

Much of the reported relationship between science and Christianity is a myth made up to strengthen the atheist position that science repudiates Christianity and makes it superfluous and dangerous in today’s enlightened world. Nothing could be further from the truth, as a Christian worldview was foundational for the development and application of the scientific method.

# Methodological Naturalism: A Farce

What about the prevalence of scientism, a belief system claiming that the hard sciences provide the only genuine knowledge of reality?

When considered carefully, the whole concept of scientism is a farce. Why? Because as philosopher J. P. Moreland points out, "Strong scientism is a philosophical assertion that claims that philosophical assertions are neither true nor can be known; only scientific assertions can be true and known."[\[12\]](#) So the premise is self-refuting. They are saying that only scientific facts can be objectively true. Thus, the statement that only scientific facts can be true must be false because it is a philosophical assertion, not a scientific fact.

Another example of the faulty philosophy behind scientism comes in their insistence on adopting methodological naturalism as a criterion for science. Methodological naturalism is "the idea that, while doing science, one must seek only natural causes or explanations for scientific data."[\[13\]](#) This idea immediately demotes science from being the search for the truth about observable items in this universe to being the search for the most plausible natural cause no matter how implausible it may be.

Although they appear to be unsure as to whether to apply the concept uniformly to all forms of science, its proponents are sure that it definitely should be applied to the field of evolutionary science. They make the *a priori* assumption that life as we know it originated and developed by strictly impersonal, unintelligent forces. No intelligence can be allowed to enter the process in any way. This approach to trying to understand the current state of life on earth is certainly an interesting exercise leading to a multitude of theories and untestable speculations. It is a challenging mental exercise and is valuable as such. However, scientism does not stop there. They declare that their unsupported (and

I would say unsupportable) theories **must be the truth** about our origins, at least until replaced by another strictly naturalistic theory.

This approach seems to be an odd (and unfruitful) way to go after the truth due to at least three reasons. First, many other areas of science which include intelligent agents in their hypotheses are respected and their results generally accepted, common examples being archaeology and forensic science. Second, the current state of evolutionary science primarily appears to be tearing holes in prior theories, e.g. Darwinian evolution, rather than closing in on a plausible explanation. And, third, scientists are continuing to find evidence supporting a hypothesis that intelligent actions were involved in the formulation of life on earth.

If the sum of the available evidence is more directly explained by the involvement of some intelligent agent, then it would be reasonable to accept that potential explanation as the leading contender for the truth until some other answer is developed that is more closely supported by the available evidence. This is the attitude embraced by the intelligent design community. They embrace it because so much of the evidence supports it, including

1. the inability of other hypothesis to account for the first appearance of life,
2. the complexity of the simplest life forms with no chain of less complex forms leading up to them,
3. the relatively sudden appearance of all types of life forms in the fossil record,
4. the fine tuning of the parameters of the universe to support life on earth, and
5. the emergence of consciousness within humans.

In contrast, those supporting theistic evolution appear to do so in order to conform to the methodological naturalism of their peers. They claim to believe that God does intervene in

nature through acts such as the miracles of Jesus and His resurrection. But they claim that God did not intervene in the processes leading up to the appearance of mankind on this planet. In my opinion, they take this stance not because the evidence demands it, but because methodological naturalism does not allow it. As Moreland opines, “Methodological naturalism is *one bad way* to put science and Christianity together.”[{14}](#)

## Things Science Cannot Explain / God of the Gaps

As we have seen, scientism is a philosophy that says the only real knowledge to be found is through application of the hard sciences and that no intelligence can be involved in any of our hypotheses. So, they believe hard science must be capable of explaining everything (even if it currently doesn't).

In this section we will consider some very important things that science cannot now nor ever be able to explain. In his book, *Scientism and Secularism*, J. P. Moreland lists five such things for us.

**First, the origin of the universe** cannot be explained by science. Why? Science has been able to identify that the universe most likely had a beginning point. But as Moreland points out, “Science can provide evidence that the universe had a beginning; it cannot, even in principle, explain that beginning; that is, it cannot say what caused it. . . No real thing can pop into existence from nothing.”[{15}](#) He points out three specific logical reasons science cannot address this issue:

1. A scientific explanation cannot be used to explain the universe because scientific explanations presuppose the universe.

2. Science cannot explain the origin of time and without time no explanation can be considered.

3. Coming-into-existence is not a process which can be reviewed and explained because it is an instantaneous event. Something either does or does not exist.

**Second, the origin of the fundamental laws of nature.** All scientific explanations presuppose these laws. We can conceive of a universe where these laws might be different resulting in a different reality, but we cannot explain how our universe came into being with the laws we see active around us.

**Third, the fine-tuning of the universe** to support life. As far as science is concerned the parameters of the forces within this universe can be observed but we cannot know what caused them to assume the values they do. However, in recent years it has been discovered that our universe “is a razor’s edge of precisely balanced life permitting conditions.”[\[16\]](#) Over one hundred parameters of this universe, such as the force of gravity, the charge of an electron, the rate of expansion of the universe, etc., must be precisely balanced or there could be no life in the universe. Science cannot answer the question of why our universe can support life.

**Fourth, the origin of consciousness.** In this context consciousness is the ability to be aware of oneself and entertain thoughts about things which are outside of oneself and possibly outside of one’s experience. From a naturalist point of view, “the appearance of mind is utterly unpredictable and inexplicable.”[\[17\]](#) However, God may choose to create conscious beings; beings that are capable of asking about and discovering the works of their creator.

**Fifth, the existence of moral laws.** As the late atheist philosopher Mackie admitted, the emergence of moral properties would constitute a refutation of naturalism and evidence for theism: “Moral properties constitute so odd a cluster of

properties and relations that they are most unlikely to have arisen in the ordinary course of events without an all-powerful god to create them.”[\[18\]](#)

These five important questions can never be answered if scientism’s flawed premise were true. However, Christian theism answers each of these questions and those answers are true if God is the real creator of the universe.

## **Integrating Christianity and Science**

Scientism claims that you cannot integrate Christianity and science. Instead, they claim all theology is nonsense and only science exists to give us the truth. As Moreland points out, “One of the effects of scientism, then, is making the ridicule of Christianity’s truth claims more common and acceptable (which is one of scientism’s goals).”[\[19\]](#)

If this view is clearly wrong, how should we as Christians view science and its relationship with Christianity and the Bible? First, we need to understand that the topics addressed by science are in most cases peripheral to the topics covered in the Bible. The Bible is primarily concerned with God’s efforts to restore people from their state as enemies of God back into eternal fellowship with Him.

One area of significant interaction is the question of how this universe came to exist in its current state. How one views that interaction (i.e. as adversarial or as complementary) depends on whether they are clinging to the unsupported myth of unguided evolution or to the new science of intelligent design. As Moreland states, “Science has done more to confirm the Christian God’s existence than to undermine it, and science has provided little or no evidence against belief of theism. Science has, however, raised challenges to various biblical texts, and Christians need to take those challenges seriously.”[\[20\]](#)

Moreland suggests there are five ways to relate issues in science and Christian philosophy. Let's consider two of those methods. One is the complementarity model. In this model, two disciplines are addressing the same object or feature but from different, essentially non-overlapping perspectives. "Neither one purports to tell the whole story, but both make true claims about reality."[\[21\]](#) This is the model used by advocates of theistic evolution who take as gospel the latest claims of evolutionary science while saying of course God kicked off the whole process including us in His plan for the universe.

Another way to interact is called the direct interaction model. In this model, theories from theology and from science may directly interact with one another on some topic, either positively or negatively. One area might raise rational difficulties for the other. This approach has the most potential for bringing information from different fields together into a fuller picture of truth. Intelligent design is an area where this model is applied as it questions the validity of eliminating intelligence from the options considered in understanding the development of life on earth.

Since scientism swears that science is the only source of truth, even when scientists cannot agree as to what that scientific truth is, they want to discount inputs from any other source no matter how helpful. So the direct interaction model is a difficult road to take. What are the rational criteria for going against the experts? Moreland suggests there are four criteria for Christian theologians to decide to take this road.

1. Make sure there is not a reasonable interpretation of the Bible that resolves the tension.
2. There is a band of academically qualified scholars who are unified in rejecting the view held by a majority of the relevant experts. In this way, we know that there are people who are familiar with the details of the majority view, who

do not believe that it is true.

3. There are good non-rational explanations for why the expert majority holds the problematic view. For historical, sociological, or theological reasons, the majority is not ready to abandon their position rather than because their evidence is overwhelming. “For example, the shift from creationism to Darwinism was primarily, though not exclusively, a shift in philosophy of science.”{22}

Given the large amount of evidential support for a Christian worldview, any view that is counter to central components of a Christian worldview should be rejected precisely for that reason. Any view meeting the first three criteria that also attempts to undermine key parts of a Christian worldview will be overwhelmed by the significant rational support for a Christian worldview.

As followers of the God of real truth, Christians need to realize that the so-called truths being taught to justify science over theology are in fact myths and/or self-refuting statements. Every Christian needs to be able to address these fallacies in today’s popular science culture. Equip your young adults with this understanding and more by attending our summer event called Mind Games Camp. More information can be found at [probe.org/mindgames](http://probe.org/mindgames).

## Notes

1. Michael Keas, *Unbelievable: 7 Myths About the History and Future of Science and Religion*, ISI Books, 2019, 2.
2. Rodney Stark, *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity*, ISI Books, 2014 p. 304, 315.
3. J. P. Moreland, *Scientism and Secularism: Learning to Respond to a Dangerous Ideology*, Crossway, 2018, 26 and 29.
4. Ibid., p. 23.
5. Ibid., p. 55.
6. Stark, p. 76.

7. Keas, p. 4 and Chapter 6.
8. Herman Bondi, *Cosmology*, Cambridge University Press, 1952.
9. Owen Gingerich, *God's Universe*, Belknap Press, 2006.
10. Sagan, 1980 *Cosmos* TV series, episode 3.
11. Kepler, letter to Herwart von Hohenburg, April 9/10, 1599.
12. Moreland, p. 52.
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15. Ibid., p. 138.
16. Ibid., p. 146.
17. Ibid., p. 151.
18. J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford, 1982, p. 115.
19. Moreland, p. 31.
20. Ibid., p.174.
21. Ibid., p. 184.
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## Lifting the Spell

*Steve Cable critically considers atheist Daniel Dennett's book Breaking the Spell to gain a better understanding of the contrast between the "bright" perspective and a biblical perspective.*

### Blinded by the "Bright"

Is your belief in God purely the result of natural evolutionary forces? Has Christianity evolved over the centuries to dupe you into belief for its own survival? This proposition may insult your faith, your intelligence, and your self worth. However, it is the central theme of a recent book by Daniel Dennett entitled *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a*

## Natural Phenomenon. {1}

Philosopher Daniel Dennett is best known for his 1995 book, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, and his July 2003 op-ed entitled "The Bright Stuff." Dennett is a self proclaimed "bright." According to him,



A bright is a person with a naturalist as opposed to a supernaturalist worldview. We brights don't believe in ghosts or elves or the Easter Bunny—or God. . . . Don't confuse the noun with the adjective: "I'm a bright" is not a boast but a proud avowal of an inquisitive worldview. {2}

I am relieved he is not boasting, but my English teacher would say that "a proud avowal" is a good definition of a boast. In any case, Dennett is a proud proponent of a naturalist worldview.

The book's premise is that religion is a powerful, dangerous force in need of rigorous study, using the tools of modern evolutionary science. By understanding the natural forces that imbue religion with so much power, perhaps an enlightened world can neutralize religion while retaining the positive benefits, if any. Our hero, Dennett, has ventured into the sorcerer's den of theologians, ministers, and philosophers to break the spell holding us prisoner. He states, "The spell that I say must be broken is the taboo against a forthright, scientific, no-holds-barred investigation of religion as one natural phenomenon among many." {3}

Dennett lobbies for a truly scientific (meaning atheistic) study of the origins and mechanisms of religion. According to Dennett, we had better understand religion before it destroys us. In today's dangerous world, that may not seem to be such a bad sentiment. Romans chapter 1 tells us that religions not based on God's revealed truth are natural phenomenon because they "worship the creature rather than the creator." {4} However, we should examine the implications of his so-called

scientific study before biting into the apple with him.

Critically considering some themes from Dennett's book may help us gain a better understanding of the contrast between the "bright" perspective and a biblical perspective. By examining an atheist's misconceptions, we may discover areas where we have unintentionally adopted a "bright" perspective rather than a biblical worldview. Thoughtfully considering the relationship between Christianity and other religions can better prepare us to defend the hope that is in us.

## A Bright's View of Religion

What is religion? Dennett begins by defining religion as "social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought."[\[5\]](#) Later he adds that "religion . . . invokes gods who are effective agents in real time and who play a central role in the way participants think about what they ought to do."[\[6\]](#)

Defined in this way, religion is all about groups of people seeking approval of supernatural agents to obtain real time benefits. He also detects an appearance of design, calling religion "a finely tuned amalgam of brilliant plays and strategies capable of holding people enthralled and loyal for their entire lives."[\[7\]](#)

You and I are probably not yearning for a social system or an "amalgam of brilliant strategies." We want an eternal relationship with a real, living God. These definitions are why we sometimes say, "Christianity is not a religion, it is a relationship."

Dennett wants to completely knock the wind out of your sails by stating "that religion is natural as opposed to supernatural, that it is a human phenomenon composed of events, organisms, objects, . . . and the like that all obey

the laws of physics or biology, and hence do not involve miracles.”{8} Elsewhere he says that “I feel a moral imperative to spread . . . evolution, but evolution is not my religion. I don’t have a religion.”{9}

For a bright, science does not follow the evidence wherever it leads, but assumes natural explanations exist for every experience. Thus, he proposes that we should study religion by assuming that its foundation is false. That is like playing tennis with your feet tied together—you can never get to where you need to be to return the ball.

Let’s consider a different definition that better captures the role of religion:

My religion is what I believe about the origin, nature, and future of man and our relationship to the supernatural. My beliefs about eternity form the foundation for how I view my life on earth.

Using this definition, Dennett’s naturalism is his religion. And, your relationship with Jesus Christ resulted from your religion, your belief that Jesus is God.

To be fair, *organized religion* is a social system for practicing and propagating a common set of religious beliefs. Organized religion may result in some of my beliefs being ingrained rather than chosen, but they are still my belief system. Determining which, if any, of these organized religions is teaching the truth about eternity should be of utmost importance to every person.

## The Purpose of Religion

What is the purpose of religion? Throughout his book, Dennett suggests that religions are evolutionary artifacts. Thus, any benefits of religion must be realized here and now to be favored by natural selection. From Dennett’s perspective, what

religious people say they want from religion is “a world at peace, with as little suffering as we can manage, with freedom and justice and well-being and meaning for all.”[{10}](#)

He also surmises that

The three favorite purposes . . . for religion are:

- To comfort us in our suffering and allay our fear of death.
- To explain things we can't otherwise explain.
- To encourage group cooperation in the face of trials and enemies.[{11}](#)

At first blush, these sound like good purposes, things we all desire (except perhaps the last one for those of us who have been burned by group projects). Some churches even promote these goals as the primary message of Christianity. But how can these purposes explain Jesus saying, “In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world”?[{12}](#) Or, Paul saying, “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory”?[{13}](#) Dennett's purposes cannot explain these statements because they are based on a naturalistic worldview where death is the end.

Ultimately, religion is not about this life. It is about the next life. One of my wife's favorite sayings to help in dieting is, “A moment on the lips means a lifetime on the hips.” It is this perspective of lasting consequences for our actions that gives religion such power. Whether it is a Buddhist seeking karma, a Muslim seeking paradise, or a Christian seeking crowns in glory, an eternal perspective is a common trait of the devoted.

The essential contrast between religions is not over which can offer the best temporal benefits or produce moral behavior. It is about which one offers the truth about the nature of God, life, and eternity. Salvation occurs when you believe that Jesus is *the way, the truth and the life*,[{14}](#) and you confess

Him as Lord.{15} In contrast, eternal separation is the result of rejecting the truth. As Paul tells us, “[they] perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.”{16}

The purpose of religion is to propagate the truth about the important questions that determine our eternal destiny. The most important topic to study is not “How can we get the temporal benefits from religion, while really assuming that there is no eternity?” but instead “How can I determine which religion has the truth about eternity?”

## Defending the Bright Religion

In *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett proposes evolutionary science can explain religious beliefs as natural phenomenon. He believes his religion, Darwinism, can make the world better by neutralizing the power of theistic religion. One problem; his religion is not accepted by most Americans. Dennett laments:

[O]nly about a quarter [of America] understands that evolution is about as well established as the fact that water is H<sub>2</sub>O. . . . how, in the face of. . . massive scientific evidence, could so many Americans disbelieve in evolution? It is simple: they have been . . . told that the theory of evolution is false (or at least unproven) by people they trust more than . . . scientists.{17}

Naturally, Dennett argues for his point of view. His argument exhibits three flaws common in many arguments for Darwinism:

1. *Bait and switch definitions.* The Darwinist says, “Fact: Evolution defined as change over time through natural selection occurs. Fact: Darwinism is based on evolution. Conclusion: Darwinism is proven as the explanation for life in this universe.” Claiming that Darwinism is proven because evolution occurs is like the over eager detective stating, “Fact: You were in the city on the day of the murder. Fact:

The murderer had to be in the city on that day. Conclusion: You are proven to be the murderer." The two facts are correct, but the reasoning is flawed.

2. *Attack the skeptics, not the evidence.* Dennett states that "there are no reputable scientists who claim (that Darwinism is unproven). Not a one. There are plenty of frauds and charlatans, though."[\[18\]](#) So, anyone who doubts is a fraud regardless of their credentials. His assertion is laughable when one realizes over seven hundred scientists with impressive credentials have signed a statement expressing their skepticism of Darwinism.[\[19\]](#) When you don't have an answer for the evidence, your only recourse is to attack the witness.

3. *Declare yourself the winner.* Assume Darwinism is true and use that assumption to refute other theories. Dennett states, "Intelligent Design proponents . . . have all been carefully and patiently rebutted by conscientious scientists who have taken the trouble to penetrate their smoke screens of propaganda and expose both their shoddy arguments and their apparently deliberate misrepresentations."[\[20\]](#)

Since defenders of Darwinism attempt to create smoke screens of propaganda, shoddy arguments, and apparently deliberate misrepresentations, it is not surprising that most Americans have not signed up for his religion. However, they control the media and educational systems, so the battle is far from over. Equip yourself to use this conflict to share the truth by checking out Probe's material, [on evolution and Darwinism](#), at [Probe.org](#).

## Toxic Tolerance

In *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett assures us that atheism is the best course, but he may be willing to tolerate other religions if it can be shown they produce some benefits. He lists three

main options among those who call themselves religious but vigorously advocate tolerance:

1. *False humility*. “The time is not ripe for candid declarations of religious superiority, . . . let sleeping dogs lie in hopes that those of other faiths can gently be brought around over the centuries.”[{21}](#)

2. *Religious equality*. “It really doesn’t matter which religion you swear allegiance to, as long as you have some religion.”[{22}](#)

3. *Benign neglect*. “Religion . . . really doesn’t do any good and is simply an empty historical legacy we can afford to maintain until it quietly extinguishes itself (in) the future.”[{23}](#)

How does your faith fit into his list of viable options? If you believe your religion is true, none of these options makes sense. How can you “let sleeping dogs lie” or say “it doesn’t really matter” when you have good news of eternal significance? Moreover, if your religion is “simply an empty historical legacy,” don’t put up with it any longer. Join with Paul in saying, “If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.”[{24}](#)

Dennett’s tolerance options assume that religions claiming revealed truth cannot coexist without leading to conflict and suffering. To the contrary, religious wars are the result of the selfish ambition of men rather than the conflict between competing truth claims. Jesus gave us the model of authentic religious tolerance when he said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would be fighting.”[{25}](#) Christianity is not about physical or political conquest. It is about redeeming people from slavery to freedom, from death to eternal life.

Truth is not threatened when competing worldviews are able to enthusiastically promote their beliefs. When each person is

free to seek the truth and make truth choices without fear of reprisals or coercion, the gospel can flourish. Eternity, not religious wars or religious leaders, will eventually be the judge of what is truth. In the end, truth is not determined by the majority, but by reality.

One thing we know to be true is that “God does not desire any to perish.”[\[26\]](#) Consequently, we should not accept any version of tolerance which mutes proclaiming the good news.

Dennett wants to “break the spell” against studying religion as a natural phenomenon. Instead, let’s join together in lifting the spell of naturalism by proclaiming the truth that Jesus Christ is indeed our Creator and Lord.

## Notes

1. Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Viking Press, 2006.
2. Daniel Dennett, “The Bright Stuff,” *The New York Times*, July, 2003.
3. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 17.
4. Romans 1:25. (All Scripture references are taken from the New American Standard Bible, update version.)
5. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 9.
6. Ibid., 11.
7. Ibid., 154.
8. Ibid., 25.
9. Ibid., 268.
10. Ibid., 17.
11. Ibid., 103.
12. John 16:33.
13. 2 Cor. 4:17.
14. John 14:6.
15. Romans 10:9-10.
16. 2 Thess 2:10-12.
17. Ibid., 59.
18. Ibid., 61.

19. [www.dissentfromdarwin.org](http://www.dissentfromdarwin.org).
20. Ibid., 61.
21. Ibid., 290.
22. Ibid., 290.
23. Ibid., 290.
24. 1 Corinthians 15:19.
25. John 18:36.
26. 1 Timothy 2:3.

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# Converting Christians

*February 27, 2014*

Jim Denison recently found a [“15-step strategy for converting Christians to atheism”](#) and [wrote about it](#) in the Denison Forum on Truth and Culture. Although the article is supposed to help atheists convert Christians, I think that Christians can learn some valuable lessons about how to approach and dialogue with non-Christians.

The article tells atheists to think about building relationships before trying to convert them to atheism. That is certainly good advice for Christians. Jim Denison reminds us that we should earn the right to share the love of Jesus.

The article also encourages atheists to learn the common arguments leveled by theists and the best rebuttals. Again, Christians should always be ready to make a defense (1 Peter 3:15) for the hope that is in us. I have noticed that in many of the debates between Christians and atheists that it is the atheist argument that is often inadequate.

The article also encourages atheists to understand their holy

book cover to cover. This would be good advice for Christians interacting with people of other religions or people who say they have no religion. What is their standard of authority? Do they believe in truth? Do they believe in revelation?

Atheists are also encouraged to study basic physics and biology because “believers may form arguments using a flawed interpretation of physics and biology.” Actually, Christians can benefit from the great work done by leading scientists, theologians, and apologists who use a proper understanding of science to show the reasonableness of biblical faith.

The article also encourages atheists to get Christians “in the habit of questioning their own faith.” Once again, that is a great suggestion for Christians. Jesus often used questions to teach biblical truths. I have found that getting people to question what they believe and why they believe it to be a very effective witnessing tool.

The article is a reminder that Christians aren’t the only ones in the world working to convert others. Atheists and apologists for other religions are also working to convert the hearts and minds of Christians. We should be prepared, but also learn some lessons from others about how to win people to Jesus Christ.

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## On the Death of a God-Hater

*Dec. 20, 2011*

Renowned evangelist for atheism Christopher Hitchens died last week at the end of his battle against cancer. Author of *God Is Not Great*, he knew the end was coming and also knew that many people would speculate about his destiny. As far as we know,

he remained persistent in his unbelief and hostility about God, religion, and any concept of the afterlife.

I am one of the many Christians who prayed for him as death approached, knowing full well it would take a miracle for Mr. Hitchens to do a "180" and throw himself on the mercy of a God he has insisted is not there. But then again, no less of a miracle than anyone who was born dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1), since dead people don't choose life apart from a miracle from God.

As I think about his death, there are two things I know for sure.

First, God is just.

He will not force Himself on someone who refuses Him. He will honor our choices, even if those choices lead to eternal separation from Him. When Jesus was face to face with people who stubbornly said "NO!" to Him, He spoke the blunt truth to them: "Since you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life (Jn. 5 :40), you will die in your sins" (Jn. 8:24). Apart from God Himself, there is no life, there is no truth, there is no light (see John 1). So if people persist in their rebellion against Him, there is no way for them to have life, truth, light. . . or peace. A terrible, terrible predicament for a person that was counting on annihilation and finds himself an eternal soul instead, separated forever from the source of all that makes eternity good, which is God Himself.

Second, God is good. Which also entails Him being full of grace and mercy. Which is why He "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). And which also explains why He proclaims, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek. 33:11).

Even up to the last moment.

If anyone, Christopher Hitchens included, turns to Jesus in faith, even the tiniest amount of faith, like that of a mustard seed, He will save them.

Dr. Russell Moore—teaching pastor, seminary professor, blogger and exceptionally kind man who knows the love of his Father—wrote about Hitchens' death last week in a post called ["Christopher Hitchens Might Be in Heaven."](#) He pointed out that no one can know that Hitchens woke up in hell; God's lovingkindness, expressed through the power of the Gospel, extended salvation up to the man's last breath.

He writes:

*"But I'm not sure Christopher Hitchens is in hell right now. It's not because I believe there's a 'second chance' after death for salvation (I don't). It's not because I don't believe in hell or in God's judgment (I do). It's because of a sermon I heard years ago that haunts me to this day, reminding me of the sometimes surprising persistence of the gospel.*

*"Fifteen or so years ago, I heard an old Welsh pastor preach on Jesus' encounter with the thieves on the cross. The preacher paused to speculate about whether the penitent thief might have had any God-fearing friends or family members. If so, he said, they probably would never have known about the terrorist's final act, his appeal to Jesus, 'Remember me when you come into your kingdom' (Lk. 23:42). They never would have heard Jesus pronounce, 'Today you will be with me in Paradise' (Lk. 23:43).*

*"These believing family members and friends would have assumed, all their lives, that this robber was in hell, especially dying as he did under the visible judgment of God (Deut. 21:22-23). They would have been shocked to meet this man in the kingdom of God. 'We thought you were in hell,' they might have said, as they danced around him in the*

*heavenly places.”*

I know that God is just. I know that God is good. I don't know where Christopher Hitchens is right now; none of us do, including his unbelieving brethren insisting he doesn't exist at all, anywhere, in any plane. But as Russell Moore concludes,

*“Hell is real and judgment is certain. The gospel comes with a warning that it will one day be too late. But, as long as there is breath, it is not yet too late. Perhaps Christopher Hitchens, like so many before him, persisted in his rebellion to the horror of the very end. But maybe not. Maybe he stopped his polemics and cried out, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’*

*“I don't know. But I do know that the gospel offers forgiveness and mercy right to the edge of death's door. And I know that the kingdom of God is made up of ex-thieves, and ex-murderers, and ex-atheists like us.”*

Like me. God is good. And He IS great.

This blog post originally appeared at  
[blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue\\_bohlin/on\\_the\\_death\\_of\\_a\\_god-hater](https://blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/on_the_death_of_a_god-hater)

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## Glee-wind: Grilled Cheesus

Oct. 16, 2010

*Episode background: Major character Finn Hudson accidentally burns his grilled cheese sandwich, imprinting one side of it with the face of Jesus Christ. Finn takes this as a sign to*

*take his nominal Christianity more seriously, irony intended by the writers it seems as Finn begins to pray to his sandwich which he now refers to as Grilled Cheesus. Every trivial and selfish thing Finn asks of Grilled Cheesus comes to pass; meanwhile, Finn's Glee Club friend Kurt might be losing his father to heart disease – it doesn't dawn on Finn to pray for Kurt or his father; instead he prays that he might be quarterback again.*

*Most of the Glee kids turn to their faith in trying to deal with the news of Kurt's father and more poignantly, the immense pain of their friend. Kurt refuses to be comforted with his friends' prayers or anything which derives from religious faith, which he considers ridiculous, irrelevant, and ignorant.*

So... Grilled Cheesus the sacred sandwich very well may be the most sacrilegious (and hilarious) thing since [Monty Python](#). But the episode as a whole really brought some very important spiritual issues to the table. Issues like: It's okay to publicly deny faith but not proclaim it. Conundrums like: You can't prove God doesn't exist and you can't prove he does. Problems like Hell; questions like: Why does it sometimes seem God answers prayers about winning football games but not about real human pain and suffering. It also highlights the fact that, for many, intellectual objections toward, and knee-jerk reactions against, religion are often on some level a shield protecting deeply painful, deeply real experiences: Sue's inability to pray hard enough to help her "handicapable" sister, Kurt's being rejected and marginalized and bullied by those who should love him most. Sure, both Sue and Kurt misunderstand certain aspects of God's nature and the way he works in the world. But so what? That can't really be addressed until we walk with them in their pain, like Mercedes does. Mercedes didn't give up on loving Kurt even after he rejected her and ridiculed her religion out of the abyss of his pain. She wasn't pushy. She just loved him. She "had [him]

at 'fabulous hat'."

This episode seems to reject Sue's wrong, but widely held, understanding of separation of Church and State. The episode seems to reject Kurt's aggressive atheism (so at least it's equal opportunity religious tolerance), growing him from this position to one that's more open – to others' spirituality and how that affects the way they inevitably relate to him if nothing else. "Grilled Cheesus" rejects the [moralistic therapeutic deism](#) rampant among Christian teens (and adults); and through Emma's talk with Finn it also rejects over-spiritualizing everything that happens. The episode affirms the reality of religious doubt and uncertainty and the often person-relative struggles of everyone's own spiritual journeying, which we should affirm. It affirms religious pluralism, which we reject. (See Bethany Keeley-Jonker's post at ThinkingChristian.com which makes [this](#) important point about Mercedes's pluralism.)

There's much, much more to dig out and explore in this episode, which isn't uncommon for *Glee*. And there are multiple possible interpretations among all that lies beneath, and that isn't uncommon for *Glee* either; things are often complicated and ambiguous. [You can't judge Glee by a single episode](#), or by what's on the surface. It's a project where characters and ideas are allowed to grow and develop in [real-life messiness](#).

This blog post originally appeared at  
[reneamac.com/2010/10/16/glee-wind-grilled-cheesus/](http://reneamac.com/2010/10/16/glee-wind-grilled-cheesus/)

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## Unrealistic Expectations

Lots of things can keep us stuck in places that are hard to get out of.

Like harboring unrealistic expectations.

When my first son was four years old, I found myself angry and frustrated with him a lot. One day I “happened” to see a book on the inspirational display at the grocery store, *Overcoming Hurts and Anger*. I don’t remember anything else from that book except the wise counsel to adjust your unrealistic expectations. I realized that although my son was four, and a smart, prodigious four at that, it was still not fair to expect him to be and do things appropriate for a twelve-year old. It was amazing how much happier I was when I decided to expect four-year-old things of him!

Many people have unrealistic expectations of what growth and change should look like. The downside of our microwave culture is that we expect things to be fixed instantly. Last week a friend who is just starting out a long journey of overcoming a lot of hurts from her past asked what she could do to speed up the process. I suggested she work to build daily the always-popular habit of saying no to her flesh and yes to self-control, loving others, and doing the opposite of what comes naturally. Fifteen minutes later she texted me with a question: “I hate people today. Can I stay home from church?”

So much for the fast track!

One of the most dangerous places for our unrealistic expectations, though, is what we think God should do. Some of the most bitter and angry people I know, or who have loud voices in the culture (think of the [“new atheists”](#) like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris) are those who feel betrayed by God, so they decide He isn’t there.

That sense of betrayal and disappointment comes from having expectations of God according to how we *think* He should act:

- Protect the innocent from pain and suffering
- Protect the people who maybe-aren’t-so-innocent-but-not-as-bad-as-axe-murderers from pain and suffering

- Show the same grace to all of us by treating us all the same
- Give us an easy life
- If I do all the right things to be “a good person,” God should do His part to make life work the way I want it to

When we pray fervently for what we want and He doesn't answer the way we want, many of us get angry with Him. That's a part of [my story](#). It's easy to decide God doesn't care, or He is evil, or He isn't there at all.

Many times, we pray in faith, believing God will give us what we ask for, but we ask for things He never promised in the first place. Or even worse, we “claim” them on the basis of a scriptural promise wrenched out of context, such as “all things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (Matthew 21:22). Jesus never promised that if we believe *in our prayers*, we would receive what we ask for. *Believing* in the Bible is all about trusting in and surrendering to the goodness and character of GOD, not our prayer list. We will always receive an answer to our prayers because God is good. Sometimes the answer is “No, beloved,” because we ask amiss. Psalm 84:11 promised, “No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly.” If God says “no,” it's because it's not a good thing *for us*. [His “no” is a “yes” to something else](#). But because we have such a limited perspective, it is essential that we trust in the unlimited perspective of the God who sees everything.

When we feel disappointed in God, when we think, “God didn't come through for me,” that's the time to take a step back and ask, “What kind of unrealistic expectations did I have in the first place?” That may be a great question to talk through with a mature trusted friend who can see things more clearly. Then we can place the unrealistic part of our expectations into God's hands as an act of worship and trust . . . and watch our anger and frustration subside.

I'll share some thoughts about why those expectations of God

are unrealistic in [my next blog post](#).

This blog post originally appeared at  
[blogs.bible.org/engage/sue\\_bohlin/unrealistic\\_expectations](https://blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/unrealistic_expectations)  
on Oct. 11, 2010.

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## **“Is Dark Matter Another Attack on God?”**

**I was reading an article about experiments with dark matter in a very deep underground lab in South Dakota. What is dark matter and is this another secular atheist way to circumvent God?**

The simple answer is that dark matter is material in space that cannot be directly detected with telescopes because it does not emit any type of radiation. Ordinary dark matter is made up of cold gas, stars with so little mass that they never ignite nuclear fusion, small rocks, etc. Even though astronomers cannot directly see dark matter, they can detect its presence through its effects, e.g. impact on movement of galaxies. (See the excerpt from an article by Dr. David Rogstad below for more information on this.) In attempting to measure the amount of dark matter required to create the observed effects, astronomers have developed a theory that there are two types of dark matter: ordinary dark matter and exotic dark matter. Exotic dark matter only weakly interacts with light and ordinary matter, so it is different than the material we normally deal with on earth. I would guess the experiments you were reading about were dealing with the study of exotic dark matter.

Based on this definition, the existence of dark matter does not directly bear on the existence of God. I have not seen any arguments from atheists that point to dark matter as supporting evidence for their claims. Given that dark matter in space can only be detected through very sophisticated, expensive methods, I would not expect the Bible to talk about it directly, and it does not. Of course, the Bible makes it clear that "For by Him [Jesus Christ] all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible" (Col. 1:16). No matter how you define dark matter, it is covered by this verse.

Going a little deeper, it is true that some (but not all) of the ways used to estimate the amount of dark matter in the universe assume that the universe has been expanding for billions of years. Some Christian scientists, such as those at Reasons to Believe, who promote a Biblical creation model based on a 13.7 billion-year-old universe, point out that the existence of dark matter in just the right quantities is further evidence that our earth is fine tuned for life to such a degree that it could only be through the work of a transcendent, all powerful, intelligent creator. RTB has a number of articles on dark matter which you can see at [www.reasons.org/search/node/?keys=%22dark+Matter%22](http://www.reasons.org/search/node/?keys=%22dark+Matter%22).

If you are interested in understanding the different Christian perspectives on the origins of the universe, check out our Faith and Science section at [www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org); in particular you may be interested in "Christian Views of Science and Earth History" at [www.probe.org/christian-views-of-science-and-earth-history](http://www.probe.org/christian-views-of-science-and-earth-history)

I hope this answer is helpful for you.

God bless,  
Steve Cable

Excerpt from Dr. David Rogstad on history of dark matter:

“Based on his observation that clusters of galaxies do not have enough matter to remain gravitationally bound, Fritz Zwicky proposed (in 1933) the existence of dark matter to provide the needed gravity. Since then, there has been a growing body of supporting evidence, including flat rotation curves in large spiral galaxies, larger-than-expected velocity dispersion in elliptical galaxies, and certain measured characteristics of the cosmic microwave background, all of which require the presence of dark matter for their explanation.” [[www.reasons.org/filling-gap](http://www.reasons.org/filling-gap)]

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