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

T.S. Weaver looks at anti-God arguments from three prominent philosophers, showing why belief is 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/) 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/, accessed March 31, 2022.
8. Thomas Nagel, "The Fear of Religion," The New Republic (October 23, 2006).

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Evidence for God's Existence

Romans chapter 1 says that God has planted evidence of Himself throughout His creation so we are without excuse. Sue Bohlin looks at different types of evidence indicating that God really does exist.

A "Just Right" Universe

There's so much about the universe, and our world in particular, that we take for granted because it works so well. But Christian astronomer Dr. Hugh Ross has cited twenty-six different characteristics about the universe that enable it to sustain life. And there are thirty-three characteristics about our galaxy, our solar system, and the planet Earth that are finely-tuned to allow life to exist.{1} I do well to make the meat, potatoes, vegetables, and bread all come out at the same time for dinner; we're talking about fifty-nine different aspects all being kept in perfect balance so the universe hangs together and we can live in it!

Our Earth, for instance, is perfectly designed for life. It's the "just right" size for the atmosphere we need. Its size and corresponding gravity hold a thin, but not too thin, layer of gases to protect us and allow us to breathe. When astronaut John Glenn returned to space, one of the things that struck him was how thin and fragile our atmosphere is (only 50 miles above the Earth). If our planet were smaller it couldn't support an atmosphere, like on Mercury. If it were larger, like Jupiter, the atmosphere would contain free hydrogen, which is poison for us.{2} Earth is the only planet we know of that contains an atmosphere that can support human, animal, and plant life.

The Earth is also placed at a "just right" distance from the sun and the other planets in our solar system. If we were closer to the sun, we'd burn up. If we were farther away, we'd

freeze. Because Earth's orbit is nearly circular, this slightly elliptical shape means that we enjoy a quite narrow range of temperatures, which is important to life. The speed of Earth's rotation on its axis, completing one turn every 24 hours, means that the sun warms the planet evenly. Compare our world to the moon, where there are incredible temperature variations because it lacks sufficient atmosphere or water to retain or deflect the sun's energy.

Speaking of the moon, its important that there is only one moon, not two or three or none, and it's the "just right" size and distance from us. The moon's gravity impacts the movement of ocean currents, keeping the water from becoming stagnant.{3}

Water itself is an important part of a "just right" world. Plants, animals and human beings are mostly made of water, and we need it to live. One of the things that makes Earth unique is the abundance of water in a liquid state.

Water has surface tension. This means that water can move upward, against gravity, to bring liquid nutrients to the tops of the tallest plants.

Everything else in the world freezes from the bottom up, but water freezes from the top down. Everything else contracts when it freezes, but water expands. This means that in winter, ponds and rivers and lakes can freeze at the surface, but allow fish and other marine creatures to live down below.

The fact that we live on a "just right" planet in a "just right" universe is evidence that it all was created by a loving God.

The Nagging Itch of "Ought"

As a mother, I was convinced of the existence of a moral God when my children, without being taught, would complain that something wasn't "fair." Fair? Who taught them about fair? Why

is it that no one ever has to teach children about fairness, but all parents hear the universal wail of “That’s not fa-a-a-a-a-air!” The concept of fairness is about an internal awareness that there’s a certain way that things ought to be. It’s not limited to three-year-olds who are unhappy that their older siblings get to stay up later. We see the same thing on “Save the Whales” bumper stickers. Why should we save the whales? Because we ought to take care of the world. Why should we take care of the world? Because we just should, that’s why. It’s the right thing to do. There’s that sense of “ought” again.

Certain values can be found in all human cultures, a belief that we act certain ways because they’re the right thing to do. Murdering one’s own people is wrong, for example. Lying and cheating is wrong. So is stealing. Where did this universal sense of right and wrong come from? If we just evolved from the apes, and there is nothing except space, time, and matter, then from where did this moral sense of right and wrong arise?

A moral sense of right and wrong isn’t connected to our muscles or bones or blood. Some scientists argue that it comes from our genes – that belief in morality selects us for survival and reproduction. But if pressed, those same scientists would assure you that ultimate right and wrong don’t exist in a measurable way, and it’s only the illusion of morality that helps us survive. But if one researcher stole another’s data and published results under his own name, all the theories about morality as illusion would go right out the window. I don’t know of any scientist who wouldn’t cry, “That’s not fair!” Living in the real world is a true antidote for sophisticated arguments against right and wrong.

Apologist Greg Koukl points out that guilt is another indicator of ultimate right and wrong. “It’s tied into our understanding of things that are right and things that are wrong. We feel guilty when we think we’ve violated a moral

rule, an "ought." And that feeling hurts. It doesn't hurt our body; it hurts our souls. An ethical violation is not a physical thing, like a punch in the nose, producing physical pain. It's a soulish injury producing a soulish pain. That's why I call it ethical pain. That's what guilt is – ethical pain."{4}

The reason all human beings start out with an awareness of right and wrong, the reason we all yearn for justice and fairness, is that we are made in the image of God, who is just and right. The reason we feel violated when someone does us wrong is that a moral law has been broken – and you can't have a moral law without a moral law giver. Every time we feel that old feeling of, "It's not fa-a-a-a-a-air!" rising up within us, it's a signpost pointing us to the existence of God. He has left signposts pointing to Himself all over creation. That's why we are without excuse.

Evidence of Design Implies a Designer



If you've ever visited or seen pictures of Mount Rushmore (South Dakota USA), you cannot help but look at the gigantic sculpture of four presidents' faces and wonder at the skill of the sculptor. You know, without having to be told, that the natural forces of wind and rain did not erode the rock into those shapes. It took the skilled hands of an artist.

William Paley made a compelling argument years ago that the intricacies of a watch are so clearly engineered that it cannot be the product of nature: a watch demands a watchmaker. In the same way, the more we discover about our world and ourselves, the more we see that like an expertly-fashioned watch, our world and we ourselves have been finely crafted with intentional design. And design implies a designer.

Since we live in our bodies and take so much of our abilities for granted, it's understandable that we might miss the evidence of design within ourselves – much like a fish might be oblivious to what it means to be wet. Dr. Phillip Bishop at the University of Alabama, challenges us to consider what would happen if we commissioned a team of mechanical engineers to develop a robot that could lift 500 pounds. And let's say we also commissioned them to design a robot that could play Chopin. They could probably do that. But what if we asked them to come up with a robot that could do both, and limit the robot's weight to 250 pounds, and require that it be able to do a variety of similar tasks? They'd laugh in our faces, no matter how much time or money we gave them to do it. But you know, all we'd be asking them to do is to come up with a very crude replication of former football player Mike Reid.{5}

Probably the greatest evidence of design in creation is DNA, the material of which our genes are made, as well as the genetic material for every living thing on the planet. One of the startling discoveries about DNA is that it is a highly complex informational code, so complex that scientists struggle hard to decipher even the tiniest portions of the various genes in every organism. DNA conveys intelligent information; in fact, molecular biologists use language terms – code, translation, transcription – to describe what it does and how it acts. Communication engineers and information scientists tell us that you can't have a code without a code-maker, so it would seem that DNA is probably the strongest indicator in our world that there is an intelligent Designer behind its existence.

Dr. Richard Dawkins, a professor of biology who writes books and articles praising evolution, said in his book *The Blind Watchmaker,* "Biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose."{6} Even those who desperately fear the implications of design keep running into it.

Those who deny the evidence of a designer are a lot like the foolish fisherman. If he fails to catch a fish, he says, “Aha! This proves there are no fish!” He doesn’t want to consider the possibility that it might be he is an inept fisherman. Since science cannot measure the intangible or the supernatural, there are many people who say, “Aha! There is no Creator.”{7} Foolish fishermen deny the evidence that God exists and has left His fingerprints all over creation.

The Reliability of the Bible

Every religion has its own holy book, but the Bible is different from all the others. It claims to be the very Word of God, not dropped out of the sky but God-breathed, infused with God’s power as He communicated His thoughts and intent through human writers.

The Bible was written over a period of 1500 years, by about forty different writers, on three different continents. They addressed a wide variety of subjects, and yet the individual books of the Bible show a remarkable consistency within themselves. There is a great deal of diversity within the Bible, at the same time displaying an amazing unity. It presents an internally consistent message with one great theme: God’s love for man and the great lengths to which He went to demonstrate that love.

If you pick up any city newspaper, you won’t find the kind of agreement and harmony in it that is the hallmark of the biblical books. A collection of documents that spans so much time and distance could not be marked by this unity unless it was superintended by one Author who was behind it all. The unity of the Bible is evidence of God’s existence.

One other aspect of the Bible is probably the greatest evidence that God exists and that He has spoken to us in His holy book: fulfilled prophecy. The Bible contains hundreds of details of history which were written in advance before any of

them came to pass. Only a sovereign God, who knows the future and can make it happen, can write prophecy that is accurately and always – eventually – fulfilled.

For example, God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel against the bustling seaport and trade center of Tyre. In Ezekiel 26:3-6, He said He would bring nations against her: “They shall destroy the walls of Tyre and break down her towers; and I will scrape her soil from her, and make her a bare rock.” Ezekiel 26-28 has many details of this prophecy against Tyre, which would be like Billy Graham announcing that God was going to wipe New York off the map.

Tyre consisted of two parts, a mainland city and an island a half- mile offshore. The first attack came from the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, who laid siege to Tyre for thirteen years. Finally, his battering rams broke through the walls, and he tore down the city’s towers. But the island part of the city wasn’t yet destroyed, because this prophecy was fulfilled in stages. For 250 years it flourished, until Alexander the Great set his sights on Tyre. Even without a navy, he was able to conquer this island city in what some consider his greatest military exploit. He turned the ruined walls and towers of Old Tyre into rubble, which he used to build a causeway from the mainland to the island. When he ran out of material, he scraped the soil from the land to finish the land- bridge, leaving only barren rocks where the old city used to be. He fulfilled the prophecy, “They will break down your walls and destroy your pleasant houses; your stones and timber and soil they will cast into the midst of the waters”(Ez. 26:12).

Fulfilled prophecy is just one example of how God shows He is there and He is not silent. How else do we explain the existence of history written in advance?

Jesus: The Ultimate Evidence

The most astounding thing God has ever done to show His

existence to us is when He passed through the veil between heaven and earth and came to live among us as a man.

Jesus Christ was far more than just a great moral teacher. He said things that would be outrageous if they weren't true, but He backed them up with even more outrageous signs to prove they were. Jesus claimed not to speak for God as a prophet, but to be God in human flesh. He said, "If you've seen Me, you've seen the Father" (John 14:9), and, "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30). When asked if He was the Messiah, the promised Savior, He said yes.{8} He told his contemporaries, "Before Abraham was, I am"(John 8:58). The fact that His unbelieving listeners decided then to kill Him shows that they realized He was claiming to be Yahweh, God Almighty.

When Jesus told His followers that He was the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-18), they would immediately be reminded of a passage in the book of Ezekiel where Yahweh God pronounced Himself shepherd over Israel (Ez. 34:1-16). Jesus equated Himself with God.

But words are cheap, so Jesus backed up His words with miracles and signs to validate His truth-claims. He healed all sorts of diseases in people: the blind, the deaf, the crippled, lepers, epileptics, and even a woman with a twelve-year hemorrhage. He took authority over the demons that terrorized and possessed people. He even raised the dead.

Jesus showed His authority over nature, as well. He calmed a terrible storm with just a word. He created food out of thin air, with bread and fish left over! He turned water into wine. He walked on water.

He showed us what God the Father is like; Jesus was God with skin on. He was loving and sensitive, at the same time strong and determined. Children and troubled people were drawn to Him like a magnet, but the arrogant and self-sufficient were threatened by Him. He drenched people with grace and mercy

while never compromising His holiness and righteousness.

And after living a perfect life, He showed His love to us by dying in our place on a Roman cross, promising to come back to life. Who else but God Himself could make a promise like thatand then fulfill it? The literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is the final, greatest proof that there is a God, that Jesus is God Himself, and that God has entered our world and showed us the way to heaven so we can be with Him forever. He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by Me" (John 14:6).

God exists, and He has spoken. He made a "just right" universe that is stamped with clues of its Maker. He placed eternity in our hearts, as Ecclesiastes tells us, and all people have a strong moral streak because we are made in the image of a moral God. The evidence of design in our bodies, our world and the universe is a signpost pointing to a loving, intelligent Designer behind it all. The unity of the Bible and the hundreds of fulfilled prophecies in it show the mind of God behind its creation. And we've looked at the way Jesus punched through the space-time continuum to show us what God looks like, and opened the doorway to heaven. Jesus is the clearest evidence of all that God does exist.

Notes

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4. Gregory Koukl, "Guilt and God," Stand to Reason Commentary. http://www.str.org/free/commentaries/theology/gultngod.htm.
5. Phillip Bishop, "Evidence of God in Human Physiology." http://www.leaderu.com/science/bishop.html
6. Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986), 1.

7. Bishop.
8. Mark 14:61-62; Matthew 26: 63-65; Luke 22:67-70

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A Conversation with an Atheist

Rick Wade distills an in-depth e-mail dialog with an atheist in which he addresses her doubts and arguments concerning the existence of God.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

About Our Dialogue

The Conversation Begins

In the fall of 1999 I became involved in an e-mail conversation with an atheist who wrote in response to a program I’d written titled *The Relevance of Christianity*. In this program [Ed. note: The transcripts for our radio programs become the online articles such as the one you are reading.] I contrast Christianity and naturalism on the matters of meaning, morality, and hope.{1} She wrote to say that she was able to find these things in her own philosophy of life without God. If such things can be had without God, why bother bringing Him in, especially given all the trouble religion causes?

Stephanie has an undergraduate degree in philosophy, and is pursuing her doctorate in physics.{2} Our conversation has been quite cordial, and in our over two-month long conversation I've grown to respect her. She isn't just out to pick a fight. I try to keep in mind that, if her ideas seem grating on me, mine are just as grating on her.

Stephanie seems genuinely baffled by theistic belief. If God is there, He is outside the bounds of what we can know. While someone like Kierkegaard saw good reason to take a "leap of faith" into that which can't be proved, she sees no reason to do that. "I think that if I had faith it would be like his," she says, "but the leap seems, at this point, both futile and risky."

Stephanie has three general objections to belief in God. First, she believes that the evidence is insufficient. The evidence of nature is all she has, and God is said to have attributes beyond the natural. There's no way to know about such things. Second, she believes that theistic belief adds nothing of importance to our lives or to what we can know through science. I asked her, "What is it about Christianity that turns you off to it?" And she replied, "I imagine believing, and I am no more fulfilled and no less worried than I am when I am not believing. God just does not seem to be a useful, beneficial, or tenable idea." Third, she believes that religion is morally bad for people. It grounds morality in fear, she believes, and it produces a dogmatism in adherents that prompts such behavior as killing abortion providers.

Stephanie began our correspondence not to be given proofs for the existence of God, but for me "to explain more personally His relevance." What is called for, then, is defense and explication rather than persuasion.

Basic Elements of Stephanie's Atheism

There are three main elements underlying Stephanie's atheism.

The first is *reason,* which she believes is sufficient for understanding our world, for morality, and for understanding and cultivating human qualities such as "aesthetic appreciation, compassion, and love." It is, of course, the final authority on religion as well. Reason does not admit faith. Insofar as one has admitted faith into the equation, one has moved toward irrationalism. As George Smith wrote, "I will not accept the existence of God, or any doctrine, on faith because I reject faith as a valid cognitive procedure. . . . If theistic doctrines must be accepted on faith, theism is necessarily excluded."{3}

The second element, *nature*, is reason's best source for information. Stephanie says, "I have no access to anything outside of the natural universe and my own mind."

The package is complete with Stephanie's commitment to *science,* which is the tool reason uses to understand nature. It alone is capable of giving us "objective, investigable knowledge," she says. In fact, I think it is fair to label Stephanie's approach to knowledge "scientistic." There seems to be no area of life which need not be submitted to science to be considered rational, and for which scientific investigation isn't sufficient.

The reason/nature/science triumvirate provides the structure for acquiring knowledge. To go beyond it is to move into irrationalism, Stephanie believes. There's certainly no reason to add God. She says, "As I understand it, the idea of God as a creator or guarantor adds nothing but unjustified mysticism to my knowledge."{4}

Theists have no problem with using reason to understand our world, or with the study of nature, or with using the tools of science. The problem comes when Stephanie concludes that nothing can be known beyond nature analyzed scientifically. She believes that nature is all that is there or at least all that is knowable. Stephanie says she doesn't consciously start

with naturalism; she has no desire to "champion naturalism as a dogma," she says. However, since science "only permits investigation of natural, repeatable phenomena," and she is satisfied with that, her view is restricted to the scope of nature. She even goes so far as to say, "I equate rationality and naturalism."

It seems, then, that the deck is stacked from the beginning. Stephanie's emphasis on science doesn't necessarily prevent her from finding God, but her naturalism does.

Insufficient Evidences

The Evidentialist Objection

Let's look at Stephanie's three basic objections to theistic belief, beginning with the charge that there is insufficient evidence to believe. Rather than offer a defense for theistic belief, let's look at the objection itself.

Stephanie's argument is called the "evidentialist objection."

She quotes W. K. Clifford, a 19th century scholar who wrote, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."{5} Stephanie's objection is that there isn't enough evidence to believe in God. The first question, of course, is what constitutes good evidence. Another question is whether we should accept Clifford's maxim in the first place.

Some atheists believe they don't bear the same burden of adducing evidences for their beliefs as theists do. They say atheism is the "default" position. To believe in God is to *add* a belief; to *not* add that belief is to remain in atheism or perhaps agnosticism.{6} But atheism isn't a "zero belief" system. Western atheism is typically naturalistic. Atheists hold definite views about the nature of the universe; there's no reason to think that atheism is where we all automatically begin in our thinking, such that to move to theism is to add a

belief while to *not* believe in God is to remain in atheism. It's hard not to agree with Alvin Plantinga that the presumption of atheism "looks like a piece of merely arbitrary intellectual imperialism."{7} If theists have to give evidences, so do atheists.

Stephanie, however, doesn't defend her atheism or naturalism this way. She believes that reason using the tools of science is the only reliable means of attaining knowledge. The result of her observations, she says, is naturalism. There simply aren't sufficient evidences for believing in God, at least the kinds of evidences that are trustworthy. Which kind are trustworthy? Stephanie wants evidences in nature, because in nature one finds "objective, investigable knowledge." However, she doesn't believe evidences for God can be found there. God must be outside of nature if He exists. She said, "You may rightly ask what kind of naturalistic evidence I would ever accept for God, and I would have to answer, none.' Because once a naturalistic investigation turns to God with its hands up, it ceases to be naturalistic, and so it ceases to refer to anything that I can hope to investigate. I lack a sense for God and I have no access to anything outside of the natural universe and my own mind." She said in a later letter that the cause of the universe may have had an agent. But when we begin adding other attributes to this agent, attributes which can't be studied scientifically, we get into trouble. "As soon as you talk about God as having infinite attributes, those attributes actually begin to lose meaning," she says. "My view," she says, "is that it's just as well to call the unknown cause what it is—an unknown cause—until the means to investigate it are developed." And by this she means natural means. *A Naturalistic Twist*

The first problem here is obvious: Stephanie has biased the argument in her favor by her restrictions on knowledge to the realm of nature. She reduces our resources for knowledge to the scientifically verifiable. Such reductionism is arbitrary.

By reducing all knowledge to that which can be discovered scientifically, Stephanie has cut out significant portions of our knowledge. Philosopher Huston Smith said this: “It is as if the scientist were inside a large plastic balloon; he can shine his torch anywhere on the balloon’s interior but cannot climb outside the balloon to view it as a whole, see where it is situated, or determine why it was fabricated.”{8} Science can’t tell us what the final cause (or purpose or goal) of a thing is; in fact it can’t tell whether there *are* ultimate purposes. It cannot determine ultimate or existential meaning. While it can describe the artist’s paintbrush and pigments and canvas, it can’t measure beauty. *Clifford’s Folly*

Beyond this difficulty is the fact that Clifford’s maxim *itself* has problems.

First, the evidentialist approach is unreasonably restrictive. If we have to be able construct an argument for everything we believe¾and upon which we act—we will believe little and act little.

Second, this approach might have validity in science, but it leaves out other significant kinds of beliefs. Kelly Clark lists perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, belief in other minds, and truths of logic as other kinds of “properly basic” beliefs that we hold without inferring them from other beliefs.{9} Beliefs involved in personal relationships are another example. Relationships often require a willingness to believe in a friend apart from sufficient evidences. In fact, the willingness to do so can have a positive effect on developing a good relationship. Beliefs *about* persons are still another example. I accept without proof that my wife is a person, that she isn’t an automaton, that she has intrinsic value, etc. These kinds of beliefs don’t require amassing evidences to formulate an inductive or deductive proof. Clifford’s maxim works well in scientific study, but not for beliefs about persons.

More to the point, religious beliefs don't fit so neatly within evidentialist restrictions. They are more like relational beliefs since, in confronting a Supreme Being, one is not confronting a hypothesis but a Person.

Fourth, Stephanie's use of Clifford's evidentialism is biased in her favor because, as we discussed above, her satisfaction with the deliverances of scientific investigation means she will only accept evidences in the natural order. *Do We Have Good Reasons for Believing?*

Some Christian scholars are saying that we don't *have* to have evidences for belief, meaning that we don't have to be able to put together an argument whereby God's existence is inferred from other beliefs. Our direct experience of God is sufficient for rational belief (using "experience" in a broader sense than emotional experience).{10} Belief in God is therefore properly basic.

This is *not* to say there are no *grounds* for believing, however. Drawing from John Calvin, Alvin Plantinga says that we have an ingrained tendency to recognize God under appropriate circumstances. Of course, there *are* a number of reasons or grounds for believing. These include direct experience of God, the testimony of a people who claim to have known God, written revelation which makes sense (if one is open to the supernatural), philosophical and scientific corroboration, the historical reality of a man named Jesus who fulfilled prophecies and did miracles, etc. Am I reversing myself here? Do we need reasons or not? The point is this: while there are valid reasons for believing in God, what we do *not* need to do is submit our belief in God ultimately to Clifford's maxim, especially a version of it already committed to naturalism. We can recognize God in our experience, and this belief can be confirmed by various reasons or evidences. Rather than view our belief as guilty until proven innocent, as the evidentialist objection would have it, we can view it as innocent until proven guilty. Let the atheists prove we're

wrong.

Theism Adds Nothing

The second general objection to belief in God Stephanie offers is that it adds nothing of value to life and to what we can know by reason alone. Is this true? *Meaning*

Consider the subject of *meaning*. Stephanie said she finds meaning in the everyday affairs of life without worrying about God. Let me quote an extended passage from Stephanie's first letter on the subject of meaning. Her reference in the first line is to a quotation from a book by Albert Camus.

> Your quote from *The Stranger* ("I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe") expresses well a feeling that I have had often. The universe is not concerned with me, so I do not need to bow and cater to anything in it; I can merely be grateful (yes, actually grateful to nothing in particular) that I can walk along a path with trees and breathe in the crisp late autumn, that I can watch cotton motes fly into my face, facing the sun, that I can struggle and wrangle my way into knowing that Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is that which keeps atoms from collapsing (in nanoseconds!!). I find meaning in my relationship with my parents, brothers, and in my marriage; my husband is the most kind, capable, ethical, and wise person I've ever met. These things are sufficiently meaningful for me; I do not think that true meaning is necessarily eternal and I do not demand recognition from the universe or the human notion of its maker. I am convinced that belief in a personal god could do nothing but dilute these things by subordinating them to something as slippery as God.

Thus, Stephanie believes that God isn't necessary for her to find meaning in life.

I replied that her naturalism provides no meaning beyond what we impose on the universe. We can *pretend* there is purpose behind it all, but a universe that doesn't care about us doesn't care about our superimposed meanings either. What does she do when the meaning she has given the universe doesn't find support in the universe itself? I wrote:

> You might see this earth as a beautiful 'mother' of sorts which nourishes and sustains its inhabitants. Do people who suffer through hurricanes or earthquakes or tornadoes see it as such? Do people who live in almost lifeless deserts who have to spend their days walking many miles to get water and who struggle to eke out a meager existence from the land find beauty and meaning in it? Often people who live close to the land do indeed find a special meaning in nature itself, but by and large they also believe there is a higher power behind it who not only gives meaning to the universe but who gives meaning to the struggle to survive and to the effort to preserve nature.

When I said that all her efforts at accomplishing some good could come to naught, and thus be ultimately meaningless, her response was, "That's OK. . . . I'm not looking for universal or eternal meaning."

It's hard to know what to say to that. We might follow Francis Schaeffer's advice and "take the roof off;"{11} in other words, expose the implications of her beliefs. Stephanie says she isn't a nihilist (one who believes that everything is thoroughly meaningless and without value); perhaps she could be called an "optimistic humanist" to use J. P. Moreland's term.{12} She believes there are no ultimate values; rather, we give life whatever meaning we choose. However, this position has no rational edge on nihilism. It simply reflects a decision to *act* as if there is meaning. Such groundless optimism is no more rationally justifiable than nihilism. It is just intellectual make-believe designed to help us be content with our lot¾adult versions of children's fairy tales.

Since the loss of absolute or transcendent meaning undercuts all absolute value, each person must choose his or her own values, moral and otherwise. As I told Stephanie, others might not agree with her values. The Nazis thought there was valid meaning in purifying the race. What did the Jews think?

What can be seen as meaningful for the *moment* is just that—meaningful for the moment. Death comes and everything that has gone before it comes to nothing, at least for the individual. Sure, one can find meaning in, say, working to discover a cure for a terrible disease knowing that it will benefit countless people for ages to come. But those people who benefit from it will die one day, too. And in the end, if atheists are correct, the whole race will die out and all that it has accomplished will come to naught.{13} Thus, while there may be *temporal* significance to what we do, there is no *ultimate* significance. Can the atheist really live with this?

By contrast, the eternal nature of God gives meaning beyond the temporal. What we do has eternal significance because it is done in the context of the creation of the eternal God who acts with purpose and does nothing capriciously. More specifically, belief in God locates our actions in the context of the building of His kingdom. There is a specific end toward which we are working that gives meaning to the specific things we do.

Strictly speaking, then, we might agree with Stephanie that it's true God doesn't *add* anything. Rather, He is the very *ground* of meaning. *Morality*

What about *morality*? Although Stephanie says that naturalistic morality is superior, when pressed to offer a standard she was only able to offer a basic impulse to kindness. In addition, she said, "I think that it is sufficient to have an internal sense of the golden rule, and I think that's a natural development." She used the metaphor of a child growing up to illustrate our growth in morality. Reason is all that is

needed for good moral behavior. If biblical moral principles agree with reason they are unnecessary. If they don't, "they are absurd."

In response I noted that we can measure the growth of a child by looking at an adult; the adult we might call the *telos* or goal of the child. We know what the child is supposed to become. What is the goal or end, in her view, of morality? What is the standard of goodness to which we should attain? Stephanie accepts the golden rule but can give me no reason why *I* should. Reason by itself doesn't direct me to. The golden rule assumes a basic equality between us all. Where does *this* idea come from? Even if it is employed only to safeguard the survival of the race, by what standard shall we say *that's* a good thing? Maybe we need to get out of the way for something else.

God, however, provides a standard grounded in His character and will to which we all are subject. He doesn't change on fundamental issues (although God has pressed certain moral demands on His people more at one time than another in keeping with the progress of revelation{14}), and His law is suited to our nature and our needs. The universe doesn't necessarily stand behind Stephanie's chosen morality, but God—and the universe¾stand behind His.

One final note. Showing the weaknesses of naturalism with respect to morality is *not* to say that all atheists are evil people. In her first letter, Stephanie wrote, "I take offense at your statement that the relativism of a godless morality permits things like the destruction of the weak and the development of a master race.' . . . I find this charge of atheist amorality from Christians to be horribly persistent and unfair." I noted that I never said in the *Relevance* radio program that all atheists are immoral or amoral. What I said was that "atheism itself makes no provision for fixed moral standards." I asked Stephanie to show me what kind of moral standard naturalism offers. In fact, it offers none. As I

noted earlier, Stephanie doesn't want to "champion naturalism." She knows it has nothing to offer. In fact, in one of her latest posts, she admitted that her philosophy only leaves her with "a frail pragmatism" and even "a certain moral relativism" because she doesn't have "the absolute word of God to fall back upon." She only has her own moral standards that have no hold on anyone else. Until she can show me what universal standard naturalism offers, I'll stand behind what I said about what naturalism allows. *Hope*

Let's turn our attention now to *hope*. Stephanie says that when she dies she will cease to exist. She thus has to be satisfied with the here and now. If there *is* nothing else, one must make do. Stephanie said, "I am satisfied with the time that I have here and now to think and feel and explore. You say, 'an impersonal universe offers no rewards,' but I am simply unable to comprehend the appeal of the vagaries of the Christian Heaven, especially with the heavy toll that they seem to of necessity take on intellectual honesty. If your notion of true hope requires a belief that one is promised eternal glory and fulfillment, then I cannot claim it. I am unable to comprehend what that could mean." Maybe the reason she is unable to comprehend it is her scientistic approach. Heaven isn't something one can analyze scientifically. P>In response I noted that she stands apart from the majority of people worldwide. There is something in us that yearns for immortality, I said. Of course, the various religions of the world have different ways of defining what the eternal state is and how to attain it. Christians believe we were created to desire it; it is a part of our make-up because we were created by an immortal God to live forever. If naturalism is true, I asked, how do you explain the desire for immortality?

If we had no good reason to believe in "the vagaries of the Christian Heaven," I suppose it would be foolish to allow it to govern one's life. However, we *do* have good reasons: the promise of God who doesn't lie, and the resurrection of Jesus.

We also have the witness of “eternity set in our hearts.” (Eccles. 3:11) Because of this hope—which isn’t a “cross your fingers” kind of hope, but is justified confidence in the future—our labors here for Christ’s kingdom will not die with us, but will have eternal significance. They are what is called “fruit that remains” (John 15:16), or the work which is “revealed with fire.” (1 Cor. 3:13-14) *Science*

We’re still thinking about what belief in God adds to our lives and our knowledge. One area in which even some theists don’t want to bring God is science itself. Does theistic belief add anything to science, or is its admission a source of trouble?

Much ink has been spilled over this question. Aside from naturalistic evolutionists, some theistic scientists believe that to go beyond what is called “methodological naturalism” is risky.{15} That’s the belief that, for the purposes of scientific investigation, the scientist should not fall back on God as an explanation, but should stay within the bounds of that which science can investigate. However, not everyone is of this opinion. As scholars active in the intelligent design movement are showing today, it isn’t necessarily so that the supernatural has no place in science.

William Dembski, a leader in the intelligent design movement, says that, far from harming scientific inquiry, design *adds* to scientific discovery. For one thing, it fosters inquiry where a naturalistic view might see no need. Dembski names the issues of “junk DNA” and vestigial organs as examples. Is this DNA really “junk”? Did these vestigial organs have a purpose or do they have a purpose still? Openness to design also raises a new set of research questions. He says, “We will want to know how it was produced, to what extent the design is optimal, and what is its purpose.” Finally, Dembski says, “An object that is designed functions within certain constraints.” So, for example, “If humans are in fact designed, then we can expect psychosocial constraints to be hardwired into us.

Transgress those constraints, and we as well as our society will suffer."{16}

In sum it simply isn't true that belief in God adds nothing of value to our lives and our knowledge. After all, whereas Stephanie is restricted to explanations arising from the natural order, we have the supernatural order in addition.

Moral Problems with Theism

It Doesn't Live up to Its Promises

A third general objection Stephanie has to theistic belief has to do with moral issues. Atheists say there are moral factors that count against believing in God. To show a contradiction between what the Bible teaches about God's character and what He actually does is to show either that He really doesn't exist or that He isn't worthy of our trust.

One argument says that the Bible doesn't live up to its promises. Stephanie pointed to the matter of unanswered prayer. She referred to a man who claimed to have been an evangelical who lost his faith primarily because of "the inefficacy of prayer." She has concluded that "hoping at God gives you the same results' that hoping at the indifferent universe does—none that are consistent enough to be useful!"

In response, I noted first that people often put God to the test as if He is the one who has to prove Himself. Do we have the right to expect Him to answer our prayers 1) just because we pray them, or 2) when we haven't done what He has called us to do? People can't live the way *they* want to and then expect God to 1jump when they pray. Second, God has promised *His* people that He will hear them and answer, but He doesn't always answer prayers the way we expect or when we expect. Answers might be a long time coming, or they might come in totally unexpected ways. Or it might be that over time our understanding of the situation or of God's desires changes so

that we realize that we need to pray differently. *Evil*

The problem of evil is a significant moral issue in the atheist's arsenal. We talk about a God of goodness, but what we see around us is suffering, and a lot of it apparently unjustifiable. Stephanie said, "Disbelief in a personal, loving God as an explanation of the way the world works is reasonable—especially when one considers natural disasters that can't be blamed on free will and sin."{17}

One response to the problem of evil is that God sees our freedom to choose as a higher value than protecting people from harm; this is the freewill defense. Stephanie said, however, that natural disasters can't be blamed on free will and sin. What about this? Is it true that natural disasters can't be blamed on sin? I replied that they *did* come into existence because of sin (Genesis 3). We're told in Romans 8 that creation will one day "be set free from its slavery to corruption," that it "groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now." The Fall caused the problem, and, in the consummation of the ages, the problem will be fixed.

Second, I noted that on a naturalistic basis, it's hard to even know what evil *is.* But the reality of God explains it. As theologian Henri Blocher said,

> The sense of evil requires the God of the Bible. In a novel by Joseph Heller, "While rejecting belief in God, the characters in the story find themselves compelled to postulate his existence in order to have an adequate object for their moral indignation." . . . When you raise this standard objection against God, to whom do you say it, other than *this* God? Without this God who is sovereign and good, what is the rationale of our complaints? Can we even tell what is evil? Perhaps the late John Lennon understood: "God is a concept by which we measure our pain," he sang. Might we be coming to the point where the sense of evil is a proof

of the existence of God?{18}

So, while it's true that no one (in my opinion) has really nailed down an answer to the problem of evil, if there is no God, there really is no problem of evil. Does the atheist ever find herself shaking her fist at the sky after some catastrophe and demanding an explanation? If there is no God, no one is listening.

Biblical Morality

Moral Character of God

Another direction atheistic objections run with respect to moral issues is in regard to the character of God. Is He good like the Bible says?

The "Old Testament God" is a favorite target of atheists for His supposed mean spirited and angry behavior, including stoning people for picking up sticks on Sunday, and having prophets call down bears on children.{19} The story of Abraham and Isaac is Stephanie's favorite biblical enigma. She asked if I would take a knife to my son's throat if God told me to. Clearly such a God isn't worthy of being called good.

Let's look more closely at the story of Abraham. Remember first of all that God did not let Abraham kill Isaac. The text says clearly that this was a test; God knew that He was going to stop Abraham.

But why such a difficult test? Consider Abraham's cultural background. As one scholar noted, "It must be ever remembered that God accommodates His instructions to the moral and spiritual standards of the people at any given time."{20} In Abraham's day, people offered their children as sacrifices to their gods. While the idea of losing his promised son must have shaken him deeply, the idea of sacrificing him wouldn't have been as unthinkable to him as to us. Think of an equivalent today, something God might call us to do that would

stretch us almost to the breaking point. Whatever we think of might not have been an adequate test for Abraham. God needed to go to the extreme with Abraham and command him to do something very difficult that wasn't beyond his imagination given his cultural setting.

Next, notice that Abraham said to the men with him "*we* will worship and return to you." (Gen. 22:5) The book of Hebrews explains that "He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received [Isaac] back as a type" (11:17-19). Abraham believed what God had told him about building a great nation through Isaac. So, if Isaac died by God's command, God would raise him from the dead.

Stephanie also objected to stories that told how God commanded the complete destruction of a town by the Israelites. The only way to understand this is to put it in the context of the nature of God and His opinion of sin, and the character of the people in question. God is absolutely holy, and He is a God of justice as well as mercy. To be true to His nature, He must deal with sin. Read too about the people He had the Israelites destroy. They were evil people. God drove them out because of their wickedness (Deut. 9:5). Walter Kaiser explains why the Canaanites were dealt with so severely.

> They were cut off to prevent Israel and the rest of the world from being corrupted (Deut. 20:16-18). When a people starts to burn their children in honor of their gods (Lev. 18:21), practice sodomy, bestiality, and all sorts of loathsome vices (Lev. 18:23,24; 20:3), the land itself begins to "vomit" them out as the body heaves under the load of internal poisons (Lev. 18:25, 27-30). . . . [William Benton] Greene likens this action on God's part, not to doing evil that good may come, but doing good in spite of certain evil consequences, just as a surgeon does not refrain from amputating a gangrenous limb even though in so doing he cannot help cutting off much healthy flesh.{21}

Kaiser goes on to note that when nations repent, God withholds judgment (Jer. 18:7,8). “Thus, Canaan had, as it were, a final forty-year countdown as they heard of the events in Egypt, at the crossing of the Red Sea, and what happened to the kings who opposed Israel along the way.” They knew about the Israelites (Josh. 2:10-14). “Thus God waited for the ‘cup of iniquity’ to fill up—and fill up it did without any signs of change in spite of the marvelous signs given so that the nations, along with Pharaoh and the Egyptians, ‘might know that He was the Lord.'”{22}

One more point. Stephanie seemed to think that God still does things today as He did in Old Testament times. When I told her that God does not require all the same things of us today that He required of the Israelites, she said that “the advantage of the absoluteness of the biblical morality you wish to trumpet is negated by your softening of OT law and by your making local and relative the very commandments of God.” In other words, we say there are absolutes, but we give ourselves a way out. I simply noted that where it was commanded by God, for example, to put a rebellious son to death, we do not soften that command at all. But when in God’s own economy He brings about change, we go with the new way. God doesn’t change, but His requirements for His people have changed at times. This doesn’t leave everything open, however. The question is, What has God called us to do today?

Its Harmful Effects on Us

For Stephanie, biblical instruction on morality not only reveals a God she can’t trust, it also is harmful for us, too. So, for example, she says, “The desire not to harm can be overcome by the desire to do right by [one’s] idea of God (look at Abraham, my favorite enigma). That’s where the real harm to society can creep in.” She believes that the certainty of religious dogmatism regarding it own rightness encourages “excesses,” such as “holy wars and terrorism for possession of the holy land, and the killing of doctors and homosexuals for

their own good." She said that Christianity permits the kind of horrors we accuse atheists of perpetrating but with the endorsement of God. "Hitler was a very devout Catholic, as I understand it," she said.

There is serious confusion here. Loaded words like "terrorism" bias the issue unfairly, and Stephanie takes some "excesses" to be rooted in Scripture when in fact they have nothing to do with biblical morality. It is unfair of her and other atheists to ignore the commands of Scripture that clearly reflect God's goodness while ignoring sound interpretive methods for understanding the harder parts. It's also wrong to let religious fanaticism in general count against God. Just as some atheists aren't going to live up to Stephanie's high standards, some Christians don't live up to God's. Gene Edward Veith says that, while Hitler had a "perverse admiration for Catholicism," he "hated Christianity."{23} What is clear is that there is no biblical basis for Hitler's atrocities. To return to the point I tried to make earlier, if he looked, Hitler *could* have found moral injunctions in Christianity to oppose his actions. Naturalists, on the other hand, have no such standard by which to measure anyone's actions. Conclusion

We have attempted to respond to Stephanie's three main objections to believing in God: there's not enough evidence; it adds nothing to what we can know from science; and theism is bad for people. These are stock objections atheists present. I think they have good answers. The next step is to try to take the atheist to the place where she or he can "see" God. Removing the reasons for rejecting God is one step in the process. The next step is to show her God. I can think of no better way to do that than to take her to Jesus, who "is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature" (Heb. 1:3). I recommended that Stephanie read one or more of the Gospels, and she said she would read John. This is the point of apologetics, to take people to the Lord in the presence of whom they must make a choice. Now we'll wait to

see what happens.

Notes

1. Rick Wade, *The Relevance of Christianity* (Probe Ministries, 1998).

2. Stephanie is aware of this program, and has given me permission to use her name.

3. George Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989), 98.

4. One is reminded of the time when the eighteenth century mathematician and physicist the Marquis de Laplace was asked where God fit in his theory of celestial mechanics. He replied, "I have no need of that hypothesis."

5. W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Baruch A. Brody (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 246.

6. Antony Flew, "The Presumption of Atheism," in *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 337-38. See also George Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989), 7-8.

7. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 28.

8. Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind,* rev. ed. (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1989), 85.

9. Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 126-28. I am indebted to this book for this portion of my discussion.

10. A good introduction to the evidentialist objection and this kind of response to it (what is being called Reformed

epistemology) is found in Clark, *Return to Reason*. See also J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City; A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 116-17. The seminal work is Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality*.

11. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 128-130.

12. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 120ff.

13. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 59.

14. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 60-64.

15. Papers from the "Naturalism, Theism and the Scientific Enterprise" conference in Austin, Texas in 1997, which included several presentations on this subject can be accessed on the Web at www.dla.utexas.edu/depts/philosophy/faculty/koons/ntse/ntse.html.

16. William A. Dembski, "Science and Design," *First Things* 86 (October 1998): 26-27.

17. There is an article on Probe's web site about the problem of evil, so I'll only make a few comments here. See Rick Rood, The Problem of Evil: How Can A Good God Allow Evil? (Probe Ministries, 1996).

18. Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 102-03.

19. For a in-depth discussion of the moral difficulties in the Old Testament, the reader might want to refer to Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, in which he devotes three chapters to such difficulties.

20. W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Genesis: A Devotional Commentary*

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 197.

21. Kaiser, 267-68.

22. Kaiser, 268.

23. Gene Edward Veith, *Modern Fascism: Liquidating the Judeo-Christian Worldview* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 50.

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Answering the Big Questions of Life

Sue Bohlin presents a Naturalistic, a Pantheistic, and a Christian perspective on the five major questions all of us should ask about life. Knowing the answers to these questions in critical to living a meaningful, fulfilling life on this earth. She concludes by demonstrating that only a Christian worldview provides consistent answers to all of these questions.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

One of the most important aspects of Probe's "Mind Games" conference is teaching students to recognize the three major world views—Naturalism, Pantheism, and Theism—and the impact they have both on the surrounding culture as well as on the ideas the students will face at the university. Because we come from an unapologetically Christian worldview, I will be presenting the ideas of Christian theism, even though Judaism and Islam are both theistic as well.

In this essay I'll be examining five of the biggest questions of life, and how each of the worldviews answers them:

- Why is there something rather than nothing?
- How do you explain human nature?
- What happens to a person at death?
- How do you determine right and wrong?
- How do you know that you know?{1}

Why Is There Something Rather than Nothing?

The most basic question of life may well be, **Why is there something rather than nothing?** Why am I here? Why is anything here at all?

Even Maria Von Trapp in the movie *The Sound of Music* knew the answer to this one. When she and the Captain are singing their love to each other in the gazebo, she croons, "Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could."

But naturalism, the belief that says there is no reality beyond the physical universe, offers two answers to this basic question. Until a few years ago, the hopeful wish of naturalism was that matter is eternal: the universe has always existed, and always will. There's no point to asking "why" because the universe simply *is*. End of discussion. Unfortunately for naturalism, the evidence that has come from our studies of astronomy makes it clear that the universe is unwinding, in a sense, and at one point it was tightly wound up. The evidence says that at some point in the past there *was* a beginning, and matter is most definitely not eternal. That's a major problem for a naturalist, who believes that everything that now is, came from nothing. First there was nothing, then there was something, but nothing caused the something to come into existence. Huh?

Pantheism is the belief that everything is part of one great

"oneness." It comes from two Greek words, *pan* meaning "everything," and *theos* meaning "God." Pantheism says that all is one, all is god, and therefore we are one with the universe; we are god. We are part of that impersonal divinity that makes up the universe. In answering the question, **Why is there something rather than nothing,** pantheism says that everything had an impersonal beginning. The universe itself has an intelligence that brought itself into being. The "something" that exists is simply how energy expresses itself. If you've seen the *Star Wars* movies, you've seen the ideas of pantheism depicted in that impersonal energy field, "The Force." Since the beginning of the universe had an impersonal origin, the question of "why" gets sidestepped. Like naturalism, pantheism basically says, "We don't have a good answer to that question, so we won't think about it."

Christian Theism is the belief that God is a personal, transcendent Creator of the universe—and of us. This worldview showed up on a T-shirt I saw recently:

"There are two things in life you can be sure of.

1. There is a God.
2. You are not Him."

Christian Theism answers the question, **Why is there something rather than nothing,** by confidently asserting that first there was God and nothing else, then He created the universe by simply speaking it into existence. The Bible's opening sentence is an answer to this most basic of questions: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."

How Do You Explain Human Nature?

Another one of the big questions of life is, **How do you explain human nature?** Why do human beings act the way we do? What it really boils down to is, Why am I so good and you're

so bad?

During World War II, a young Jewish teenager kept a journal during the years she and her family hid from the Nazis in a secret apartment in a house in Amsterdam. Anne Frank's diary poignantly explored the way she tried to decide if people were basically good or basically evil. Acts of kindness and blessing seemed to indicate people were basically good; but then the next day, Anne would learn of yet another barbarous act of depravity and torture, and she would think that perhaps people were basically bad after all. After reading her diary, I remember carrying on the quest for an answer in my own mind, and not finding it until I trusted Christ and learned what His Word had to say about it.

Naturalism says that humans are nothing more than evolved social animals. There is nothing that truly separates us from the other animals, so all our behavior can be explained in terms of doing what helps us to survive and reproduce. Your only purpose in life, naturalism says, is to make babies. And failing that, to help those who share your genes to make babies. Kind of makes you want to jump out of bed in the morning, doesn't it?

Another answer from naturalism is that we are born as blank slates, and we become whatever is written on those slates. You might mix in some genetic factors, in which case human nature is nothing more than a product of our genes and our environment.

Pantheism explains human nature by saying we're all a part of god, but our problem is that we forget we're god. We just need to be re- educated and start living like the god we are. Our human nature will be enhanced by attaining what pantheists call "cosmic consciousness." According to New Age thought, the problem with humans is that we suffer from a collective form of metaphysical amnesia. We just need to wake up and remember we're god. When people are bad, (which is one result of

forgetting you're god), pantheism says that they'll pay for it in the next life when they are reincarnated as something less spiritually evolved than their present life. I had a Buddhist friend who refused to kill insects in her house because she said they had been bad in their previous lives and had to come back as bugs, and it wasn't her place to prematurely mess up their karma.

The Christian worldview gives the most satisfying answer to the question, **How do you explain human nature?** The Bible teaches that God created us to be His image-bearers, which makes us distinct from the entire rest of creation. But when Adam and Eve chose to rebel in disobedience, their fall into sin distorted and marred the sacred Image. The fact that we are created in God's image explains the noble, creative, positive things we can do; the fact that we are sinners who love to disobey and rebel against God's rightful place as King of our lives explains our wicked, destructive, negative behavior. It makes sense that this biblical view of human nature reveals the reasons why mankind is capable of producing both Mother Teresa and the holocaust.

What Happens after Death?

In the movie *Flatliners,* medical students took turns stopping each other's hearts to give them a chance to experience what happens after death. After a few minutes, they resuscitated the metaphysical traveller who told the others what he or she saw. The reason for pursuing such a dangerous experiment was explained by the med student who thought it up in the first place: "**What happens after death?** Mankind deserves an answer. Philosophy failed; religion failed. Now it's up to the physical sciences."

Well, maybe religion failed, but the Lord Jesus didn't. But first, let's address how naturalism answers this question.

Because this worldview says that there is nothing outside of

space, time and energy, naturalism insists that death brings the extinction of personality and the disorganization of matter. Things just stop living and start decomposing. Or, as my brother said when he was in his atheist phase, “When you die, you’re like a dog by the side of the road. You’re dead, and that’s it.” To the naturalist, there is no life after death. The body recycles back to the earth and the mental and emotional energies that comprised the person disintegrate forever.

Pantheism teaches reincarnation, the belief that all of life is an endless cycle of birth and death. After death, each person is reborn as someone, or something, else. Your reincarnated persona in the next life depends on how you live during this one. This is the concept of karma, which is the law of cause and effect in life. If you make evil or foolish choices, you will have to work off that bad karma by being reborn as something like a rat or a cow. If you’re really bad, you might come back as a termite. But if you’re good, you’ll come back as someone who can be wonderful and powerful. New Age followers sometimes undergo something they call “past lives therapy,” which regresses them back beyond this life, beyond birth, and into previous lives. I think it’s interesting that people always seem to have been someone glamorous like Cleopatra and never someone like a garbage collector or an executioner!

Christian Theism handles the question, **What happens to a person at death**, with such a plain, no-nonsense answer that people have been stumbling over it for millenia. Death is a gateway that either whisks a person to eternal bliss with God or takes him straight to a horrible place of eternal separation from God. What determines whether one goes to heaven or hell is the way we respond to the light God gives us concerning His Son, Jesus Christ. When we confess that we are sinners in need of mercy we don’t deserve, and trust the Lord Jesus to save us from not only our sin but the wrath that sin

brings to us, He comes to live inside us and take us to heaven to be with Him forever when we die. When we remain in rebellion against God, either actively disobeying Him or passively ignoring Him, the consequences of our sin remain on us and God allows us to keep them for all eternity—but separated from Him and all life and hope. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31). But it is a delightful thing to fall into the arms of the Lover of your soul, Who has gone on ahead to prepare a place for you! Which will you choose?

How Do You Determine Right and Wrong?

One of the big questions in life is, How do you determine right and wrong? Steven Covey, author of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show one day. He asked the studio audience to close their eyes and point north. When they opened their eyes, there were several hundred arms pointing in wildly different directions. Then Mr. Covey pulled out a compass and said, "*This* is how we know which way is north. You can't know from within yourself." He used a powerful object lesson to illustrate the way Christian theism answers this big question in life.

Naturalism says that there is no absolute outside of ourselves. There is no final authority because space, time and energy are all that is. There is no such thing as right and wrong because there is no right- and wrong-giver. So naturalism tries to deal with the question of ethics by providing several unsatisfying answers. One is the belief that there is no free choice, that all our behaviors and beliefs are driven by our genes. We are just as determined in our behavior as the smallest animals or insects. Another is the belief that moral values are determined from what is; the way things are is the way they ought to be. If you are being abused by your husband, that's the way things are, so that's the way they ought to be. Even worse is the concept of

arbitrary ethics: might makes right. Bullies get to decide the way things ought to be because they're stronger and meaner than everybody else. That's what happens in totalitarian regimes; the people with the power decide what's right and what's wrong.

Pantheism says that there is no such thing as ultimate right and wrong because everything is part of a great undifferentiated whole where right and wrong, good and evil, are all part of the oneness of the universe. Remember "Star Wars"? The Force was both good and evil at the same time. Pantheism denies one of the basic rules of philosophy, which is that two opposite things cannot both be true at the same time. Because Pantheism denies that there are absolutes, things which are true all the time, it holds that all right and wrong is relative. Right and wrong are determined by cultures and situations. So murdering one's unborn baby might be right for one person and wrong for another.

Theism says that there is such a thing as absolute truth, and absolute right and wrong. We can know this because this information has come to us from a transcendent source outside of ourselves and outside of our world. Christian Theism says that the God who created us has also communicated certain truths to us. He communicated generally, through His creation, and He communicated specifically and understandably through His Word, the Bible. We call this revelation. Christian Theism says that absolute truth is rooted in God Himself, who is an Absolute; He is Truth. As Creator, He has the right to tell us the difference between right and wrong, and He has taken great care to communicate this to us.

That's why Steven Covey's illustration was so powerful. When he pulled out a compass, he showed that we need a transcendent source of information, something outside ourselves and which is fixed and constant, to show us the moral equivalent of "North." We are creatures created to be dependent on our Creator for the information we need to live life right. God

has given us a compass in revelation.

How Do You Know That You Know?

This question generally doesn't come up around the cafeteria lunch table at work, and even the most inquisitive toddler usually won't ask it, but it's an important question nonetheless: How do you know that you know?

There's a great scene in the movie *Terminator 2* where the young boy that the cyborg terminator has been sent to protect, is threatened by a couple of hoodlums. The terminator is about to blow one away when the young boy cries out, "You can't do that!" The terminator—Arnold Schwarzenegger—asks, "Why not?" "You just can't go around killing people!" the boy protests. "Why not?" "Take my word for it," the boy says. "You just can't." He knew that it was wrong to kill another human being, but he didn't know how he knew. There are a lot of people in our culture like that!

Naturalism, believing that there is nothing beyond space, time and energy, would answer the question by pointing to the human mind. Rational thought—iguring things out deductively—is one prime way we gain knowledge. Human reason is a good enough method to find out what we need to know. The mind is the center of our source of knowledge. Another way to knowledge is by accumulating hard scientific data of observable and measurable experience. This view says that the source of our knowledge is found in the senses. We know what we can perceive through what we can measure. Since naturalism denies any supernaturalism (anything above or outside of the natural world), what the human mind can reason and measure is the only standard for gaining knowledge.

Pantheism would agree with this assessment of how we know that we know. Followers of pantheism tend to put a lot of value on personal experience. The rash of near- and after-death experiences in the past few years, for example, are extremely

important to New Agers. These experiences usually validate the preconceptions of pantheistic thought, which denies absolutes such as the Christian tenet that Jesus is the only way to God. The experiences of past- lives therapy have persuaded even some Christians to believe in reincarnation, even though the Bible explicitly denies that doctrine, because personal experience is often considered the most valid way to know reality.

Christian Theism says that while human reason and perception are legitimate ways to gain knowledge, we cannot depend on these methods alone because they're not enough. Some information needs to be given to us from outside the system. An outside Revealer provides information we can't get any other way. Revelation—revealed truth from the One who knows everything—is another, not only legitimate but necessary way to know some important things. Revelation is how we know what happened when the earth, the universe and man were created. Revelation is how we know what God wants us to do and be. Revelation is how we can know how the world will end and what heaven is like. Revelation in the form of the Lord Jesus Christ is the only way we can experience "God with skin on."

Naturalism's answers are inadequate, depressing, and wrong; pantheism's answers are slippery, don't square with reality, and wrong; but Christian theism—the Christian worldview—is full of hope, consistent with reality, and it resonates in our souls that it's very, very right.

Notes

1. These questions are taken from James W. Sire's book *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, Ill.:InterVarsity Press), 1977.

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Worldviews

A worldview is like a pair of glasses through which we view the world. Everyone has one. Jerry Solomon examines the basic worldviews and some of the beliefs and questions that they involve.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

A friend of mine recently told me of a conversation he had with a good friend we will call Joe. Joe is a doctor. He is not a Christian. This is how the conversation went: "Joe, you're an excellent doctor. You care deeply about your patients. Why do you care so much for people since you believe we have evolved by chance? What gives us value?" Joe was stunned by the question and couldn't answer it. His "worldview" had taken a blow.

The concept of a worldview has received increasing attention for the past several years. Many books have been written on the subject of worldviews from both Christian and non-Christian perspectives. Frequently speakers will refer to the term. On occasion even reviews of movies and music will include the phrase. All this attention prompts us to ask, "What does the term mean?" and "What difference does it make?" It is our intent to answer these questions. And it is our hope that all of us will give serious attention to our own worldview, as well as the worldviews of those around us.

What is a Worldview?

What is a *worldview*? A variety of definitions have been offered by numerous authors. For example, James Sire asserts that "A worldview is a set of presuppositions (or assumptions)

which we hold (consciously or subconsciously) about the basic makeup of our world."{1} Phillips and Brown state that "A worldview is, first of all, *an explanation and interpretation of the world* and second, *an application of this view to life*. In simpler terms, our worldview is a view *of the world* and a view *for the world*."{2} Walsh and Middleton provide what we think is the most succinct and understandable explanation: "A world view provides a model *of the world* which guides its adherents *in the world*."{3} With the realization that many subtleties can be added, this will be our working definition.

The Need for a Worldview

Worldviews act somewhat like eye glasses or contact lenses. That is, a worldview should provide the correct "prescription" for making sense of the world just as wearing the correct prescription for your eyes brings things into focus. And, in either example, an incorrect prescription can be dangerous, even life-threatening. People who are struggling with worldview questions are often despairing and even suicidal. Thus it's important for us to give attention to the formulation of the proper worldview. Arthur Holmes states that the need for a worldview is fourfold: "the need to unify thought and life; the need to define the good life and find hope and meaning in life; the need to guide thought; the need to guide action."{4} Yet another prominent need for the proper worldview is to help us deal with an increasingly diverse culture. We are faced with a smorgasbord of worldviews, all of which make claims concerning truth. We are challenged to sort through this mixture of worldviews with wisdom. These needs are experienced by all people, either consciously or unconsciously. All of us have a worldview with which we strive to meet such needs. The proper worldview helps us by orienting us to the intellectual and philosophical terrain about us.

Worldviews are so much a part of our lives that we see and hear them daily, whether we recognize them or not. For

example, movies, television, music, magazines, newspapers, government, education, science, art, and all other aspects of culture are affected by worldviews. If we ignore their importance, we do so to our detriment.

Testing Worldviews

A worldview should pass certain tests. First, it should be rational. It should not ask us to believe contradictory things. Second, it should be supported by evidence. It should be consistent with what we observe. Third, it should give a satisfying comprehensive explanation of reality. It should be able to explain why things are the way they are. Fourth, it should provide a satisfactory basis for living. It should not leave us feeling compelled to borrow elements of another worldview in order to live in this world.

Components Found in All Worldviews

In addition to putting worldviews to these tests, we should also see that worldviews have common components. These components are self-evident. It is important to keep these in mind as you establish your own worldview, and as you share with others. There are four of them.

First, **something exists**. This may sound obvious, but it really is an important foundational element of worldview building since some will try to deny it. But a denial is self-defeating because all people experience cause and effect. The universe is rational; it is predictable.

Second, **all people have absolutes**. Again, many will try to deny this, but to deny it is to assert it. All of us seek an infinite reference point. For some it is God; for others it is the state, or love, or power, and for some this reference point is themselves or man.

Third, **two contradictory statements cannot both be right**. This

is a primary law of logic that is continually denied. Ideally speaking, only one worldview can correctly mirror reality. This cannot be overemphasized in light of the prominent belief that tolerance is the ultimate virtue. To say that someone is wrong is labeled intolerant or narrow-minded. A good illustration of this is when we hear people declare that all religions are the same. It would mean that Hindus, for example, agree with Christians concerning God, Jesus, salvation, heaven, hell, and a host of other doctrines. This is nonsense.

Fourth,**all people exercise faith**. All of us presuppose certain things to be true without absolute proof. These are inferences or assumptions upon which a belief is based. This becomes important, for example, when we interact with those who allege that only the scientist is completely neutral. Some common assumptions are: a personal God exists; man evolved from inorganic material; man is essentially good; reality is material.

As we dialogue with people who have opposing worldviews, an understanding of these common components can help us listen more patiently, and they can guide us to make our case more wisely.

Six Worldview Questions

Have you ever been frustrated with finding ways to stir the thinking of a non-Christian friend? We are confident the following questions will be of help. And we are also confident they will stir your thinking about the subject of worldviews.

We will answer these questions with various non-Christian responses. Christian responses will be discussed later in this article.

First, **Why is there something rather than nothing?** Some may actually say something came from nothing. Others may state

that something is here because of impersonal spirit or energy. And many believe matter is eternal.

Second, **How do you explain human nature?** Frequently people will say we are born as blank slates, neither good nor evil. Another popular response is that we are born good, but society causes us to behave otherwise.

Third, **What happens to a person at death?** Many will say that a person's death is just the disorganization of matter. Increasingly people in our culture are saying that death brings reincarnation or realization of oneness.

Fourth, **How do you determine what is right and wrong?** Often we hear it said that ethics are relative or situational. Others assert that we have no free choice since we are entirely determined. Some simply derive "oughts" from what "is." And of course history has shown us the tragic results of a "might makes right" answer.

Fifth, **How do you know that you know?** Some say that the mind is the center of our source of knowledge. Things are only known deductively. Others claim that knowledge is only found in the senses. We know only what is perceived.

Sixth, **What is the meaning of history?** One answer is that history is determined as part of a mechanistic universe. Another answer is that history is a linear stream of events linked by cause and effect but without purpose. Yet another answer is that history is meaningless because life is absurd.{5}

The alert Christian will quickly recognize that the preceding answers are contrary to his beliefs. There are definite, sometimes startling differences. Worldviews are in collision. Thus we should know at least something about the worldviews that are central to the conflict. And we should certainly be able to articulate a Christian worldview.

Examples of Worldviews

In his excellent book, *The Universe Next Door*, James Sire catalogs the most influential worldviews of the past and present. These are Christian Theism, Deism, Naturalism, Nihilism, Existentialism, Eastern Pantheism, and New Age or New Consciousness.{6}

Deism, a prominent worldview during the eighteenth century, has almost entirely left the scene. The Deist believes in God, but that God created and then abandoned the universe.

Nihilism, a more recent worldview, is alive among many young people and some intellectuals. Nihilists see no value to reality; life is absurd.

Existentialism is prominent and can be seen frequently, even among unwitting Christians. The Existentialist, like the Nihilist, sees life as absurd, but sees man as totally free to *make himself* in the face of this absurdity.

Christian Theism, Naturalism, and New Age Pantheism are the most influential worldviews presently in the United States. Now we will survey each of them.

Christian Theism

Let's return to the six questions we asked earlier and briefly see how the Christian Theist might answer them.

Question: **Why is there something rather than nothing?** Answer: There is an infinite-personal God who has created the universe out of nothing.

Question: **How do you explain human nature?** Answer: Man was originally created good in God's image, but chose to sin and thus infected all of humanity with what is called a "sin nature." So man has been endowed with value by his creator, but his negative behavior is in league with his nature.

Question: **What happens to a person at death?** Answer: Death is either the gate to life with God or to eternal separation from Him. The destination is dependent upon the response we give to God's provision for our sinfulness.

Question: **How do you determine what is right and wrong?** Answer: The guidelines for conduct are revealed by God.

Question: **How do you know that you know?** Answer: Reason and experience can be legitimate teachers, but a transcendent source is necessary. We know some things only because we are told by God through the Bible.

Question: **What is the meaning of history?** Answer: History is a linear and meaningful sequence of events leading to the fulfillment of God's purposes for man.

Christian Theism had a long history in Western culture. This does not mean that all individuals who have lived in Western culture have been Christians. It simply means that this worldview was dominant; it was the most influential. And this was true even among non-Christians. This is no longer valid. Western culture has experienced a transition to what is called Naturalism.

Naturalism

Even though Naturalism in various forms is ancient, we will use the term to refer to a worldview that has had considerable influence in a relatively short time within Western culture. The seeds were planted in the seventeenth century and began to flower in the eighteenth. Most of us have been exposed to Naturalism through Marxism and what is called Secular Humanism.

What are the basic tenets of this worldview? First, God is irrelevant. This tenet helps us better understand the term Naturalism; it is in direct contrast to Christian Theism, which is based on *supernaturalism*. Second, progress and

evolutionary change are inevitable. Third, man is autonomous, self-centered, and will save himself. Fourth, education is the guide to life; intelligence and freedom guarantee full human potential. Fifth, science is the ultimate provider both for knowledge and morals. These tenets have permeated our lives. They are apparent, for example, in the media, government, and education. We should be alert constantly to their influence.

After World War II "Postmodernism" began to replace the confidence of Naturalism. With it came the conclusion that truth, in any real sense, doesn't exist. This may be the next major worldview, or anti-worldview, that will infect the culture. It is presently the rage on many of our college campuses. In the meantime, though, the past few decades have brought us another ancient worldview dressed in Western clothing.

New Age Pantheism

Various forms of Pantheism have been prominent in Eastern cultures for thousands of years. But it began to have an effect on our culture in the 1950s. There had been various attempts to introduce its teachings before then, but those attempts did not arouse the interest that was stirred in that decade. It is now most readily observed in what is called the New Age Movement.

What are the basic tenets of this worldview? First, all is one. There are no ultimate distinctions between humans, animals, or the rest of creation. Second, since all is one, all is god. All of life has a spark of divinity. Third, if all is one and all is god, then each of us is god. Fourth, humans must discover their own divinity by experiencing a change in consciousness. We suffer from a collective form of metaphysical amnesia. Fifth, humans travel through indefinite cycles of birth, death, and reincarnation in order to work off what is called "bad karma." Sixth, New Age disciples think in terms of gray, not black and white. Thus they believe that two

conflicting statements can both be true.

On the popular level these tenets are presently asserted through various media, such as books, magazines, television, and movies. Perhaps the most visible teacher is Shirley MacLaine. But these beliefs are also found increasingly among intellectuals in fields such as medicine, psychology, sociology, and education.

Conclusion

We have very briefly scanned the subject of worldviews. Let's return to a definition we affirmed in the beginning of this article: "A worldview provides a model *of the world* which guides its adherents *in the world*." If your model of the world includes an infinite-personal God, as in Christian Theism, that belief should provide guidance for your life. If your model rejects God, as in Naturalism, again such a belief serves as a guide. Or if your model asserts that you are god, as in New Age Pantheism, yet again your life is being guided by such a conception. These examples should remind us that we are living in a culture that puts us in touch constantly with such ideas, and many more. They cannot all be true.

Thus some of us may be confronted with the need to think more deeply than we ever have before. Some of us may need to purge those things from our lives that are contrary to the worldview of Christian Theism. Some of us may need to better understand that our thoughts are to be unified with daily life. Some of us may need to better understand that the good life and hope and meaning are found only through God's answers. Some of us may need to let God's ideas guide our thoughts more completely. And some of us may need to let God's guidelines guide our actions more fully.

Paul's admonition to the believers in ancient Colossae couldn't be more contemporary or helpful in light of our discussion. He wrote:

> *See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ (Col. 2:8).*

Notes

1. James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988), 17.
2. W. Gary Phillips and William E. Brown, *Making Sense of Your World* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 29.
3. Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1984), 32.
4. Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 5.
5. Sire, 18.
6. Ibid.

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